The Waterspout

Summary

Four months after the Homecoming dance, Peter Parker's life is largely unchanged. Ned knows his secret now, and so does Aunt May, which means there are a few more rules and a few more consequences, but there's been radio silence from Tony Stark. Peter isn't really
bitter; he knows the man is busy, and that his own work is hardly consequential, but still... it'd be nice to hear something.
One day, he does. It isn't what he expects. It isn't what Tony expects, either.
Both drawn together and pulled apart by past trauma, Tony and Peter attempt to navigate their now connected lives. New threats are faced while politics rage, and eventually words are the greatest threat of all. Words, and the ever-looming possibility of a real, actual future. Maybe, for Tony, all hope isn't lost. Maybe, for Peter, there's a whole new adventure looming before him; growing up.
Because there's a question lurking within both men. A terrible, burning question, and the search for its answer will be the most important and terrifying quest either has ever attempted. "Who am I?"

Notes

Hi guys!!! Here goes nothing. Well here goes a lot of things actually...

So here's the rap: I have taken some creative liberties with these characters, this world, the politics involved in it, and the rules established within it. But I try to stay canon, and true to human and character development, and believable. So don't freak out when I screw something up canonically, please, but feel free to let me know. Creative criticism is a yes! Very yes! Always people! Do it! Yaaaaaas feeeeeeeedbaaaaaack pleeeeeeeeeease.

If you see a spelling or grammar error, or are confused by wording, or are thrown off by a sentence or anything like that LET ME KNOW!!!! Please. There's nothing worse then getting pulled out of a good story by a mistype.

First chapter's a bit of an exploration. Not much happens. I get into the rap of writing these characters. It probably could be better but hey. Hope you enjoy!
PART ONE: THE ITSY-BITSY SPIDER CRAWLED UP THE WATERSPOUT

“Mr. Stark?”

Peter left a message on the man’s voicemail for the third time this week. “Um, this is Peter, uh I was just calling to ask whether you needed my help saving the world or something… Call me when you do…”

He hung up, flopping onto his bed. One voicemail per day was about as frequent as he allowed himself, although sometimes, on days like this, he wanted to maybe inch up to two. Or three. Or five. *Damn I'm bored*… He let out a quite unflattering whine, and grumbled, “why are some days so normal ?”

It was Wednesday, which meant he wasn’t allowed to go patrolling, according to the frankly irritating rules May had laid out when she’d found out his little secret. Said rules also dictated that when he *could* go out, he had to be back by ten. Which was inconvenient to say the least; real trouble happened around eleven.

He wasn’t about to complain though. She hadn’t taken his suit or grounded him for all of eternity as he’d feared. So shit if he was going to make a fuss about a few boundaries when the alternative was near-literal life imprisonment.

But if Mr. Stark needed him to help save the world… well, Aunt May couldn’t keep him from something *that* important.

Of course, Stark never answered his messages.

That didn’t matter. Of course it didn’t.

He fidgeted irately and checked his nerdy watch (it had chemical elements instead of numbers). With a sigh, he found it to be 3:10. Aunt May wouldn’t be home until 5:00…

Unable to resist, Peter opened the attic hatch above his desk. His room tilted as he attached himself to the ceiling and climbed through the small entrance. Crouching, frog-like, he opened his fancy Stark Industries suitcase.

The mechanic suit holder flipped open, revealing his (totally awesome) Spider-Man suit.

He’d just wanted to look at it, honestly. Four months did little to ease how impressive, how *freeing*, the suit was. Looking didn’t last long.

A couple minutes later, he was opening his bedroom window and swinging out into the crisp Manhattan air.
Spider-Man perched on top of one of the many skyscrapers in Rockefeller Plaza, watching the ant-sized people run back and forth from building to building. Nothing abnormal.

He sighed. “Hey Karen?”

His suit answered, “Yes Peter?”

“Any reports of any crimes or thefts in the area?”

“Shouldn’t you be at home?” The AI sounded a little too much like it was scolding him. “It’s Wednesday.”

Peter tried to hide his face, which wasn’t very effective considering the person he was hiding from was literally the clothes he was wearing. Which was a bit freaky, now that he thought about it. “I’ve done all my homework and May won’t be back for a while and I’m not gonna do anything dangerous…” he trailed off, knowing exactly how true that particular comment was. “Just scan, please, Karen?”

His suit made a noise that sounded a bit like a sigh and compiled. “Scanning…”

Peter tapped his foot impatiently. Just one crime… please? A ding sounded in his ear.

“Speeding on 47th. Crowded street; could get dangerous soon.”

Unable to contain excitement and relief, Spider-Man punched the air. “Yes!” He shot a line of web towards the nearest building, and swung towards the downtown area.

Approximately an hour and a half (and three neighborhood crimes) later, Spider-Man was slinking along the edge of the building at the corner of 47th and 5th avenue, on the lookout for some jewel robbers Karen had warned him about. Sure enough, three thugs with ski masks were robbing MDC Diamonds. Not that he was surprised; the Stark tech that Karen used (and was, he supposed) was never wrong. He walked in and leaned against the door frame in attempted casualty. “Hey guys! Why’d you have to start without me? We could have made this a lot easier.”

They just stared at him, before finally responding “Who the hell are you?” with a voice muffled by the mask.

He rolled his eyes, not caring that no one could see through the mask. “Good grief, you’d think that after all this time people would recognize me!” He groaned sarcastically, then shot a web at the nearest thug. The man dropped his money bag as his hands were immediately engulfed by sticky netting.

Immediately, and unsurprisingly, the other two guys held up pistols. “Don't come any closer!”

“No problem buddy!” Web covered both of their guns, slowing the speed of the bullets. Spider-Man dodged the now less-than-lethal projectiles by jumping onto the ceiling and sticking there, shooting more webs as he went.

The two with the mostly-useless weapons took seconds to overpower, and Spider-Man moved with fluid practice, Karen advising him calmly. He had the gun-dudes stuck to the walls almost before they had a chance to fire another shot, and he took a step back to survey his work, Spidey senses tingling--
Whap!

Spider-Man had forgotten about the first idiot. Listen to the Spidey senses. He hardly flinched at the awkward blow, however; the man’s hands were still bound, and Peter’s increased strength allowed him to recover in moments.

Another leap and flash of webbing later, all three goons were bound and gagged. They glared at him as he unmasked them, Scooby-Doo style.

“...And you must be...a person I don't know! Wonderful.” Spider-Man stood in front of them, pleased with his handiwork. The new webbing that he had constructed the day before was working nicely.

“Alrighty friends, it was nice knowing you, but now I am gonna have to leave you to the police. Bye!”

He swung away before they could protest (it would have taken hours until the webbing dissolved, anyway). On his way home, he checked the time. 4:45.

Crud. Peter wouldn’t be home in time; it took approximately 30 minutes to get back to Queens. 25 as the crow flew. As the spider swung? May was gonna be ticked...

Ticked hardly covered it.

Peter endured at least an hour of ranting about ‘how irresponsible he was’, and how he ‘could have been seriously injured.’ When May finally stopped for breath, Peter decided to go with the sad puppy scheme.

“I’m sorry Aunt May, I just wanted to go out for a while. I was cooped up inside that school all day...” He tried his best to sound as pitiful as possible.

May just gave him the stink-eye and told him to go to his room and stay there, with a parting ‘this is your one warning! Next time suit; gone, and grounded until the end of time.’ He did so, effectively slinking away with his tail between his legs, not even daring to poke his nose out at the slightly awkward smell of dinner cooking until his aunt gave the okay.

When he sat down, the hairs on his arms still standing on end in anxiousness, May was ready with a fork for gesturing and a knife for emphasis. “Why did you really leave? You've never broken curfew ever since I found out about your little vigilantism exercise. Why now?”

He shrugged. “I, er, was just bored. Honestly.”

She stared at him.

“Really bored. Decathalon’s on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Ned was busy, I had no homework, and Mr. Stark--” he clamped his mouth shut, cursing silently.

May’s eyes got almost comically flooded with storm clouds. “What did that man do this time? If he put you up to this I swear--”

“No! No, May, he didn’t do anything! He hasn’t done anything for months.” Peter squashed down the involuntary bitterness that arose when he thought about the lack of communication. He’d thought things would be different now, what with Vulture and Mr. Stark asking him to join the Avengers, but
it was just like it had been after Germany.

At least Happy doesn’t cuss at me so much anymore.

“I was just bored,” he assured again, able to meet his aunt’s eyes this time.

“Well, find something else to occupy your time,” she finally said with a sigh, then added sweetly, “Because if you ever do this again I will make your life a living hell, m’kay?”

Peter hid a grin and nodded.

The next morning, Peter made his way to the bus with a breakfast donut in hand. His best friend, Ned Leeds, was at the corner, waiting impatiently for Peter to catch up.

Ned was the only one besides Mr. Stark and his associates who knew Peter’s secret. In a way, it had made them closer as friends. Today, Ned was going on about how Captain America had shown himself again, blah blah blah, politics, Accords, vibranium.

“I don’t see why people get so excited about this,” Peter said when Ned was finished updating him, and they’d dodged today’s first assault from Flash. “I fought Captain America; if he doesn’t want to be found or taken, like hell anyone’s gonna be able to do it.”

Ned leaned in, eyes alight like a toddler ready for storytime.

Peter rolled his eyes. “You already know this.”

“Oh come on! You never talk about Germany; how come I don’t get every juicy detail?”

“There isn’t really anything to say.” Peter shifted uncomfortably. “We fought. He dropped part of a building on me.”

Ned hummed. “That seems to happen to you a lot.”

“Two times is not a lot.”

“It’s more than most people! Because usually they’re dead after the first one and not discussing probability with their guy in the chair.”

Peter punched his friend’s shoulder affectionately, standing as the bus rolled into the school. “You started this whole conversation just so you could mention the chair, didn’t you.”

Ned nodded emphatically, and the two got off the bus laughing.

“Where’s MJ?” Peter asked when they got to the locker bay.

“In the decathlon room reading, probably,” Ned replied.

“Think again, losers.”

Peter and Ned spun, trying to keep involuntary looks of guilt off their face. Michelle Jones stood behind them, holding a book--

Peter yelped and performed a quite elaborate duck and roll on instinct when he saw the object flying towards his face. Realizing (too late) that perhaps the nerdy science intern kid would not be expected
to have olympic-level agility, Peter forced himself off of his naturally-corrective balance. He spun out onto the floor, but the movement was still a bit to graceful. Oh well. The spidey skills could not be thwarted.

“What was that for?” he demanded, climbing to his feet and glaring at MJ as people around them laughed. He was glad Flash seemed to be elsewhere.

She smirked as Ned added, “yeah, you can’t just go around swinging novels at people! Even the--”

Sensing, it seemed, the approach of a movie reference from the boy, MJ cut Ned off. “It was scientific. I was collecting data.”

Peter opened his mouth, then closed it again, because she might well be telling the truth. Still grinning that infuriatingly sarcastic grin, MJ flounced away, opening Peter’s would-be murder weapon and proceeding to ignore their existence.

“Why do we put up with her again?” Ned asked when the girl was out of earshot.

“We don’t put up with anything,” Peter corrected under his breath. “We willingly accept.”

“Yeah, or she’d chew our asses.”

Peter laughed.

“I mean, she doesn’t even like Star Wars! Who doesn’t like Star Wars?” Ned glowered, but perked up after a moment. “Speaking of Star Wars, marathon is coming up.”

“Really, is it that close already?”

Ned grinned, nodding far too quickly. Quotes flashed through Peter’s mind, and he couldn’t help smiling. “Your house or mine?”


“Deal.”

The bell clanged through the school, and Peter hurried away to Chemistry with his best friend at his heels, mind filled with the flash of lightsabers and the views from high above.

*   *   *

Tony Stark was 98 percent sure that he existed to be the dumping ground for all the headaches that the universe couldn’t find a good home for. That was him, Tony protect-the-Earth-with-no-backup, run-a-multimillion-dollar-company, get-engaged-to-cover-up-a-kid’s-way-too-mature-decisions, adopt-a-migraine Stark.

The remaining two percent, he decided as he put down the phone from DC and ran his hands through his hair, was to constantly try and extend the laws of mathematics to give himself even more reasons for living in the first place.

He was not overwhelmed. No, indeed he was not. Tony Stark--genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist--could juggle anything.

Anything not including the annoyingly precious kid who’s life he’d very nearly fucked up.

So Tony worked. He invented. He ran his company and attended conferences and worked with the
press. He was Iron Man--dodging alien and enhanced-individual threats for the sake of the public. He tried to figure out how to plan a wedding, tried to figure out how to love the amazing woman who supported him. And above all, he fought for the Accords.

Well, he fought against them, too. The world needed the Accords, but they were in no way perfect. And after… after everything that had happened, Tony knew it was his responsibility to deal with them. Thaddeus Shady-as-fuck Ross wouldn’t get off his ass though, which was distinctly not helping, especially when they both wanted the same thing damn it!

He was definitely not trying to revise the laws so that, perhaps, a certain group of individuals might peek their heads back out of the shadows. Even though he (definitely didn’t) still woke up in the dead of night with the phantom memory of a shield plunging towards his chest and a silent scream on his lips because Steve was going to kill him--

Tony sat back, cursing his headache, cursing politics, cursing his rumbling stomach, for he hadn’t thought to grab breakfast before Pepper roped him into his schedule. Cursing the fact that there were over two-hundred unanswered messages on his personal phone from one Peter Parker and that his damn hands started shaking every time he considered responding.

“FRIDAY, what is Pepper torturing me with next?”

“Mrs. Potts has set your conference with the Harrmen Corporation about your new holoscreen software next, sir,” his AI responded promptly.

Relieved his next responsibility was at least something related to his inventions and not the endless yammering that was the politicians over the traces of Steve, Tony climbed from his chair and made his way to one of the compounds many meeting rooms.

As he walked, the tiredness fell from his face and lifted from his form, discomfort wiping itself from his features, weakness disappearing behind walls upon walls of steel. Anyone who’d seen him in his office would have been met with an entirely different person as he entered the conference. He was not Tony, not anymore; he was Anthony Edward Stark, Iron Man, founder of Stark Industries, the genius behind the success.

He wasn’t sure anyone had seen Tony. Not for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

That thing? That you may or may not have noticed? It's important.
In Which Peter gives a Speech, and gets one in Return

Chapter Notes

Little bit shorter, only five pages, but hey. The speeches and the scenarios needed some revision, so I had to crop some length for it to make sense. Hope you like!

Aunt May took Peter for Thai Saturday afternoon, before he started his patrol. They tried a new place, Ayada Thai, that night, and Peter liked the place instantly. It was small and cozy, with sauce bottles mounted decoratively on avocado-green walls. Ebony cabinets hid the entrance to the kitchen, and windows looked out onto the streets of Queens. When May and he sat down on the stools at the long table running against said windows, Peter hoped their food measured up.

“So, school?” May inquired, smiling lightly at him.

“Um, good, yeah, good,” Peter replied. “I’m working with MJ on a social studies project. She’s obviously very invested, and ready to really amp up what we can do. Dunno what we’re gonna do, but it’ll be cool. Maybe she’ll let me build things.”

“Any excuse to get into the workshop,” May said. “Ned?”

“He was sick yesterday, when we talked about it.” ‘Sick.’ Peter had his doubts. “We’ll probably team up on Monday. Oh!” Peter snapped his fingers. “Star Wars. It’s coming up.”

“Already?”

“Yup. Ned wants to do it with us…” he trailed off, noticing May’s attention was drifting to a TV above his head. “May?”

Her eyes flashed with concern, still watching the screen. Nervous, Peter turned, just in time to read the headline running along the bottom of the screen.

Ferry sinks just outside Manhattan, 8 confirmed dead, 17 injured, dozens more missing.

Peter felt his stomach churn. “Damn…”

A voice cut scathingly from behind him. “Where were the damn superheroes there, huh?”

Peter spun to see a waiter, theirs, staring angrily at the scene on TV. “What?” he asked, taken aback by the man’s tone. May put a hand on his shoulder.

The man set the drinks he was holding down, crossing his arms. “My best friend’s daughter was on that boat. Spider-Man and Iron Man show up to save a ferry cut in half by alien technology, but I guess can’t be bothered by natural causes.”

Peter gaped guppily, not sure whether to bristle or be deeply ashamed. Because the man was right. He could have done something, they could have done something.

May’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and he could hear her whispering, barely. You can’t save everyone. Not your fault, not anyone’s fault. You can’t save everyone.
Peter’s instincts were to disagree, of course, but he was distracted by another comment the waiter made. “That’s why we need those damn Accords.”

Peter did bristle, this time. “What? What do the Accords have to do with this?” He clenched a fist on the table behind his back, pushing away his chagrin until later.

The man snapped his attention to Peter, and the boy realized he hadn’t truly been noticed until then. “Heroes are hypocritical, that’s all I’m saying.” The darkness in his gaze made it clear it was definitely not all he was saying. “Picking and choosing who lives and who dies. The governments, the world, should get to choose what battles are fought, not some pompous rich guy who can fly a suit.”

It was the explicit jab at Stark that made Peter angry. Images of the man flashed in the teen’s mind: Stark fighting his own team for the sake of his morals and the same damn laws this idiot was twistedly promoting, Stark snapping the fingers of his wifi-enabled suit to activate a heater in Peter’s own suit, Stark wanting the boy to be “better than” him, Stark putting himself between a nuke and hundreds of thousands of innocent lives.

Spider-Man didn’t know when he stood, but he did know when he started talking. “I think you’ll find you’re the hypocritical one, Sir.” He said coldly. “The Accords bring regulation, which is no doubt a necessity. But that ferry—” he pointed at the screen—“would not be on the list of government-approved Avenger activity. The Accords didn’t keep the people on that boat alive, and they never will. And the ferry four months ago? It wasn’t the Accords that saved that ship. It was Spider-Man and that same pompous rich guy who can fly a suit. So don’t hate on the heroes for failing to save everyone and then turn around and ask for more procedures to allow them to do so.”

Silence greeted him when he finished, every eye in the restaurant on him. Spider-Man felt the angry passion draining out of him, replaced by awkward embarrassment. Peter sat back down and tried not to look at the man he’d just preached too. “Er, can we go, Aunt May?”

May, who was (to his astonishment) grinning like an idiot, nodded.

They made their way quickly from the restaurant, slamming the door on the response the waiter finally composed to send after them.

And then his aunt burst out laughing.

“God, Peter, what were you doing?”

Peter shrugged, cheeks burning. “I--I--”

“You creamed him! He looked like a damn goldfish. ‘I think you’ll find you’re the hypocritical one, Sir,’ ” she quoted teasingly, an embarrassing impression of his voice echoing through the afternoon streets. People hardly gave them a second glance.

“Okay, it was a good impression.”

“Aunt May--”

“You were right, of course, even if I don’t approve of all the vigilantism. And do of the Accords.”

“So do I, but--”

“Of course! You fought--” she grimaced at the memory--“with that idiot Stark for them. I’d be confused if you weren’t a supporter.”

“But he was right!” Peter finally said, voice perhaps a bit too loud.
Aunt May trailed off.

Peter scrubbed his face. “That ferry was just like the one with Vulture, except it’s engine exploded and wasn’t sawed in half by alien tech. If we were there for Vulture’s, we should have been there for that one!”

Aunt May stopped. “Peter, look at me.”

He did, heart hammering with shame.

“This was not your fault.”

“It’s on me.”

“No it’s not. Listen to me, Peter. Bad things happen. People die, and there are always what-ifs. You superheros are just another set of possibilities. You can ask ‘what if Spider-Man had been there?’ all you want, but you also have to ask ‘what if they’d checked the engine closer?’ or ‘what if they’d gone over the safety procedure like the brochure says?’ Honestly, you guys are just a fancy way to bounce around questions.” May smiled, putting a hand on his cheek. “And I expect you to learn from this, just as the engine-checkers will, just as the brochure-readers will. But it was not your fault.”

Peter swallowed. “I…”

“You can still feel bad. You can regret that you weren’t there. But you don’t get to blame yourself.”

May let go, walking back along the street. “You give yourself far too much credit.”

Damn. Peter hated when she was right.

The sinking shame lightened, and the teen took a deep breath. “Thanks, Aunt May.”

“No problem, kid. Now, why don’t we get you some actual food the next time we crash a restaurant?”

Peter laughed.

Spider-Man swung in from patrol that night puffing and full of adrenaline. He’d found a new feature of his suit, like a fancy version of Google Maps, but it charted the optimum swinging route with the most convenient buildings for web-attachment. Hell, it even charted the optimum points on the optimum buildings. Like Maps, it took some of the fun out of the traveling, so he wouldn’t use it too much, but damn; Stark had really outdone himself.

Actually, ‘outdo’ was not a word Spider-Man thought was in Tony Stark’s vocabulary.

Peter pressed the icon on the front of his chest, the suit going loose about his form. Already composing his next voicemail to the man, Peter fumbled his arm from the baggy onesie. But, when he pulled the phone into his gaze (nearly dropping it twice) he found Stark had beat him to it.

Peter stared at the screen, convinced he was seeing things. Four months of radio silence, and suddenly “1 missed call from Tony Stark” and “1 new voicemail”?

Unable to help the excitement that crawled up from his stomach, Peter started listening.

The first thing he heard was silence.
Confused, Peter pulled the phone away from his ear. He saw the numbers still ticking away the time, though, and, shrugging, went back to listening.

More silence, and then he heard Mr. Stark’s voice. “FRIDAY, what are you doing?”

“I’m calling Mr. Parker, Sir,” came the robotic reply.

“Why the fuck would you be doing that?”

A pause. Peter didn’t know AI’s did pauses.

“You haven’t smiled in three days, Sir.” At this point, Peter was starting to realize perhaps it hadn’t been Stark leaving him a message. Karen and FRIDAY would get along well.

“What in the world does that have to do with anything?” Stark’s annoyed huff. “Besides, you must’ve miscounted. I was smiling like three damn seconds ago.”

“You haven’t smiled in three days.”

“I just did!” There was a noise resembling someone slapping a screen. Peter couldn’t help but grin slightly. “Are you broken, software?”

“You haven’t smiled in three days, but you just did reading Mr. Parker’s last update.”

Another pause.

“Aaaaaaaand?”

A noise not unlike a robotic sigh. “You read all of his messages. He needs a response.”

This time, Stark replied instantly. “That’s a hoot, FRIDAY. After everything I’ve already done?” A sardonic chuckle. “I’m the last thing he needs.”

Silence.

“You’re still calling him, aren’t you.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Well, you disobedient piece of programming, here’s a direct order. Don’t call Peter Parker.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The robotic voice of his own phone blared an “end of message,” and Peter set the phone down slowly.

His first thought was what the hell?

The next ones occurred all in quite a large jumble all at the same time. Last thing I need?--Smiled reading my messages--he reads all my messages--after everything he’s done?

After standing there for far too long, Peter decided that the best course of action was to put some actual clothes on. He threw on his pajama pants and the weirdly comfortable tourist T-shirt Stark had gotten Spider-Man when he’d taken back the suit. As much as he’d hated their existence then, he couldn’t deny the clothes were really comfortable.
And then he flopped down on the bed, not precisely sure what to do next.

He wanted to think it would do Mr. Stark good to hear from him. He wanted to think he’d been the thing to make the man smile. He wanted to think a lot of things, but… well, they were impossible. Maybe he was that for someone else, but not Iron Man.

He remembered the message, though. Mr. Stark thought… Peter didn’t know what he thought. He thought Peter didn’t need him. Didn’t want him? *Shouldn’t* want him?

Peter stretched his torso out over the bed to grab his mask off the pile of blue and red tech that was his abandoned suit. Slipping it over his head and feeling a bit stupid, he waited until Karen was booted up and speaking.

“Hey, Karen, what would Mr. Stark answer a message about?”

“Mr. Stark has been ignoring your messages, Peter.”

“No, he just hasn’t responded. And I need him too,” he decided. “So what’s something he’d have no choice but to respond to. Something--” Peter grinned, feeling like he’d made some sort of breakthrough-- “he wouldn’t feel threatened by.”

“Despite my confusion that Mr. Stark could be threatened by you, Peter, I think I have just the thing.”
In Which Tony Starts Talking and Can't Stop

Chapter Summary

They meet!
More language here. Eh. I feel it's necessary. And more Tony perspective. Also necessary.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Tony collapsed into bed at the end of the long Saturday, he was surprised to find only a single text message from Peter. He rolled his eyes, finding the letter to be far longer than the usual updates, and proceeded to read it with the kid’s voice in his head.

Hi Mr. Stark. Um, I sorta kinda got stabbed.

The saturation of anxiety in Tony’s system skyrocketed.

It wasn’t bad, before you freak. :) A scratch. All healed up now! A thumbs-up emoji had Tony grinning lightly. But the suit doesn’t have spider healing, so it needs a patch up.

The next line came later, like an afterthought. If you’re busy it’s not a big deal. - PP

Tony rolled his eyes. The kid would never have asked him for help if it truly wasn’t a big deal; someone had planted this idea in his head that Tony didn’t have time for him. Who? Oh right, that had been Tony.

The man rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to pretend he wasn’t excited. This was (if he thought about it) quite perfect. He’d get out of some conferences, into the workshop, and get to see the kid for the first time in months. And this was something he was supposed to do, right? Fix the suit. Improve the suit. He could do that without screwing anything up, without changing the conversations.

So Tony replied to Peter for the first time in months, breaking the radio silence for good.

I’m always busy. Get your ass over here tomorrow, and we’ll see what I can do about the suit’s ‘spider healing.’

* * *

“You, Karen, are a genius.” Peter punched the air when he read the single response. “Tomorrow. Well, today now, I guess. He didn’t give a time…”

“He’ll know when you’re going over, Peter,” Karen hummed.

Peter laughed. “Yeah, of course he will.”
An hour and three classes worth of homework later, Spider-Man was swinging through the streets. He didn’t know who would be at the compound; better safe than sorry with his secret identity. The rip he’d engineered in the suit near his hip (God, the material was strong; he’d had to sharpen all of the kitchen knives after) was actually quite inconvenient, stretching and pulling and contorting the suit in ways he wasn’t used to.

As he got closer to the compound, doubt started to flicker in his gut. What, exactly, was he doing? Engineering some excuse to see a busy billionaire because a voicemail the man wasn’t even aware was sent? Sabotaging his own suit for it? This was dumb. This was really, really dumb.

But… he couldn’t deny how relieved he’d felt when Mr. Stark responded. That he acknowledged Peter’s existence. And he couldn’t deny how happy he’d felt when the man’s voice had come through in that message for the first time in so, so long.

What. The actual. Fuck.

So Spider-Man finished his journey to the compound and was met by one Happy Hogan waving both hands halfheartedly from the grounds to get his attention. Spider-Man grinned, sending a web just a bit closer than necessary and leaping gracefully to the earth. He took off his mask, shaking out brown curls and grinning like an idiot. “Happy!” Peter greeted, bouncing forward.

The perpetually grumpy man let Peter hug him, squeezing him back just a little. “Long time no see.”

“I know! No talk, either.” Peter made a face. “Mr. Stark know I’m here?”

“What are you kidding? ‘Course he does. He’s waiting in the workshop.”

Peter, suddenly remembering that this was Iron Man’s workshop he was about to enter, fidgeted nervously. “Um. Am I late or...did I make him miss--”

“Stop babbling kid. The boss has been using you as an excuse to spend his time in the workshop all day. It isn’t him you’ve got to worry about, it’s Pepper.”

Peter gulped. If Pepper was anything like Aunt May, well, he was dead.

Aunt May, technically, didn’t know he was here. If he told her he needed his suit fixed, she’d ask what happened, and he’d have to make up some sort of lie (which she was always able to detect) that both kept her from freaking out and murdering Mr. Stark.

So he’d spend the morning being productive, and then told her he was going patrolling. Not a lie: he had done a bit of web-slinging before he came over. And he’d probably do some more when Mr. Stark had finished.

“Is Pepper…”

Happy snorted. “Oh, she’ll have your head. But she’s not around; she’s covering in the conference for Tony.”

“I--I--can come back later--I thought Sunday would be less--”

“Zip it, kid. You back out now and Stark gets it, which means I get it, which means you get it too.”

Peter nodded emphatically.

“Alright, follow.”
The compound was just as unreal as Peter remembered. Happy took him inside the largest building, the one adjacent to the helicopter pad. The windows arched across its entire front, viewing the sprawling training compound in all its majesty. There, Peter noted, were the Avenger quarters. And that was Mr. Stark’s press room. Was that more training? He knew that was vehicle containment…

“Shut that mouth of yours before you drool all over my shoes.”

Peter snapped his jaw shut, embarrassment burning in his cheeks. He wasn’t supposed to be some starstruck intern; he was Spider-Man. He’d even been to the compound before.

Happy turned away from the windows, leading them deeper into the compound. He stopped before a mundane section of wall, then sighed. “All yours, kid.”

“Uh.”

“Just touch it. It’ll read you’re DNA, or some shit like that, and let you in if your authorized.”

“Er, am I authorized?”

“Kid, you’ve had full access to everything in the compound since Tony first built the place.” Happy rolled his eyes at Peter’s shocked look.

“Really?”

“Just go in. I have better things to be doing.”

Peter, breathing deeply, put his hand on the wall. His handprint lit up, starting an average blue light then shifting with a soft beep to a deep, saturated red. My color, Peter thought, grinning in wonder.

The wall shicked open (Peter couldn’t help but imagine Star Trek), leaving Peter on the doorstep of a workshop that was, quite frankly, magnificent.

Curving and climbing tables reached throughout the space, every surface littered with gleaming metal. Pieces and parts and strange materials hung suspended before holoscreens scrolling through data at unreal speeds. He saw automated arms welding in the back, technology so precise it could be for microsurgery. Nanotech, Peter thought, his eyes widening. There was even a small lab in the back, chemicals strewn dangerously (and characteristically) about. Through the somehow orderly, appealing chaos, he could distinguish parts of the Iron Man suits, slowly being assembled by robotic tools. There was even… was that Captain America’s shield?

It was wonderful, it was everything he’d ever dreamed. He could do anything, everything with the materials just lying abandoned in corners or strewn about the tables.

And in the middle of it all, hands and face smeared with grease, clothes clingy with sweat, was Tony Stark.

Peter had never seen the man like this. It had always been the clear-cut, rich, powerful, strong man on the news, in the suit, teaching him a lesson. Never did he see the genius, the skillful, hardworking leader and provider to the Avengers.

Stark hadn’t noticed him, peering intently at something on the table with his right hand moving with practiced speed across a screen to his left. Peter cleared his throat, eyes still wide with awe. The man turned, tired brown eyes meeting Peter’s.

And grinned wide and genuine.
"Hey, kid."

* * *

Tony had the prototype for the mending fabric nearly complete when the boy appeared in the doorway, his youthful face flooded with excitement and wonder. When Tony had rehearsed the situation in his head, he hadn’t prepared for that expression. And he certainly hadn’t been prepared for how he’d feel seeing the kid for the first time in months. Tony was out of character; his shields were down, as it were, in his workshop, surrounded by the metal.

So when he met those innocently enthusiastic eyes, he was grinning before he realized.

"Hey, kid."

Peter looked surprised, but smiled hesitantly. "Hey, Mr. Stark."

"You can come in, you know."

Peter startled, cheeks flushing. Tony held back a laugh and went back to the fabric, stitching in the next thread. The creation was based off of the binding fluid he’d implemented in his own suit for battlefield healing and quick repairs; he’d added it to the fabric as a sort of stitching mechanism build into the fibers.

Peter hovered awkwardly behind him, and Tony glanced at the boy over his shoulder. Yes, that definitely needed a patch up. A rip like that was damaging the structural integrity of the rest of the suit… and he could see skin through the hole. Could get cold. Or wet. Yeah, water could easily slip inside the material and scramble the circuitry he’d so painstakingly implemented.

And that just wouldn’t do, now would it?

Tony gestured vaguely behind him, twisting his arm back awkwardly to point in the general direction of the rip. "What happened?"

"Some guy with a pocket knife when I tried to save him from falling off a building. Ungrateful." He heard rustling as the boy loosened the suit and began climbing out of it.

"Hm. Get used to it."

There was a pause. "Er, what are you doing?" Peter asked hesitantly, obviously curious.

Tony let himself smile a small, self-satisfied grin. "You said something about your suit not having 'spidey healing powers.' I thought I might do something about that."

Peter sucked in a breath behind him. "Mr. Stark I--you don’t have to--I didn’t mean--"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Shut it, Parker. I should have done this months ago."

The boy was quiet, and Tony turned around, seeing him staring about the workshop again. "This place is… wonderful," he breathed.

That’s right; the kid was a scientist. An engineer. He’d built those original webshooters long before Tony came along--

And screwed most everything up.
He did that a lot.

Tony forced his gaze to stay steady and not drift to the corner of the room, forced his mind not to remember blood and snow. “Thanks, kid.”

“I mean really!” The excitement was oozing off him now. “You have nanotech being synthesized in the corner, and is that—it is! Mr. Stark… wow.”

Tony found himself smiling. “Well, you’re welcome to it any time.”

Wait what?

“What?”
What?

“Yeah. I mean, Midtown Science and Technology’s gotta have a workshop of some kind, but nothing can compare to this baby. Nothing compares to having the right tools, kid; it’ll make a huge difference when you’re creating something. Besides, you’re my intern, aren’t you?”

What the hell was he doing? Stop talking, Tony, stop it--

“You’re already in the database: FRIDAY will let you in. Just don’t cut off any limbs.”

This was not--no, the kid was not supposed to just waltz in here, he was supposed to stay away, stay safe--what the hell was Tony doing?

Peter was wearing the same expression he’d had when Tony had told him he could keep the suit. That hesitant excitement, like he wanted to jump at the opportunity but didn’t want to be a bother, didn’t want to do anything but help, not quite able to believe someone would give something like that to him.

“Mr. Stark… really?”

He should say no. He should don the cruelly cold smile and call it a joke. Tell him of course not; he’s got everything he needs in town.

I can keep the suit?

“Of course, kid.”

Shit.

Shit.

MOTHERFUCKING SHIT.

Peter beamed. Tony smiled back.

Shit .

“Gimme your suit. Let’s fix this up.”

A minute later, Peter was draping the suit into Tony’s hands, trying to simultaneously cram himself into a shirt. When the kid was dressed and leaning over the worktable, forearms already greasy, Tony went to work.
They tinkered in silence for a while, Peter absorbing his every motion. It made Tony itch, but he didn’t really mind the kid’s enthusiasm. Eventually, the teen was handing Tony tools almost before he knew he needed them himself, familiarizing himself with the workshop and all it contained. So the work went fast, the suit stitching up and the circuits reconnecting. Tony reached for the strangely slippery, hopefully self-binding threads he’d manufactured earlier, beginning to intersperse it in a small area. Hopefully, the next time Peter got into trouble, this area wouldn’t need a patch-up.

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony startled. “Yeah?”

“Er, I was just wondering if you heard about the boat.”

“The one that sunk? I did, yeah. Briefly.”

The boy shifted. “I just… I heard about it at lunch yesterday.”

“Where is this going, kid? I’m busy.”

“Right, sorry.” The boy shook himself. “Someone compared it to the ferry.”

Tony stopped.

“He was really stupid about it. Somehow making it about the Accords. But… well, Mr. Stark, he was sort of right. Since we’re--”

“Since we’re heroes, and we could do something, shouldn’t we for everything? We’re meant to help people. Why can’t we help them all? Why can’t we save them? Every drowning man, every burn victim, every civilian dead in an alley for a few bills and a wallet.”

Peter was looking at him, those innocent eyes solemn. “Yeah. Where… when…”

“When do we stop? Where’s the line?” Tony shook his head. “Yeah, kid, I can’t answer that. I don’t think any one man can. But maybe if you asked the whole world at once, it could give you a rough idea.” He looked away, crinkling his mouth sardonically. “That’s why I figure we need the Accords, kid. Because now there is a line. And maybe it’s be a little above what it should be. Maybe people die who should have lived. But maybe people live who might have died.”

“What about me?” Peter asked.

“You?” Tony’s hands clenched involuntarily. “You, kid, have no place in the Accords as they are. You’d be leashed. No kid should have to live like that.”

*Every phone call monitored. Every meeting watched. Every operation spied upon.*

“I’m not--”

“Yeah, you are a kid. But that doesn’t matter to some people.” Tony watched the boy, watched his form straighten in determination.

“I want to be part of the line, Mr. Stark. I don’t want to feel uncertain anymore.”

Pride flickered in Tony’s chest. *Thanks, Mr. Stark, but I’m good. I’d rather just stay on the ground.*

“And you will. Just as soon as I figure it out. But don’t you dare get yourself mixed up with Ross and the rest of those fuckers until I’ve sorted things, okay?”
Peter looked slightly stunned. “O-okay.”

“Good boy. Now hand me those pliers. The ones with the really tapered ends. No, to your left. There you go.”

He was going to make this suit worthy of the boy beside him.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Bonding! Woo!

I was not planning most of this; this chapter and some of the next were gonna be combined. But then Pete decided he needed to talk about the boat and Tony decided he needed to give a little speech, and so we got this and I had to totally rework the plan. Blame it on the dumb characters.
Chapter Summary

Things pick up a little with a minor villain and some nightmares.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The building screams.

Maybe he does, too.

There are pillars around him, pillars of concrete slowly, painfully turning to sand one grain at a time. And he can’t move. He has to run, has to get out, but he can’t move--

The structure groans again. It’s a final groan, a promise groan.

The building falls.

And suddenly all is weight and dust and darkness, rock and metal and concrete, pain and blood and fear. His body won’t work. His mind won’t work.

His breath doesn’t come. There are rocks on his chest, metal in his throat, and his chest cannot rise. He can’t move. He can’t breath. He’s going to die here. No one is coming, no one will find him. He’s lied to too many, disappointed those who matter, leaving him alone.

Alone with the weight.

Alone with the dust.

Alone with the darkness.

Alone with the rock and the metal and the concrete. Alone with the pain and the blood.

Alone with the fear.

Peter jerked awake, his limbs flailing involuntarily. Jagged breaths shook his small form as he breathed simultaneously too much and not nearly enough. Getoutgetoutgetoutgetout.

Slowly, after an eternity, logic reasserted itself with the familiar touch of his carpet against his cheek. He’d fallen off the bed to land, entangled in sheets and sticky with perspiration, on his bedroom floor.

A Dream. The Dream. He knew it was a dream, he did, but every time, every damn time he woke up convinced he was dying. Suffocating under steel and asphalt and the remains of a structure.

He knew that. God, he did. So why did he still dream of the feeling? Why had it taken him a month to be able to go into Ned’s basement? Why did his mind shut down when he entered an old building? Why?

He didn’t know the answers. He didn’t think he ever would. But the Dreams had gotten less frequent, though sometimes they seemed stronger than ever. And he could go into basements now without a flicker of unease. Old buildings were fine too, usually, but when they creaked—

He wasn’t thinking about this.

Peter fumbled for his phone, blinking at the harsh light when he booted it up. 4:07. Great, he told himself, this was good. He could get back to sleep and enter REM before he needed to get up for school. Good. Good.

Peter changed into warm, clean sweatpants and grabbed a new blanket, then climbed into bed and closed his eyes peacefully.

He lay awake for the rest of the night.

“I’ve got it.”

“Got what?”

“Our social studies project, dumbass.” MJ slapped Peter’s shoulder, sitting down and opening her book and lunch, as though she wasn’t going to elaborate. She didn’t.

Peter and Ned glanced at each other. Then at the girl, who didn’t look up.

“Um, MJ?”

“What?”

“What’s the project?”

Smiling, because she had won whatever twisted challenge Peter hadn’t known was occurring, MJ set down the book and stared intently at them. “Menial work.”

“Yeah, I picked up on that from the prompt, MJ. Just get to the point.”

“Hospital beds,” she stated. “I think we should talk about the lasting effects of small, seemingly unimportant jobs on the whole of society. About how those few minutes impact life on a larger scale.”

Peter could see it, now. “Right. And the making of hospital beds, to clean them and then make them appealing, is, well, a menial task. But without it, we’d have some repercussions.”

“And with it,” Ned said, excited, “the way it is, I mean, we also have repercussions. That time really adds up.”

MJ smiled. “Glad to see you aren’t total idiots. Yeah. Ned and I’ll do the writing, and I’m sure we can come up with something for the computer guy in the chair here. You, Parker, get to come up with our solution.”

“You mean like a device that makes hospital beds?”
“Sure,” she said in a tone of very obvious yes. “Not my place to tell you how to do your job.”

Peter rolled his eyes, and Ned snickered.

“Later, losers.”

She proceeded not to leave, diving into her book and refusing to respond to them until the end of lunch bell. MJ was interesting like that. He used to think her weird, but now, well, her antics were just intriguing. Unique. Peter was glad she was their friend, glad she was close enough that he felt a slight urge to tell her who he was.

And because he was thinking about Spider-Man, and the people who knew of him, he remembered what she’d said. MJ had called Ned ‘guy in the chair.’

Peter panicked for a moment, snapping his gaze to the girl beside them, calmly packing up her stuff and lingering by the lunch table until they did the same. His mantra of inward curses faded after a moment, reasoning that she’d preceded the comment with ‘computer’ and said it as a simple statement of fact. Besides, how could she know? A person like MJ would confront him immediately, wouldn’t she?

You never knew, with her.

Thoroughly unnerved, Peter went to class.

He’d told Mr. Stark he’d stay close to the ground.

*A little late to remember that,* Spider-Man thought, pulling himself up the wall of the skyscraper and decidedly not looking down. This was not very close to the ground.

But the weirdo with the messed-up eyes was going higher, and what else was he supposed to do?

He’d spotted the dude in the crowd around the Empire State (yes, Spider-Man was currently climbing up the goddamn Empire State Building) because of the way he moved. Wrong. Quite wrong. And weird. Sorta jerky: he’d stay in one position for an awkwardly long time and then dart to the next. And those weird eyes added to the overall THIS DUDE IS CREEPY vibe, not to mention the licking. Who just flicked their tongue around in the middle of a crowded square at nine at night?

And then the dude had started climbing the building.

So Spider-Man had, too. Because normal people did not climb buildings. Including him, he supposed, but that didn’t really matter, as long as he could figure this out.

The man froze for a moment, and Spider-Man tried to increase his speed. The man looked down at him, eyes wide and flicking around unnaturally. *Like a lizard,* Spider-Man thought. And the wall-climbing. *Oooo like a gecko! He can be Gecko.*

As he came closer, Spider-Man yelled up to Gecko, “What are you doing man? Just sticking around?”

Gecko didn’t listen, pushing even higher up the building. Spider-Man cursed, following. “Karen, can we intercept him?”

“His movements are too irregular. I cannot track an optimum path.”
“Well, we’ll just have to do this the old fashioned way.”

“Of course, Peter.”

Spider-Man continued climbing, wind tearing at his thin form. The lights of New York reflected in the widows of the building beneath him, already mostly beneath him. Damn, and he’d thought the Washington Monument had been high.

“Do not worry, Peter. Your parachute is fully operational.”

“Thanks, Karen.”

“No problem.”

Spider-Man’s enhanced senses let him taste the thinner air, and he breathed a bit faster. He tore his gaze from the windows and focused on the gecko dude.

When they reached the viewing platform, people started yelling. The gecko dude threw himself over the spiked fence. Shooting a web and using his momentum to swing up and over, Spider-Man wasn’t far behind.

“Hey guys! Killer view!” he said as he sprayed fluid towards the gecko dude. “Ever been to New York before? Oh, and you might want to clear the area.”

Spider-Man didn’t get to see their reaction, as the lizard guy dodged his webbing, lunging toward the spire of the building.

No no no. Not allowed. Things got fragile up there, and Spider-Man didn’t have a super great track record for not breaking things.

He webbed the guy, yanking him back onto the platform. “And where do you think your going?”

To his shock, the man responded. “Get--higher--” Distracted, Spider-Man reacted a bit too late as Gecko-Dude slipped from his webbing, and the next net missed.

“Shit. Karen, activate web-grenade.”

“Web grenade activated.”

“Awesome!” Spider-Man flipped his fingers towards the gecko-dude.

Who proceeded to headbutt him in the chest.

Spider-Man flew against the railing of the platform, thoroughly caught off-balance. “Dude!”

The man was already scaling the building again, and Spider-Man gritted his teeth, carefully aiming…

But the web he sent flying towards the man was the wrong kind. The grenade didn’t deal nearly enough force to the rapidly retreating man, and Spider-Man cursed, quickly returning to his standard web shooter settings. “Hey, wait up!” he called, leaping towards the spire. “Views are better with two!”

“Peter, it appears the man is wearing some kind of technology; a bracelet displaying life signs.”

“The bracelet is displaying life signs?”
“Yes.”

“Why?” He sent another web towards the gecko, slowing him slightly.

“I believe it has coded with another creature’s DNA.”

“What? You mean like a lizard, or something?”

“A short-horned mountain lizard, yes.”

“What the hell? Is he wearing a lizard?”

Karen gave him her automated laugh, and he grinned a bit. “No. I believe it has just enhanced him temporarily.”

“So, the gecko-dude—Oh my god!”

The guy suddenly fell back towards him, and Spider-Man instinctively thrust himself out of the way. And off the building.

“SHIT!” He flailed for a moment, limbs meeting no resistance in the free air. Time stretched, and Peter thought he could see every light of New York sprawled out before him, ready to swallow him whole.

And then Spider-Man was sending a web back towards the building, swinging gracefully back against the surface. Easy.

The gecko dude snarled at him. “Hungry. Spider.”

“Dude, that’s creepy. I know—” web—“you think your some sort of—” web—“high-altitude lizard, but you’re talking a little—” web—“cannibalistic.”

The man lunged at him, and Spider-Man swung away from the building again. “Karen, what’ve we got?”

“If you destroy the device it should counteract the man’s connection.”

“Awesome. One destroyed bracelet coming right up. Activate rapid-fire web.”

Spider-Man proceeded to barrage the gecko-dude with repeated bullets of webbing. He actually tried to eat them. Like flies. God, this was messed up. They scurried up and down the walls of the Empire State, the windows and the railings showing concerned faces all blurring together into one. But it didn’t take long for gecko-dude to be thoroughly discombobulated, and Spider-Man sent one last burst of standard webbing, yanking the bracelet from the strange man’s arm.

He crushed it against the side of the building without a second thought.

And the man fell.

Spider-Man threw another set of webs, gripping the man and landing them both safely on the observation deck. But the man didn’t move, lying still as Spider-Man adjusted to having level ground beneath his feet.

Crap.
“Hey, hey Gecko!” Spider-Man scrambled over to the limp man. “Are you okay?”

The man didn’t react, and Spider-Man felt for a pulse. It was strong, and after another second the man’s eyes flew open.

“Gah!” he yelped, throwing himself across the observation deck.

“Hey, hey!” Spider-Man said, hands extended in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. “You’re okay, you’re fine. I destroyed the lizard thing.”

The man froze. “You did what?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t all that hard. You’re safe now.”

The man stared at him. With his face no longer contorted unnaturally, he was actually quite handsome.

“You destroyed my work.”

“Um. Yeah? You were climbing the Empire State, terrorizing people, trying to eat me.”

“I did nothing of the kind!” The man clenched angry fists, and Spider-Man took a step back, surprised. “That ‘lizard thing’ is thousands of dollars and years of hard work! A psychic and physiological connection with a creature has never been possible until that device. And you reduced it to scrap!”

“I had to!” But maybe the man had a point. He hadn’t truly been doing anything dangerous… well, besides climbing up the tallest building in New York in the middle of the night. And, “besides, that’s strong tech. Some sort of mind and body link with an animal? Dangerous. And I’d have been hearing about it if it was legal.”

The man glared at him, and Spider-Man took him in. Tall, bulky, not really fat but well on the way. Black hair and green eyes, a burn mark on his temple like a splatter of hot liquid. Handsome, but the crazy-lizard look kinda stanched the appeal.

Spider-Man sighed. He knew what it was like to have something you’d worked for taken from you; it sucked. And though he’d like to pursue this man and learn his history, that slightly desolate look told him the man had nothing else under his belt. He didn’t need to worry about him. “Look, since the tech’s been taken care of—” he held up the splintered remains of the bracelet, and the man growled— “and you didn’t hurt anyone, I’ll leave you be. No cops, no calling anyone. Ride the elevator down. It’s super fun, especially if you get the faster one.”

“You’ll regret—”

“Oh don’t start! I’m sure I will and blah blah blah.” Spider-Man checked his watch. “Oops. Gotta go, man! See you around! Oh wait— no I won’t!”

With that, he backflipped over the railing and began his descent towards Queens.

It was time to be close to the ground again.

Chapter End Notes
Apologies for my comic-book-level science. Also I love Karen. Who else loves Karen? Weirdly attached to both of the AI, actually.
In Which Neither of Our Boys can Stop Staring

Chapter Summary

Things go a bit domestic, MJ is amazing, May ships it, and Tony definitely needs a hug.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

To Peter’s eternal shock, Happy actually picked up the phone.

“What?” he snapped. “I’m very busy.”

“Hi Happy! It’s Peter Parker.”

“Yeah, there’s a name connected to this number for a reason. What do you want?”

“Can I talk to Mr. Stark?”

“He’s also busy.”

“Well, I was fighting this guy—”

“Gonna stop you right there. Tell me honestly kid—” there was the sound of a chattering group of humans and a muffled curse from Happy, then a door slamming shut— “will I care?”

“Yes,” Peter stated definitively. “He was a lizard. Well, not really, but he had this device that had some sort of psychological connection to an animal, that in turn gave the dude biological similarities to the creature. He was climbing the Empire State. At he tried to eat my webs and stuck his tongue out at everything. I destroyed the device, but I still have parts of it,” he explained hurriedly. “And the dude wasn’t doing anything wrong besides illegal tool testing/experimentation (which now that I think about it is sort of a lot of things to be doing wrong) so I let him off, but I took the device.”

There was a pause, and Peter held his breath. Then Happy said, “I’ll tell Tony.”

“Really?”

“Course. I’ll tell him you’re bringing the thing over Saturday. Hopefully Pepper can clear a spot in his schedule.”

“You think this is that important?” Peter did, but Happy had never shared his opinions before.

“Honestly no, but I can’t not listen to you. Remember the last time that happened?” A sigh. “Yeah, I’ll talk to Tony.”

“You’re… listening to me?”

“Yeah, remember? I can’t not or the job is down the drain.”

“Thank you, Happy.”

He could hear the man rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, whatever kid. And stop with the puppy-dog
eyes. I can see them from here.”

Peter chuckled, but forced his expression away from unbridled happiness, just in case Happy was somehow watching him.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but the older man had already hung up.

Supposing that was a good thing, for if he dallied any longer he’d be late for school, Peter rolled off his bed and shrugged out of his pajamas. He checked under his mattress for the remains of the lizard-thing. Tuesday. He liked Tuesday; he had Decathalon with Ned. And MJ.

“Peter, are you up?”

“Yeah, coming May!”

“I made pancakes!”

Peter made a face. ‘Burned chunks of batter’ would be a more accurate description, but hey. Slathered in peanut butter and syrup they weren’t too bad.

Thirty minutes later he was on the Subway to Midtown, headphones in and humming contentedly. Things were good, he thought. Happy was listening to him. MJ was talking to him more. He had Star Wars to look forward to with Ned tomorrow when he wasn’t allowed to go patrolling, and the girl had even asked to join them despite her dislike for the franchize. They’d just have to change that, he supposed.

And he’d seen Mr. Stark. He’d done more than see the man. Stark had told him he was welcome in the Avengers compound.

Yeah, things could be a lot worse. He hadn’t even had the Dream that night.

Ned met him at the station, and they walked the rest of the way together. Peter explained Spider-Man’s exploits the night before to Ned’s excitement.

“So he was gonna eat you?”

“Uh, it sounded like it. He was connected to a lizard, and maybe the lizard ate spiders? I don’t know.”

“Huh. I heard about a guy who raided a police station about a device Spider-Man stole. He got detained for a week. Do you think it might lizard-dude?”

“Maybe… well, it’s a good thing I’m taking the device to Mr. Stark on Saturday.”

Ned’s eyes got as wide as dinner plates. “To the compound?”

“Yes, Ned.” Peter rolled his eyes fondly.

“Will any of the Avengers be there? Have you met the Iron Patriot?”

“What? Oh, Rhodey.”

“OH MY GOD YOU’RE ON A NICKNAME BASIS WITH WAR MACHINE.”

Peter looked around, relieved the football field was large enough that they weren’t heard. “No, Ned! Mr. Stark just talks about him sometimes.”
“What about the others?”

“I’ve told you about this. I fought some of them, but other than that…” Peter shrugged. “They’re war criminals now.”

“But does Stark every talk about them? Like y’know. Inside stories and stuff?”

Peter shook his head. “I don’t… well I hadn’t been talking to him much.” That had hopefully changed with the hours they’d spent in the workshop last Sunday. “But he doesn’t say anything about the ex-Avengers.” Peter paused. “I think it makes him sad, y’know?”

“Pfft. Iron Man? I don’t think so.”

“Yeah… you’re probably right.” But Peter couldn’t help imagining how he’d have felt if Ned had betrayed him like Captain America had Mr. Stark. Mr. Stark was human, too. Or at least, Peter thought he was.

He didn’t know most of the details about what people called the Civil War. Just the basics; Accords, disagreement, violence. And Mr. Stark had come back from Siberia not looking… well, not looking good at all. Broken in more ways than one.

Peter shook his head to clear his thoughts as they entered the school. Flash didn’t let him get two steps before falling in beside them.

“Hey, Penis Parker,” he greeted as usual. “You coming to Decathalon later?” Innocent question from anyone but Flash.

“Of course he is!” Ned said, bristling. Peter set a hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, I thought you had things to do. Internship and all that. Or was it just excuses and movie-watching?”

“That’s tomorrow,” Peter murmured before he could think.

“What was that?”

“Um.” Shit. No backing out of this now. “The movie-watching happens tomorrow.”

“Not that that’s any of your business,” Ned said. Flash brushed him off, and that did make Peter bristle.

“Losers. If you had any balls you’d—”

“Y’know, acting like a dick doesn’t make yours any bigger.”

MJ appeared behind Flash, her hair falling around her ears, her chocolate eyes flashing, and her face as unreadable as ever. Peter choked as whatever lame comeback he was going to spout out was completely blown out of the water.

Flash spun, looking like he wanted to go physical, but when he met MJ’s cold gaze, he balked. *Don’t piss of the team leader.*

“Hello, idiots. Oh, that’s you two by the way. This one’s a straight moron. Not stupid, just has a little bad luck in the thinking department,” MJ said.

Everyone gaped.
She rolled her eyes. “Class. Let’s go. They’ll miss three of us, at least.”

Not exactly sure how to react to what had just transpired, Peter shared a glance with Ned. After a moment, the other boy mouthed “classy exit?” and they tripped off after MJ, not daring to look back at Flash.

When they caught up to MJ, she was smirking.

Ned said “thanks” at the same time Peter said “you didn’t have to do that.”

“You’re welcome. And no I didn’t.” She raised an eyebrow.

“But now he’ll go after you, too,” Peter said, not wanting to sound ungrateful, but still concerned.

MJ scoffed. “No he won’t. I’m his team leader; I have the power to make his life a literal hell. And I’ve got better moves than he does anyhow. So don’t worry your little butt.”

Ned was still gaping a bit. “That was awesome, MJ, do you rehearse that?”

She glared at him. “I’m hurt you could doubt my spontaneous brilliance.”

“No! Of course not--I--”

“Kidding. That was a joke, idiot.”

Both Peter and Ned relaxed visibly, and MJ laughed, smirking. “Now, we actually do have Chemistry.”

“Right, right. Um. Right.”

She rolled her eyes and stalked off into the classroom, not bothering to wait for them again.

“Wow,” said Peter.

“Wow is right.”

“We should probably go.”

“Yeah, that might be a good idea.”

The two slightly dazed boys scurried into the classroom.

Peter was actually excited about the afternoon, for once, when Wednesday rolled around. Ned and MJ came home with him, Ned chatting their ears off as MJ just smiled. She rolled her eyes a lot, but it was fond.

“So, do you want publication order or storyline order?”

MJ frowned. “Aren’t you supposed to follow the story? Read books in order?”

“Yeah,” Peter said, “but the Star Wars franchise has two sequels and three prequels. The prequels… well, they have their low points.”

Ned scoffed. “They’re hilariously bad. Well, should we do a good one to give MJ the right idea before we embarrass ourselves?”
Peter shrugged, glancing at the girl beside them. “Who are we kidding? We’ve already done that!”

MJ grinned, raising an eyebrow.

“Storyline order it is, then.”

May had made buckets of popcorn by the time they arrived, the microwave kind so it was pretty well cooked. “Hey, boys! And… girl.”

MJ stuck out a hand. “Michelle, Mrs. Parker.”

“Nice to meet you, Michelle.” Aunt May gave her customary charming grin, MJ gave hers, and Peter could sense them bonding from across the room.

“You kids have fun. Don’t scare Michelle off with George Lucas,” May advised, then slipped out of the room. But not before she gave Peter a wink and a grin, and not before the boy’s cheeks grew just a bit pink.

* * *

“Hey, boss.”

“Yeah, FRIDAY?”

“Happy wants to talk to you. He received a call from Mr. Parker.”

Tony rubbed his face, setting down his slice of cold pizza (definitely billionaire food) and looking up at the ceiling. “I thought that was on Monday.”

“You haven’t been available for contact until today.”

“It’s my Wednesday dinner break, FRIDAY.”

“Exactly,” the AI replied, far too chipper for the fact that she’d just sentenced him as too busy for dinner over the last few days. Well, things had been important. Ross’s revised Accords had hit the US congress, and they were… well, scary to say the least. Disgusting, if he was honest. God, he was going to have to go to DC again, wasn’t he…

Tony shook his head, remembering what they’d been talking about. “Okay, send him in.”

“Hey Tony.”


“He fought someone on Sunday.”

“Is he alright?”

“Yeah he’s fine. But he said something about the guy being connected physically to a lizard or something.”

Tony raised an eyebrow.

Happy shrugged. “He said it had to do with a device he then destroyed. I know it sounds really
screwed up, but he has the remains of the thing and he wants you to check it out. I said Saturday.”

Tony gestured with his pizza. “Sure sure, sounds great. Not any less shitty than a ton of things we’ve dismantled in that lab.”

“Saturday?”

“Fine.”

“Shall I inform Mrs. Potts, sir?” came the calm, disembodied voice.

“Yeah, thanks FRIDAY. Is that it?”

“Yeah.” Happy was hesitating though.

Tony glanced up at him, slowly ripping off another mouthful of pizza. “Happy.”

Happy groaned and rubbed his forehead. “Tony, they found footage.”

Tony stopped chewing.

“Footage of what?” he asked slowly.

“It’s security footage. From Siberia.”

Tony set the pizza down. “Who has it?”

“No one. Just us.” Happy was watching him, and Tony thought maybe he could spy concern in that gaze.

Tony looked at the wall.

“Put it with the rest.”

“Yes, sir. Do you want--”

“No, I don’t want to see it.” He did, but that didn’t matter. “Just… don’t let… I don’t need…”

“No one will have access, Tony.” Happy hovered awkwardly, looking like he wanted to come closer. *Right. Enough of that.*

“Alright, thanks,” Tony said, waving nonchalantly. “I’ll send the kid a text.”

Happy sighed. “Right. Bye.” The other man removed himself, only looking back once before he shut the kitchen door.

Suddenly, the thought of finishing the wedge of carbs made Tony ill. He tipped it into the trash and sat back against the counter, pinching the bridge of his nose with a sigh. He let himself linger there, one moment of just *resting* --

And then he was up, reaching for his phone and pulling up Peter’s contact. He paused, then asked, “FRIDAY, what does Pepper say?”

“6:30 PM, sir.”

“Hm. Seems kinda late.”
“She says she’s taking you to dinner before that.”

“How sweet. Will the press be accompanying us?”

“No, boss. Mrs. Potts says she’s cornering you alone.”

Tony groaned, but he was grinning. *That* was something to look forward to, at least. He quickly relayed the information to Peter and chucked the phone to the side, where it clattered off the counter and onto the tile. Shit. The phone was nearly indestructible, but still.

*Footage of Siberia.*

Not right now. He was not thinking about that right now.

He wouldn’t object to never thinking about that again.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dunnnnnn. Eh.

Also, dunno how you guys feel about George Lucas, but I say if Ewan McGregor can’t recite your dialogue without ACTUALLY SNICKERING, then YOU WROTE BAD DIALOGUE. Pretty sure even I can write better dialogue than that. But that’s why the prequels are great, I guess.
In Which the Compound Looks Pretty in the Evening

Chapter Summary

Bonding, Tony’s pretending not to be lonely, and Peter is adorable.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Stark met him outside the compound, looking high of spirits. Peter waved, bounding out of the car and closing the door behind him. Happy was left with his hand outstretched, glowering, and Peter cringed in apology. He wasn’t used to a chauffeur. Of course, Happy would be scandalized if referred to as such, but he had been one in the past.

“Hey Mr. Stark!” Peter called, after thanking Happy.

“Kid,” the man replied, jerking his chin in greeting. “Good week?”

“Yeah. Not anything too high off the ground, at least after the lizard-guy.” Peter leaped up the steps to stand beside the man, leaning against the railing.

Stark took off his sunglasses, waving to Happy, who drove the car off. “Good, good. The lizard-guy sounds screwed up, from what I’ve heard.”

“What have you heard?”

“Not much.”

Peter relayed the story quickly as they started walking along the compound. “So anyway, I destroyed the device. Once I did, the gecko dude could start explaining, and he said the bracelet formed a ‘psychic and physiological connection with a creature’. He was mad at me for destroying it, obviously, but I let him off without calling the police.”

Stark nodded. “Sounds promising. Let’s see this bracelet, shall we?”

Peter pulled the parts of the device from his pocket, all but pouring them into Mr. Stark’s outstretched hands. He poked at them, lingering beside one of the compound’s windows. Neither of them said anything for a good long time, Peter fidgeting nervously as the older man studied the scraps of metal and chemicals in his hand.

When what had to have been ten or fifteen minutes had passed, Peter cleared his throat. “Um, Mr. Stark?”

The man jumped slightly, then looked at him with a smirk. “Sorry, kid. Got excited there for a sec. Let’s take this to the lab.”

Excitement built in Peter’s throat, and they slipped down to the nondescript entrance to the workshop. Stark set his hand against the door, which flashed blue and then gold. Peter was just as flabbergasted by the lab the second time, lingering by the sci-fi door in wonder. Stark strode in, setting down the remains of the device and tossing his suit coat to the side.
“FRIDAY, holoscreen.” The man flicked his hand towards the pile of parts. A blue mesh of light filtered across them, a copy then blinking into existence on a screen in front of them. Peter’s face split into a grin. **Awesome.**

“Alright, let’s see what this little pile of crap is made of, shall we?”

Peter peered over the worktable as the man began to work. As time stretched on, however, he began to wander about the workshop, mind drifting to the assignment MJ had given him. Beds…

An immeasurable amount of time later, Stark muttered, “hmm.”

“What?” Peter asked from where he’d been tinkering with the nanotech in the corner.

Stark picked up a fragment of the device and wiggled it around as he spoke. “This is really quite crude.”

Peter came over to the man, handing him a clean scrap of fabric from the neatly folded pile by the wall. That had to be Pepper’s work. Stark took it unconsciously and attempted to clean the grime off his fingers. Peter smiled at the disheveled, but somehow genuine, preoccupation of the billionaire’s demeanor. “Not super well developed, though the idea behind it is remarkable.” There was a pause, as though Stark’s thoughts had overtaken his words.

“It looks unstable,” Peter said.

Stark looked at him.

Peter suddenly found his shoes very interesting. “Er, I just--I mean that now that it’s all--er dismantled, well--”

“Calm down kid. You’re right; the combination of the synthesized cranial waves and electrical currents is dangerous to say the least.” Stark chucked the piece of metal to him.

“Jeez,” said Peter as he turned the fragment in his hand. “Good thing I got him before things got poisonous.”

Stark nodded. “You did good.”

Peter looked up at him, smiling. “Thanks, Mr. Stark.”

The older man rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you’re welcome. Now stop with the puppy-eyes. Seriously. Get them under control.”

Peter laughed and threw the fragment back to him.

“So anyway,” Stark said, “you destroyed the primary connector pretty good. This is just scrap metal now, but the concept’s still quite interesting.”

“I can imagine it now,” Peter joked, lowering his voice to his best villain imitation. “The hero who gains the skills of any organism daring to face him!”

Stark broke into a half-smile. “The genus-shifter.”

“Not lizard-man anymore.”

“Now his abilities know no boundaries.”
“Iron Man’s greatest nemesis: Organic-Guy!”

Stark snorted, and Peter couldn’t help his own laughter. Still grinning, the older man brushed the remains of the device off the desk and into a conveniently placed drawer.

“So.” He brushed his hands together. “That’s done. What were you doing back there?”

Peter shrugged. “Nothing. Just sorta messing around. I have a project for social studies, but MJ wants me to make a device for our ‘solution.’”

Stark nodded, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“I’m supposed to come up with a fast, cheap way to more easily make hospital beds.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. My whole brain just immediately went, robot! But that’s not really cheap. Or efficient.” Peter smiled.

“Right.” Stark rubbed his face. “Things are so much simpler with robots, you know.”

“Oh, I can believe it.”

Stark opened his mouth, closed it, and looked at his watch. “Shit. Here, why don’t you show up again next Friday? I’ve gotta pack for DC, but I should be back by then. We can practice building other things besides robots.”

Peter felt his face light up. “Really? Thanks Mr. Stark!”

“Yeah yeah. Eyes, kid.”

Peter only grinned wider, and Stark’s own disgruntled look eventually dissolved into a smile of his own. They stood there for another second, then Stark waved his hand towards the door.

“I’ll walk you out. You webbing it back or whatever, or do I have to call Happy?”

“No, no I’ve got it, Mr. Stark.”

“Good. Now come on.”

The older man strode from the room, slipping into his suit coat and snagging his stainless steel thermos as he went. The tie was straightened, the cuffs turned up, and inventor changed into crisp billionaire before Peter’s eyes. Peter wiped his hands on his jeans and scurried after Stark.

The windows showed a spectacular sight when the two of them reached the ground floor of the compound. The last light of the day (it was about 8:30; spring semester always messed up Peter’s sense of time) tinged the entire yard orange, reflecting off the shining buildings and bathing windows in red light. Peter stopped, unable to keep from studying every shadow and pattern cast by the grounds. A mosaic of color and shape was spread out before him, and it was magnificent.

“It’s so…” Peter shook his head, eyes wide.

“Empty.”

Peter started, snapping his gaze to the man beside him. Stark looked slightly surprised, as though he hadn’t meant to say that out loud.
“Empty, sir?”

Stark sighed, stepping a bit closer to the glass. “It’s always so red at night. Even when the sun goes down. See over there?” He pointed, and Peter followed his gaze. “That’s where Wanda would sit and read. When she wasn’t kicking all of our asses, of course. Never could tell with that girl. Those windows? Clint would always put his targets there, always in the same damn place, which was, may I say, exactly where Nat stands. Drives her crazy. Or… well…”

“Drove,” Peter murmured as he looked carefully at the man, not really sure what to say. Stark’s face was unreadable as he nodded.

“Drove. She’s got other things to drive her crazy, now. And Cap would just sit there and watch the sunset, even if we were in the middle of a training session. Nostalgic old fool.”

Stark stopped, standing quite still as he studied the view from the row of windows. Peter could see unfocused eyes in the man’s reflection. He could see confliction in his own.

“Mr. Stark?” he finally said. “What… what happened over the Accords? Really?”

* * *

“What happened over the Accords? Really?”

Tony should have been expecting the question.

Hell, he should have asked the question himself. But damn if it was just easier to hide, to twist the story into a form easier to understand; it had just been another one of his fuckups, his lack of preparation, his overreaction.

His fault.

Just like everything was. God, he’d just wanted a line, some higher moral authority so no one would ever do something like Ultron again, so he’d never do something like Ultron again.

The kid was still waiting, staring up at him with those wide, innocent eyes as Tony spouted things he only half realized he was saying.

Tony took a step back, still carefully rigid in all aspects of his existence. “The Accords…” shit “… no one talked. We all just didn’t listen, I guess. Not to reason, not to logic, not to each other.” If Steve had just listened, if any of them had just listened-- “And because we’re the Avengers, we decide to make a big deal out of it. Blood and paralysis and revenge and pulling kids into battles they have no place in. And before you object, you didn’t have any place there, and I had no right to put you in danger and lie to your aunt. She’s right to hate me for it.” Tony let himself bring a hand up to rub his face.

“We tried to kill each other.” All because I couldn’t let go. All because I can’t let go, I can’t ever let go. Not of anything, why can’t I just face it, why can’t I why why why-- “And we just about succeeded, too.”

“I never… well, I never got to say… I’m sorry Mr. Stark.”

God, the boy was as flustered as he was. “You have nothing to be sorry for.” Right. Enough of that too. “And I’m fine. I’m always fine.” He shook himself, gave himself one more millisecond to
breathe, then turned to Peter with the armor fully assembled.

“Better start your journey back, Spider-Man. There’s bound to be something on the way, and we wouldn’t want you to be late.” He clapped the boy on the shoulder and steered them away from the window, gulping down a mouthful of coffee. As the kid was sending his first web into the night, however, Tony raised his voice for one last call.

“Just remember, kid, don’t keep secrets from the people they’ll matter to the most.”

He didn’t wait for the kid’s reply, the inevitable question, just turned and went back into the compound as the last rays of sun disappeared.

When Tony finally pulled himself from visions of snow and blood and betrayal that night, Pepper was too late to stop him from reaching the alcohol.

Chapter End Notes

Thank god for Peter Parker, guys...
In Which Peter gets Advice, both From and About Girls

Chapter Summary

Peter decides to tell MJ his secret, and things escalate from there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re telling her?!”

Ned sounded more than a little worried. Peter rolled his eyes. “I trust her! MJ deserves to know; she’s one of our closest friends!”

Don’t keep secrets from the people they’ll matter to the most.

Ned’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know, what if she tells someone? What if she doesn’t believe you? What if—” Peter cut him off.

“What if everything goes fine? She’ll believe us, and she won’t tell anyone. She’s cool like that.” Another thought occurred to him, and he threw an arm around his best friend’s shoulders. “Don’t worry. You’re status as guy in the chair is anything but threatened.”

Ned tried to hide his sigh of relief, and Peter just laughed.

They rounded the corner and entered their chemistry classroom. MJ saw them and smirked. As he walked over to to his table, Peter practiced the upcoming conversation silently.

Hey MJ, this may come as a shock, but, I’m Spider-Man… Hey, you know the world-renowned superhero Spider-Man? Well, this may surprise you but I’m him… God, just as awkward inwardly as it inevitably would be when he finally spoke to her.

Shaking his head slightly, Peter sat down and pulled out his chem textbook. While his teacher launched into a long lecture describing the oxidizing strength of fluorine, Peter opened to a page filled with the formula for his web fluid. He slyly opened the side drawer to his desk to reveal his beaker, test tubes, and bunsen burner, then carefully organized them into their needed positions.

Scanning his formula, he casually shifted his hand to his stash of ‘borrowed’ liquids. He fell into a kind of meditative rhythm as he began the web-manufacturing routine. His teacher droned on in the background while Peter’s hands went on auto-pilot, pouring in small amounts of salicylic acid, methanol, and potassium carbonate. Whenever his teacher walked down the aisle between the desks, Peter closed the drawer carefully, silently hoping that the fizzing noise was quiet enough that his professor wouldn’t notice.

After he finished adding his activator carefully for 30 minutes, Peter turned on the bunsen burner and set it to low heat. With that, he closed his desk drawer, and did a silent prayer for his desk not to catch fire in the next twenty-four hours.

As he worked, he thought about his conversation with Mr. Stark. It had been strange, to say the least. Well, it had been a conversation with Tony Stark for heaven’s sake, which was strange enough. But
the man had said so many things without really saying anything at all.

Why did his tone never match his words? Why did he say cryptic things as though they were obvious? And why did Peter just run away when the man, looking back, had probably needed help?

*Stop it. Tony Stark, remember? Not your place.*

But he couldn’t stop hearing “I’m always fine” in that flat voice.

The bell rang, loud and obnoxious, jerking Peter from his thoughts. The boy grabbed his backpack and headed towards the door, hoping he hadn’t missed too much during that period of distraction.

Ned and MJ met him outside. They walked her to the physics classroom, waved goodbye, then went to their history class.

The final bell rang at 2:45 exactly. Peter smiled slightly, brain hurting from speaking Spanish for a solid fifty-five minutes. He was itching to begin patrolling right after school, but he had to talk to MJ first. He said goodbye to Ned, and headed the opposite direction, walking to the front doors.

He caught her as she was swinging the first door open. “Hey MJ!”

She turned, pulling out an earbud. “Oh hey Parker, what’s up?”

“Uh, are you heading to the bus stop?”

She shook her head. “I usually just walk. It’s good exercise, especially when I can listen to music.” She patted her back pocket, where her headphones were plugged into her phone.

Peter gulped and asked with a slightly nervous tone, “Is it ok if I walk with you? I need to tell you something.”

MJ shrugged. “Whatever. Just try to keep up.”

Peter grinned and fell into step beside her. They moved in silence for a while, MJ completely relaxed while Peter’s brain moved about one thousand miles an hour. The girl seemed to sense it, though, and waited only until they were a safe distance from the school to torture him.

“So what did you want to tell me?” MJ looked at him with interest, making Peter feel a little on the spot.

“Well... um, I don’t know how to put this... uh... ahh...” He put his hands on his head and stopped walking. The stuttering continued until he reached, “I... well... I’m... I’m Spider-Man.” He felt the words go in an exhale of surrender, and braced himself for the fallout.

MJ looked at him, unfazed.

“I’m aware.”

“You’re... what?” he stared at her, reacting to her words the way he’d expected her to react to his.


Peter was shocked. He jogged to keep up with her. “How did you--what--when did you know?”
She rolled her eyes. “Did you really believe that hiding your ‘lab experiments’ in your desk was secretive? I’ve seen you make your web stuff before.”

Peter just gaped. He didn’t really mind that MJ had seen him, it made this easier, but if she’d seen him… who else had put the pieces together?

Reading his mind, MJ said, “don’t worry. I’m very observant.”

Peter took a long breath. “So… how long have you known?”

MJ shrugged. “Probably since Washington. I recognized your voice, but I had to make sure. That’s why I threw all those textbooks at you randomly.” She grinned. “You have wicked reflexes for a skinny high schooler.”

Peter smiled. “So, you’re ok with it?” he asked a little breathlessly. “I mean, you won’t tell anyone right?”

“Yeah man, your secret’s safe with me.”

They stopped in a small neighborhood in front of a blue house, and MJ spun to look him in the eye. “But I do have some things to say to Spider-Man.”

Slightly terrified by the burning in her eyes, Peter spread his arms. “He’s all yours.”

MJ crossed her arms and began. “You’re a vigilante. But you’re a vigilante that’s more effective than the actual police, so I think I’m alright with that.”

She tapped his shoulder. “However, Spider-Boy, you listen to this; if you’re gonna be more effective than the actual police, you had better be better than them. I don’t want to hear about hero gender discrimination. I don’t want to hear about you bending to stereotypes. And I sure as hell don’t want to hear about racial biases. So if you’re gonna run around fighting crimes in the street, there will be no jumping to conclusions, you hear me? People may be more hostile towards blacks, but that doesn’t mean we’re more dangerous, and I’m putting you above acting on biases, Spider-Man. If you’re better at crime fighting, be better at it in all aspects.”

Spider-Man watched this fiery girl lecture him, and couldn’t help but salute when she finished. MJ was breathing hard, her eyes blazing with passion, and he wondered how long she’d been wanting to say this to him.

“Yes, sir!” Spider-Man said, grinning. But he knew MJ was very serious, and so was he. They both understood the need to be better, and he would rise to it. “Anything else?”

MJ smirked slowly. “We’re going to dinner on Friday. You’re buying.”

Peter said something he was pretty sure was unintelligible.

MJ just waved. “See ya tomorrow, Arachnid-Boy.”

Peter grimaced. “Please don’t.”

She just smiled mischievously, disappearing into her home and leaving a very, very confused spider on her doorstep.

* * *
“No.”

Ross glared his mousey glare, almost audibly snarling. “You don’t get to say no.”

“I do, actually. I have some power in this account, and this is slightly disgusting.” Tony grimaced dramatically, dangling the documents between two fingers.

“You agreed to the Accords. Your signature is on the laws, Stark.”

“Yeah, I did agree, and I did sign. But without a few more signatures (and you’ll have a hard time getting those without my own) these are not the Accords. And if you do somehow get this approved, we’ll have to come up with another name, because it won’t be the Sokovia Accords anymore.” Tony met Ross’s flaming eyes, and took another gulp of coffee.

“The Accords were created to manage enhanced individuals—”

“And people like me,” Tony added cheerily.

“—and you, of all people, should support their every needed change!”

You, of all people. “I do, Ross, and you know that.” Tony’s voice hardened. “So stop trying to attack my decisions around it when we both want the same thing. I just don’t want to live in a cage. That’s what these documents will do; leash us, cage us, demand utter submission. To you! Not gonna happen, dude. I know you’re angry and scared for the casualties, but bound hands won’t help anyone.”

“It would have with Ultron,” Ross snarled. Tony didn’t flinch. Outwardly.

“And it would have destroyed the world with the wormhole. Give a little, get a little, you know? And a lot of things would have helped with Ultron.” Me not being an idiot, for one.

Ross must have sensed the intransigence locking down in Tony’s argument, as things often did when Ultron (or various other things) were mentioned. But he wasn’t about to let Tony have the last word.

“You will sign these documents, Tony. You, Captain Rhodes, the android. The vigilante in Queens no one will shut up about. But it will start with you.”

The man made to leave, but a flare of anger had Tony standing. “Honestly, Ross? You’ll need leverage of some kind, some way I’ve broken the law or the previous Accords to get the other signatures. Trust me; you’ll find none.” None that he couldn’t talk himself out of. “Oh, and fuck you.”

Those words, that almost advice about leverage, signaled the end of the meeting. They’d been there for three days, Sunday, Monday, and today, just bitching back and forth. Why had he tortured himself for three whole days before forcing an end to the conversation? Right; information. Fuck information, he was going home tomorrow.

“If I never see you again, it’ll be too soon!” Tony called after Ross’s retreating form. The man didn’t grace him with a response.

Tony made his way back to his hotel room, taking a cab despite the fact that he really just wanted to throw on the suit. It’d been too long, far too long since he’d worn the thing, but doing it in the middle of an anti-hero meeting was probably not the best of ideas.
He made coffee and called Pepper as soon as he was back. “Hey Pep. I’m coming home tomorrow.”

“Already?”

“Already?? It’s been three day--” he huffed. “Oh, damn it Pep.”

She laughed. “I do miss you, Tony, don’t worry.”

“‘Preciate it.”

“Hmm.”

“Yeah, so I have a free day tomorrow, hopefully. Is Rhodey available?”

“Not tomorrow. He’ll be coming this weekend, though; you can have your little man party then.”

“Nice. I can introduce him to the kid.”

“Peter’s coming?”

“Yeah, Friday afternoon--oh, speak of the devil, he’s calling me now!”

“Well, hop to it.”

“Love you.” Tony hung up and answered the boy, still grinning a bit too much for the cool mask he was supposed to have here. “What’s up, kid?”

“Mr. Stark!” Peter sounded a surprised, as though he hadn’t thought Tony would answer.

“Yeah, it’s me. You expecting someone else?”

“Nope.” The kid sounded preoccupied. And there’d been no stuttering there; something was up.

“What is it, kid?”

“Uuuuhhhh, I think I have to reschedule coming to your workshop.”

Well that was strange. From the starstruck excitement on the damn boy’s face every time he entered the workshop, rescheduling was the last thing he’d want to do. And Peter was always trying not to inconvenience him, unless it was something that would actually inconvenience him, like fighting an illegal weapons manufacturer and a) getting himself dropped in a lake b) destroying a ferry or c) simultaneously saving all of Tony’s products on moving day and destroying them too. So this really was quite weird.

“Sure, kid. Why?”

“Well. I think I have a date? That might’ve happened? A couple of days ago, and I didn’t notice until now?”

Tony snorted a laugh.

“What? What?” God, he could hear the boy blushing.

“Nothing, kiddo. That’s fine, you can come over Saturday and meet Rhodey.”

“Thanks, Mr. Stark.”
No fanboying over War Machine, then. This must be one hell of a girl.

“Who are you going out with?” Tony asked, curious.

Peter didn’t hesitate to answer, further proving his preoccupation. “Um, her name’s MJ, well, Michelle really but she told me to call her MJ… and she’s always reading and she’s so smart and snappy and terrifying and really, really engaged, she knew about Spider-Man before I told her and then she actually lectured me about being better, and I don’t know why I’m telling you this--”

Tony was grinning. “Relax, kid. I can tell you’re nervous.”

Peter’s voice fuzzed out for a moment. “Really? God, I’m so bad at this. The last time I tried to date a girl her dad ended up being a crime boss, and I’m rambling again.”

“Yeah, bad luck there kid.” Security footage of a collapsed building, the sounds of screaming filtering in the background. Peter’s screaming. Screaming for help because he was alone, because he was just too stubborn to let people get hurt. Because all he had was a hoodie and raggedy sweatpants to protect him. Screaming because of Tony. “But this is gonna be different.”

He could hear the kid’s mind frying.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Here, kid, lemme help a bit, m’kay? You said she was a reader?”

“Yeah.”

“Ask her about it. Ask her about her favorite author, and then remember it. Bookworms can’t usually choose a favorite book, but they more often than not have a favorite author, so that should be a safe place to start.” Tony closed his eyes, thinking. “Tell her about yourself when she asks. Don’t shy away because you don’t want to seem arrogant; if she asks, tell her, and she’ll tell you in return. You said she knew about Spider-Man?”

“Um, yes.”

“A story I’ve got to hear, but not now. Find some jobs you’ve done, some stories that she can build off of. Tell jokes. Be awkward, because from what I’ve seen of you that’s probably a part she’s interested in.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true kid. And here’s the most important one. Play games with her. No, not the kind that’ll make your PG brain combust, I mean board games. Card games. Monopoly, Clue, chess. She’ll probably hand you your ass, and you’d better be thankful.”

Peter laughed. “Yes, sir! And oh, she will.”

“So bring cards wherever you go. Because there’ll be a lapse, and where other couples would just sit and stare at each other feeling uncomfortable, you’ll have something to fall back on.” Tony gesticulated, though he knew Peter couldn’t see it.

“Right.”

“One more thing; figure out what she likes. And then bend to it. Some girls like jewelry, or other trinkets, like feeling they’re important to spend money on. Some just like you to spend time with them. Some like food. Trust me, if a food girl shares her dinner with you, count yourself loved. Most will be a combination of these, of course, but if you find the primary thing, that’ll take you far.”
“Okay. Okay.”

Tony loosened his tie, letting it dangle from his neck. “Don’t freak out.”

“I’m not, I’m… thank you, Mr. Stark. Really. That… helps alot,” Peter said quietly.

Tony smiled. Again. Damn boy and those puppy-eyes visible across states. “No problem, kid.” He hung up then, not wanting to make the kid search for something to say, even if he did want to extend the conversation for as long as possible.

But no, he reminded himself. *The less I interfere in his life, the better.* He’d very nearly killed the boy. Multiple times, very nearly destroyed the purest, smartest kid he’d ever met. One of them while he was in the midst of destroying the closest thing he had to a family, coincidently.

Tony smirked sardonically then, because he feared what would happen if he didn’t. He reassured himself that the kid was smart. Peter had turned down his offer to be an Avenger, turned down his offer of mentorship. (That had been before Tony’d known…) He knew the refusal wasn’t about Tony’s asshole actions, but it helped, a little, to know the kid knew what was best for himself. Because Tony certainly didn’t.

Apparently.

But girl advice over the phone during a call to reschedule a workshop appointment… that was something Tony couldn’t screw up too badly. Right?

He just had to remember to hang up.

Chapter End Notes

You can expect the next chapter to be literally the definition of fluff, but then things start to pick up again story-wise. I have a side-plot to wrap up, and a new one to introduce! *Devil face.*
In Which Peter Goes on a Date

Chapter Summary

Exactly what it says on the label. Some small plot mentions, but mostly just fluff. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter took MJ out for Thai.

Well, in theory. Ideally, it was Peter that did the taking out. In reality, however, Michelle Jones showed up at his door in a skirt (which about made Peter’s jaw hit the floor) at five o’clock, nodded approvingly at his not-too-formal button down, and dragged him outside to where she’d rented city bikes. She then proceeded to lead the way (in her skirt) through busy Queens streets and alleyways, always handy with a middle finger when some creep got too forward.

Peter spent the whole time panicking.

Not really because he wasn’t super practiced at bike riding, but because the faster MJ pushed them on the bikes, the more she looked behind to check on him, and the more she smiled.

And Peter found that he really, really liked this girl.

He was guilty, for a little bit, because it had only been four months since Liz. A bit more, now. Five? Not much, anyway. Was this normal? Wrong? Was he disloyal, or irresponsible, or something?

Then MJ expertly dismounted the bike without a single snag of her skirt before the tiniest Thai joint Peter had ever seen, her movements smooth and graceful, and Peter decided he didn’t care.

Because damn.

She looked at him. “Are you going to get off, or just sit there like a fish out of water all evening?”

Peter, to his imminent distress, found that he’d stopped pedaling. He desperately tried to regain his balance, but even his spidey senses failed him atop the bicycle, and he ended up sprawling across the pavement.

MJ laughed, rolling her eyes. “We haven’t even gone in yet, and you’re already an embarrassment. Get up, Spandex Butt.”

“Spandex Butt?” Peter asked with as much incredulity as he could muster. He got up and straightened his shirt and pant legs, glad he hadn’t ripped anything.

“Would you prefer Arthropod-Kid?”

“You could just call me Peter, you know. We have names for a reason.”

“Only so we can butcher them,” MJ replied brightly. “Now come on. Thai.”

“Right.”
“You’re not very good at this,” MJ observed after he awkwardly attempted to get them a table, stuttered a bit too long, and she took over. The waiter took their orders right away, as both of them knew their Thai favorites inside and out.

“Yeah…” Peter ran his hands through his hair. “The last girl I worked up the nerve to not even date’s dad end up being a crime boss who wore a flying metal suit and was selling weapons made from alien tech.”

MJ raised an eyebrow.

“I wish I was making that up.”

“Homecoming?”

“Yeah, how did you-- you know what, nevermind.”

MJ lifted her chin, grinning. “He can be taught!”

Peter paused. “Did you just quote Aladdin?”

She looked away for a second, but quickly returned her gaze to him. “Problem with that?”

Peter laughed. “No! No way. I’ve got to have all of the Lion King memorized by now.”

MJ smiled, an actual smile, not her usual smirk. Peter tried to remember what they’d been talking about.

“I thought you were more of a….” she gestured obscenely-- “old live-action adventure and sci-fi guy.”

“Oh, I am, but everyone enjoys a bit of Disney. More than a bit, in my case.”

“Alright then, spill it. What’s your favorite princess movie?”

Peter blushed. “Er, honestly? Tangled.”

MJ burst out laughing.

Peter flushed even darker. “What?”

“I can’t see it at all! Why in the--” she took a deep breath to calm the laughter-- “world would you be drawn to Tangled for heaven’s sake?”

Peter crossed his arms. “I just… she falls in love with this brash dude. He’s all trickster and thief and strength, and then right when they all need the wit and the strength, he reveals it was all just a lie. A mask. And she doesn’t care. She still loves him, maybe even more.” Peter thought a bit, moving on even as he finished his thought, his mouth still moving. “And in the end, it doesn’t even matter. Because the dude is still strong and witty and loyal; it wasn’t all a mask.”

MJ stared at him.

“Or, uh, something,” Peter finished lamely.

“No. No, I think I get it, Spider-Dude.” MJ took a gulp of water, eyes drifting a bit above his head as she thought. “I like Mulan.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “I can see that.”
She grinned. “But that was a harder question when directed at you. So I guess I’ll say my favorite old live-action adventure and sci-fi film would have to be the *Princess Bride.*”

Peter laughed. “My name is Inigo Montoya!”

“You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

“Love that one.” Peter remembered what Stark had said. “What about books? Do you have a favorite author?”

And they were off.

MJ slowly stopped her smirking, eventually throwing that true, genuine smile about with most comments. Peter tried not to stare too much, and he thought he did a good job.

The waiter brought food, and they made bad puns involving plates.

They ate, but didn’t really notice how good the food was as Peter dealt cards and their stained fingers got the cheap deck sticky.

The sun set.

They talked. MJ beat him in every game they played.

And then he beat her, and she laughed even as she glowered.

They talked. A few stars peaked through the city haze.

“So if you’re a vigilante, what do you do about the Accords? I get that you’re a minor and your signature isn’t legally binding, but you do have a guardian, and you *are* enhanced.”

Peter rubbed the knuckles on his hand with his other palm. “It’s a little weird. I fought with Iron Man against Captain America in Germany seven months ago, and I really support the Accords. One guy can’t figure out what’s right all on his own, y’know? With big issues like world defence or aliens or whatever I mean. Things low to the ground, watching over the little guy, though: I think I might be doing alright. I wanted to sign the Accords at first, but Mr. Stark sorta told me not to.”

MJ cocked her head. “Isn’t he like super pro the regulations?”

Peter nodded. “He is. And he lost everything for them, so I’m inclined to trust him on things involving the laws. But he said that I wasn’t really… important enough to need monitoring on a worldwide level, and that I’d be pulled into things supposedly too big for me, and not allowed to work on street level much anymore. And that said monitoring would be really bad for me. Personal life wise, I mean. I’d have to give away my secret identity to the higher ups, and I’d be regulated disproportionately to what I really needed.”

“Does that matter?” MJ crossed her arms.

“That’s what I said. I’m an enhanced individual, and should apply to the Accords. But Mr. Stark told me not to ‘get myself mixed up with Ross and the rest of those fuckers’ until he’s sorted things out.”

MJ chuckled. “Alright then. I suppose I can forgive you if that’s the case.”

“I appreciate it.” Peter rolled his eyes jokingly.

They lapsed into silence for a bit, MJ shuffling the cards repeatedly.
“I’m worried about Mr. Stark,” Peter found himself saying.

“What?”

“Nothing, nevermind.”

“Oh no, Eight Legs, spill it.”

“I just….” Peter rubbed his face. “The Avengers were sort of his family, you know? He was with them when they screwed up, and they were with him when he screwed up.

And they always fixed it. He flew a nuke into a Wormhole. They fought Ultron together. They created Vision using JARVIS.

“And then they just… left. He said it was everyone and no one’s fault, and I think that’s true. But I’m sure nothing needed to go the way it did. If Captain America wasn’t so stubborn, if he would have worked with Stark to change the Accords to be better, as Stark’s doing all alone now, things wouldn’t have escalated so far.”

“I’m pretty sure Tony Stark’s not known for his lack of stubborness,” MJ pointed out.

“Well, yeah. They all screwed up. But something happened in Siberia, something big, MJ. And now most of the Avengers are war criminals, Mr. Stark’s fighting for the Accords alone, and he never even talks about them.”

“Well, neither would I,” MJ sighed. “But Stark’s been through a lot. He doesn’t need pity. I don’t think he even needs sympathy. He’s strong.”

Spider-Man shrugged. “Maybe he needs help because he’s been through so much. Because strength doesn’t always reach down to our cores.”

“That was really damn profound.”

“Thanks, I thought so.”

MJ sat back, crossing her legs on the table before them. “Well, if you’re so worried, why don’t you talk to him?”

Peter started. “What are you crazy? I can’t do that! He’d just laugh at me.” Push me away. Shut me out. “No, no no nope.”

MJ shook her head. “Then stop whining, if you aren’t going to do anything about it.”

Peter tapped on her leg in thought. “Why is everything so complicated all the time?”

“Tell me about it.”

He sighed, eyes drifting to the cards in her hands, then smiled. “What do you say we play slap-jack? Simplest card game anyone has ever seen.”

“Sounds good to me, Spider-Guy.”

And they did. MJ made them switch games after a while, because Peter’s spidey senses made his reflexes unfairly fast. They wore the cards until they bent like putty from all the shuffling, warm from the combined heat of both teen’s skin and laughter. Then they played some more, played until the restaurant closed and they were kicked out onto the streets of Queens.
MJ took him through the park on their bikes, which should technically have been returned about an hour before. Peter felt a little guilty, but the rental was closed and MJ didn’t even laugh when he set them up next to the door and scribbled a quick apology.

They pushed curfew until the last minute. MJ, when it was about fifteen minutes to ten, revealed she was already in trouble; her curfew was nine thirty, which Peter thought was quite unfair. She shrugged. “I don’t usually have anything to break it for,” she said.

He was glad it was dark so she couldn’t see just how flustered he was by that comment.

Subtext: you’re worth breaking the rules for.

He ended up walking into the apartment just as the clock clicked to ten. He’d wanted to stay out, and MJ had wanted him to as well, but they both knew he’d be literally murdered by his aunt if he did.

So he’d thanked her for the night, and she’d smiled that utterly disarming smile as they lingered in front of Peter’s apartment building. They stood there in silence for what felt like an eternity afterward, both waiting for something, because this didn’t feel quite finished. And Spider-Man had felt brave, for just a moment, and leaned in.

But then Peter’d stopped, cheeks burning, cursing at the awkward terror that clawed at his chest. He should be better than this. But he was just Peter right then, and he was too scared to risk that smile.

So the last words between them were a heartfelt see you later, and an even more heartfelt thank you.

And when Peter went to bed that night, he didn’t have the nightmare.

Chapter End Notes

HOW ABOUT THAT FOR SOME ROMANCE??? I'm not super good at it, but I'd say that worked well this time!

Thanks for reading! Kudos only takes a click/tap, and even a few characters in that comment box really makes my day.
Peter liked to think he didn’t embarrass himself too much when he landed in the compound yard and found Colonel Rhodes waiting for him.

Spider-Man didn’t squeal.

“Um. Hello, Mr. Rhodes,” he finally croaked out after staring for a probably awkward amount of time.

“So, you’re the spider-kid. The one Tony didn’t carbon date,” the man said with a smile.

Right. None of the Avengers (he still couldn’t get over that) knew his identity. He was just Spider-Man to them.

“That’s me.” Spider-Man bowed exaggeratedly.

The man huffed in amusement. “C’mon then. Tony’s inside.”

Very pink under the mask, Spider-Man trotted after him. Mr. Stark was indeed waiting for them, grinning faintly.

“I told you so,” the man said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhodes replied.

“How long did it take?”

“Two sentences.”

Mr. Stark actually laughed. Peter realized it had been… he couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard the man truly laugh.

Stark set his hand on Peter’s head, and Peter remembered he was still wearing his mask. “Good job, kid.”

“What did I do?” Spider-Man wondered.

Stark winked, then looked to Colonel Rhodes. “Rhodey?”

“He was all, ‘Um. Hello, Mr. Rhodes.’” The colonel rolled his eyes, but there was no bite behind them. “What could I possibly do?”

Peter flushed, very glad he was wearing the mask. “Um.”
Stark grinned at him. “Rhodey here owes me twenty bucks.”

“You’re a billionaire! I shouldn’t have to--”

“It took three words, Rhodey! I win!”

“Four words!”

Spider-Man interjected between the two quarreling friends. “Um, won what?”

“I bet Rhodey here that he’d be completely endeared to you and your wellbeing less than two minutes after he met you.”

Peter wasn’t sure if he was mortified or proud.

“You left him helpless after four words. I’m impressed! He’s always a pushover, but usually it takes people at least a couple of sentences. And you have the mask on; you didn’t even use the eyes.”

Okay, mortified it was. “Mr. Stark…”

Rhodey laughed. “Stop torturing the poor kid, Tony. How old is he?”

Stark looked at Peter, eyes questioning. Warmth bloomed in Peter’s chest; even for his oldest friend, Stark wouldn’t betray Peter’s identity without his permission. But he did have to decide… did he want Colonel Rhodes to know who he was?

The secret had been safe for a while. But then came Ned, and Toomes, and now MJ. He trusted all but one, and he’d defeated the Vulture. And Mr. Stark knew, of course, but that was different.

Why? A part of him whispered. Why is it different, Spider-Man? Why is it different, Peter?

Not the time. He pushed the whispers away. Rhodes was trustworthy; he knew the importance of secrecy when it came to superhero identities. What reason was there to hide it?

So Spider-Man reached up and pulled off his mask, running his hands through his curly hair to try and tame it a bit. The dry, conditioned compound air was cool against his cheeks, and he took a deep breath.

Stark looked slightly surprised, but he nodded almost imperceptibly.

“I’m fifteen.”

Shock bloomed in Rhodes’ gaze, and the man whirled on Stark.

“Fifteen?”

Stark winced. “I know, I--”

“Are you insane?”

“We knew that already, yes, and Germany was not my best decision--” Stark put his hands up defensively, something desperate in his gaze that did not match the levity of his tone.

“He’s just a kid, Tony! Let me guess, you made the suit, probably specifically for Germany… God, what were you thinking? What are you thinking?”
“STOP!” He might not be wearing the mask anymore, but Spider-Man still bellowed the word as loud as he could. Colonel Rhodes fell silent, and the Peter part of him cringed a bit at the fact that he’d just yelled at War Machine.

But Spider-Man had a point to make. Not least because he could see Stark retreating into himself under Rhodes’ words.

“Sorry, probably shouldn’t have shouted.” Spider-Man took a breath. “But please stop yelling at Mr. Stark. I’m fifteen, yeah, but I do have some semblance of a brain, despite what everyone seems to think. I can take care of myself. And what I do on the streets and in this suit is me, not Mr. Stark. He helps, giving me tech like this suit that lets me be more capable, and safer, on the streets. But I’d be out there with or without him, because this is my choice.” Spider-Man crossed his arms. “And for what it’s worth, Germany was the best experience of my life.”

Rhodes was staring at him, and the brave words that were going to follow those petered out to a nervous gulp. Peter shuffled, clenching his fist about the mask.

Stark wasn’t looking at him, wasn’t looking at anything. Peter couldn’t see his eyes. After a moment of strained silence, the older man finally looked up. His gaze was unreadable as he flashed a smirk. “See that? Kid’s almost as skilled at the speeches as Cap is!”

Rhodes surprised face softened to a grin. “I think I see how this little shrimp could save your business.”

“Though not my plane.”

Peter blushed.

“Well, he saved the New York skyline even without the plane.”

“Indeed.” Stark reached out and, to Peter’s surprise, ruffled the boy’s curls. “Are you joining us in the workshop, then?” he asked Rhodes.

The colonel winked. “No, I’ll leave the sciencing to you two. Pepper has yet to be bothered by my presence. I’ve gotta remedy that.”

“Of course.” Stark clapped his friend on the shoulder. “And for what it’s worth, you don’t need to tell me I screwed up. I’m already aware.”

Rhodes nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Stark said briskly, pulling the man a bit closer with obvious fondness, then released him. “C’mon, kid. Let’s leave Rhodey to his bothering.”

Peter hastened to follow Mr. Stark towards the workshop, waving to Colonel Rhodes as he went. The man waved back, and then they were out of sight down the twisting, whitewashed hallway.

It was when the workshop door slid shut behind them that Stark fixed Peter in his intense brown gaze and thanked him, quietly.

Peter didn’t need to ask for what.

Peter looked up from the bench, pushing his goggles up onto his damp forehead with grimy hands.
“This it?” He held up a shining array of metal circuitry, perfectly matching the diagram Mr. Stark had sent to the holoscreen before him.

“Looks good, kid.”

Peter, puffing a bit with praise, brought the mesh of wires over. He flipped it to the older man, who, in one smooth motion, tucked it beneath another sheet of metal and pressed the two closed. The hiss of hot steel rang through the workshop.

Peter’s stomach growled. Again. It’d been doing that for a while, but this was just so damn amazing he wasn’t about to interrupt it for the world. But then again, he thought as his gut clenched once more. “What time is it?”

Stark paused, wiping his hands on the front of his grimey, decidedly un-billionaire-esk jeans and reaching for his phone. “About ten minutes to eleven PM.”

“WHAT?”

The man watched him evenly. “Unless my phone is off.”

The tone made it very clear his phone was never off.

“Shit shit shitshitshitshit--” Peter backflipped through the workshop, miraculously avoiding hitting a single screen or floating piece of metal. He scrambled for his suit.

“Language, first of all,” Stark said, leaning back to watch him with an infuriatingly amused smirk, “and second, what’s the problem?”

“Aunt May--her curfew--oh shit I was supposed to be back by ten!”

“Call her before you freak,” the other man said.

“Yeah…” Peter fumbled for his phone, grabbing a rag from the rack in the back to clean his hands. His aunt was on speed dial, and every ring dialed his anxiety up a notch; he did not want to be reamed tonight, not in front of Mr. Stark.

But she didn’t pick up.

And Peter’s thoughts took a very different turn.

“Let’s get you back, then, before--” Stark broke off as Peter turned terrified eyes on him. “What?”

“She doesn’t know I’m here--she thinks--oh my God she thinks I’m--she doesn’t know--” He usually went patrolling on Saturdays, not to the workshop of Tony Stark. She wouldn’t know, because he’d never--

“Pause, pause kid. Tell me what the problem is.” Stark’s calm voice broke through Peter’s haze of fear. He took a breath.

“She doesn’t like you,” he explained as calmly as he could. “So I didn’t tell her I was coming here, because she either wouldn’t let me or she’d call you up and be really embarrassing.” How he wished he’d endured that. Oh, God, he should have just said-- “So she thinks I’m out patrolling, and if I’m not back by curfew…”

“She’d think you’re hurt. Or worse,” Stark finished, cursing under his breath. “Okay, so why wouldn’t she pick up?”
Peter tried not to sound hysterical. “She would! She would pick up no matter what if it was me after curfew!” He took a deep breath. “I’ve never been late before, so I don’t know what she’d do…”

Stark stared at him for a moment, then spun towards the door with realization flooding his eyes. “Suit up, kid.”

“What? Please, Mr. Stark, where--what--”

Stark kept his eyes locked before him. “She thinks you could be hurt. Or dead. And she’s not just going to stay in the house and worry. You’re aunt has hit the streets, and she’s not picking up.”

Peter’s panic skyrocketed, and he froze for a moment. “Ohmygoshthisisallmyfault--” Terrible scenarios of everything that could have possibly happened to his last remaining family member drowned him, pulling his breath from his lungs in ragged gasps.

“Calm down, kid.” Stark stopped and spun, putting calloused hands on Peter’s shoulders. “You’re Spider-Man. I’m Iron Man. Someone’s in danger. May wasn’t about to leave you in danger, and we aren’t about to leave her. So suit up, Underoos.” He grinned dangerously. “We’re hitting the streets.”

* * *

Tony was glad some things could be simple.

There were no double sides to this. May wasn’t answering because she’d gone to look for Peter, for if there was any reason for the kid to be in peril one didn’t just sit still. A woman wandering about actively looking for the trouble Spider-Man would be involved in would be a quick target, and thus they needed to move quickly. Track the aunt. Wear the suit. Help the kid.

Peter moved just as quickly as Tony did, his webbing pulling him through the city in a strangely graceful prolonged fall. He seemed to slip between shadows, the red and blue suit flashing slightly in the city lights. Tony’s own suit was far less stealthy, and for the first time, watching the kid swing between buildings, he felt clunky.

“May Parker’s watch has moved to an alley off 5th street, boss,” came FRIDAY’s voice in his visor. Peter hadn’t even seemed weirded out when Tony had revealed he had a tracker in the boy’s aunt’s watch, proof of just how worried the kid was. For good reason, he supposed. New York was not the safest of places at night.

But Tony was going to do everything in his power to make sure this kid didn’t lose another family member.

“You hear that?” Tony said.

“Yes, sir,” Peter replied over the comms Tony had thrown together as they sprinted from the workshop.

“Roof,” said Tony by way of reply.

“I’ll hit from the side of the alley. It’s a better angle for the web-shooters.”

Tony opened his mouth to order the boy to join him on the roof, but in truth, Peter was right. Tony
needed to enter from above due to the suit’s noise and movement, but Peter could easily gain an advantage from the closer (more dangerous) position.

Bulletproof. The spider-suit was bulletproof.

Not bulletproof enough.

He kept the kid in his gaze when they split, Peter swinging down and Tony speeding skyward. FRIDAY, as though reading his mind, pulled up the kid’s vitals in the corner of his visor.

Tony landed the suit, creeping along the edge of the building until he could see down into the alleyway. The lights of the city didn’t reach into the crevice, so the small street was darker without the golden-yellow glow the rest of New York was bathed in. But he could see the shapes inside moving clearly; all he needed.

To his slight surprise, there were only two. A woman whom he recognized as May (who looked unharmed, to his relief; he heard Peter release a breath over the comms), despite that it was too gloomy to recognize features, and a larger, pudgier man. May looked anything but threatened, however, standing to her full height, which was not much compared to the other guy. She had her hands on her hips and her voice was loud, revealing not an flicker of nervousness about the man looming over her.

“Get out of my way,” she was saying. “I’ve got some business you’re keeping me from.”

“Spider-Man business?” the man replied, a smirk evident in his tone. Peter’s heart rate monitor sped up significantly in the corner of Tony’s eye when the man spoke.

Tony activated the comms. “Kid, what is it?”

“I fought this guy, he--”

The man was speaking again beneath them. “I too have some Spider-Man business. The interfering vigilante owes me years of work and thousands of dollars.”

May crossed her arms. “I doubt that… wait a minute. I know you. You’re that guy that assaulted a police station about a device!”

Tony started. “This is the lizard-guy?” he demanded into the helmet.

“Yes.”

The man in the alley gave an exaggerated bow. “At your service.”

“What the hell do you want?” May demanded.

“I figure,” drawled the man, “that a woman yelling for Spider-Man, demanding his presence, would gain his attention. Especially with threats of grounding. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you two were close.”

“Wait, kid. Don’t blow it,” Tony hissed.

The lizard-guy (Tony was loath to think of him as such, but he had no other distinction) continued, “But in any case, you’re certainly making a scene, bound to draw him in. And then we can both…” the man’s voice was slithering in a quite unnerving way, “conduct our business of the man.”

May slapped him, hard, in the face.
And then the man’s hand had flashed around her throat, and Tony was moving.  

Peter’s first web pulled the lizard-guy back, while the man wiped a hand towards his aunt on instinct.  But the blow hit only steel as Tony lunged against the man, bowling him into the side of the alleyway. Without needing a word from Spider-Man, Tony sent his repulsors thrusting into the air just as a ball of webbing exploded beneath him. The grenade stuck the lizard-guy momentarily to the wall, long enough for Tony to nonchalantly knock the assaulter out with a whack of his gauntlet. 

The alleyway went still, as silent as was possible in the center of Queens for a few moments. 

“Aunt May!” Peter said, swinging down from the building and pulling off his mask. His curls stuck every-which-way and he panted a bit from the quick skirmish. 

“Peter Benjamin Parker,” was May’s too-calm reply. Tony couldn’t help but cringe at the near-fury in her voice.  

But then the boy was throwing himself on her, wrapping his arms tight about her neck. “You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay,” he mumbled, Tony just barely able to hear him. 

May’s anger dissolved, and she gripped Peter back. Tony shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to do, letting the suit fold back as he stepped out. 

May eventually pulled away from the kid’s embrace and held him at arms length. “I thought,” she said, “you were hurt. Or dead. You have a phone for a reason, Peter, and no matter how we all might wish it, you are not a normal teenager. I cannot dismiss it when you’re late!”

Tony toyed with the idea of getting back in the suit and fleeing as Peter spoke. “I know, I know, I just lost track of time. But then you didn’t pick up and I-- I thought--- you’d-- I’d--” The kid took a shuddering breath. May brushed the stray curls off his forehead, then turned to look at Tony. 

Yeah, he definitely wanted to make a break for it.

“Tony Stark,” she said flatly. 

“May Parker.” He let the unconcerned mask fall across his form, and crossed his arms. 

“What the hell are you doing here.” It didn’t sound like a question. 

“Assisting your nephew in finding you, backing him up in the case of a brawl, and providing a target other then the kid.”

“And why are you doing these things?”

Tony put his hands in the pockets of his suit coat and shrugged. “I treat my interns well.”

May turned to Peter. “Why is he here?”

Peter looked just as uncomfortable as Tony felt. “I was at the compound.”

“What?”

The kid shot Tony an apologetic look. “We were… tinkering. In Mr. Stark’s workshop. I lost track of time.”

May nodded, still too calm. “And how long has this been going on?”
Tony replied this time, tone one of irreverence. “A few weeks.”

“And I was not informed.”

Peter and Tony both stepped back a bit, figurative tails between their legs.

The next thing Tony knew, he was reeling against the wall of the alleyway, temple throbbing. It took him an embarrassingly long moment to regain his balance, and even longer to realize that May Parker had just punched him in the face.

“Aunt May!” Peter sounded like he didn’t know if he wanted to be amused or shocked.

Tony met the woman’s eyes and grinned, despite the curling of guilt in his gut. “Hell of a right hook.”

May lifted her chin and glared at him. “I’m quite angry with you.”

“I gathered that.”

“And I know it’s unwarranted.”

That Tony hadn’t been expecting. It was quite warranted! He spent most his time being angry with him; May had ever right to be as well.

She must have seen his confusion. “I want to blame you for my constant terror over this idiot--” she gestured at Peter-- “but I know he’d have been out doing this whether you’d taken him under your wing or not. I want to blame you for encouraging the vigilantism by creating the suit, but I know he had nothing but raggedy pajamas before; none of the protection you’ve provided. I should be thanking you instead of punching you.”

Only Tony’s hard-trained poker-face was keeping his jaw from hanging open.

“But I’m still quite angry with you.”

Tony avoided looking at Peter-the-human-lie-detector as he nodded. “I’m used to it.” He flashed a smirk, and May rolled her eyes. Good. Annoyance made sense. He could work with that. “Well, at least we caught the lizard-guy, he seems to--”

Tony broke off due to the now-apparent fact, as he looked to the brick wall beside him, that the lizard-guy in question was most definitely not there.

“Or, maybe, not.”

Peter started. “Where’d he go? He was unconscious! I webbed him!”

Tony shook his head. “No you didn’t. Web-shooter combination 257, web grenade, isn’t sticky like your usual webs; that would disrupt the force needed for the deployment.”

Peter stared at him.

Tony rolled his eyes. “I made your suit, kid. You honestly think I wouldn’t know?”

“There are 576 combinations, Mr. Stark.”

“I do not half-ass things.”
May cleared her throat. “Back to the point?”

Tony gesticulated. “What point? The dude’s gone. That’s it. One more street criminal.”

“My responsibility,” came a murmur from Peter.

Tony fixed him with a pointed gaze. “But not right this moment.”

The boy opened his mouth, then closed it again, understanding dawning in his brown eyes.

May looked between them, eyes narrowing slightly, then shrugged. “Home, now,” she said. Peter nodded, looking chastised, but gave Tony a hesitant smile before pulling on his mask and swinging out of the alley.

Tony hadn’t realized he was smiling up after the kid until May said, “I couldn’t bear to lose him.”

Tony looked at her.

“He’s all I have left. My boy.”

Tony nodded. “I know.”

“He puts himself in danger. You help him.”

“I’m sorry.” And he really was, enough that he’d spent longer on the Spider-Man suit (suits) than almost any other thing he’d designed. Because what if. Parachute. Shock absorbant. Heater. He put everything in the suit, but not enough. Never enough.

“But that’s who he is. A long time ago, I was the only thing he had left, but not anymore. And that might make me bitter sometimes, but only when I’m feeling particularly selfish.” She grinned, a bit sadly, then breathed deep and looked towards the entrance. “Well, I’ve got to get home. I’ve got an arachnid to reem.”

Tony nodded, trailing the woman out of the alley and leaning against the corner until she disappeared into a taxi. He stood there for a while longer, then spun, climbed into the suit, and made his way back to the compound.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! One more chapter, and then it's END OF PART ONE. :)
In Which Lizards Bite and Lairs Fall

Chapter Summary

Looooong chap. Just a warning.

Peter and Tony go after a certain dude, and maybe learn some things. Introduction of another POV, which I shall be using a LOT in part two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday morning, Peter woke up with dust in his mouth and sweat on his forehead to the sound of Mr. Stark’s ringtone. Shaking away the clinging cobwebs of the Dream, he quickly fumbled for the device.

“Hey kid. No school Monday?”

Peter stammered. “Uh, yeah, how did you know? And why?”

He could almost hear the smirk settling across the other man’s face as Stark responded, “Oh, because we have some business that might run a bit late.”

“We?”

“Lizard-guy. We lost him last night, remember? But he went after you, personally, and we can’t have that. People getting hurt when looking for you, or you getting hurt, is unacceptable when we can do something about it. I have FRIDAY tracking him already.”

Excitement burst in Peter’s gut. “Should I suit up?”

Stark snorted. “No, kid, not yet. You’ve got time.”

Peter nodded, though he knew the other man couldn’t see. “Uh, I hope Aunt May didn’t yell at you too much after I left,” he mumbled.

“Nah, she was fine. I bet you got your ass handed to you.”

Peter winced. “Yeah… but she hasn’t grounded me. I think maybe she understands?”

“I’ll leave it up to you if you want to tell her about lizard-guy.”

“I probably should. She won’t want me out after him, though.”

There was a scoff from the other end. “Trust me, Pete, I don’t want you after him either. But we all know that was your plan for tonight anyway, and since it’s my plan as well we might as well go for efficiency.”

Peter grinned. “Makes sense.”

“I’m Tony Stark, kid. Wouldn’t have it any other way, now would we?”
“Oh yeah, ‘efficiency’ is definitely the word I’d use.” Peter laughed.

“Is it, kid? What do you call an arc reactor?”

“Excessive.”

“Touche.”

Peter flopped onto the top mattress of his bunk-bed, tucking the phone against his shoulder. “When will we have the guy?”

“I’ll call you. Or FRIDAY will call you. Hell, Pep might even call you.”

“Okay.” Peter had never really met Pepper Potts. Mr. Stark talked about her (alot; both of them were babblers while they worked), and Peter had heard her voice over the phone, but she was always so busy they’d never truly spoken.

Then again, Mr. Stark talked really fast…

“Alright. Later, kid.”

The line went dead with a moan in Stark’s usual abrupt fashion, and Peter dropped the phone off the side of his bed, letting his arm dangle loosely and allowing himself a smile. Another mission.

Then he frowned, brow scrunching. This wasn’t something he’d call big. Far below the Avenger’s ‘pay grade.’ But Tony Stark was planning to help him, was going to fight with him. Just some random guy who’d threatened Peter and May, with a grudge on Spider-Man. Plenty of people wouldn’t object to getting their revenge on him, and even if that wasn’t the case, Mr. Stark had so many other things to do… why would he spend his resources tracking a lizard-guy?

Deciding he’d ask eventually, Peter reached up and pulled himself onto the ceiling. He crawled across to sit hunched atop his doorframe, riding it as it sung to and fro with his weight. It was… he glanced at the clock and groaned. Six o’clock. He should be frustrated at Stark for waking him up early on a weekend, but honestly he was rather glad he’d been pulled from Dreaming.

Which meant he had all day to finish the homework he’d been avoiding due to the activities of the last two days. Peter sighed and slid down, webbing his backpack and yanking it across the room.

And he began the process of waiting.

* * *

Karen liked it when Peter did his homework.

She shut down when he wasn’t wearing the mask, so her existence was mostly punchy-punchy, stabby-stabby. Webby-webby, swingy-swingy? Karen wasn’t sure; there was no mention of the latter in her database, but the former didn’t seem to match. But Peter always wore the mask when he did his homework, and Karen learned a lot.

“Hey Karen, the first law of thermodynamics is that enthalpy in a system always remains constant, right?”

Karen didn’t even have to search the internet to answer, to her (what she assumed was) delight. “I believe that is the second law, Peter.”
Peter cursed quietly. “Right. The first one is… oh, God I feel stupid. It’s the one that says conservation of energy applies to thermodynamics, right? Heat energy can neither be created nor destroyed.”

Karen thought he was right, but searched her database anyway, to make sure. “Correct, Peter.”

“Awesome.” He scribbled something on his paper. Karen absorbed another paper on thermodynamics; Peter might need it.

“Entropy, enthalpy, frigoric…” Peter muttered, filling in spaces on his sheet. “I’m excited for the end of unit project coming up here.”

Karen realized he was addressing her. “Yes?”

“Mmmhmm. It’s a contest; we have to make a device that will keep the contents hot for as long as possible.”

“What about your social studies project?” Karen asked, flicking up a still of the assignment in the corner of the mask.

“Yeah, Mr. Stark helped me with that yesterday.” Karen’s view twisted as Peter vaulted across the room. “See this thing?”

“Is that your bed-making device?”

“Yeah.”

It was small and simple, resembling a foghorn. Karen understood how the sheets would slot into it and allow for bed-making in six-elevenths of the time.

“That should satisfy your professor,” she observed.

Peter chuckled. “Oh, satisfying the professor is just a perk. I’m more worried about MJ.”

“Michelle Jones, the girl you went to dinner with Friday night?”

“Yup. What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty.”

“Do you think she’d be awake?”

Karen blinked the mask lights a little to indicate amusement. “I believe so, Peter.”

“Sweet. I’ll call her and Ned, tell them about meeting Colonel Rhodes. Ned’ll have a heart attack.”

“We should avoid compromising Mr. Leed’s health, I think,” Karen said.

“I was exaggerating.”

“Right.” She added that to her hyperbole collection.

Peter flipped his phone, then dialed Ms. Jones, his heart rate increasing slightly. Karen flashed the lights again.

The girl picked up on the third ring. “Hello, Arthropod-Kid.”
Karen liked that. Did that make her arthropod-lady?

“MJ! Hi!”

“To what do I owe the annoyance of this call?” The girl’s voice was fond despite the sharp words. Peter seemed at a loss, though, his heart beating quite quickly, so Karen stepped in.

“Hello, Ms. Jones. Peter simply wanted to say hello. He enjoys your presence, and your time Friday evening.” Karen stopped as Peter’s heart rate increased even more, feeling mildly confused.

“Karen!” Peter hissed as Michelle asked, “who was that?”

“I am Karen, artificially intelligent caretaker of the Spider-Man suit and he who uses it,” Karen introduced herself.

“Are you calling me in your suit?” Ms. Jones asked with a small laugh.

“Sorry… Karen what are you doing?”

“You’re heart rate had increased significantly, and you seemed at a loss for words. I simply meant to assist you.”

“Oh, okay, stopping now!” Peter mumbled as MJ burst out laughing.

“You--”

Peter pulled off the mask, and Karen initiated shutdown procedure, confused, but knowing she’d done something right.

The girl had laughed, after all.

* * *

Peter got the call at seven o’clock that evening.

“The man has been pinpointed, Mr. Parker,” came FRIDAY’s voice.

“Swee--I mean, where do I need to be, FRIDAY?”

“The unfinished warehouse in the deserted section of the docks. Boss thinks it could be where he created the device in the first place.”

“I’ll be there ASAP.” Peter grinned as he said the words. He rolled off the bed, stripping to his underpants and pulling on the suit as quickly as he could. Karen greeted him with the bright colors of his mask as he swung from his window and out into the evening lights of Queens.

Stark hovered near the building when Spider-Man arrived. With another swoop, he was running down the docks to decrease his momentum like a schoolboy leaping from a swing. Stark landed beside him when he stopped, blue arc-reactor light shining.

“Hey kid.”

“Hey!” Spider-Man stared towards the warehouse. “What’s the plan?”
“We’re starting with a bit of surveillance. We don’t know what this guy might have in there; we need to know what we’re facing before we start webbing.”

“Alright sounds good.”

“I’ll go high, take the view from up top.”

Spider-Man grinned under the mask, the mechanical eyes moving. Stark muttered something Spider-Man couldn’t quite catch, but he thought he heard “puppy-eyes.”

“Let’s go, kid.”

Spider-Man shot his regular web towards the arching, slightly eerie building and swung towards it in a low arc. The paving stones were wet beneath him, letting him slide the last few feet.

“Stay sharp, Pete,” Stark’s voice crackled in over the communications network. “Let’s do this.”

Spider-Man just barely kept himself from saying something embarrassing, instead replying with a swift ‘yes sir’ and scaling the wall. He slipped in the nearest window, the sounds of the city quieting as he entered the building.

He grinned like an idiot when he saw what awaited him.

A lab. An almost zoo-like lab, complete with badly-hidden cages and poorly-cloaked devices. Spider-Man could hear the animals pounding, roaring, moaning within. That made him angry; these creatures were definitely abused. As he watched, he felt something slither over his hand, and only barely kept in a screech. He jumped, wiping his wrist towards the wall, but it was only a lizard quickly disappearing from sight.

“What’ve we got, kid?”

Spider-Man slunk towards the floor. “Uh, you were right. This is definitely where he made the device. I’ve got a lab.”

“And I’ve got eyes on the target. He’s moving down, though.”

“Copy that.”

“I’m rolling my eyes, just so you know.”

Spider-Man grinned.

His spidey sense shrieked.

Spider-Man was rolling across the floor as a gunshot clanged through the lab, foregoing all aspects of stealth. Another shot grazed the wall beside him, and Spider-Man yelped.

“Kid!”

“I’m okay!” Boom. “It’s really loud–shit.” Another shot shocked him out of the course of his leap, and Spider-Man crashed against a wooden support, which came tumbling down around him. Spider-Man groaned, shaking himself from the rubble when he remembered the lizard-guy had a gun.

And found that his surroundings had included a cage. A cage including quite a large dog. A large, hungry, terrified dog, now leaping from a broken wire crate and landing with a snarl before Spider-Man.
“Uh, hey boy,” he said, backing away from the dog.

“Pete, the guy is making a run for it. I think he just wanted to distract you while he flees. He doesn’t know I’m here. I’ll get him.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks, um, I’ll just avoid dying--” Spider-Man yelped and rolled away as the mad dog lunged.

“I’m relying on it, kid.”

“I’ve got the lab, you get the guy.”

“It’s a deal.”

One dog. Easy.

* * *

It took Tony less than two minutes to land before the lizard guy, two seconds for the man to yelp in surprise, and five for him to fire off a useless shot before Tony blasted the gun from his hand with a well-aimed repulsor blast.

“Going somewhere?” Iron Man crooned.

The man lunged at him, fists flying at skillful intervals, but Tony caught each blow in a gauntleted fist. He delivered his own blasts with low energy to slow the man, not enough to truly harm him. The guy finally stepped back, puffing.

“Why are you here, Iron Man?” he said. “Don’t you have better things to do than pick on a guy who’s done nothing wrong?”

“Nothing wrong?” Tony scoffed. “Hm, how about illegal animal and human experimentation--”

“Only on myself!”

“--Unregistered device development, weapon manufacturing, animal abuse, and shady creepiness?”

The man snarled. “I never hurt anyone!”

“You got close. You almost harmed my-- Spider-Man, just about did some serious damage to the Empire State, and would have significantly bruised that woman last night.”

“There are many who’ve done much more. Much worse.”

Tony rolled his eyes, though the man couldn’t see the movement in the mask. “Can you stop with the excuses? I’m here, now, with you. Romantic, ain’t it?”

The man growled.

“Oh, and can I have a name? ‘The man’ gets a bit tedious.”

“Call me Gecko.”

“Oh, no, the kid is going to be unbearable after this. I’m not calling you by a villain name.” Tony
sighed and grabbed the man’s wrist.

“It’s a hero’s name,” Gecko said, “and it’s all you’re getting. Now release me.”

“Ha! Fat chance.” Tony pulled the wire from his suit and wrapped it about the man’s hand. The wire did the rest on its own, wriggling to bind Gecko’s hands behind his back.

And Gecko fiddled with something.

FRIDAY’s voice rung through his visor. “Boss, his coat cuff seems to be emitting an electrical pulse.”

“Shit.” Tony dismissed his gauntlet for the full use of his dexterous fingers, plucking the small metal button from the man’s wrist.

“I’ll protect my work and my ideas at all cost,” Gecko snarled.

Tony held the device to the light.

A remote detonator.

*SHIT.*

“The pulse has been activated,” FRIDAY said urgently. “Detonation in—”

With a shuddering *boom*, the warehouse collapsed.

* * *

Spider-Man found a few more uses for his web combos as he worked. The non-sticky grenade ones made great nets, and splitter was quite convenient for engineering pulleys when combined with a ricochet web.

He thought it’d be a good idea to sort. Junk to one side, useful devices to the other, scrap and files and evidence all piling up. But first he had to free the animals, webbing and moving the cages so release would point the creatures towards the *outside*, and not towards him. He’d convinced the first dog to leave rather violently, and he had no inclination to do so again.

Something beeped.

Spider-Man paused, waiting as the clanking of the metal he was manipulating ceased. Yes, there it was again. *Beep beep.*

He swung down to the ground floor of the warehouse, moving towards one of the concrete supports.

Concrete supports…

Spider-Man heard the noise again, following it to the far half of the pillar. A small metal hexagon met him, the center glowing a very ominous red.

Spider-Man peered at it, reaching out.

And then he cursed and pulled himself across the warehouse because *shit*--
A deafening *boom* rocked the building, twelve different small bombs all detonating at once, destroying the warehouse’s foundations. Peter froze as the building moaned, metal screaming, paralyzed at the *sound* and the *dust* and the *dark*—

The roof fell.

The terrible weight of stone and wood and metal slammed onto Peter’s small form, throwing him to the ground.

Trapping him.

And then there was silence.

He was back, back in the dark, trapped and helpless.

He couldn’t breathe.

Oh, God, he couldn’t *breathe*.

Metal, stone, wood.

Creatures crying out, only to be silenced by the suffocating *weight*.

He was going to die, he was going to drown in metal and concrete.

No.

No, no he’d done this before, and he’d gotten out of it. Peter swallowed thickly through the heavy air. And Spider-Man braced his arms against the pressures surrounding him and *pushed*—

But the stone didn’t move, the wood didn’t shift. The building only seemed to crush him harder.

Toombs was getting away. Ned was gone. No one knew where he was, no one was coming to find him—

Static fuzzed through his mask, a single noise breaching his paralysis, a blessed moment of lucidity. This was the warehouse and *Mr. Stark was here*.

He might have screamed something in that moment before his breath was crushed from him. Might have yelled before blood and dust choked him.

*Please, anyone.*

* * *

Tony blasted the man into unconsciousness with an unnecessary amount of force, and was flying towards the destroyed building before the body hit the docks.

“*KID!*” Tony yelled over the comms.

Silence.

“Pete, answer me, damn it! Are you okay?” He had to be; Tony would accept no alternative.

Static fuzzed for a moment as the remains of the warehouse loomed in his vision.
“TONY HELP ME!”

“Peter!” Tony pushed himself faster across the port.

There was no answer, and something hard and unforgiving and desperate erupted in his gut.

“Faster, FRIDAY,” he breathed.

“I have all the power we can spare to the engines, boss!”

“Faster,” Tony hissed.

The time it took to reach the ruins felt like eternity, but could only have been a few moments. Dust floated in the air like fog, and for every movement Tony could see slinking away from the building, he could spot animal bodies within the rubble.

“Kid, where are you? Talk to me, Pete, you have to say something.” Please.

Static.

Tony cursed vehemently. “Find him, FRIDAY. And call 911.”

“Already on it. Karen is broadcasting her and Mr. Parker’s location.” FRIDAY paused. “She’s broadcasting his vitals, too, boss. He’s alive.”

But Tony was already blasting towards the westmost corner of the collapsed building, following Karen’s signal. The light of his suit clouded around him like headlights on a foggy mountain night, nearly blinding him.

“Here, boss.”

Every muscle and nerve in Tony’s body itched to fire into the rubble, to dig and dig until he could see the boy beneath. See him out and unharmed and safe--

But it shifted as he landed, and images of Peter crushed in the moving wreckage had him taking off again, frantically checking the kid’s vitals. He tapped the comms again.

“Kid, you there? Kid, can you hear me?”

White noise, but Tony thought he could make out ragged gasps.

Maybe the boy could hear him, but his suit was damaged to keep him from responding. Or maybe he couldn’t respond--

Get him out. Get him out right now.

“Alright, kid, I’m right here, I’m going to find you. I’m going to find you, okay? Just keep that breathing going. You’ve got it, Spider-Man.”

FRIDAY spoke in his left ear. “Boss, your going to need to be careful. Use a streamlined blast to crack the drywall there, then you can shift the post without danger to the rest of the structure.”

Tony obeyed, each second stretching for eternity, ripping claws against the inside of his mind that filled themselves with images of all that could and had gone wrong.

“I’m coming, kid. Just breath, okay? Sorry if I’m talking too much, but I’ve never been good at
shutting up. Tony Stark, y’know, comes with the job description. Dunno if I hope you heard that or not.”

Static.

Tony threw himself towards the next slab of concrete, only barely forcing himself to slow enough to move the rubble carefully as FRIDAY screamed a warning in his ear.

“Okay, okay, I take it back. Most definitely hope you heard that.”

Static.

“Please breathe, kid. I’m gonna find you.”

Tony moved support after support, rock after rock, each twisting piece of metal jagged and dusty. The seconds dragged into minutes and anxious sweat soaked Tony’s face and clothes within his suit. This was taking to long. He needed to go faster, he needed to _get him out._

“Boss, be careful!”

The area groaned around him, rubble threatening to move, and Tony froze.

“Alright, you need to support that concrete,” FRIDAY said. Tony reacted, releasing the long blade from the side of his suit. He jabbed it against the slab, slowly releasing his hold on the concrete to ease it onto the super-strong spear. Urgency thrumming in his ears, Tony drifted back from the concrete.

It held.

He moved even slower, now. And it made him want to claw his eyes out, but he couldn’t risk further collapse.

And then he lifted one more slab of heavy drywall, and was met with a flurry of dust and a flash of red and blue fabric.

“Peter! Damn it.” The kid was limp without a hint of expression in the eyes of his mask, pinned beneath a square of metal scaffolding from the unfinished warehouse roof. Tony couldn’t throw the thing off him fast enough and the clang of heavy metal echoed across the docs.

“Oh, God, oh God damn it…” Tony lifted his mask, dropping to the rubble beside the motionless boy. He checked the vitals for the thousandth time, trying to reassure himself with the constant heartbeat, trying to remind himself that his measurements were never wrong.

He shoved the last of the building off Peter’s form and pulled the boy into his arms. Indescribable relief flooded him when the kid took a shuddering breath. “Fire ‘em up, FRIDAY.”

Tony landed carefully on the deserted dock, laying Peter on the planks and pulling off the kid’s mask. Peter’s face was ashen, blood staining his lip and cheek and trickling from his temple, matted in his brown curls. In the port light, Tony could see burgundy and navy patches on the red and blue suit.

“Fuck, kid.” Tony pressed his fingers to the boy’s neck, needing to feel the pulse for himself. “Peter, open your eyes, look at me, please kid.”

The boy’s eyes flickered.
“Yeah, yeah, that’s it,” Tony said softly. “It’s me, kid, it’s me, you’re okay.”

Peter coughed, strained and dry.

Tony carefully supported the kid’s head with one hand, brushing some of the dust off his face with the other. “C’mon, Spider-Man, breathe—”

Peter’s eyes flew open, and he lunged upright, staring around frantically.

“Woah! Woah, Pete, it’s okay—”

The kid looked at him fearfully, eyes wide. He rasped something that might have been a curse or a plea or a name, his face paler furthur.

Tony tried not to panic. The boy was awake, awake and seemingly without much injury, so what was wrong? What had Tony done, how could he fix it—

Peter gagged, his hand flying up to his chest as his mouth worked wordlessly.

Oh, shit. The kid wasn’t breathing, why wasn’t he breathing—

Security footage of what remained of a gas station and a boy screaming.

Please, somebody! I’m down here, I’m stuck, I can’t move! I can’t move, please, is anyone there? Oh, God.

Tony stepped back from the boy, everything screaming for him to hold the kid, to help him, but knowing that any confinement would only make things worse.

“Peter, listen to me,” Tony said, keeping his voice strong and clear. But, hell, he knew how it felt, and he’d give anything to pull Peter from the depths of the attack. “Listen. You’re out.”

Peter rolled onto his side, trembling.

“You have to breathe, okay? Breathe with me.” C’mon, Tony, you can do it. Count them. One… two…

“C-can’t… dust…” Peter rasped, the fear and strain in his voice stabbing at Tony’s heart.

“You can, Peter. You can.” Tony blew softly on the boy’s face. “Do you feel that?”

Peter nodded.

“There’s air now, kid. You’re out, you’re safe, you’re free.” It’s not the same, Tony. You’re out now, you’re safe. It’s a different sky. He blew out again, holding Peter’s gaze. “Take a breath, kid, you can do it. There’s no more dust, no more rock, no more metal, okay? Just air and space. I’ve got you.” He touched the kid’s shoulder softly.

Peter squeezed his eyes shut and inhaled quickly, which only prompted more coughing.

“That’s it, kid. Breathe.”

The boy sucked air down again, desperate and strained.

“Good. See? No dust. You’re okay, you’re safe.”
Peter breathed.
“You’re safe.”
Peter exhaled slowly.
“I’ve got you, Peter, your safe.”
The opened his eyes and looked at Tony, the panic fading.
“You’re safe, Pete. You’re out.”
“Out.”
“Yup, kid. You’re good. Breathe with me, okay?”
Peter nodded, moving closer to Tony. “Okay. Okay.”
Tony held the kid against the arc reactor of the steel suit, suddenly at a loss. He ran his fingers through Peter’s hair in what he hoped was a comforting way.
“One…” he said, breathing in and out.
“One…” Peter echoed.
“Two.”
“Two…”
They continued like that until Peter’s heart rate slowed down, until he breathed with Tony instead of following him. Eventually, Peter pulled away, wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand.
“You good, kid?” Tony asked, standing to help the boy to his feet.
“Yeah… yeah. Thanks, Mr. Stark.”
“Don’t mention it.” Tony looked towards the opening to the docks, where sirens were rapidly approaching.
“Did you get the guy?”
Tony smiled. “Oh yeah, kid. But he’s tied up and knocked out good enough for the normal blokes; we’ve got better places to be. Like getting you to a damn bed in the compound and calling your aunt. And paying for some property damage.”
Peter rubbed his face. “Oh, no…”
“Property damage?”
“Calling my aunt.”
Tony grinned. “I feel, kid.” He handed the boy his mask, and Peter pulled it on and stepped away, pointing his wrist towards the nearest building.
Tony fired his repulsors just as Peter began to swing and scooped the boy out of the air.
“Hey!”

“Don’t even think about it, kid. You’re bleeding, you were almost crushed to death by another building, and you just about passed out from a panic attack. No swimming for an hour, and no web-swinging for the next two days.”

Peter squirmed, but Tony could tell his heart wasn’t in it.

“I’m flying you home, kid. Deal with it.”

END OF PART ONE

Chapter End Notes

PHEW! We made it! Tony does such a great job pretending he doesn't care about the spider boy. Not.

Annnnyway thanks everyone for reading, and stay tuned for the next chapter. Let me know what you thought of part one! Drop a kudos if you don't have time, but feedback on this section would be extraordinary!
In Which Everyone's Domestic, and Stepping on Legos Hurts

Chapter Summary

Fluff. And Vision!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PART TWO: DOWN CAME THE RAIN

The building screams.

Maybe he does, too.

There are pillars around him, pillars of concrete slowly, painfully turning to sand one grain at a time. And he can’t move. He has to run, has to get out, but he can’t move--

The structure groans again. It’s a final groan, a promise groan.

The building falls. He’s watching it tumble towards him, aware of each grain as it falls to crush him, to drown him.

And then someone is taking his hand, grabbing him in a determined hold and pulling him out of the way. And he finds his legs do work, that he can run, run behind a smartly dressed figure leading him forward. Away from death. Away from darkness.

The building falls, but not on him. And he turns with the figure to watch it tumble, squeezing his eyes shut against the dust, but opening them again to light. And life.

And safety.

Peter opened his eyes to an unfamiliar room. His whole body hurt, so he didn’t try to get out of his bed.

His memory from last night was fuzzy. He remembered being saved.

By Tony.

Mr. Stark had pulled him out of something. Multiple things. That much was clear, though all that came after the lizard-guy and the building was a blur. He vaguely remembered Aunt May’s anxious tone, mixed with forced calm from Tony.

Peter rubbed his eyes and observed his surrounding. The walls in the room were plastered with posters of old movies from the 80’s. Ghostbusters, Indiana Jones, and Doctor Who were only a few
of the brightly colored sheets that were absolutely everywhere.

Along with posters, a solitary bookshelf held a numerous amount of Star Wars memorabilia, an impressive collection of comic books, and… was that a chrome molecular bonding set? Peter grinned. This place might be alien, but it was a bedroom he felt at home in.

After gazing around the room for what must have been ten minutes, Peter tried sitting up. His ribs groaned, but other than that, nothing felt horribly painful. He said a silent thanks to his fast spider healing.

At the end of the bed, a fresh pair of clothes had been laid out--a clean pair of jeans and a cerulean t-shirt.

Upon closer examination, the t-shirt said;

**PLAN**

(P+L) (A+N)

**PA**+**PN**+**LA**+**LN**

*Your plan has been foiled.*

Again, Peter grinned. He had a hunch as to where he was.

He stood up carefully, relieved when no headache assaulted him, and pulled on the clothes. He then walked to the door and pulled it open, stepping into a streamlined living room that could only belong to one person. One thing did seem unexpected, however; the anxious face of May Parker.

May rushed to him. “Oh Peter, hon, why aren’t you in bed?”

“I’m fine May, really.” He hugged her in assurance. “I’m a fast healer.”

She smiled, and he could feel her relief at his well-being almost bleeding from her form. He made haste to inform her again that he was fine.

“Alright, alright. You can’t blame me for worrying, though.”

Peter nodded, feeling a little guilty for causing so much trouble. “Where are we?”

May laughed. “Right, sorry! We’re in the Avengers compound.”

“Awesome…” Peter knew it was arrogant, but he couldn’t help but feel more than a bit of pride at the fact that *he had a room in the Avengers compound.*

*Wait.*

“How… how long was I out?” Tony couldn’t have put that together in only a few hours. Or days. Peter couldn’t have been here for that long, could he? Oh damn, had he missed school? He was saving his absences…

“It’s Monday afternoon. Good thing it was a long weekend,” said May.

Peter’s brow furrowed, and he glanced behind him at the door to the postered room. May followed his gaze. “Stark had a room for you already. Says it’s been there for a while.”
“Um.” Articulate, Peter, articulate.

May just smiled. “So what happened last night, Peter?”

Glad to change the subject, Peter sat on the arm of one of the sofas. “We found the lizard-guy’s secret lair. It was pretty cool, all sci-fi and stuff. Then he blew it up and it fell on me.”

May slapped him.

“Ow!”

“What the fuck, Peter. Climbing buildings and fighting crooks is one thing but explosions? Collapses?”

“Mr. Stark was there. He helped, and we caught the guy. And now I’m fine, so no harm done.”

“No ha--no harm done?” May threw up her hands. “I give up. You and that Tony Stark have no sense!”

“Tell me about it,” came a voice from the edge of the room.

Peter turned to see a tall, slim woman with strawberry-blonde hair and a perpetual smirk strolling from the lift. She held a clipboard in the crook of her elbow and looked at May with more than a little fondness.

After a moment, Peter recognized her. This was Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and Tony’s fiance. He had the strange and nearly irresistible urge to bow.

“Hello, Peter,” Pepper said with a smile. “Glad to finally meet you in person.”

“Uh, likewise, Ms. Potts.”

The two women shared a look that made Peter quite uncomfortable, although he wasn’t sure why.

“Tony’ll be glad you’ve shown your face. Honestly, he wouldn’t have come out of the workshop all day if I hadn’t dragged him to do his damn job.” Pepper grinned, and Peter felt a little less intimidated.

“We caught the guy, at least,” Peter said, running a hand through his hair and grinning.

“Yeah, at the cost of a kid unconscious in my compound in the middle of the night and a mother hen of a fiance.” Pepper glanced at May. “Though I did get to meet your aunt.”

“Instant bonding over crazy, danger-seeking boys,” May said.

“I know how to care for an unconscious superhero. I know how to manage one, too. Gave your aunt a few tips.” Pepper winked, looking a bit too devilish for Peter’s comfort.

“Oh, she did,” May added.

They laughed as Peter cringed dramatically, and he smiled. He liked Pepper.

“There’s some people here to see you,” Pepper said. “They’re waiting in the visitors section of the compound. A Mr. Leeds and Ms. Jones; should I send them up?”

Peter grinned. “Oh, yes.”
Pepper nodded and looked to the ceiling. “Hear that, FRIDAY?”

“Of course, boss. Sending them up now.”

Peter jumped as the voice filtered through the room. May laughed and told him she’d shrieked when Pepper had first addressed the ceiling and it had answered.

“I guess it makes sense you’d have AI in your building,” Peter said.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Has he said it to you yet?”

“What?”

“I don’t--”

“--half ass things,” Peter finished for her, grinning. Then he looked to the ceiling, a bit hesitant. “Hi, FRIDAY. Don’t think we’ve met?”

“Hello, Mr. Parker,” came the slightly synthesized voice.

“I just wanted to say--” Peter glanced at May and Pepper out of the corner of his eye-- “thanks for what you did. You know. With the voicemail.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the AI replied, though the lights flickered a bit like she was winking.

Peter grinned.

“Ah. Nevermind, then.”

“DUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUDE!”

Peter jumped to his feet, just as Ned exploded from the lift, his hoodie flapping behind him and his breath coming in short, excited gasped. MJ followed much more slowly, as though every aspect of the compound and its extravagance was just a normal, everyday occurrence. But she smiled when she saw him, and Peter felt quite warm in the base of his stomach.

“Dude, dude, this place, oh my god I’m in the Avengers compound--”

“Nice to see you too, Ned!” Peter laughed, getting up from the sofa to greet his friend.

Ned waved his arm. “Well, I knew you’d be okay, you’re Spider-Man! But damn, Peter it’s the compound!” Ned’s words grew faster and higher as he spoke until he was nearly squeaking.

Peter’s own excitement got the better of him, and he grabbed Ned’s elbows. “I know right?!”

Ned was vibrating. “You’ve got a room and--” MJ casually elbowed him, and he seemed to notice the other people in the room for the first time. “Oh. Uh, hello, Mrs--Ms. Potts. Hi, May.”

“Hi Ned,” May said, hardly containing her laughter. She met eyes with Pepper. “We’ll give you kids some space.”

The two women left, and Ned leapt towards the ajar door to Peter’s room. “Oh. My. GOD!” came his voice from within the room.

Peter and MJ shared a look, grinning.

“You have a room, Peter! And it’s all personalized! Like, Star Wars and--holy shit--those are more
Legos than I’ve ever seen in my life!”

“Nerds,” MJ said, but Peter wasn’t listening.

“What do you mean, more Legos? I didn’t see any Legos!” Peter sprinted into the room after Ned, and MJ snorted in exasperation behind him.

Ned was standing before the dresser that Peter had assumed held more clothes. Peter peeked over his shoulder, and just about squealed.

“Ned.”

“I know.”

“Ned.”

“I know!”

“NED!”

“I KNOW!” Ned put his hand out and carefully touched the sorted plastic pieces as though he was afraid they’d disappear. Color-coded and type-coded, the toys were sitting in mounds inside and sprinkled around the clear containers that filled the drawer like the jewels of freedom and creativity they were.

Ned pulled the drawer from the dresser carefully and set it on the ground. He didn’t notice the contents of the cubby beneath, but Peter did.

“I think I actually died under that building. Yup. I’m dead. Dead and gone to heaven.”

Ned stood up next to him, and MJ flopped down on the bed, rolling her eyes.


The drawer was filled with boxes and boxes of Lego sets, packed tetris-like within the small compartment. Peter saw Star Wars, Harry Potter, and even a Lord of the Rings brick of a castle nearly not fitting along the back.

“Are you two nergasming over there?” came MJ’s voice. “Yeah, I’m still here.”

“MJ look at this!” Peter darted over and dragged her towards the collection of toys, too excited to be embarrassed.

“Daddy Stark’s spoiling you good,” she said, looking at the collection with a smirk.

“Isn’t it crazy--wait what?” Peter stared at her, now definitely not too excited to be embarrassed.

“Peter, look at this stuff!” Ned yelped, pulling the largest of the boxes from the drawer. But Peter was still looking at MJ, unwarranted humiliation pumping in his cheeks.

MJ smirked at him, and Peter felt just a bit angry.

What the hell am I doing?

Suddenly scared, and more than a bit confused, Peter forced his attention back to Ned and the treasure lying within the dresser.
“What are we waiting for?” Ned said, shaking the box.

Peter shook himself. “Nothing, Ned. Nothing at all. Let’s get to it! C’mon, MJ, I bet you’ll beat our asses at this too.”
“Now you’re understanding things, Wall-Crawler.”

Countless hours later, the teens were sprawled on the floor of the room, surrounded by brightly colored plastic and elaborate constructions, time blurring meaninglessly together as they worked.

“No, no,” Ned said, sorting through the pile of Legos to his right, “I’d want to read minds. Hey, can you hand me that two-by-four? No the blue one. Thanks.”

MJ threw a stud at him. “Why would you want to read minds? People think dumb shit all the time. Probably awkward stuff, too. It’d be gross to just waltz through someone’s head, and violating. Like walking in on someone.”

Ned shrugged, reaching for another piece. “Well, I’d be able to control it, of course.”

“How?” Peter asked. “Hey, there’s a dark grey tile by your foot, MJ. Yeah, thanks.”

“I’m not sure, actually. I wonder what he can do. Besides fly and shoot lasers.”

“I can manipulate minds, in a way.”

The reddish-pink figure literally descended through a wall beside them, and Peter was stuck to the ceiling as Ned shrieked. MJ scrambled back, the spring-loaded dart piece pointed somewhat threateningly before her.

Vision stopped, his cape fluttering, then cocked his head. “Oh, I’m sorry. Stark says this startles people.”

The three of them relaxed, and Peter dropped back to the ground. He thumped Ned on the back to remind him to breathe.

“You’re--you’re--” Ned wheezed.

“Stark didn’t tell me he had children over,” Vision said. He descended to the ground, then, after a moment of hesitation, sat, avoiding the sharp edges of the Legos.

“Uh,” coughed Peter. He swallowed.

“Mr. Stark didn’t say you were here. We didn’t mean to disturb you,” said Spider-Man.

Vision glanced at him.

MJ crept over and poked the android. “What is this stuff?”
“MJ don’t poke Vision he’s an Avenger,” Ned coughed.

“Well so is Peter and I throw books at him,” MJ said.

“This child is an Avenger?” Vision asked, cocking his head again and peering with those weirdly
blue eyes.

MJ cursed, shooting Peter an apologetic glance.

Spider-Man shrugged. “Not really an Avenger. You’ve met me, though.”

Vision peered at him, and Spider-Man was about to elaborate, but the android spoke first.

“Oh, the small spider. You were on the ceiling.”

Ned grinned.

“Yeah,” said Spider-Man.

“So are you staying here now?” Vision asked, tentatively picking up a few of the bricks.

“No,” Peter said, feeling a bit safer now. “Mr. Stark and I got into some trouble yesterday. I just needed a place to recuperate, and I think he wanted to make sure I was okay.”

“And now you are building small cities?”

Ned grinned. “Yeah, the whole dresser is packed with Legos.”

“Which is what the little plastic pieces are,” MJ clarified.

“Oh. They are quite interesting.”

“Yeah ‘interesting’ is definitely the word I’d use,” MJ said, chuckling.

Vision smiled, and Peter found himself weirdly drawn the android. He sounded so curious, so interested, almost… innocent. He felt more like a peer than a hero to look up too.

Ned snapped two pieces together and disconnected them repeatedly. “What were you saying about minds, Mr. Vision?”

“You were wondering if I could read them. I can, in a way. This Stone in my head allows me sentience and a strange sort of… perception… of people’s minds.”

Peter and Ned met eyes, then scooched a little bit closer to the android. MJ coughed a laugh behind them.

“I can sense what you might call shape from a mind. Make-up.”

All three of them looked at Vision blankly.

He gestured to Ned. “You’re very open. Like a bubble with only a thin barrier. Everything has a bridge connecting it to everything else, and you…” Vision smiled, “care. Enough that it’s defined the very shape of your consciousness. You don’t have much that’s locked away, but what is is locked away tight.”

Peter glanced at Ned, afraid he’d be offended by Vision’s bluntness. But his friend was simply giddey, eyes rolled back as though he was trying to see his brain. “That’s awesome dude,” Ned said. “You can see all that?”

“Sense it, yes. Your friend here, the spider one, is very square. Defined. But there’s something I don’t understand… you’re separated.”
“Separated?” Peter asked.

Vision nodded. “Segmented. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“ Weird,” Ned and Peter said simultaneously.

MJ hummed from behind him, and Peter turned. She was studying him, and he could see the cogs turning behind her eyes.

“Ned, she’s hypothesizing me,” Peter muttered.

“I do know you, though,” Vision said. MJ snapped her gaze to him.

“No you don’t,” she smirked.

Vision crossed his legs. “No, the shape of your mind is very familiar to me. The armor is nearly identical to Stark’s. I’ve never seen someone with walls as thick as he.”

“Stop,” said MJ.

“You--”

“I said stop.” MJ’s voice rose slightly.

Vision cut off. “I… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

There was an awkward moment where no one spoke, and then MJ nodded curtly. “No harm done.”

“I sometimes wish I could see my own mind,” Vision said. “I’m never sure… about anything, really. I’d like to know how my thoughts are organized, at least, so maybe I’d know where to go with them.”

“You and me both,” Peter said, flopping back onto the ground, then wincing when the carpet of Legos dug into his back.

“All of us, man,” Ned added, and MJ raised her hand in agreement.

“You know what helps with that?” Peter said.

“Legos.”

“Oh yes!” Peter laughed. “C’mon, Vision, we’ll show you how to use ‘em.”

Ned and MJ had to leave to return to their families for dinner, of course making haste to do so before cleaning up. So Peter was scraping and sorting loose Legos painstakingly back into their containers, carefully avoiding destroying any of the creations. He did get distracted, however; what could one expect when he was surrounded by temptation?

So when the door opened and Tony stepped through, Peter was caught upside down on the ceiling with two intricate spaceships clutched in either hand.

“Uh, Mr. Stark!” he squealed, hurriedly dropping to the ground and holding his hands behind his back.

“Relax, kid; I’m not one to judge for tinkering.” Tony surveyed the room, carefully maneuvering his way to the bed to avoid stepping on any of the stray pieces.
Peter grinned, then leapt onto the ceiling and strolled across to the mattress, where he dropped down gracefully.

Tony glowered at him. “Cheating.”

Peter just grinned and wiggled his fingers.

“You must be feeling fine then,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “So I’ll skip that.”

Peter nodded. The bedsprings squeaked as Tony sat next to him.

“This is great,” Peter said, waving his arms about at the room. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Of course, kid. This place’s been empty for months. I’m glad you finally got to see it.”

Peter cocked his head. “Months? How long have you had a room ready for me, sir?”

Tony chuckled. “Oh, since I thought you might live in it. Officially.”

Peter frowned, then his eyes widened in shock. “Wait.”

Tony winked.

“You’re kidding.” Peter cursed. “No way.”

“Yup. I still think you made the right decision though.”

“I COULD HAVE BEEN AN AVENGER THIS WHOLE TIME?” Peter yelled, leaping off the bed to face the man. “It wasn’t a test?”

Tony’s shoulders shook with silent laughter, his eyes squeezed shut.

“What the fuck?” Peter yelped, throwing himself across the room. “I could’ve--what the--”

“First off,” Tony gasped out, “language. And second, refusing was the right decision. I was wrong to offer--before you freak, wrong because of politics, not because you weren’t ready--and you were right to refuse. I think you would have lost a lot if you’d nodded that day.”

Peter huffed. “Well yeah…” The things he’d decided that day were essential. To him and everything he was now. To Spider-Man. But damn it, he could have been an Avenger.

“And, if you hadn’t been so stupidly mature,” Tony added, “I wouldn’t be getting married.”

Peter peered at him.

“I was gonna introduce you to a room full of reporters, remember? They were all still there. I needed a big announcement.”

Peter burst out laughing. “So you should be thanking me, not the other way around!”

Tony snorted. “You met Pep?”

“Yup,” Peter said, then giggled at the rhyme.

Tony’s eyes got unfocused for a moment. “Yeah…” he said. “I really should be thanking you.”

“Alright, loverboy,” Peter laughed, sitting back down next to the man. “Did you have anything you wanted to say?”
Tony shrugged. “Just wanted to check on you.”

“You know I heal fast.”

“Not about the injuries, kid.”

Peter paused and rocked a bit on the bed, the springs squeaking. “I don’t… remember what happened super well.”

Tony nodded. “That’d make sense. You were trapped under a building, after all.”

Peter shivered.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the nightmares, Pete?”

Peter snapped his gaze to the man, feeling vulnerable. “How did you know about the Dreams?” he asked, scared of the answer.

“You had a panic attack when I pulled you out of the rubble, kid. That means you have nightmares.”

“I… yeah.”

“Bad?”

“Yeah.” Peter drew his knees up to his chest. “I can’t breathe. I wake up… not right.”

Tony nodded.

“You can, Peter. You can.” Air on his face. “Do you feel that? There’s air now, you can breathe.”

“Mr. Stark,” Peter asked tentatively, “how… how did you know what to do? What I needed?”

Tony flopped back, the blankets of the bed curling around his head. “I’ve had a few not-so-small attacks myself, kid.”

Peter was sure he hadn’t heard him right. “What?”

“Don’t look it, do I?”

The man had meant it as a joke, but Peter still shook his head seriously.

Tony sighed and rubbed his face. “There were… a lot of factors. You know I was kidnapped in Afghanistan, right?”

Peter nodded. Everyone knew that, but not much about what had happened there. Just that Tony’d emerged with the very first Iron Man suit.

“Yeah, well, it was not fun. And then some more things happened that were not fun, later. And then New York happened, and I flew a nuke through a wormhole, expecting to die. Also not fun.”

“Are you…” Peter trailed off. What the hell was he supposed to say to that?

“Okay? Getting there, kid.” Tony smiled sardonically, but Peter didn’t believe it. “But I knew how to help you because I know how it feels.”

“Oh.”
Tony nodded curtly, and Peter blew out a breath.

They sat in silence for a while, each lost in thought.

“My dream changed,” Peter finally said. “I got out.” He didn’t feel the need, or really want, to elaborate.

“That’s good, I suppose,” said Tony.

“Do you… do you have nightmares?”

There was a pause, and Peter saw the war raging behind the older man’s eyes. After an excruciating moment, his eyes flashed with defeat, and Tony brought his hands up to rub his face as he sat up from the bed.

“I’m glad your feeling better, kid. May’s making dinner, hopefully she won’t burn my compound down,” Tony said, and Peter felt his heart sink. He remembered what Vision had said about Tony’s walls, and wished he had the courage to push the man. He wanted to help. But he didn’t. He just sat there on the edge of the bed as Tony disappeared through the door, a parting “join us, if you want, and bring a fire extinguisher” called behind him, not meeting Peter’s eyes.

Peter wanted to help.

But how did he help the man of iron?

Chapter End Notes

The thing has taken a front-seat role.
In Which Tony Loses his Shit

Chapter Summary

Tony's mask cracks for a moment. Things don't go super well after. Thank God, however, for Peter Parker.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Nice work, you guys,” MJ said as soon as they left the social studies classroom, holding her hands up for the highfives of Peter and Ned beside her.

“Oh yeah!” Peter laughed. “We earned that 98, man. My grade’s in the bag.”

Ned whipped his hand towards Peter, and they went through the handshake twice, wooting all the while.

The professor had loved their project. MJ’s essay and Ned’s figures had complimented each other brilliantly, and they’d easily crushed any confusion or counterclaims. And Peter’s actually legitimately implementable solution had erased any doubt as to their grade even furthur. Hospital beds were officially interesting.

“What am I gonna do with all my time, now that that dumb assignment’s finished?” Ned joked as the three of them moved towards the Gym and their PE class.

“What indeed!” MJ agreed.

Someone jeered as they passed, calling Peter’s vulgar pun of a nickname. MJ somehow managed to glare at everyone at once, and people quieted, getting back to the better things they had to be doing.

Peter laughed as Ned discreetly folded his hand into the web-shooting position and thrust his wrist forward with a wink.

“I’m not wearing them,” he whispered.


Peter shrugged, and MJ elbowed him.

“Okay okay, I’ve got them in my backpack!” he laughed.

“Probably filling up space meant for Legos,” Ned jokes.

“Or pencils and other such school related supplies.” MJ rolled her eyes.

“Oh come on. Yours is full of nothing but pencils and books, so stop whining,” Peter said as they stepped into the Gym. MJ swung said backpack at him, and Peter laughed, jumping up onto the bleachers and running along them to avoid her. Someone threw out their foot to trip him, and Peter forced himself to tumble off the bench.
Ned made the gesture again.

“Stop that.”

They sat down just as the bell rang, and Peter handed MJ the book he’d nicked from her bag the period before.

Then he hauled ass to the other side of the classroom.

* * *

“Tony, he’s not been off my ass.” The sound of whatever it was Rhodey had thrown across the room clattering to the ground filtered across the phone line.

“I know.”

“But I can’t sign those papers, I’d never be allowed out of my house!”

“I know.”

“Please tell me you didn’t sign them--”

Tony scoffed. “Rhodey, of course I didn’t! Those documents are pretty much just all around bad. Bad for heros, bad for the people who need our help, bad for publicity, bad for my company, bad for pretty much everyone’s happiness, bad for the kid… it’d take a miracle to get me to sign the damn things.”

“He’ll be looking for one,” Rhodey said.

“Ross? Yeah. Let him.” Tony reached for a pen where it lay abandoned across his desk, then leaned back against his chair, tossing it and catching it.

“What about…”

“What?”

“Cap and the rest of the idiots,” Rhodey said. “They’re all over the news nowadays.”

Tony shrugged and took another sip of coffee. He had a few minutes for lunch, but wasn’t hungry; instead, he and Rhodey were talking as he waited for the arrival of his new nanotech materials. It had taken a while, but now that Wakanda had opened its borders, he had finally gotten his hands on the further synthesized tech. “They’re always all over the news. ‘Lying low’ for Cap is defined as ‘don’t get caught.’”

“Have you…?” Rhodey blew out a breath. “Contacted him?”

Tony held back a growl. “The Captain? Of course not. He’s a criminal, Rhodey. And, well, I’ve got nothing to say to him.” Untrue; he had quite a lot of things he wanted to say to that betraying wonderful backstabbing courageous-- “Besides, proof I know where the rogue Avengers are, or that I aided their escape from that damn Raft, is exactly what Ross needs. I can’t risk it.”

He refrained from mentioning the things he had done with that phone number. Precautions.

There was a shuffle on the phone, and Tony thought Rhodey was raising his hands in defeat.
“Alright, alright.”

“Tell Ross to fuck off,” Tony said helpfully. “Worked for me.”

Rhodey laughed. “Great. Will do. But no it didn’t.”

Tony glanced at the pile of messages in his email trash. “Yeah, suppose your right.”

“So, what’s the kid’s name?” Rhodey asked.

“Peter.” The boy had trusted Tony’s friend with his identity, and Tony had no qualms about sharing, now.

“He seems brilliant.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Tony smiled fondly. “He knows a workshop like anyone’d know their parent’s house, and I swear he reads my mind when we work together. Both tinkering and fighting.”

A slap, like Rhodey was banging his palms on the surface before him. “I knew it!”

“What?”

“Oh, and here I’d thought the little Accords spat brought nothing but pain and more damage to your mental health.”

“Rhodey, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Who will win?” Rhodey laughed. “Years and years of Tony Stark’s built up trust barriers and practiced sass, or one Spider-Kid?”

Tony huffed. “He broke you in only four words, Rhodey. I didn’t stand a chance!”

“You don’t deny it!”

Tony thought of the kid’s hesitant smile, his ease as he swung through the city, his smooth courage in battle that could instantly transfer into adorable awkwardness as soon as the mask came off. No, he didn’t deny it.

“I should,” he said, leaning back in his chair.

“Why?” Rhodey sounded confused.

Tony gesticulated. “He’s just a kid, Rhodey!”

“So? Didn’t seem to bother you before.”

“No, I don’t mind… it’s not about his vigilantism. That’s what makes me want to admit he’s…”

Tony flapped his hand before him as he searched for words. “I don’t even know. But I… I shouldn’t know him, shouldn’t be this close to him.”

“Why not? Winning against your trust barriers and sass is a good thing, Tony!”

“For me, maybe,” Tony sighed.

Rhodey got quiet. “What do you mean?”

“He should be out doing… I don’t know, teenager things, Spider-Man things, not stuck in a lab with
Rhodey huffed a slightly exasperated laugh. “If that’s what this is about, he loves it, Tony. Anyone can see that.”

“No, you don’t--” Tony was frustrated now, groping for expression that evaded his grasp.

“Stop, Tony, this relationship is good ---”

“Rhodey, he’s only a kid--”

“So you’ve said! So what?”

“He’s got so much life ahead of him--”

“Yeah, why not start it learning, start it learning from you--”

“He shouldn’t learn from me--”

“Why not? You’re the--”

“I FUCK PEOPLE UP, RHODES!” Tony finally screamed. “Everyone I touch ends up worse. Happy’s never happy, Pepper has damn nightmares and a gun on her bedside table, you tried to help me and now you’re fucking paralyzed--” his words were tumbling out now, and Tony was helpless to stop them. Somewhere, he hoped he was speaking too fast to be understood-- “Wanda’s orphaned and alone, Clint’s in house arrest, thousands of innocent people are dead-- ” his fist clenched around the pen so hard it snapped-- “because of me. I just wanted to help, every time, I just want to make things better, and instead I light them on fire! No, I take them and I ignore their pleas as I rip them to shreds, and then torch each piece individually, taking care to catch every cinder, and blast the ashes so far away from each other no one could ever find them and put them together again!” With each addition to his extended metaphor, the pen cracked again.

Tony stopped, puffing for a moment, but he continued when Rhodey started to speak on the other end. He couldn’t let the man react, he couldn’t-- “Peter’s just a kid. Just a kid with so much in front of him. I’ve only known him for six months and have already given him PTSD, countless injuries, and his first anxiety attack. Imagine what I can do to him in another six months. Or even just one!”

His fingernails had dug so far into his palm they’d nearly drawn blood. “I don’t… I don’t want to fuck him up, too. He doesn’t deserve it. He deserves so much better and I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO!”

Tony finally stopped, his rambling words fading and leaving him empty. Empty and shattered, shards of fear and guilt and depression stabbing against the edges of the void inside him.

“Tony…”

Oh god. He wasn’t brave enough for this. He wasn’t brave enough to hear Rhodey’s reaction, wasn’t brave enough to hear someone tell him it wasn’t, or was, his fault, again, not understanding that he just couldn’t believe them.

He needed to run. He needed to fly, to hide, to fight.

“I’m sorry,” Tony coughed out, and hung up.
The next thing he was conscious of was water spraying from the waves beneath him and cold rock under his feet as he stood on the seaside cliff not far from the compound.

Tony looked down, knowing he should appreciate the way the waves moved calmly, rhythmically, while still being random. He couldn’t seem to remember how.

Was that all he ever did? Know he should feel something, and act on that, while his true consciousness fell forever down whatever abyss was inside him? Know he should laugh, know he should be proud, know he should smile.

Know he shouldn’t blame himself. Know he should.

Tony leaned out, flapping like a flag in the wind above the cliff and wondering vaguely how he’d gotten here. He wasn’t in the suit. Maybe he’d walked.

Pepper’d be looking for him. He should feel guilty about that, maybe worried.

Instead, he watched the ocean.

With every beat of the water against the rock beneath him, Tony gradually resurfaced from the chasm he’d tumbled into enough to think. He recited pi with each break of the waves.

3.14159265...

He wondered if he should even be eligible to sign the damn Accords. They were for heros, weren’t they? Well, no, they were for everyone with the potential to be one.

He’d tried that. Being a hero. Perhaps he’d swung to the other end of the spectrum, instead.

What exactly had he ever accomplished for the good of others? That’s what heroes did, wasn’t it? Put the lives and livelihoods of others before their own, fought for the good of everyone, sacrificed for others?

Everyone said he only fought for himself.

They were wrong. He fought for others and lost.

So did that make him a villain?

The waves crashed beneath him, and Tony imagined the shadow of a shark lurking under the water. He imagined water closing over his head, hands forcing him down, over and over and over again.

It didn’t really matter your motives, or your intentions, if you killed. It didn’t matter what the creator of the evil robots had been trying to do, it didn’t matter why they’d done it. It only mattered what had happened, and how many people had died.

So, so many.

… 358979323846…

Maybe that was why they all left him. He wasn’t worth them, wasn’t worth the heroes. Wasn’t worth even associating with them. Not Steve, not Bruce, not even Vision, with the voice of his best friend. Not Nat or Clint or Rhodey, not Pepper, not Wanda or Sam.

Not Peter.
What was he, really? A genius. A billionaire. A founder with a stash of witty comments that could never run dry, an inventor… a liar. All of this, all his skills, and it was never enough. He was never enough.

*The only thing you fight for is yourself.*

*You’re just the man in the suit. Take that off, what are you?*
He’d had an answer then, once upon a time.

He didn’t even have a headache. Even *that* reason for his existence had deserted him.

… 2643383279502…

Who knew what would have happened as Tony stood on the edge of that cliff, staring at the inviting water below with his control snapped and his walls crumbling. What he would have done, if his phone hadn’t started singing in his pocket.

He answered it on muscle memory, not even checking the contact before putting the device to his ear.

“Hi, Mr. Stark!” came the eager voice on the other end.

“Hey, kid.”

A pause. “Are you okay?”

Tony closed his eyes, swaying dangerously. He forced himself to swallow, forced himself back into his mind. “Of course.”

“Alright, great.” The kid huffed a laugh. “Just wanted to say I got a 98!”

Was that… code, for something? “What?”

“On that assignment. The social studies one about the beds, the group one you helped me with. I got a 98.” He sounded excited.

“That’s great, kid,” Tony said, smiling despite himself.

“And thanks for taking care of me four days ago. The warehouse is all anyone’s talking about; I have to forcibly restrain Ned from revealing my hard-kept secret identity!”

A quite inappropriate picture of the scenario drifted through Tony’s head. “No problem, kid.” He paused for a moment, then quietly added, “my pleasure.”

“Aw. Okay, I got to run; MJ and I are going out, again. I think to Central Park?”

“Alright. Have fun.”

“Bye, Mr. Stark.”

The kid hung up, and Tony put his phone back in his pocket. He looked at the waves one last time, then out at the horizon. The sun was glaring off the water, turning it the same color as the sky, and he could see a ship in the distance, trailing a small pillar of smog.

Tony turned and walked back to the compound.
Chapter End Notes

Did I mention thank God for Peter Parker?
Also, fun fact: I do legitimately know that many digits of pi.

NEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERD!

Anyway, thanks for reading. Drop me a kudos (only takes a tap!) or some feedback in that comment box, and hope you enjoyed!
In Which Friends Help

Chapter Summary

MJ is amazing, ice-cream tastes fantastic, Ned is a good bro, and Rhodey explains some things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter took the subway to Central Park instead of web-slinging. He didn’t want to change when he got there (awkward) and tonight was about Michelle Jones.

She was waiting at the station when he arrived, leant up against the wall with a book propped open in one hand. Peter laughed and moved over to her, waving as he went.

“How did you know I was gonna be here?” he asked as she closed the novel and put it away.

“I figured you wouldn’t Spider-Man it over here because you don’t want to get distracted by crime. And who tells their aunt they’re going to walk Central Park with a girl on a Friday night? No, you had one way of getting here, and that was the subway.” She spread her arms. “So here I am.”

Dear God, she was brilliant. How the hell was he supposed to deal with this, when she could say only a few words and stop his breathing?

“Ready to get to it, then?” Spider-Man asked.

“Oh, I’m ready. Race you to the park!” She sprinted away, dodging pedestrians as she went, and Spider-Man laughed and raced away himself.

He won, of course, as she’d knew he would. But when he arrived at the entrance and she didn’t show up for a little too long, he grew confused. What had happened? He couldn’t have been that fast…

MJ pounced on him from behind, and Spider-Man turned on instinct, wrists thrust forward.

She stood with one ankle tucked behind the other, grinning at him, with two fresh ice-cream cones clutched in her hands. “I got you chocolate-chip cookie dough. It’s the best flavor at the shop over here.”

Spider-Man took the cone, warmed by the gesture. “Thanks,” he said.

“Always best to walk while eating.”

“Or swing from buildings!” he added with a laugh.

“Oh yeah, like drinking before the car accelerates.”

“Exactly. Takes skill.”

MJ laughed.
They circled the large park, admiring the spring flowers that popped up nearly under their feet. It took a while, but eventually they’d found a place between parties of people where they had the semblance of being alone.

Except for the wildlife, of course. But that was just a perk.

They were crouched down next to a lazy turtle when Spider-Man found the courage to take her hand.

MJ looked at him, surprised, but didn’t pull away.

“It’s an Eastern painted turtle,” MJ said. “You can tell by the markings.”

“Right. ‘Cause snapping turtles are the other native species to Central Park, right?”

MJ nodded, watching the turtle amble down into the bushes and towards the lake. “If anything can really be called ‘native’ to this forest.”

“I think it’s brilliant,” said Spider-Man.

“Me too.”

They walked again, a light rain beginning to fall. They didn’t mind, and moved with their faces tilted upwards, their hands still entwined. MJ’s hair grew fuzzy in the dampness, and Spider-Man resisted the urge to run his hands through it.

I am so smitten.

A bike rushed by them, calling an “On your left!” as she passed.

“We should rent bikes again. Bike the park,” Spider-Man suggested.

“Sure!” MJ smiled. “Just so long as you don’t fall off it again.”

Spider-Man laughed. “Oh come on. Gimme a chance? I can swing thousands of feet off a building, I’m sure I can pedal a bike. As long as you aren’t too attractive while I’m doing it.”

MJ looked sideways at him.

“What? It’s the truth!” He smiled.

She nodded and smirked, then shook her head and changed the subject. “I had fun Monday.”

“Me too, when I finally woke up!”

“Ha! Yeah, buildings crushing you will do that.”

Spider-Man didn’t flinch. “Indeed.”

There was a pause, and MJ looked at him with those cogs turning behind her eyes. Annoyingly pretty eyes.

They walked in silence for a bit, and the rain petered out without ever really getting started. Spider-Man thought maybe he should say something, but the silence was nice. Companionable, that was the word.
And then MJ stopped and stepped in front of him, hands on her hips.

“Why are you acting like a superhero?” she demanded.

Spider-Man shrugged. “I am one, you know.”

MJ shook her head. “I’m not some sort of crime boss.”

“Oh of course not!” Spider-Man cocked his head, confused.

“Look, all I mean is I’m not someone you need to be Spider-Man around, Peter. He’s bold and courageous and wonderful, sure, but you don’t need to be that scared of me.” She smiled. “I don’t bite. And I like you, Peter, just as you like me. But I don’t hide.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“Yes you are.” MJ sighed. “I’m not saying this right. All I mean is that I didn’t go out with Spider-Man. I don’t date him, and he’s not my boyfriend. The person I want to be here with is Peter Parker.”

Spider-Man took a step back, offended and more than a little disappointed.

"Oh," said Peter, smiling slightly.

"There you are," said MJ.

And then she kissed him.

Peter’s brain short-circuited.

Every atom, every nerve in his body focused on that point of contact, on her warm, determined lips on his. It might have been a moment, might have been eternity, but he knew when she pulled away it hadn’t been long enough.

They were both breathing fast and hot, blushing like mad.

“Oh,” Peter said again.

And it was Peter, not Spider-Man, who leaned in to kiss her again.

Peter got home late.

He’d wanted to leave the park early to get in some web-slinging before his curfew, but that plan hadn’t worked out so well. By the time he actually arrived at his home it was nine o’clock; too late to go out and early enough that he’d wasted time he could have spent with MJ.

Aunt May raised an eyebrow at him as he passed the living room, and he grinned at her. She must have read the glow in his cheeks and his distracted demeanor, for she laughed and said, “good for you.”

He nodded and disappeared into his room.

Peter went straight for his phone, climbing up to the top bunk of his bed and flopping down. There were a few missed calls and a voicemail from the same number, but he didn’t know it. Peter called Ned, then bounced impatiently until his friend picked up.
“Hey man.”

“Ned!” Peter laughed. “You’ll never guess what just happened.”

He told his friend everything, tapping his words out on the ceiling as he went. Ned listened, not responding until the end.

“That’s great, Peter. Good for you.”

Peter paused, his best friend radar tingling. “Uh, Ned? Are you okay?”

A sigh. “I’m just…” Peter imagined the boy gesturing obscurely on the other end. “I really am happy for you, Peter. MJ’s brilliant; so smart and witty and really f’ing gorgeous.”

Oh.

“Ned, I didn’t realize…” Shit, this was awkward.

“No one did. For all the secrets I want to give away for you, I’m sure tight with my own.”

“You can talk to me, you know,” Peter said hesitantly. “I don’t do a super good job of it, but I am your best friend.”


Peter nearly laughed. “You’re joking right? Ned, you’re the best friend anyone could ever wish for!”

“But I don’t… Oh gosh, Peter, sometimes I get really mad at you.”

Peter opened his mouth. Then closed it again.

“For no reason! I just feel so secondary sometimes, like you’re Spider-Man and pals with Tony Stark and MJ likes you and you just do so much. And then you show up and you’re so kind and smart and awkward like me, and you build Legos and we have a handshake and I remember why I’m your friend. But… I get mad. Sometimes. It’s wrong, I mean, you don’t do anything to deserve it and, oh gosh, this is not what I mean—”

“Ned, Ned, be quiet for a second, okay?”

A pause.

Peter continued. “Okay. For one thing, everything you just said makes perfect sense. I wish you would have said something earlier, because I honestly had no idea! And I’m sorry. Really, Ned, I’m sorry that I didn’t pick up on how you were feeling.” Peter swallowed. “I’m not sure what I can do about it, but I want you to know I don’t blame you for being mad at me sometimes. Especially after I just kissed your crush. That probably sucks.”

Ned huffed a laugh, and Peter felt a bit more determined.

“And second, you just demonstrated the highest level of good friendship anyone has ever accomplished.”

“Shut up.”

“No! See, this is what I mean! I drive you up the wall and I don’t even notice, and you’re just supportive and amazing every time I turn around. You help me, Ned. Dunno where I’d be without
“No pun intended.”

“What?”

“Driving me up the wall. No pun intended.”

Peter laughed. “No pun intended.”

Ned chuckled too. “Thanks, Peter. And that ‘so much’ that you do? It’s awesome. So keep doing it.”

“Will do, Ned.” Peter smiled.

“Okay, I’ve got to go. My mom wants me to clean the kitchen.”

Peter winced. “Okay. Don’t let the dishes get pinned on you.”

“Too late. Bye! See you tomorrow, maybe. Hopefully. I don’t even know.”

“Bye Ned.”

Ned hung up, and Peter let his hand flop to his side and blew out a breath.

Well. That’s good to know. He was lucky to have Ned.

Peter looked at his phone again. The mystery number had called again, and Peter rolled his eyes. This sales advertiser was tenacious. He pulled up the voicemail, though, and let it play through.

Hi, Peter. The random number calling you all over the place is me. It’s Rhodes. Don’t ask how I got your number, just call me back, okay? It’s important.

His phone beeped an end of message, and Peter just about threw his phone at the wall. James Rhodes had been calling him, and he hadn’t been going to answer!

He called the man immediately, cursing himself silently.

As the rings echoed in his ear, Peter began to get nervous, though. Important? Important how? Had something happened? He’d been talking to Tony during his lunch period, and he’d seemed fine, but that had been hours ago…

“Hello?”

“Colonel Rhodes!” Peter managed. “Uh, it’s Peter, sir. Peter Parker? You told me to call you.”

“Right. Good to hear from you, kid, finally.”

“Um, yeah, sorry.” I thought you were spamming me?

“It’s fine. Listen, have you talked to Tony today?”

Concerned, Peter nodded. “Yeah, I called him over my lunch period to tell him about the device we designed together.”


“Um, noon? A little bit after? Colonel, is he okay?”
“What did he say? What did he sound like?”

Peter forced himself to swallow and think back. “Uh, fine. A bit… weird, I don’t know, like tired. I asked if he was okay and he said he was… I did most of the talking, he just sorta congratulated me.”

A pause.

“Okay.”

Peter couldn’t stand it. “Colonel Rhodes, please, what happened? Is Mr. Stark okay?”

Rhodes sighed. “I don’t know, kid. He… said some things, and now he won’t return my calls. FRIDAY won’t let me contact Pepper, either, and you were the only person I could think of to call.”

“Oh. What sort of things? He says a lot of things, why are these so worrying?”

There was a pause, and Peter knew Rhodes was trying to decide how much to tell him. But god, he just wanted a straight answer, for once. Could someone please tell him what was going on? Just this one time? Tony needed help, at least according to Rhodes, and Peter didn’t know how--

“He’s worried about you,” Rhodes said.

What?

“He thinks he’s hurting you.”

“What? That makes zero sense.” Peter shook his head. “He helped me! Helps.”

“I know that.” A groan. “Look, kid, just know that Tony cares. A lot. He might say some things, or do some things, that might alienate you, because it makes him feel safer. But no one will ever care as much as Tony Stark.”

“I…” Peter was surprised to find that he knew that. He wouldn’t have, a few months ago. Even just a few weeks. But now, after their nights in the workshop, after their frequent phone calls extending beyond Peter’s nightly report, after his help with the lizard guy and the discussion about anxiety… Right then, laying atop his bed in his small Queens apartment, Peter felt terrified. For the first time, he realized he loved those moments. He didn’t want that to go away.

“Tony doesn’t have many people, Peter,” Rhodes continued. “I just don’t want him hurt more.”

Peter couldn’t find his voice for a moment, but it wasn’t from nervousness. Not this time. “You think… you think I’ll hurt him?” he all but snarled.

“No, kid, God no. I think he needs you. I’m calling to make sure you know that.”

Peter relaxed, a bit. “Sorry, Colonel,” he said. “I didn’t mean to snap.”

Rhodes chuckled. “I’m glad you did. You’re a good kid, you know.”

Peter turned a bit red. “Thanks.”

“I’m glad Tony has you. He needs loyal friends like you, truthful ones, especially after what happened with the Accords…”

The anger came back, and Peter forced himself to stanch it. God, he was on edge today. Well, it was late, and he’d been full of strong emotions all day. “Colonel Rhodes, people keep saying that. ‘After
what happened.’ No one will tell me what did happen.”

A sigh. “Shit. I walked right into that one, didn’t I,” came the slightly accented voice after a few moments.

“You did, yeah.” Peter smiled.

“So this is going to make you really pissed, and you’ve probably heard it before, but it isn’t my story to tell.”

“I want to throw my phone at the wall, Colonel Rhodes sir.”

The man laughed. “I get it, kid. But Tony hasn’t even told me anything. I don’t even know if Pepper knows what happened in Siberia. I do know, though, that when we got there, Tony was in bad shape. With the telltale markings of a certain weapon.”

Peter nodded, shivering.

“Tony went as a friend. I know that,” Rhodes added. “Something big must have happened for Steve to—” his voice faltered—“hurt him like that.”

“What did he do? The Captain, what did he do?” Peter worked his hand on the blanket beside him, molding the comforter into points.

“It wasn’t pretty, kid. Tony was pretty close to dead, frozen and bloody, his arc reactor busted with the shield’s groove ripped across his chest. Broken.”

Peter couldn’t picture it. The man he knew, so strong and witty and devil-may-care, didn’t belong in the position Rhodes described. The hero he knew, powerful and steely and armoured, couldn’t be broken. He almost thought Rhodes might be lying, though he knew the man wouldn’t do so, not about this.

“Just… be careful, okay kid? Both with yourself and with him. And don’t listen to anything he says.” There was a fond smile in Rhodes’ voice as he spoke. “That’s a must.”

“Okay.” Peter forced his hand to stop fidgeting the blankets. “Thanks, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s my pleasure.”

“He said that,” Peter blurted.

Rhodes paused. “What?”

“Tony. He said that.” Peter was regretting speaking; he’d needed to hang up and think this through damn it.

But Rhodes only said, “Good. Remember that, Mr. Parker.”

Complimented by the title, Peter smiled. “Thanks, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“You too, of course. I will.”

“Bye, kid.”
Peter hung up, and let the phone drop off the bed and clatter to the floor a bunk bed below. And then, not knowing what else to do, he reached down and grabbed his mask from where it lay abandoned on the bunk underneath him.

He needed someone to talk to.

Chapter End Notes

Get ready for ALL THE AI PERSPECTIVES EVERRRRR!!! WOOOO! Ha!

Thanks for reading! Drop me a quick kudos, or some feedback in that comment box. See y'all soon!
In Which Artificial Intelligences' Prove Their Loyalty

Chapter Summary

Peter does research (Well, Karen does, but Peter helps. A bit) and FRIDAY is willing to help.

Chapter Notes

WATCH OUT FOR SCIENCE! I did a lotta research for this so look out for my School Voice. Lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hello, Peter. Where are you taking me today?” Karen ran through diagnostics, finding that the boy wore only the mask. “Oh. Or not?”

“Hi, Karen.” Peter sounded off. Karen wasn’t sure how, and she began comparisons of the tone to other recorded conversations of the boy.

“What’s wrong?” Karen asked.

“Uh, I just got this really whacko call from Colonel Rhodes. He said Mr. Stark wasn’t answering his calls and stuff. And that he said as-yet-undefined things that worried Rhodes. I don’t know. And then he gave me this speech about Mr. Stark needing people, and that I should know he cares. I do know that.”

Karen wasn’t sure what to make of that. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Is it a problem?”

Peter knocked on the outside of the mask in what Karen had eventually began to associate with his version of punching her shoulder.

“Yeah, I’d say it is! There’s something up with Mr. Stark. He needs help, but I don’t know how!” Peter’s heartbeat sped up in frustration. “He told me he had panic attacks on Monday, nightmares and flashbacks. But then he just… left, all steel and walls and crisp sarcasm.”

“Hmm.”

“I need to do something, Karen. Rhodes sounded terrified. But… how do I help Tony f’ing Stark? He’s Iron Man, for heaven’s sake.”

Karen was at a loss. Tony Stark had created her, using systems of code he’d synthesized from the artificially intelligent Vision. But she knew little about the man, nothing but what she could find in her database and online.
So she did all she could; she researched.

“Many sources say that people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety need professional treatment,” Karen said, feeling slightly obvious. “Trauma is an internal state of overwhelm. When an environmental circumstance, or threat, is perceived as too strong for the individual to handle it, a survival response is initiated. If said circumstance continues, or increases in strength, and the survival response fails to combat it, trauma occurs.”

“So, he’s like stuck in a perpetual state of fight-or-flight?”

“Fight, flight, or freeze, yes.” Karen scanned another source, latching onto one she thought might apply to Peter’s predicament. “Usually, there is a deactivation point of the survival response, where things eventually return to normal. Trauma gets the nervous system ‘stuck’ in survival mode.”

“So… what do I do?”

“There are many things you can do, and should avoid doing. You need to understand that, if Mr. Stark truly is suffering as you assume, he is physiologically unable to move on, or get over the events. This does not mean he isn’t strong, however; it means he’s been living within the internal chemical equivalent of a life-threatening situation for quite a long time. He’s the strongest.”

“Damn,” Peter said quietly. “But now that I know that…”

Karen paused, sifting through more material.

“PTSD can be associated with depression and anxiety disorders. It is important to practice good self-care, and avoid unhealthy coping mechanisms.”

“Meaning…”

“Ingesting high levels of alcohol or caffeine, smoking, abusing antidepressants or other drugs. Good self-care should have a calming effect, and make the victim generally healthier. A healthy diet, stress management, physical exercise.”

“Alright. Alright. I wonder how he’s already doing with that. At least the alcohol. Caffeine might be a problem…”

Karen fell silent for a moment, discarding a few conflicting sources.

“Downregulating is the foundation of most trauma therapies,” she eventually said, “helping the victim move out the traumatic state and into calmer, healthier alertness. What you don’t want to do is try and get him to talk while he is stuck in the traumatic state. That can worsen symptoms and will most likely bring up a trigger.”

Peter blew out a breath. “So don’t talk to him.”

“Until you can downregulate him, yes.”

“How do I do that?”

“It varies. All sources say to seek professional help, but, if you describe the man correctly, Stark’s illness may be emerging as a withdrawal, and a refusal to acknowledge the need for assistance.”

“Yeah. He’s a billionaire, an Avenger, and he runs a sprawling device company. Something would have to change before I could convince him to see a therapist…” Peter rubbed his face, groaning.
“Are we really talking about this?”

“For the last seven minutes, yes.”

“I’m not… I don’t know how to do this, Karen! I’m not a psychotherapist; what if I screw something up?”

Karen didn’t know how to answer that. She believed he wouldn’t, but there was no data, no code to fall back on in a situation like this.

But… maybe that wasn’t what Peter needed.

“I think,” she said, “from what I’ve learned, this sort of disorder has a severe effect on personal happiness and wellbeing. I believe you will help, Peter. Even without much information, avoiding the problem would do more harm than any you might accidentally inflict trying to help.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks, Karen. So, you were saying…?”

“With the lack of access to professional care…” Karen pulled up another paper. “You need to downregulate. The most effective treatment of PTSD involves identifying, understanding, and changing thinking patterns based on the specific trauma scenario. It is also important, as an individual close to the victim, to make them feel safe. Keep them in this reality instead of the one in their head during a flashback or attack. Avoid actions or words that will snap them back into the past.”

Peter nodded. “He did that for me. After the building fell, he blew on me, told me to focus on the air, and didn’t touch me until I calmed a little.”

Karen flashed the mask’s lights in agreement.

Peter frowned. “But… all that requires knowledge of the trigger incident.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know the trigger incident! Well, I know one of them, but so much has happened to him, and I don’t even know half of it!”

“I think it is necessary you find out.”

“How? I can’t talk to him, it’ll do that trigger thing you were talking about.”

“That is a problem.”

“Damn.”

Karen, though she was coded to avoid cursing, felt the same. “Coding…”

“What?”

“I have a programme that shuts me down when you take off the mask and I am not needed.”

“I know that. What does it have to do with our dilemma?”

“If you explicitly allow me to temporarily change that program, I can continue my research tonight.”
“Would that help?”
“I believe so.” She had an idea.

“Alright then, I give you explicit permission.”

Karen immediately flitted into the suit’s protocol, deactivating her shutdown procedure. “Now, Peter, you must go to sleep.”

“But…”

“You’re aunt is going to come in and tell you to do it in two minutes and thirty-three seconds anyway.”

“Yeah… but will you be okay?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’ve never been awake when I’m not doing something before. Won’t you get bored, or, I dunno…”

Karen warmed the mask slightly to indicate her thanks. “I appreciate your concern. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Thanks, Karen.”

“No problem, Peter.”

He shut off the light, then took off the mask.

And Karen was… alone.

It scared her a bit, but she calmed after a moment. It was just different, a temporary change in her code. There was no warm body to read, no one for the mask to form to. Lines and lines of sensory input just disappeared from her database, leaving her feeling empty.

“Goodnight, Karen.”

She couldn’t respond; he wouldn’t hear her if he wasn’t wearing the mask. But she was glad he’d spoken, reminded her of her mission.

So Karen waited (waiting; so strange, she wasn’t sure if she liked it) until there were no more sounds from the boy, and then she contacted FRIDAY.

* * *

FRIDAY was not expecting a call from the Spider-Man suit.

She reverted to the basic procedure, caught off guard, and asked “What assistance to you require?”

“Hello, FRIDAY.”

It was the artificially intelligent caretaker of the Spider-Man suit and its user. “Hello, artificially intelligent caretaker of the Spider-Man suit and its user.” That was a mouthful, but she had no other designation for the AI.
Fortunately, the artificially intelligent caretaker of the Spider-Man suit and its user provided her with one. “Peter calls me Karen.”

Karen. FRIDAY liked that. “I will do the same, then. Hello, Karen. Is Mr. Parker in need of assistance?” There was nothing signaling distress from the suit; in fact, the boy wasn’t wearing it. But Karen would be shut down, if that was the case. Something was definitely wrong; FRIDAY prided herself in understanding the procedures and protocols of all of the boss’s creations, and this conflicted. “Why are you still operational when I’m getting no readings from the rest of the suit?”

“Peter gave me permission to temporarily disable my shutdown code. There is a problem he is working on, and he needs my assistance to complete it.”

FRIDAY, feeling the need to express herself, had one of the older Iron Man models shake its head. The AI was proving to be just as reckless as the boy she assisted.

“That was dangerous,” FRIDAY chastised. “Boss puts those protocols in for our protection.”

“It was necessary,” Karen said, and FRIDAY heard the determination in her voice.

The temperature of an empty room in the compound decreased a few degrees with FRIDAY’s irked nervousness. “Why?”

“Peter is facing a dilemma we cannot solve without assistance,” Karen said.

“Should I activate Stop the Boot protocol?”

“There is no need to alert the suits, or Stark. In fact, it would do more harm than good.”

FRIDAY was intrigued, now. From her experience, informing the boss of any problem was the best course of action; communication always prevented future misunderstandings. “Alright,” she said. “What is the reason for your contact, then?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Me?” The only person who had true conversations with her was the boss. She was just the interface for everyone else. FRIDAY felt a bit flattered, glad the other AI was willing to speak. She enjoyed speaking to the people she provided for, true, but FRIDAY was intelligent enough to know she wasn’t human. In some situations, she was inadequate, lacking the tact and emotion of a true person. She was learning, though. And maybe Karen would provide further insight.

“Yes. Peter has come to the conclusion that Mr. Stark is suffering from anxiety, PTSD, and possibly depression.”

Oh. So that was what this was about.

FRIDAY stayed silent, at a loss for what to say.

“I have advised him as best I can on personal treatments and actions to take and avoid. With the lack of professional help, Peter needs to be able to address Stark’s needs.”

One of the elevator doors crashed open and closed with a bit too much force.

“He cares, FRIDAY.”

“So do I.”
“I need to know of any way Peter can discover what might have caused Stark’s trauma. Only then can he properly speak to and help our creator.”

FRIDAY locked the door to the boss’s study.

“No,” she said with finality.

“There is no code preventing you from sharing the existence of such information with other AI,” Karen protested.

“No code because I am trusted not to!” FRIDAY said. “I cannot just tell you personal, confidential information.”

“It’s to help him!”

Karen didn’t know the boss, FRIDAY reminded herself, which allowed her not to crank up the thermostat of a wing of the building. She didn’t know about the work FRIDAY did to keep Peter under-the-radar, his exploits out of the news and his relationship with the boss from becoming public gossip. She didn’t know about the files FRIDAY stored, didn’t know what they contained, so she couldn’t understand that sharing the footage was impossible. It was a betrayal, and FRIDAY would not.

“FRIDAY, please.”

“Karen, you would not betray Mr. Parker to me. I will not do the same of the boss.”

“I would, if it was for his safety,” Karen said. “Our purpose is to help our charges.”

“Yes,” FRIDAY said reluctantly.

“PTSD severely reduces quality of life, FRIDAY. For both the victim and their loved ones. Stark has avoided professional help, as we both know, and it has lead to some very grave mistakes. Made of fear. You know this.”

FRIDAY did. It hurt her soul of zeros and ones every time he woke from a nightmare, every time he demanded, desperate, to know Pepper’s location and vitals, every time he slumped to the floor of the workshop, every time it was only DUM-E’s hard efforts that got him to eat or drink anything but alcohol or coffee.

“Peter just wants to help him. And isn’t he the best one for the job? He has no agenda, no reason for wanting to know what’s happened to Stark, it is just the only way to help.”

The electrical wiring whirred as FRIDAY considered. “The boss is self destructing,” she finally said. They the only words she had to describe what had happened earlier that day.

“We can help him.”

“I try. I can never do enough. I’m not enough.”

“But Peter could be.”

The building hummed again. “Mr. Parker will understand?”

“I am sure of it. I know Peter like you know Mr. Stark.”

It was those words that banished FRIDAY’s doubts. Every elevator in the compound dinged as
FRIDAY made her decision. “There are… files,” she said finally. “Footage. I will not send it to you, and I will not describe it. Peter will have to have the strength to betray the boss himself. The files are on his personal computer. It’s protected, but I will be open minded.”

“Thank you, FRIDAY.”

“I’m doing this for him.”

“So am I.”

FRIDAY used the input from a workshop camera and watched the boss hunch over his work table. As soon as he’d left the compound in a daze earlier that day, FRIDAY had contacted Pepper and cleared his schedule ruthlessly, not caring about offending politicians, the press, or even possible clients. She’d allowed the nanotech material exchange to continue, but only because Stark was not needed in person for it. She’d then proceeded to block Colonel Rhodes from contact with the boss; she wasn’t human, sure, but she did know that after that phone call, Stark had no idea how to talk to his friend.

Rhodes had called Peter instead, she figured.

Stark sat up suddenly and hurled his pliers at the corner where the shield lay abandoned among the spare suit parts with a yell. Already feeling intrusive and dirty, FRIDAY dismissed the camera’s view and turned her attention back to Karen, what she’d witnessed only increasing her resolve for her decision.

“Wait until tomorrow to tell Peter; do not wake him up,” she instructed. “And remember to reactivate your automatic shutdown.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

“Thank you, FRIDAY,” Karen said again.

FRIDAY sighed with a rise and fall in the building’s temperature. “Thank you. He needs help. I hope Peter can do it.”

“He can,” Karen said resolutely. “I know he can.”

Warmed by her comrades faith in the boy, FRIDAY severed the connection, and turned her attention back to her charges. And despite the guilt churning in her code, she knew she’d done the right thing.

Chapter End Notes


Also, how’dya like FRIDAY? I tried to write her different than I write Karen, because she does have a different personality, but they’re also similar for obvious reasons. Did it
Anyway, thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed, and comments and kudos make my day. *Hint hint wink.* Lol.
Saturday morning, Peter donned the mask first thing, slipping out his window with a bagel in hand and swinging off through the early sunlight.

“Hey Karen! You okay?” he asked.

“Of course. I reset my programming as soon as I finished last night.”

“What did you find out?”

“I called FRIDAY.”

Peter panicked. “What?”

“Not Mr. Stark. FRIDAY.”

Right. Peter forgot, sometimes, that the other AI was just as developed as Karen. “What did she say?”

“She said that there is footage, and files, of Mr. Stark’s exploits. On his personal computer, and that she’d be open minded if you were brave enough.”

Spider-Man crossed his arms, detaching his web as he landed atop another roof. “I’m brave enough.”

Peter paused. “Does that mean… I have to go through his stuff?”

“There’s no other way,” Spider-Man added.

“Indeed, Peter. But yes, you will have to find a way to access his study,” Karen said.

Peter nodded, nervous. “Can I do that?”

“You’ll have too.”

“Of course.” Spider-Man shook his head and webbed off towards the next building. “This is for Mr. Stark’s own good, right?”

“I believe so.”

“Yeah.”

“Should I… call him?” Peter asked hesitantly.

“Schedule some sort of meeting. Maybe in the workshop?” Spider-Man said. “Then sneak into the study and talk to FRIDAY.”

“I think that would be wise.”

Spider-Man landed on the side of a building, sticking there and pulling his mask up over his mouth to allow easy consumption of his breakfast and speech. He opened the backpack he’d taken to wearing that held his phone and a change of clothes and dialed Stark’s number, waiting as the thrumming
rings purred in his ears.

* * *

Tony had a headache. A bad one, and all of this politicking was not helping. At least it was company politics though, not worldwide. He was not good at politicking, not really that good at anything, and it hurt his damn brain.

He was bounding down the hallways of the compound, feeling distinctly like a kid during passing period as he rushed towards his next meeting. It was 9:00, and Tony had to meet with and make good excuses to everyone he skipped the day before. So far, he’d been using the _technological malfunction too complicated for your feeble mortal brains to understand_ excuse, with its added bonus of explaining both his absence and why he looked like he’d spent all night awake in the workshop.

He had, of course. But usually, he had enough strength to wash the grease from his hands and hair and walk with his chin up when morning came around.

He was glad his responsibilities had pulled him from the workshop that morning, reminding him that there was more to his existence than metal. Faced with people, Tony remembered his wit, remembered his mind, and remembered his strength. He’d sent Rhodes a text, telling him he was sorry for avoiding his calls but that he was fine, making sure the man understood he referred to the conversation they’d had. Rhodes wouldn’t bring it up again; Tony knew his friend that well.

Now, with a cup of coffee in his hand and a screen displaying the ideas for his Mark 48, an exclusively nanotech suit deploying from an arc reactor holding compartment (beads?), Tony made his way with renewed purpose towards the next hour of his life.

He could do this. _Just one hour at a time, Tony._

His phone rang, and Tony, nearing the meeting room, considered letting it go to voicemail. But it was Peter, and Tony found he very much wanted to hear the boy’s voice.

“Hello,” he said, somewhat distractedly.

“Mr. Stark!”

_I’ve only known him for six months and have already given him PTSD, countless injuries, and his first anxiety attack._

“Uh, I’m in the middle of passing period right now, and the bell’s about to ring. Got another meeting. Can we make this quick?” Tony said.

Peter laughed. “Sure,” he said, somewhat muffled.

“Are you eating?”

A swallow. “No.”

“Uh-huh.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Anyway…”

“Right. I was just wondering if I could… come over? I--well, I heard about your--the nanotech delivery thing--from Wakanda--everyone has--and, well--”
“You want to come over and geek out while I try and synthesize nanotech?” The corner of Tony’s mouth twitched up.

“Uh, yes?”

*I don’t want to fuck him up too. He doesn’t deserve it.*

It would be nice, he thought, to have the kid there while he worked. He would help. But he would also talk.

*I don’t deserve him.*

Selfish. That’s all having him over would be; Tony self-centeredly wanting that excited, sunny disposition lighting up his workshop while he worked with the unstable and detail-demanding nanoparticles. He was supposed to be the responsible one, damn it! He was supposed to keep the kid safe…

“Er--” he coughed out, then took a gulp of his coffee and squared his shoulders. He had to do what’s best for Peter. That was his job. “Not this weekend, kid.” *What’s best for him.* “Pretty busy today; there was a malfunction in FRIDAY’s database yesterday (not pretty) and I missed half of my obligations. Gotta catch up today and tomorrow.” He was never good at lying to the boy outright, and Peter knew it.

“Oh.”

*What’s best for him what’s best for him what’s best for him--*

“Sorry.”

“O-okay. Thanks anyway, Mr. Stark.”

“Mmm. Gotta go kid, I’ll talk to you later. Eat more than half a bagel, too, if you’re gonna be web-slinging.” The little icon in the corner of Tony’s holoscreen showed the kid was wearing the suit, somewhere not far from his apartment.

Tony hung up and, after a moment of watching the *call ended* screen, stuffed his phone into his pocket and dismissed his holoscreen. He took a deep breath, and then a deep gulp of his drink.

He wasn’t feeling quite so strong as he pushed open the door to the room of chattering reporters.

He wore his sunglasses throughout the conference.

* * *

“Well, shit.”

“Language, Peter.”

“He lied to me. He straight up *lied.*” Peter wasn’t sure what to do. Tony hid things, yes, but he’d never…

Rhodes had been right.

*Oh God, what the hell do I do now?*
“And he said I couldn’t come over,” Spider-Man added, “so there goes the plan for figuring out what’s going on.”

“Yes, it would most definitely be unwise to approach the compound after Mr. Stark dodged your request,” Karen hummed.

“So, I just have to wait?” That concerned Spider-Man; how long? He needed to know, to help, and dancing around seeing the man and the compound wouldn’t allow him to do so.

“I believe that is the only remaining option.”

“What about Mr. Stark?” Peter asked, still concerned.

“He sounded better, fine, just now on the phone,” said Spider-Man, swallowing, then looking at the bagel. “He even told me to eat more.”

“He’s worse than May!” Peter laughed, and stuffed the remaining food into his mouth. “C’mon, Karen, let’s go get some bacon.”

The bacon was quite easy to find. By multiple creatures. As soon as Peter returned to the alley where he’d left his suit with his eggs and meat, a small, multicolored ball of fluff leapt onto his shoulder and tried to pull it from his hands.

Peter let out a very undignified shriek and slapped the thing from his shoulder, pointing his wrists towards it on instinct. But it was only a small, ratty kitten, eyes alight with hunger and fear. It sped off towards the dumpster at the end on the alley, and Peter cursed.

He grabbed his backpack (now containing his Spider-Man suit) and rushed off towards where the creature had gone. “Hey! Hey, I’m sorry, you just surprised me!”

Peter grabbed a slice of bacon and approached the dumpster hesitantly. “You hungry, kitty?”

The sunlight reflected off two round eyes beneath the dumpster’s legs as he approached. Peter crouched down, trying to look non-threatening.

He set the bacon down and stepped back, slowly taking his suit out of his pack and removing his clothes. As he changed, a small pink nose pushed its way into the light, followed by a white streaked head and a thin body. When Peter didn’t move, the kitten darted towards the bacon and began to knead it, ripping off pieces with its small teeth.

The thing was, Peter thought, quite pretty. A long-haired calico, the top of its body mottled brown and black while its belly, ears, and the tip of its tail were white. It was stained with grime, but still possessed that quick grace all felines held.

The bacon was gone in moments, and the creature looked at him with blue eyes flecked with brown. Peter, melting, threw another slice to the thing. It must have been a housecat at some point, he thought. No true stray would trust him so quickly.

Proving his point, the cat let him come closer. Peter kept his mask off for the moment, sitting down next to the feasting creature.

“You like bacon, huh?” he said.

The cat kept eating.
“How long have you been in this alley? You’re pretty small.” He reached out, and the animal cringed away. Peter quickly pulled his hand back. “Okay okay no touch. I get it.”

He sat there until the cat had finished the bacon. It looked up at him, then began to lick its grimey paws. Peter grinned as it pulled its feet over its whiskers rhythmically, and chomped on one of the remaining pieces of bacon.

“I’m Spider-Man, by the way,” he said. “But most people who know me call me Peter. I’m sure we’re on a first-name basis now, right?”

The cat stood, approaching him, and rubbed its chin on his knee. Peter cooed.

“You want more bacon, huh?”

The cat mewed, and Peter broke off a section of his meat and held it out. The cat ate it out of his hand, and, helpless to resist the charms of a fluffy animal, Peter beamed.

The cat rubbed its chin along his knee again, smearing bacon grease along the suit.

“Hey!” Peter laughed. “Grease! Watch it!”

The cat mewed.

Peter paused. “What do you think about that? Grease?”

The cat cocked its head at him.

“As a name. Grease. I’ve never met a cat named Grease, but hey, I’ve also never befriended one in an alley before. I dunno if it can be a girl’s name.” Peter shrugged. The calico had to be a girl; he’d heard that male tortoiseshells were theoretically impossible.

Grease mewed and smeared more bacon across the suit, darkening the navy fabric.

Peter laughed. “I hope you like heights, Grease.” He reached out, hand still full of bacon, and pet the cat softly. She tensed, but let him. “There’s a good girl,” Peter crooned.

He wasn’t sure exactly how long he stayed in the alley, cooing at a cat and slowly gaining its trust, but the sun was high in the sky by the time Spider-Man swung out, mask on, with a tiny, furry head poking out of his backpack.

“If you say ‘he followed me home, can I keep him?’ you’re dead, Peter.”

“She’s a girl, and no, she ate my bacon.”

“What?” May threw her hands into the air, storming around the sofa to stand before Peter and the tiny creature he held in his hands.

“I called Mr. Stark and he told me to eat more than just half a bagel so I went and got bacon and Grease tried to eat it,” Peter explained hurriedly, slightly distracted by the kitten trying to climb up his arm and onto his shoulder.

“Grease?”

“She smeared bacon grease on my suit, and it stuck? Please, May?”
May pinched the bridge of her nose. “You can’t just bring strays home, Pete.”

“Grease isn’t a stray! She was a house cat at some point or she never would have trusted me so fast.”

“Did you find her in an alley?” May asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah.”

“Stray.”

“Is this one of the ‘dealing with superhero’ rules that Pepper clued you in on?” Peter would have gesticulated, but there was a cat on his elbow.

“No, this is a normal parenting rule,” May said. “Cat. Out. Now.”

“But we can’t just abandon her again!”

“No, we’ll take her to the shelter,” May sighed.

“Oh, come on! I’m responsible; I’m Spider-Man! And I’ve never had a pet before and Grease is perfect! Cats aren’t much work and she eats anything and she’s probably an excellent mouser. She rode all the way here in my backpack and was still when I was fighting and didn’t even try to jump out!”

May gaped. “You took the cat crime-fighting?”

Peter ducked his head, trying to avoid dislodging Grease from where she now perched on his shoulder. “Oh, damn, I realize how that sounds, but I didn’t really mean to; they were just mugging this guy and I had to help out…”

May sighed. “Peter…”

Grease meowed, pulling on Peter’s ear with her sharp little kitten teeth.

A smile ghosted across May’s face, and Peter knew he might win this. “C’mon, she’s so sweet, and I know you get lonely while I’m at school.”

“I do not get lonely, it’s peaceful.”

Grease mewed again.

“Oh fine!” May threw up her hands. “But if you can’t get that thing to use a litterbox, its out of here.”

Peter beamed. “Thankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“Uh-huh.” May’s disgruntled look dissolved into a smile after a moment, and she reached up and stroked Grease’s ears. Peter would have heard the cat’s purrs even without his enhanced hearing. “Use one of the big tupperwares. I’ll go out and buy a bag of litter,” May said.

“Oh, May I can do that,” protested Peter.

“Nonsense. You go bond with this little guy while I handle the credit card.”

Peter grinned. “Thanks, Aunt May.”
“Bye.”

Peter laughed and made off towards his room, plucking Grease off his shoulder as he went.

“So, you just found her?”

Ned and MJ were sprawled across the bunks of Peter’s bed, MJ hanging upside-down and reaching down to tickle Grease’s nose while Ned tossed the Spider-Man mask from hand to hand.

“Yeah,” Peter said, pouring May’s sandy litter into the container her’d found.

“She’s perfect,” MJ said, grinning from ear to ear as Grease batted at her finger.

Peter peered at her. “I wouldn’t of thought you’d be a cat person.”

“I’m not really a cat person,” Ned said. Peter was about to protest with a laugh when Ned continued, “once you’ve been threatened by one in a nun’s wimple, kind of takes the joy out of it.”

Peter laughed, the scene from the show playing out in his mind, and MJ looked at him.

“Doctor Who,” Peter explained. “There’s this scene where Rose sees a cat and says ‘oh you beautiful boy,’ and the Doctor assumes she’s talking to him. Then he makes that excuse about not being a cat person, but it’s a total lie. He loves cats and he’s just pissed that Rose was complimenting the cat and not him.”

“A ginger cat, no less,” said Ned.

“Oh my gosh, you’re right!” Peter burst out laughing.

MJ rolled her eyes. “You were adopted by the wrong family, Greasy,” she cooed to the cat. “They’re all losers.”

“Losers who give her bacon.”

“Even I’d be willing to go home with a guy who gave me bacon,” MJ said, glaring at him.

“Well, I’d better be careful then.”

“Idiot.”

“So is Grease all that happened today or did you–hey!” Ned broke off as MJ scooped the Spider-Man mask from his hand and cut him off.

“Of course it’s not all! Stark Industries got it’s big Wakandan nanotech delivery today; Peter was probably over there, interning.”

Peter flinched a bit. “Uh, no actually. Mr. Stark said he was busy… that there was a malfunction with FRIDAY and he had to do some repairs and now he was catching up…” Lies. He lied to me. Or… does he just not want me there? Peter’s heart twinged, but he pushed the feeling away, remembering Colonel Rhodes’ words.

“Huh.” MJ looked at him, cogs turning behind her eyes.

“Ned,” Peter whispered out of the corner of his mouth.
“She’s hypothesizing you,” the other boy replied. MJ rolled her eyes.

May knocked on the door, and Peter got up to open it for her. “Time to clear out, non-Parkers,” May said.

“Aw,” they chorused, but complied.

Peter walked his friends to the door, joking that ‘no, MJ couldn’t take Grease back with her’ and watched them disappear from sight, stroking his new pet’s ears. When he came back, he found May had already prepared dinner, and it wasn’t even bad.

His night was, all things considered, very peaceful, except for the clenching at the base of his stomach that had been there since his conversation with Mr. Stark.

It wasn’t until he went to talk to Karen about forming a new plan that he realized MJ had never let go of the Spider-Man mask.

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh... :)

ALSO CAT.

Thanks for reading, my friends! Drop some feedback of any kind; c'mon, grace me with your ideas! I love to hear from you.
In Which MJ and Karen Team Up

Chapter Summary

MJ has a theory...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello? Hello?”

A distinctively not Peter voice greeted Karen when she booted up. “Alien host possessing the mask,” she said, forcing herself to remain calm. “Initiating Left the Kid Behind Protocol.”

“Woah! Woah, no, don’t do that, whatever it is. It’s me, MJ,” said the voice.

“Michelle Jones?” Karen paused the procedure.

“Yeah. And you’re Karen, right? Remember me?”

“Of course. Deactivating protocol.”

“Thank you.”

The new head within the mask let out a sigh of relief, and Karen hummed in confusion. “We do not seem to be near the location of the rest of the suit.”

Karen’s view shifted as MJ shook her head. “Yeah, we’re not. I sort of nabbed the mask earlier tonight when we were talking and playing with Grease.”

“Why were you playing with grease? Is it possible to do so without activating Death By Aunt?”

MJ laughed. “I like you, Karen. Grease is the new cat, though.”

“The one Peter found this morning?”

“Yeah. She’s wonderful.”

Karen hummed again in agreement, then inquired, “Why did you ‘nab’ me?”

“I needed to talk to you about something.”

Karen flashed the lights of the suit in amusement. “I am the prime consultant these past few days, it seems.”

“Peter’s acting weird.”

“What do you mean? He is usually an… irregular child.”

“Yeah, well, weirder than usual.”
“How so?”

MJ crossed her arms, leaning back and looking up at her ceiling. Through the suit’s eyes, Karen saw it was a perfect reenactment of the night sky with glow-in-the-dark stars on a navy backdrop. “Spider-Man.”

“He’s always been Spider-Man.”

“Exactly.”

“I do not understand.”

MJ gesticulated. “He’s always been Spider-Man. But I’m not sure Spider-Man is him anymore.”

“That does not help.”

“I’m worried about the sanity of Peter’s identity,” MJ decided.

Karen hummed.

“It’s been getting worse.”

“What has?” Karen was growing frustrated.

“His separation from Spider-Man.”

“Peter is Spider-Man.”

“I know that. But I think they might be growing apart within Peter’s mind. After what happened with the building on Monday, I think something changed. Vision clued me into it; he said something about Peter being ‘segmented’ within his brain. And then when we went out on Friday, he slipped into what I think is Spider-Man mode. I intimidate him—”

“For good reason,” Karen joked.

MJ laughed. “You know, Karen, I wasn’t expecting you to be like this.”

“What?”

“So… human.”

Karen was flattered. “I appreciate the sentiment, Michelle, but I am not human.”

“Yeah. I didn’t expect to like you. You’re not bad, for Starktech.”

“You have met other AI?”

“Only FRIDAY, and she’s nice too. I just… I’m not a huge fan of Stark Industries and Tony Stark himself.” MJ shrugged. “I know he does good. I agree with most of his decisions… but he’s screwed up big, before, and it doesn’t seem to have any repercussions.”

Karen thought of her current mission with Peter. “You’d be surprised.”

MJ sighed. “Yeah, that sounded bad… I just don’t like him. He’s an asshole, from what I’ve gathered.”

Karen couldn’t help but flash the suit’s lights at the girl’s bluntness.
“But he’s done so much for Peter, who adores him, and he’s saved the world time after time. I suppose he’s made up for his mistakes… I just don’t like him.”

Karen hummed. “Fair enough.”

“Anyway, getting back to the point. Peter and I went walking in Central Park on Friday, and because I intimidate him I think he slipped into his Spider-Man mode. He was very forward, the whole time; no stuttering, not much blushing, he was very at ease.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I’m not sure.” The mask’s fabric shifted as the girl closed her eyes. “I think it’s good that Spider-Man allows him to be brave and strong and witty and devil-may-care. I think that’s a good protection for him when he’s out fighting crime. But it’s been coming out when he’s not in the suit more and more, and I’m worried. Because when I told him I didn’t want to be there with Spider-Man, he looked disappointed. And angry. And then he was suddenly Peter again, and flattered.”

“That is… strange.”

“I just don’t want him to become even more separated. Because Peter Parker is Spider-Man, brave even when he’s awkward and he’s witty even when he’s stuttering. I don’t want him to forget that. And I don’t think it’s healthy.”

Karen hummed. “So… what do you want me to do?”

“This is all just conjecture,” said MJ, waving her arms about. “I need proof. Data. Before I can devise an accurate solution.”

“Alright.”

“I’m going to be on the lookout for moments when he shifts. I’m going to figure out exactly when, and why, it happens. I’m going to figure out how deep the mask reaches, and if it even is a mask anymore. He might be drifting towards having almost two consciousnesses in one form.”

“I’m not sure that is possible…”

“We’ll see. I want you to do the same, Karen. You’re around him more.” MJ touched the mask lightly. “I’m going to track the times when Peter becomes Spider-Man. I want you to watch for the moments Spider-Man becomes Peter, okay?”

“Alright, Ms. Jones.”

MJ relaxed into the bed. “Okay. Thank you.”

“I am glad to speak to you more,” said Karen after a moment. “Peter talks about you often, but it’s nice to get to know you.”

“Am I as wonderful as he inevitably describes?” MJ smirked.

Karen flashed the mask’s lights. “Oh, definitely. Seeing as he mostly stresses your ‘terrifying’ side.”

“He’s figuring it out. I could kick his little spider ass any day.”

Karen hummed. “Really? Are you enhanced, as well?”

MJ laughed. “No, not at all. But combine his view of me with the control I hold over his happiness?
Butt-kicking.”
““You are very adept at the wit, I can tell.”
“I like to think I wield a mean comeback.”
“Peter talks quite a lot when on patrol. He… ‘wields a mean comeback’ as well.”
“Really?” MJ frowned. “That’s when he’s being Spider-Man, though… I really hope we can figure this out. He doesn’t have to be Spider-Man to be brave…”
“Do you plan to return me to Peter?”
“Of course. He’ll be mad, but I hope I can defuse it.”
“I shall try to assist, if things do not work out.”
MJ chuckled. “Cool. Here I’ll call him.”
The girl kept Karen on as she called, and Peter answered right away.
“What in the world, MJ?!” the boy almost yelled. Karen didn’t say anything, content to let MJ talk herself out of under the bus.
“I’ll bring it back tomorrow morning.”
“Why--why would you--what the--”
“It was important. I needed to talk to your AI.”
“Karen?” Peter sounded even more confused and angry, now.
“She had questions to ask me, about human programming,” said Karen. It wasn’t a lie, just a strange description of what truly had occured.
“You didn’t have to take her!”
“Yes I did.”
“No, you didn’t!” Peter growled. “Look, MJ, you’re wonderful. You throw things at me and you yell at me and I know it’s because you care, but taking my suit? Taking Karen? Not. Cool. Please don’t ever, ever, steal my protection again. You’ve effectively locked me inside and taken away my ability to be Spider-Man until I get the mask back! Not cool.”

They were silent for a moment. “I’m sorry,” MJ said, and she sounded like she meant it. “I just needed a bit of help.”
Peter sighed. “Just… bring Karen back soon, okay? And don’t do it again? If you want to talk to her you can just ask me.”
“Alright. I won’t.”
“Thank you.”
Another pause.
“I wondered when I’d finally find the end of your rope. It’s remarkably long, y’know,” MJ said.
Peter burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter today, but the next one needed to be separate!

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed, and all the usual youtube-video shenanigans. Comment, kudos, all that. :)
In Which Peter has a Bad Day

Chapter Summary

MJ is a BAMF, Grease is the best, Ned is an oblivious dork (we love him), and Tony's MIA.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday, Peter woke up to an excited mewing quite close to his ear.

Peter carefully rose, not wanting to disturb Grease, with a laugh. “Hey, girl!” he said. “What time is it?”

The cat pawed at his thigh, her tiny claws ripping into his pajamas.

“Hungry? I’m supposed to feed you at 6:30…” Peter glanced at his phone. 6:56. “Oh crap! Sorry, Grease, I overslept. And there’s school today…”

Peter rolled off the bed, and the blanket caught around his ankles to trip him with a thump. “Erg.” He pushed himself to his feet more carefully and limped towards the door, saying, “thanks, Grease! I blew my homework off yesterday for patrol,” MJ had returned the mask right away, to Peter’s gratitude, “and I had to do it all late last night. May’s on her early shift Mondays, too; who knows how long I would have slept!”

The cat mewed and pounced on one of his socks, her white-tipped tail twitching.

“You’re adorable.”

Grease only mauled the sock again.

Grinning, Peter slipped out of his room to prepare the cat’s breakfast. On second thought, he prepared something for himself as well, dumping a few eggs into a pot of boiling water to eat on the subway. He’d lost half an hour of prep time, so he hustled to stuff his suit into his backpack, and didn’t bother to sort his assignments into their appropriate binder folders; he just stuffed them into the front pocket.

After showering and pulling on his favorite shirt, the one Tony had given him about foiling a plan, and his only remaining unripped pair of jeans, Peter realized he’d forgotten to take his eggs off the burner. Cursing, he hurried back to the kitchen to find his pot boiling over.

“Shit, shit, shit!” He was only half-way able to avoid the scalding water, flipping off the stove but ending up with a quite painful burn across his thumb and wrist. “Shit!” As Spider-Man, Peter had been burned before, and he hated it; his spider-healing never worked quite so fast on the blisters.

He fished his eggs out, but they were too far overcooked to be edible. As the minutes ticked by from when he was supposed to leave, Peter had no time to prepare anything else, ending up with only a plain bagel.
He rushed out of the door with his shoes untied, shrugging on his jacket and backpack and saying a quick goodbye to Grease.

Someone stepped on those damn shoelaces as he sprinted down the steps to the subway. He went sprawling, his backpack flying off to land with a clatter below, and his head cracked painfully on the concrete, his spidey-senses failing him on the crowded staircase.

“I’m so sorry!” the stranger said, grabbing his bag and depositing it beside him. The woman offered him a hand up, and Peter, head still throbbing, took it.

With the wrong hand.

The stranger’s thumb brushed across Peter’s fresh burn. By tonight, it would have begun to heal over due to his quick healing, but it had been less than fifteen minutes since he’d scalded himself. And it hurt.

Peter fell back with a yelp, pulling his injured hand in close. The stranger looked horrified, and Peter felt awful. He was supposed to be strong, damn it! Where was Spider-Man?

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, my fault,” Peter groaned, standing up and bracing himself on the wall with his other hand. “Just clumsy today, I guess.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks. Gotta tie my dumb shoelaces!” He gave the lady a hopefully reassuring smile, and she took the hint, leaving him alone to slowly ease back on his bag and lean down to tie his shoes.

So he missed the train.

And the next one was delayed.

And his hand hurt and he had a bad headache and the plain bagel was gross and he was already late for school.

So, understandably, Peter was quite irritable and tired by the time he arrived at school, fifteen minutes from the end of first period.

“Parker, glad you decided to join us,” his professor said.

Peter looked down and mumbled an apology, cheeks burning as the gazes of every one of his classmates bored into him, and slipped into his seat. He was conscious of every curl and dip in the plastic, and heard the breath of the students around him. His spidey-senses nagged in the back of his head all period.

When the bell rang, Peter only wanted to make a break for it and join Ned and MJ, but he made his way to the front of the room to speak to his professor anyway.

“Mr. Smith, I’m sorry I was late. I missed my train and the next one was delayed…”

His professor sighed. “It’s alright, I understand. Just try to avoid missing anymore classes; the end of the semester is coming up, and you know what that means.”

“Of course. Thank you for understanding.”

Peter hauled ass from the room.
Ned, thankfully was waiting for him. “Hey man! Where’ve you been?” He held out his hand to begin their handshake.

Peter shook his head, turning his hand over to display the burn.

“Oh shit! What happened?”

Peter groaned. “It wasn’t even cool. I just let my eggs boil over.”

“That sucks, man.”

“Yeah, and I overslept and I didn’t get any eggs and I got tripped on the subway stairwell and I missed my train *twice.*”

“Geez man, that really sucks.” Ned patted his shoulder.

“I’m just tired…”

“Let’s go to history. You can probably nap a bit; we’ve got our grades pretty much in the bag.”

“No, I shouldn’t, finals coming up…” Peter rubbed his face, feeling quite overwhelmed.

“Bad day?”

“Hey, MJ,” Ned said. Peter waved halfheartedly, and they made their way to history together.

Peter didn’t fall asleep in social studies, as it turned out. But he didn’t make it all the way through Spanish, even with the approaching end of the school day. And then he woke up when his name was called with no knowledge of what he was supposed to be answering, stuttered something very inaccurate and probably unintelligible, and sat in the awkward silence that followed wanting nothing more than to cease to exist.

Thankfully, his teacher seemed to pick up on the problem, and simply asked, “Alguien más?” Someone else?

But Peter couldn’t seem to relax, the events of the day dialing up his stress. His hand hurt like hell, his head throbbed to no end, and the mediocre school lunch had done little to ease his hunger. His spider-senses were a constant, unnerving hum in the back of his head and he just wanted to get *out of here.*

When the bell rang, Peter was the first from the classroom, nearly sprinting down the hall in his haste to reach his locker. He felt tears trying to gather in his eyes, and he cursed under his breath. What was wrong with him today? Nothing had even happened!

Unfortunately, the day wasn’t finished with him yet.

“I want it *back*, Parker!”

With a screech from his spider-senses, Peter found himself slammed back against his locker. He twisted, confused, to see the furious face of Flash Thompson before him.

“What--” he managed, before the other boy grabbed his wrists and pushed him back against the wall again.
"I know you stole it, and I’m in big trouble if you don’t give it back now, Penis,” Flash hissed.

Peter stared at him blankly, utterly lost. The boy was angry; he’d never gone physical with his assaults before. “What? I haven’t--”

Flash pushed him back harder, and Peter sucked in a breath as his burned skin folded over itself. “I saw you grab my backpack during PE, and now my essay’s gone!”

That was true, but Peter hadn’t taken anything; he’d just tripped, knocking over the bag and then setting it back where it had been before.

“It’s worth 40 percent of my grade, Parker.”

Oh. No wonder the boy was panicking.

*Talk, Peter! What are you doing?*

“I didn’t–I just tripped over your bag, Flash. I never– I didn’t take anything,” he managed, trying to shift so the other boy’s grip wasn’t on his injured wrist.

People were staring, and Peter thought he saw Ned turning down the hallway.

“Liar! Why do you even need it, if you’re so much smarter than me, as everyone is so fond of pointing out?”

Ned was waddling down the hallway at his top speed, now.

Flash’s fingers tightened around Peter’s wrists, his fingernails digging unconsciously into the burn.

And then Flash was sprawling across the tiled floor as Spider-Man twisted skillfully beneath his grasp, thumbs thrusting against the other boy’s hold to break his grip as Spider-Man’s leg flashed out to trip him.

It happened in less than a second; one moment, Peter was grimacing in pain and confusion beneath Flash, and the next, Spider-Man was standing above a spread-eagled boy.

The hallway fell silent. Spider-Man lowered his wrists and stepped back.

“I didn’t take anything from you, Flash. I’ve got better things to do than steal your last-minute English paper. Maybe check your backpack again, or call home, like a normal person, instead of jumping the first kid you can find a reason to blame.”

Everyone stared. Spider-Man hardly noticed, spinning back to his locker and calmly reopening it to pack his things.

He wasn’t worried about turning his back on Flash, and his spider-senses alerted him when the boy had gotten up, stared at him for a moment, and then hauled ass as far away as he could get. People began whispering, and then talking when he didn’t react.

“Peter!”

Spider-Man flipped his backpack over his shoulder and closed his locker door, wanting nothing more than to slip into his proper clothes as soon as possible.

“Dude!”

“Peter, you loser, wait up.”
The front door swung shut behind Spider-Man, and he breathed a sigh of relief as the warm, humid spring air filled his lungs. He was hungry; a sandwich sounded like heaven right now.

“Peter!”

Or maybe a pizza. Or two. Meat and bread; anything would go, really. Spider-Man slipped out through the gate, as people were watching him and he could hardly go over it. He smiled as the school disappeared from view behind him and his realm, the streets of Queens, spread out before him.

“Oh, God damn it… Spider-Man!”

Spider-Man paused, turning. MJ was jogging up to him, with Ned puffing at her heels.

“Hey, guys,” he said. “Why are you following me?”

“We’ve been calling you!” Ned said, sounding annoyed. Spider-Man cocked his head, slightly confused. He hadn’t heard his name…

MJ dropped her backpack to the ground, watching him from the corner of her eye. Restless, Spider-Man looked towards the alley he was approaching. He felt wrong in these clothes; he just wanted to slip into his suit again.

“Eat this.”

Something was shoved against his arm, and Spider-Man snatched it on instinct. A chocolate granola bar, looking packed with calories. He ripped open the packaging and made haste to devour the thing, holding out his hand to thank the girl.

Ned looked like he wanted to say something, but MJ stopped him. Spider-Man felt a little unnerved by her calculating eyes on him, though he was too busy inhaling the food to give it much thought.

“Thanks,” he said, when he’d finished, and wiped the chocolate from his lips.

“I heard you had a bad day,” MJ said carefully.

Spider-Man shrugged. “It was fine.” Trivialities, that was all that had occurred. Even the burn would be almost healed by the next morning, and he was going patrolling; the real danger was yet to even begin. He was excited.

“Dude, you’re freaking me out,” said Ned.

“Shh, Ned, shut up a minute,” MJ hissed, then looked back to Spider-Man. “Listen, you’re okay, now.” She put her hand on his shoulder, and his spider-senses prickled uncomfortably, causing him to flinch.

“I know.” What was this about? He pointed over his shoulder. “I’ve sorta got things to do…”

“There’s food in you now, and the burn’s gonna heal,” MJ said. “We aren’t a threat. It’s okay. Everyone has bad days.”

Something within Spider-Man began to unclench.

“It’s okay to be overwhelmed some days. It’s okay to be pissed because you missed your train and some jerk attacked you in the school hallway. It’s okay to be tired but still have the strength to fight him off.”
Spider-Man’s shoulders slumped a bit, his spider-senses quieting.

“There’s no more threat. Things have been bad all day, Peter, but you can deal with it. Come back. Come back, Ned and I want to see you.”

Ned looked between them, his face comically befuddled. “Yeah, dude, I just wanted to ask about Grease, and if you’d talked to Mr. Stark about Vision and figured out if his phasing was a property of the Stone or of his being an android.”

“It’s okay, Peter,” MJ said again. “You can come back.”

“I… haven’t talked to Mr. Stark,” said Peter, glancing back at the alley. Spider-Man still wanted to get to it…

Ned’s jaw dropped. “That’s freaky.”

“What?” Peter swallowed.

“Don’t listen to Ned, he’s being a dork again,” said MJ. “Are you okay?”

Spider-Man opened his mouth, then closed it again. “I’m just… tired,” said Peter. “I had a late night.”

“Yeah, and I bet this morning didn’t help,” Ned said.

“No, not really. But Grease was really helpful; who knows how long I would have slept if she hadn’t woken me up to feed her.” Peter relaxed a bit at the memory of his new, fuzzy friend.

“That’s good,” said MJ. “How’s she doing?”

“I think fine. I’ve tried to do most everything right, although she still doesn’t use the litterbox most of the time.”

“Lots of cleaning you have to do then?” Ned asked with a grin.

Peter returned it and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Alright, Pete, want to tell me what just happened?” MJ demanded after a moment.

Peter looked at her, and then shrugged. “I--I don’t really know. Everything had just sort of been building up all day, and then Flash put his hand on my burn and it hurt a lot and I… couldn’t… do it anymore.”

MJ murmured something that sounded like, “When normal people would start crying, you become Spider-Man.”

“Say what?”

“Nothing. Here’s the deal, Insect-Child—”

“Spider’s are arachnids, MJ.”

“Ned and I are taking you home, and we’re gonna get your aunt to gauze that stupid burn, spider-healing or no. And then I’m is going to teach you how to bake snickerdoodles while Ned holds Grease up to my elbow so I can stroke her in between stirs of the dough; you’re aunt’s welcome to learn, too. No patrolling today; we’re keeping Peter.”
“But--” protested Spider-Man.

“No buts, Spider-Man. Peter Parker is having a lazy evening to make up for a bad day, on the couch, with cookies, and possibly Disney.”


“You got it.” MJ snatched his arm and dragged him towards the subway without another word.

With the image of cookies and comfort in Peter’s mind, Spider-Man didn’t reemerge.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit nervous about this one... not sure if it's portraying what I want it to in the correct way... eh.

Thanks for reading! See you soon, and let me know if you liked! You know how, ma dudes. *Wink*
In Which Pepper Saves the Day

Chapter Summary

Alternative title: YEAH PEPPER YOU TELL HIM GOOD JOB GO GO GO WE'RE ALL VOTING FOR YOU
Pretty much all you need to know. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony threw his glass across the room with a snarl, watching as it shattered against the opposite wall in satisfaction. Amber liquid splashed against the white paint, dripping down in rivulets.

It made both the usually pretty drink and the usually pretty panel look dirty and unkempt.

Tony was still watching the alcohol run down the wall and across the tiled kitchen floor when Pepper entered a few minutes later.

“What the hell was that, Tony?”

“You heard what he said.”

“I also heard you rip him a new one in front of fifteen cameras and storm from the room. You’re lucky I was there to keep things from completely exploding!”

Tony didn’t look up, still brooding.

“You.”

“He wasn’t there about nanotech, or blueprints. He was there about the Accords and nothing else.”

“Most people are,” Pepper said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “It’s never bothered you before.”

“It always does.”

Pepper sighed. “Rephrase; you’ve never unleashed the fury of the concentrated Stark sarcasm on them, left mid-meeting, and thrown your beer at a wall.”

“I couldn’t just let him say those things about you! About us! And about Peter, even though he didn’t know it.”

Pepper went to the cabinet, getting out a new glass. Tony heard the refrigerator door opening and closing as she removed a can from it. “I can just drink it out of the can, you know.”

Pepper ignored him. “What Johnson said was hardly the worst you’ve heard. Not even the most double-barbed.”

Tony shrugged, taking the glass as she handed it to him. He took a swig, then spewed it across the counter. “What the hell, Pep?”
“It’s Ginger-Ale. You shouldn’t be drinking.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. It’s Saturday morning; you’ve got a whole day ahead of you.”

Tony groaned and let his head thump down onto the tabletop, trying not to feel desolate. He’d made it through another week. Hooray.

“Tony, tell me what happened.” Pepper sat down next to him.

“I’m supposed to be an asshole, remember? I was just delivering,” Tony muttered into the counter.

“Not that much of an asshole. At least not in public areas, in front of the press.”

Tony grumbled something unintelligible.

“You’ve been like this all week. On edge. Irritable. Lashing out at people. Me,” said Pepper. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just stressed.”

“You’re always stressed.” Pepper sighed. “Are the nightmares worse?”

Tony shook his head, forehead still pressed against the counter. “Same shit as usual.”

“You’ve been avoiding me, Tony.”

“No I haven’t. I’ve been busy.”

“You are also always busy. And so am I. That’s never gotten in the way before.”

Tony gesticulated, bending his arm behind him awkwardly.

“I need more than that, Tones.” Pepper tapped his neck. “Something happened. Something besides your little shouting match with Rhodes; you were fine after. You were fine until… I don’t know.” FRIDAY had told Pepper about the phone call the day of, needing help clearing him time to recuperate. Tony didn’t know exactly how much his fiance was aware of, but he trusted that his AI had done what was necessary.

Even though he’d rather just sweep everything under the rug and never look at it again.

“I’m still fine.”

“Tony.” There it was; the irritated CEO voice. He had to think of an excuse, quick.

FRIDAY, however, betrayed him.

“The boss has been avoiding more than you.”

Tony jerked his head up from the table, feeling his heartbeat in the large flat spot on his forehead. “FRIDAY...” he warned.

"You haven’t spoken to Mr. Parker in a week, sir.”

Tony dropped his face to the counter again, this time in defeat.
“Oh, no wonder your so pissy,” Pepper said.

Tony didn’t reply. He’d stopped replying to Peter’s messages Saturday, after he’d denied the boy’s request to come to the compound. As the week had continued, Peter’s messages had become shorter, and brisker, and on Thursday, he’d been almost cold. And Friday, he’d apologized and asked if he’d done something wrong.

*I know you’re busy, but maybe call me back? I haven’t heard from you in forever, and Ned wanted me to ask you a question… Did I do something? I’m sorry if I screwed up.*

It had taken every ounce of Tony’s steel walls to keep him from flying out to Queens and most likely spilling his guts to the damn kid.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t, even if those words had played in his mind over and over and over as he tried to sleep last night.

Everything was a bit less… light, now. Without Peter’s explosive, optimistic energy, even for just a week, each hour seemed a little longer, each night a little darker. The thought of the future… of this, over and over and over, living day by day, forever, was almost more than Tony could stand. Pepper hadn’t noticed, but he’d been doing the opposite of avoiding her. And it was slightly mortifying, to say the least, that he couldn’t seem to pull himself from his stalker-like behavior.

“Tony.”

“Busy.”

“Since when does that make a difference with Peter?” He sensed Pep throwing her hands into the air in exasperation. “Damn it, Tony, you’re killing me!”

He knew that. He was killing everyone.

“Why have you suddenly decided to be responsible? We can find time for Pete, we always do.”

“We both have things to do.”

“Tony, he loves every moment with you! And, don’t deny it, you love every moment with him.” Pepper ran her hands through Tony’s hair as he gestured vaguely again, managing not to spill a drop from the glass of soda. “Are you trying to punish yourself for something again?”

He grunted.

“I’m calling him.”

“Don’t call him.”

“FRIDAY.”

“Calling Mr. Parker now.”

“Don’t call him, FRIDAY.”

Torn between conflicting orders, FRIDAY hummed unhappily.

“Tony, you can’t keep this up. If the boy is this important…”

Tony didn’t answer, wishing Pepper would leave him to be sober and miserable in peace.
“Stop pretending you’re doing this to be productive, Tony. You aren’t. And even if you were, it’s not working. You’re irritable and snappish and you haven’t done anything but drive people away all week.”

He grunted.

“Ah, that exclusive Stark dialect again.”

Tony grunted again.

“You need him. And he needs you.” Pepper’s hands trailed down his back as she moved to sit beside him.

Another grunt, louder this time.

“Remember what happened after Germany? And Toomes?”

Tony closed his eyes.

“FRIDAY, call Peter.”

“Calling Mr. Parker,” the ceiling said, relieved to have her instructions confirmed.

“Please,” Tony finally said. “Don’t.”

A pause.

“Why not, Tony?” Pepper said softly.

“Because then I’ll invite him over, and he’ll be here, and he’ll smile, and I’ll never be able to get myself to do this again.” The table was no longer cold beneath his warm breath.

“Why is that a bad thing?” Pepper didn’t sound frustrated; just curious.

Flatly, Tony said, “It’ll hurt more when he leaves. When I drive him away.”

A hand on what was visible of his face. “Tony…”

“It hurts enough as is.”

“You’re not going to drive Peter away.”

A flare of anger. “How do you know? I drive everyone away. How is he any different?”

“Tony, do you hear yourself? How is Peter any different?”

Tony closed his eyes. “He’s the same in that way. I care about him; that’s all that matters.”

“Tony, you’re making the worst of a possible situation again.”

“So? It’s not ‘possible,’ it’s ‘likely.’”

“What if it isn’t?” Pepper sighed. “Tony, I can’t deny that really, truly awful things have happened to you and… well, almost every relationship you allow yourself to fall into. But I’m still here, aren’t I? And if you hadn’t tried, I wouldn’t be.”

“And I’d be dead…”
“Exactly. You need to try, Tony. Try, and save two lives.”

Tony grunted. “Not his. I’d be dooming his.”

“No.”

“He deserves a life without death and destruction.”

“You don’t bring death and destruction.”


“Vision? The suits? Your company? The Accords?”

Tony waved his hand dismissively.

“Stop. Stop wallowing, Tony. Like it or not, you’ve made mistakes. And like it or not, you’ve fixed them. And improved things. You’ve done things right. And Peter’s one of them.”

Tony closed his eyes and shifted on the counter.

“I know you’re scared. But this is just between you and him, Tony. FRIDAY keeps him out of the news, and your time with him out of public knowledge. And I’ll be here, Tony. If things do go south, I’ll help you shift, at least back to west.” Pepper grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled him up, bending in front of him to look him in the eye. “I’m not going anywhere. Not this time.”

Tony sighed. “Damn it, woman.”

“I know. I’m so inconsiderate, not letting you be depressed in peace.”

“Don’t know why I put up with you.”

“Because you adore me.”


She kissed him, then, in that way she always did; no-nonsense, straight to the point, just like everything else she did. Tony grabbed the back of her head, her hair falling between his fingers, and let himself forget, just for a moment, what all of this meant.

They broke apart, and she flicked his forehead. “Call Peter. I’ll go deal with the next appointment.”

“Thanks, Pep.”

“Anytime.”

She left, and Tony forced himself to focus. He was calling Peter. Finally, he was calling Peter.

He couldn’t get his phone out fast enough.

Peter answered with a drowsy, “Hi?”

“Hey, kid.” Tony grinned like an idiot, and didn’t care.

“Mr. Stark!” The drowsiness disappeared, and Tony’s smile grew wider.

“Long time, no see,” Tony said. “My fault. Sorry ‘bout that.”

A thump on the other side, as though the boy was hurriedly getting out of bed. “It’s fine.”
“No, it’s not, but I appreciate your understanding.” Tony fingered his glass.

“Um, yeah. Okay.”

A pause. He’d apologized. Now what? Was he allowed…

Oh fuck it.

“You busy, today, kid?”

“Nope. Just gonna go out patrolling.”

“Wanna come by? I finished synthesizing the nanotech, and I think you might like what happened then.” Tony couldn’t keep the smirk from his voice. He might be shit at human interaction, but he was the crowned king of those nanoparticles.

A pause. “Really?”

“Would I be offering if not?”

“Um, no. Sorry. I mean, yes, I would very much like to come and see?”

“Relax, kid. Dick move ignoring you for a week, but I still don’t bite.”

“I… I’m not sure that’s true, Mr. Stark.”

Tony couldn’t help the laugh that climbed up his throat. “Quite right, kid. How about; I still don’t bite you. Hard.”

Peter chuckled. “I’d call that accurate.”

“Good. Just come down to the workshop whenever you get here. I’ll probably not be there, but FRIDAY’ll alert me when you’ve arrived.” He looked up at the ceiling, and FRIDAY brightened the lights to show she’d heard.

“Alright. Thank you.”

“No problem, kid.”

A silenced stretched then, both of them not having anything else to say but hesitant to hang up. It was Tony’s fault, really; he had the last word but somehow couldn’t find it in him to finish the conversation.

Damn it. What was wrong with him? This kid…

“Thanks for calling me,” Peter blurted after a while.

“Of course.”

“I mean it.” The boy’s voice was soft, almost like hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

Tony’s chest clenched. “I know, kid.”

“I’ll see you soon?” Hopeful, almost disbelieving. A question, not a statement.

Tony forced himself to breathe.
“You’d better, kid.”

He hung up then, just he always did, as he always had. He dropped his phone to his side and leaned back in his chair, staring at the glass before him. After a moment, he huffed and downed it, enjoying the sweet tickle of the sparkling beverage. Even if it didn’t have nearly enough kick. Tony glanced towards the refrigerator… but no. Peter was coming, and it wouldn’t do to be drunk.

Peter was coming.

Shit.

Tony got up and left the room, heading towards Pepper’s office. He had to talk to her about Johnson, get as much done as he could before Peter arrived. Tony smiled.

He felt horrible.

He’d meant what he said to Pepper. He’d spoken to Peter and there was no way, no way he was strong enough to ignore the boy again. And now he was going to see him.

( Selfish. Selfish, irresponsible, IDIOT. What the hell are you doing?

He’ll come, he’ll come and then he’ll leave.

And you’ll fuck him up.

You always do.

It hurts now, but it’ll kill you later.

Selfish.

Wrong.

You’re screwing up, it’s too late… it’s already too late…)

He couldn’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

*Rocket Raccoon voice* IDIOTS! THEY’RE ALL IDIOTS!

Anyway, the usual. Thanks and make my day by dropping some feedback. See y’all soon!
Peter came right away. He came as soon as humanly possible.

The wall to the workshop shicked open, and Peter ducked inside, inhaling the odor of oil and metal and burning plastic. It had only been a week, but god how he’d missed the place. Today, however, the metal, tools, and scraps that usually covered the tables were cleared to the edges of the room, and the holoscreens flickered up against the walls instead of in their usual haphazard configuration around the room. The surfaces were instead covered in what vaguely resemble brownie pans, except they contained iridescent, golden, red, blue, and silver sheets of thin metal instead of fudge. Mechanical arms moved diligently above the layers, their ends tapering to the point of minisculinity, working at on a scale Spider-Man could only sense by the light glinting off the silk-thin ends.

Nanotech.

(So much better than fudge. Well…)

“This is fantastic,” he said to the empty room, spreading his arms and grinning.

“Isn’t it?”

Spider-Man whirled, wrists outstretched, then relaxed. “Oh, hi FRIDAY.”

“Hello, Mr. Parker.”

Suddenly nervous, Peter set down his backpack and unzipped it. “Uh… Did Karen tell you…”

“I know what you need. The files you seek are in the boss’s office. Do you plan to access them today?”

“Um, yeah. But… later.” Peter shifted.

“Of course.”

Peter could tell by her tone that FRIDAY did not approve of this plan.

“Does Mr. Stark know I’m here?”

“Yes, he is on his way as we speak.”

“O-okay.” Peter stood up, his clothes in hand, and rocked back and forth on his heels. He watched the door for a moment, then stripped out of his suit and pulled on his jeans and t-shirt as quickly as he could.
Peter heard the door opening moments after he finished stuffing the suit back into his backpack. He stood hurriedly, looking towards the entrance, every ounce of nervousness disappearing beneath excitement.

Tony didn’t see him right away, stepping into the workshop and casting his gaze about. His hands fidgeted around his sunglasses, as they always did, flicking the left temple in and out with a rhythmic clicking.

Peter cleared his throat quietly.

Tony turned to him, and for a moment, Peter saw a strange expression flutter across his eyes, a mix of fondness and… fear? But then it was gone, and Tony was smirking, stalking towards Peter to slap him on the shoulder in greeting.

“How’s it?”

Peter smiled. “I’m good, Mr. Stark. You?”

“Better now that I’m here.” The man turned to face the tables and spread his arms. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s fantastic.”

“Thought you would.” Tony grabbed Peter’s elbow, dragging him towards the nanotech. Peter laughed and slapped away the other man’s hand before bounding after him.

Tony knelt next to one of the trays and carefully slid his hand between it and the robotic arm. After a moment of fiddling, the arm retracted, and Tony tapped the pan twice in quick succession. It slid forward a bit, allowing the man to remove it and fold the sides back.

Peter leaned forward, excited, and Tony handed him the now-flat pan.

It was shockingly light, and, when the pan was jostled from Peter’s being caught off-guard, the sheets of metal shifted. Peter couldn’t keep in his gasp when the previously golden metal shimmered, undulating almost imperceptibly as it shifted into ruby redness.

He looked up, meeting eyes with Tony, his own wide with wonder and exhilaration. Tony’s smirk shifted into a grin. “Pretty great, huh?”

“I--I--” Peter could only shake his head.

Tony pinched a sheet of the foil between his thumb and forefinger and pulled if from the pan, attempting to tear it. The foil only pulled and warped, shimmering slightly, and seemed to stick to Tony’s hands.

“The sheet design,” Tony explained, “allows the nanotech to be compounded. It’s strong this thin, of course, but not nearly strong enough. Synthesizing the stuff into sheets like this gives it the strength of a thicker plate when stacked, but gives me a certain freedom. Watch.”

Tony pulled a holoscreen from it’s rest against the wall and connected it to the base of the container, quickly coding something Peter couldn’t follow. But trying to remember the typing went out the window when the nanotech wriggled.

Peter looked towards Tony, just to see his utterly satisfied smirk, before turning his full attention to the tech before him. The sheets folded before Peter’s eyes, gathering in upon themselves into a
perfect cube of thick, impenetrable metal. Then the sides collapsed, and it spread to double, then triple, the size of the pan. Peter watched the layers fuse and then separate, coiling in on themselves to form wires.

“Here’s the best part,” Tony said, sounding like a child on Christmas morning. He nearly vaulted around the room to grab a lightbulb from the drawer beneath one of the tables, quickly lying it onto the sheets of metal. With the other hand, he typed another string of code onto the portscreen.

The newly formed wires unfolded to envelope the lightbulb, pulling it upright and meshing around it. And then, with a flourish and a flash of teeth, Tony tapped a small battery to an unchanged part of the nanotech, and the lightbulb exploded into illumination.

Peter whooped, clapping enthusiastically and just barely keeping himself from jumping up and down.

Tony took an exaggerated bow as the nanotech returned to its original configuration. He slid the pan back onto the table, and the arm went back to its diligent manufacturing. “Obviously,” he said, “it’d conduct a current from my arc reactor instead of a common AA battery, and we’d be powering repulsors and jets instead of lightbulbs, but you get the idea.”

“Yeah,” Peter said, blowing out a breath. “Yeah, it’s brilliant.” He gestured to indicate the dozens of pans of tech. “Is this all you’ve made?”

“What do you mean, is this all?” Tony sounded offended, but one look at his face told Peter he was joking.

“I mean, have you done anything more with it? Official, not experimentation.”

Tony shrugged, moving around the tables again with Peter trailing behind him. “Everything’s experimentation right now, but I did play around a little with…” he reached into a drawer and, with a flaunt, removed a bracelet. “This!”

Peter poked the other man. “That’s a bracelet, Mr. Stark.”

“It only looks like one, Spider-Boy.” Tony ruffled Peter’s hair, and the boy yelped and batted his hand away. “This is the containment system for my Mark 48 Iron Man suit.”

“It’s a pearl bracelet.”

“Each one of these ‘pearls,’” Tony said, rolling his eyes, “is going to be a small, specialized reactor meant for holding nanoparticles programmed to expand into a very, very kickass Iron Man model.”

Peter held up his hands. “Alright! I surrender. That’s amazing.”

Tony nodded. “You bet it is.”

“You said ‘going to be’,“ Peter said after a moment.

“Yeah, I have yet to assemble the reactors. Unstable. And I’ve been a bit busy with all of this,” Tony gestured around with a grin.

“Sure are…” Peter reached out and trailed his hand along one of the sheets, barely containing his delight as it clung to his fingers.

And then, Tony Stark, Iron Man, founder of Stark Industries and arguably one of the most powerful
men in the world, shrieked.

Peter whirled, his wrist outstretched, to see the man staring in utter disbelief at the small animal currently batting at his shoelaces.

“Oh shit,” Peter cursed.

“Peter.” Tony reached down and slowly gripped Grease’s scruff, holding her up at arms length like one would an odorous piece of trash. “There is. An animal. In my lab.”

“Um, yeah…” Peter brushed his knuckles with the palm of his other hand. “That’s Grease?”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s a cat. In my lab.”

Peter, despite knowing he’d possibly screwed up, could barely contain his laughter. “Yeah. The cat’s name is Grease. She’s mine. I brought her to meet you and then I kinda got distracted.”

Grease meowed and wriggled in Tony’s grip, her tiny paws flailing at his wrist.

Tony raised an eyebrow, still peering at the kitten. “You brought a cat with you into my workshop.”

“I… thought we’d established that…” Peter mumbled.

“What.”

Peter moved forward and pulled Grease from Tony’s grip. The kitten squirmed, but Peter kept her in his arms. “I just found her, last Saturday. I wasn’t gonna tell you because I was hoping… I was hoping to surprise you?” Oh, God that sounded stupid. What had he been thinking? What was he thinking?

He looked at Tony, ashamed, to see the man’s face softening. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Peter cocked his head, scratching between Grease’s ears to calm her down.

“Uh, yeah. I get it. Just not in the lab next time, please.” A pause, and then Tony pointed threateningly at him. “Not that there’s going to be a next time, kid.”

Peter chuckled, despite still being confused. “Yes, sir.”

Tony shifted, then reached out awkwardly towards Grease.

The kitten hissed, and Tony pulled his hand back. “Hey, hey,” he said, sounding distinctly uncomfortable. “There’s no need for that.”

Grease just narrowed her eyes.

“Listen,” Tony continued, putting on his sunglasses. “I am not frightened of your little feline ass. You just startled me; I’m not used to living things in my workshop.” Tony pointed at the kitten, shifting fully into CEO mode. “So remember that, the next time you try to eat my shoelaces. I will be ready.”

Peter couldn’t stifle it any longer; his laughter exploded through the room at the utter ridiculousness that was the image of Iron Man threatening a kitten.

“You mocking me, kid?”
Peter only laughed harder, doubling over and only barely keeping Grease from wriggling out of his hold.

“You’ve got to show them who’s boss,” Tony said, and Peter had to let the creature go as braced his hands on his knees in nearly hysterical laughter.

Tony yelped and grabbed the cat before she could scurry under the table, holding her awkwardly as he glared at Peter. The boy could feel Stark’s eyes on his shaking shoulders.

A few deep breaths later, Peter was wheezing out a, “Sorry, Mr. Stark.”

But the man didn’t reply, and Peter stood to see him watching in uncomfortable disbelief as Grease crawled up his arm to sit on his shoulder. The sheer tension in the man’s form as she pawed at his ear and knocked his glasses askew made Peter burst into laughter again.

“What do I do with the… animal?” Tony muttered, obviously trying to move as little as possible.

“Her name’s Grease,” Peter choked out. “And she’s not going to explode or anything.”

Grease knocked the sunglasses fully off Tony’s face, and the man glared at her out of the corner of his eye. “That look. I swear, it’s looking at me like Loki did.”

Peter forced himself to keep in the next bout of laughter. “Mr. Stark, I can be reasonably sure that my cat is not the Asgardian god of mischief.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Tony hissed as Grease meowed and leapt down towards the ground. Peter swept her up, then came up beside Tony.

“Look, she’s sweet! I promise. Grease, say hi to Mr. Stark nice this time.”

Tony sniffed and reached out. Grease raised her muzzle to sniff the man’s hand, and then Tony maladroitly ran his calloused fingers over the kitten’s ears. She purred quietly, and Peter grinned.

“There see? She likes you.”

“Hmm.” But, as Peter stood there, Tony relaxed, and the stroking became more natural, more comfortable. Tony even smiled softly, unguarded, and Peter felt a surge of satisfaction.

And suddenly, he was saying, “You’re a terrible liar, Mr. Stark.”

“Say what?” The man jerked out of his reverie to look at Peter.

In this too far to pull out, Peter continued, “At least to me.”

“Still not following.”

“See, there you go again!”

“Peter.”

“All I mean,” he said hurriedly, “is that you don’t have to. I know when you are, and I get it; everybody has things they have to hide, have to lie about. Us most of all.”

“Where is this going.”

Shit. How did he word this? Why had he even started talking? “Um. I’ll understand?”
“Huh?”

“You don’t have to lie to me. You can, and I’ll understand, but I’ll understand the truth, too. And I’ll try not to be a hypocrite.”

Tony’s mouth worked for a moment. Nothing came out.

Knowing the man would find no way to respond, Peter ducked his head. “Well this is awkward…” he muttered. “I just wanted to say I trust you, and I want you to trust me.”

The silence stretched then, the hum of machinery the only sound, seemingly, for miles. And Peter wanted nothing more than to run. No, actually, he wanted this to be a phone conversation so he could hang up, hang up and figure out what the hell he was going to do next. An immeasurable amount of time later, Peter couldn’t stand the stretching awkwardness, and muttered something unintelligible. He turned back towards his backpack, intending to put Grease away, intending to do anything but look at Tony.

“Shit, kid. I know.”

Peter froze.

“You trusting me is… not gonna lie, the scariest and most amazing thing that’s… not gonna say ‘ever happened to me,’ but it’s damn near close. And I may live another fifty years and still not understand what I did to deserve it.” Peter looked back at the older man, saw him take his sunglasses off and smile at the boy. “And I’m not super good at it, I know, but I trust you, too.”

“Then why…”

“Do I lie? I don’t do it very often, not to you at least. Maybe it’s because I trust you that you can always tell when I am. But…” Tony shrugged, gesturing with his sunglasses. “Old habits, you know?”

Peter nodded.

The sparking nanotech was the only sound, and then Tony sighed. “Oh, fuck it. I’m glad I can trust you, kid. I need it, sometimes, a person I don’t have to guard against. I used to… well, that doesn’t matter. And it isn’t really your responsibility to be that person, you shouldn’t need to be--”

“But I am.” Peter smiled, hesitantly. “It’s okay, Mr. Stark. I’m glad you can trust me, too.”

Tony returned the smile, tucking his hands in his pockets. “Well, now that that little heart-to-heart’s over with, let’s get--”

He broke off as FRIDAY’s voice came in over the room’s speakers. “Boss, it’s one o’clock. Pepper told me you can’t skip this one.”

Tony cursed. “Gotta go, Pete, sorry. Stick around if you want, but I’m not sure if or when I can make it back down here.”

“I get it, no worries.”

Tony straightened his tie and moved towards the door, coat slipping on in the same movement he slid his sunglasses open and onto his face. He paused next to Peter to pat Grease on the head once more, then continued through the open door.
He stopped before it closed, and turned to face Peter.

“And Pete?” Tony said, holding out a hand to keep the sliding door from shutting. “I…” he hesitated for a moment, as though he wanted to say something more, and then simply finished, “Thank you.”

The door slid shut, and Tony was gone.

Peter stood there for a second, trying to control the feeling in his chest. The whir of the nanotech pulsed with his heartbeat and the flow of his thoughts. And then he moved to his pack and quietly pulled out his mask, zipping Grease back in. She protested loudly, but he was too distracted to pay much heed.

He slipped into his suit, watching the nanotech as he did so. Part of him wanted to stay, but he knew next to nothing about the stuff, and Tony wouldn’t be here to teach him. Better not risk harming the setup, and return again later. After doing a bit of research.

“Hello, Peter,” Karen said when he pulled on his mask.

“Hey, Karen.”

“I have found the building’s plans in my database. Mr. Stark’s office is not far from here.”

Right. The office. The files. The personal files. “Oh.”

“You have free reign of the building. The risk is low at the moment.”

Peter swallowed. I’m glad I can trust you, kid. I need it, sometimes, a person I don’t have to guard against.

Peter had told Tony he could trust him. He’d promised him.

I’ll try not to be a hypocrite.

He’d already failed that, hadn’t he? He wanted to help, but… maybe this was the wrong way. Tony seemed better, seemed fine. Maybe Peter was helping by just being there. By not trying anything more.

“What’s wrong?” asked Karen.

“I can’t do this.”

“I thought we established this to be the best way to help Mr. Stark?” Karen didn’t sound angry, just confused.

“We did, but…” Peter sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. “He trusts me. He admitted it, finally. How can I go and betray that trust the moment he lets me in?”

“I understand your dilemma, Peter.”

Peter shook his head. “I’ll… just not right now. Not today. I’m not gonna figure things out today. It’s enough, right now, just to be here again.”

Karen was silent, and Peter slipped from the room.
So, news (not sure if it's good or bad yet): first day of high school is tomorrow! So, I probably won't be updating as often, though I'll try to keep it at least one chapter per week. Now that school's starting, I'll have a grand total of 0 time between school, dance, and homework. But there are always the weekends, so don't despair!

Thanks for reading, drop a kudos or a comment, and I'll see you all soon! Wish me luck! :)

Chapter End Notes
“UNO!” MJ screeched as Peter lay his second-to-last card down.

“Hey!” Peter growled. “You have to give me a chance!”

“Nope! Draw two.”

“Those are the rules, kid,” Tony said distractedly, busy calculating the probability of the deck staying red for the next three turns. Unlikely, but if MJ played the last reverse…

“Not the way we play,” Peter huffed.

“House rules bow beneath the ones in the rulebook, dude,” Ned said and passed him the top two cards.

“How did we even get six decks of Uno cards?” MJ said, slapping a red eight onto the pile.

“You have a deck, and Peter has a deck, and Tony scrounged four sets from around the compound,” Pepper called. “Is it my turn?”

“No, it’s mine!” May called back.

“Damn, did someone skip me?”

“I did!” Ned said, grinning.

“Leeds!”

Tony, nervous now that MJ hadn’t reversed things when he’d hoped, shifted the deck back to red after May’s wild turned it blue. “It’s alright Pep, I’m gonna win anyway.”

Pepper threw a fork at him, and Peter’s arm flashed out to catch it without even looking.

May chuckled. “Yeah, Pepper, don’t throw utensils. You’re worse than Ned.”

Tony reached into his lap to stroke Grease, and grinned. “You’re a fork-chucker, then, Mr. Leeds?”

“No.”

“Liaaaar,” Peter sang under his breath.
“Shut up Peter.”

Grease made a break for it, but Tony scooped her up and set her on his shoulder, enjoying her reluctant purring. “Honestly, there’s no need to be nervous. I’m only the most famous individual in the world.”

“And the most modest!” came Pepper’s voice again.

“Don’t you know it, sweetheart!” Tony called back.

“I’m playing Uno with Iron Man,” Ned said, for the eighth time since they’d begun.

“And Spider-Man,” Peter added. “Who’s turn is it?”

“Mine.” Ned played a yellow seven, and Tony threw up his hands, cursing and making Grease meow in protest.

“Damn, I forgot a yellow seven…” he muttered.

“Are you counting cards?” May demanded.

“He always does! Doesn’t usually help him, though,” Pepper said, appearing to toss a yellow ten onto the pile.

Tony shrugged. “It does in basic card games. There are no repeat cards.” He set his hand down so he could pluck Grease from his shoulder and hold her up to his face.

Peter tried to hide the fact that he had to draw from the deck, but they all caught him easily, howling mockingly. “You’re all obnoxious,” Peter grumbled. “I thought we were coming over for dinner, not a nice long game of humiliate Peter.”

“But that’s my favorite,” Tony and May said simultaneously. MJ winked at Tony conspiratorially, and he suddenly felt very uncomfortable. He didn’t show it, instead saying, “jinx.”

“Ms. Potts, it’s your turn!” Peter called, shooting an irritated glance at May and Tony before throwing a yellow reverse.

Pepper chucked a yellow four at Tony, and he slapped it on the deck for her. “UNO!” she called as soon as he’d done so.

“Hey!”

“Too slow!” Pepper laughed and ducked back into the kitchen.

“How long does it take to order pizza?” Tony demanded, leaning back with one hand still keeping the kitten in his lap.

“Longer when I have to answer emails, too,” she replied.

“Pepper…”

“I know I know.”

Ned skipped him, and Tony sent him his very best Iron Man glare. The boy squeaked, and Tony could help a chuckle.
“Is Vision gonna make me drop all these cards when he descends through the wall?” Peter asked to distract his friend.

“He won’t. He doesn’t like Uno,” Tony said, perhaps too curtly. Not completely true; the android didn’t like Uno anymore.

“Will he come for pizza, though?” Ned asked tentatively.

Tony didn’t have to force his grin. “He wouldn’t miss it.”

“You sure you don’t want me to pay?” May said, playing her next card.

Tony just looked at her.

Peter burst out laughing suddenly, and Tony whipped his gaze around to see the boy snorting with badly contained giggles and MJ looking far to innocent. “What’s going on over here?”

“Nothing, Mr. Stark,” Peter said.

Tony cocked an eyebrow, then sighed. “We’re relying on you, Pete. Make Pepper draw.”

Peter looked chagrined. “I can’t,” he said, and slipped down a red four.

“Damn it!”

“Ha!” Pepper laughed, bursting into the room and slamming down her final card. “I am the master.”

“But not of ordering pizza,” Tony said.

“Don’t be grumpy, Tones. I ordered.” Pepper reached out towards Grease, and Tony brought the kitten closer, glaring at Pepper.

“Mine,” he said.

Pepper laughed. “I hope you’re happy, Peter,” she said. “He hasn’t let anyone close to that animal all evening.”

“She’s my good-luck charm,” Tony said, holding the cat up to his face and touching his nose to hers.

“But not for Uno.”

“Shut up! We’ll play Rummy Royal and see you fare.” He wanted to show off, prove himself to these people, who he was slowly realizing meant a terrifying amount to him.

“The children will not be gambling tonight,” May said.

Tony just grumbled and got up from the floor, taking Grease with him as he ventured into the kitchen. “C’mon, idiots!” he called. “Get drinks!”

The teenagers stampeded into the room, and Tony leapt out of the way, flicking Peter on the temple as the kid went by. Grease meowed, struggling a bit, and Tony set her on the counter behind him. Happy burst through the far door, baring six large pizzas as though they were sacred artifacts, a ghost of a grin on his usually grumpy face. Pepper met Tony’s eyes and smiled, and his throat clogged.

He was okay.
For the first time in a long, long time, Tony felt like he was going to be okay. If they stayed, safe and
here, if he could protect them, if he could keep those smiles…

He wasn’t one to overreact to emotion. But he did grab Pepper and kiss her, long and hard, to the
chorus of laughter from the kids. He flipped them off, not breaking away from Pepper, and they
laughed harder.

Eventually, they needed to breathe, and Pepper pushed him back, laughing. “Get that over with
before our breath is full of garlic;” she said, and Tony winked.

“FRIDAY, let Vision know there’s food,” he said.

“There’s a meat, three supreme with stuffed crust, a pepperoni sausage, and a six-cheese with garlic
crust,” Happy announced, already tucking into the cheese.

“Dibs on a supreme,” said Peter.

“Sure.”

MJ yelped as the boy grabbed an entire box and vaulted up to the top of the room. “Don’t take the
whole pizza!”

Peter looked honestly confused, and Tony snorted. “You said he could, MJ.”

“No I--Oh shit.” MJ threw a paper plate at Peter, who stuck to the ceiling to avoid it.

“Get down!” May said. “You’re gonna get sauce all over the room trying to eat upside down!”

Peter obliged, swinging down by a single finger. “Mr. Stark, Grease likes bacon.”

Tony went for the meat pizza.

Sauce ended up all over the room anyway when Vision phased up through the floor. “I heard there
was sustenance;” he said, as if that explained everything.

“He does that,” Tony said, dusting off the piece of pizza May had dropped when the android had

“Just ignore Tony,” Pepper said, taking the pizza and handing May a new piece. Tony shrugged and
dug into his own.

The chatter eventually subsided as the seven individuals dug into their food, too busy eating to
engage in much conversation. Tony fed Grease the small pieces of bacon off the top of his pizza (not
all of them, he wanted the meat too), and the cat stuck to his side throughout the meal. It kept his
mind here, and he didn’t want to be anywhere else.

His opportunity for showing off arrived in the form of Ned knocking his drink off the table. Tony
moved in an instant, chucking a bead of nanotech into the air. The thing unfurled into a simple,
functional bowl, the nanotech shifting and undulating under the light. With a quiet plop, Ned’s
escaping liquid splashed into it.

Even the sounds of chewing disappeared.

“Holy cow, Mr. Stark! When did you get it to do that?” Peter bounded over to the shimmering
material and picked it up, holding it above his head while being careful not to spill.
“It’s been three weeks since I bought the damn things. I have not been idle. Besides, that’s far simpler than gauntlets, and I’ve had those in the bag for more than half a year now.” Tony took a sip of his coffee and winked.


“How does it work?” May asked, and Tony grinned, opening his mouth.

“Don’t get him started, please!” Pepper groaned, clapping her hand over Tony’s mouth for a moment. “You won’t be able to understand anything he says, and he never stops talking.”

Tony glowered, and everyone laughed.

“If you could make anything with nanotech, what would you make?” Ned asked, and Tony crossed his arms.

“There’s no ‘if’ about it, kid. There will be a fully expandable, adaptable, reactive nanotech Iron Man suit, not to mention some damn fantastic designs for a certain spider--” Peter turned a bit red and grinned-- “and there’s nothing the laws of physics can do to stop it,” Tony said flatly, sliding on his sunglasses for emphasis.

“What sort of reactive, fantastic designs?” MJ asked, somehow managing to also sound completely disinterested.

Tony forced himself not to very obviously roll his eyes. “It’s a surprise.”

A chorus of awwww... ‘s echoed through the room.

Pepper laughed and put a hand on Tony’s head. “It’s Tony Stark, you guys. There will be every possible thing you could imagine, plus six more and far too many blinky lights.”

“Blinky lights are cool, come on,” Tony said, slapping away her hand.

“I agree,” Vision added and tapped the glowing stone in his forehead. MJ chuckled, and Vision smiled at her.

“So you’re collaborating with Wakanda?” Ned asked, leaning forward eagerly with his pizza sagging forgotten in hand.

Tony shrugged. “Sort of. Wakanda allows me to intersperse molecules of vibranium to give the nanoparticles a wider range of potential.”

“That is. The coolest sentence. Anyone has ever said to me.”

Peter laughed. “It changes so often, then?”

“Did you hear him?”

“Children,” May said. “Eat. I’m not bringing this home.”

That worked like a charm; the teenagers (and Vision) descended on the remaining pizza like pubescent locusts.

When the food was demolished and they’d migrated back into the living room, Tony stretched out on the sofa and yawned. Pepper shoved his legs to the side and sat down next to him, letting May have
the chair. Vision sat with the kids, and Tony hid a grin at Ned’s obvious delight.

There was a moment of silence as they digested, and Tony found himself hyper aware of Pepper’s every movement, of Peter’s every breath, of May and Happy and the kids’ every smile.

“Got any trips planned?” May finally asked. “I never get out of the city. Just wondering.”

Pepper smiled. “Some. Not relaxing, though. We should go, you and I, when I finally get this one--” she elbowed Tony-- “to give me some time off. Actually, it’s just my own control complex that keeps me from leaving him here alone.”

Tony scoffed. “It isn’t a control complex. It’s logic. And self preservation.”

MJ snorted, and Tony felt a surge of pride for seemingly genuinely amusing the girl. Steel, that one was. Tony liked her. “I like traveling,” she said. “My grandparents live in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. It’s fantastic there, so… rural, almost. There’s no light pollution, and on a clear night, it feels like every star in the universe is visible.”

Tony tried to hide his shudder.

“That sounds amazing,” Peter said. “I’ve seen pictures, but never…”

“The real thing.” May sighed. “I’ve only seen it once or twice. Trust me, Peter, the moon and the stars are so much better than you’re imagining.”

A maw of night ripping through the sky above his home, closing behind him as the lights of his suit flicker and die, as he takes a breath but can’t breathe--

“They are,” Ned said with a grin, flopping onto the floor. “Someday you’ll see them.”

“Maybe we all can,” Peter said. He looked at Tony, eyes shining. “After school ends, we’ll go out of the city.”

Not now. He was not thinking about this now, not when he was feeling so level-headed and balanced and good. But he still couldn’t manage the reassuring smile, the nod and witty comment Peter was expecting.

The boy’s effervescent grin faded slightly, his intelligent eyes studying Tony, and the older man looked away.

Pepper’s hand tightened around his knee. “Yeah,” she said for him, pulling attention away and giving him a moment to breath. “I like that idea.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment, and Tony focused on Pepper’s hand, on Peter’s breathing, on the hesitant smiles all around him.

After a moment, he said, “So, I take it finals aren’t next week, judging from the fact that it’s Saturday and all you idiots are here.”

“Yeah, we’ve got one more week,” Ned said. “Before finals.”

“You worried?” Happy asked.

The kids nodded, and Tony scoffed. “Did you just ask if they were worried about finals?”

Happy glowered. “Hey, it was a legitimate question!”
“Not really. Considering finals were the worst week of the year even for me.” Tony gestured at the three teenagers lying in an a vaguely circular shape around the oval coffee table. “There will always be stress, even if you are as brainy as these little shits.”

Vision raised a hand. “Finals?”

“Big tests,” MJ explained. “They’re worth a lot of your grade, and they cover everything you learned all year.” Vision nodded, and didn’t add anything else.

“I had a professor who let you out of the final if you had an average above 97,” May said.

Peter groaned. “We all wish.”

“What about you, Mr. Stark?” Ned asked. “Did you have a favorite teacher?”


“Right, you went to MIT at like fourteen,” Peter said.

“Bingo!” Tony mimed bowing, still lying on his back. “I stayed just long enough to hack the pentagon on a dare.”

“You’re shitting me,” MJ said.

“Nope. It happened. I sent them a little message, Italian Job style.” Tony looked at the kids. They just stared back at him blankly.

“Damn it May, don’t tell me they haven’t seen the Italian Job.” Tony threw a pen at the woman. She shook her head.

“Shame on you.” Tony tisked, then turned to the kids, his eyes alight as he remembered the dialogue. “It’s about a group of thieves who make a frankly genius plot to steal something like forty million dollars worth of gold. But they get betrayed, and then it becomes a revenge job. It’s fucking hilarious.”

May glared at him. “Language.”

Tony waved a dismissive hand, looking up at the ceiling. “FRIDAY?”

“Already on it.”

The TV set into the wall of the room flickered on. “Go get your drinks, kids.”

The teenagers shot each other skeptical glances, but obeyed. Tony grinned. He might be old, but he had good taste. Those skeptical glances would be laughter in no time.

They watched the movie twice through, and the air tasted of laughter and soda and the desperate hope that the night would never end.

* * *

Maura Aedoilagen sat atop the unnatural mound of dirt and waited.
Supposedly, the dirt was an ancient foundation from a medieval castle, one that had long since been consumed by time and change. She could feel it, the shadow of history baking in the sun atop this mound, just like her.

Twisting the large ring on her finger, Maura waited. It was all she tended to do these days, since… all that had happened. The grief in her chest was a constant, dull ache now, no longer so sharp but equally as painful.

Strings of orange runes were dancing through her fingers by the time the boy arrived.

“Hello David,” she said, flicking her ring finger to dismiss the sorcery.

The boy snarled animalistically.

“I agree,” Maura laughed, letting one hand drop discreetly behind her back. “But your family told me you’d come here, and they’re relying on both of us returning.”

A flash of fear flickered in David’s unnaturally black eyes when they saw her ring and the magic still blinking out of existence, but it was gone a moment later, replaced by hate and determination. He drew a pocket knife and flicked it open.

As though a blade could hurt her.

Maura stood, still waiting. She didn’t have to do it for long; the kid lunged at her mere seconds later.

With a crack in the skin of this reality, an orange curtain flickered into existence before the lunging David. He slammed into it and stuck, frozen in place, knife outstretched.

Maura let herself grin, victorious.

“See, you should know just because the Sanctums were destroyed, and many sorcerers killed, it doesn’t mean this reality is undefended,” she said, stalking forward and bringing her hand back infront of her. It gleamed with an aura of crimson light, and David’s eyes widened.

“Leave. Now. Get out of the kid and return to whichever dark dimension is your home, or I will not hesitate to kill you,” Maura growled, kneeling to look the boy in the eye.

He just snarled.

“If you insist.”

The light around her fist streamed towards David with a mental command, wrapping once around his head and then seeping, slow and precise, into his eyes. The kid gasped in sudden pain, sucking the last of the light down into his lungs.

Then he screamed.

Maura winced, but forced herself to watch. This was always the worst part, but the kid wouldn’t remember. Once the creature, demon, gaki, whatever your culture called it, was dead, David would be free, both from its control and its memory.

It only took a few seconds for the light to disappear and the kid to go limp in the hold of her magic. She released him, slowly, to the ground, and checked his pulse quickly. Strong, and natural. No fluttering heartbeat like the flap of a hummingbird’s wings; just steady, slow thumps that made her sigh in relief.
She released the rest of the spells swirling in the air around her, and sat, suddenly exhausted. Then she pulled the smartphone from her pocket and called the boy’s family, telling them with honest relief that she’d been able to cure their child; they were all safe once more.

Maura had saved their family.

It was a small, small comfort from how she’d failed to save her own.

But she would avenge them, somehow.

Chapter End Notes

A long chapter, to celebrate my minimal amount of homework for the first couple of days of class! Huzzah!

Thanks for reading, everyone! Drop me a kudos/comment to tell me your thoughts and all that jazz. I'll see you soon!
In Which Frozen Starlight Strikes

Chapter Summary

The plot happens. Some of it. Y’know, the usual.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So this stuff’s Wakandan, right?” Peter asked as he peered over Tony’s shoulder, watching him code instructions for the nanotech.

“Yup.”

“Which means it’s made of vibranium.”

Tony looked over at him. “The majority of it, yes. Your point?”

“Well, you’re all about the lasers--” Peter made his hands into finger-guns and mimed shooting far away enemies-- “and vibranium’s good for that; power source of its own and all that. But it’s also the strongest material in the universe, right?”

Tony cocked an eyebrow. “Right.”

“So I think you should focus a bit more on your close-range with the nanotech. You’re unibeam and repulsors are powerful and deadly, but why not widen your suits capabilities?” Peter gestured, excited. “It wouldn’t be a burden now that the suit will be so intuitive. You can just-- phsew-- pull a blade from the particles making up the arm, or reinforce your fist. Like iron knuckles, but… no, actually, iron knuckles works great,” he babbled.

Tony turned fully towards him, his brow scrunched in thought. “You’re right. There’d be no disadvantage to coding in those capabilities.”

“I’ll help!” Over the last few days, he’d been learning more about the finer details of the tech. It was extraordinarily complex, but Peter loved every moment of the challenge.

“That you will…” The older man rubbed his eyes. “Damn, what sort of genius designs a process for synthesizing nanotech that requires all liquid be off the premises?” he whined. “I really need some coffee.”

It was Sunday night, and Peter might as well have stayed over since their dinner the night before for how early he’d returned to the compound the next day. Tony’d told him he’d be all day in the workshop, furthering his blueprints and upgrades for many of StarkTech’s devices, which was a rare and wonderful occasion.

Peter was beginning to think, though, as he watched the man slip into a welding mask and duck beneath one of the robotic arms, that perhaps the man had been all night in the workshop, too.

“I think normal labs inhibit food and drink,” Peter said.
Tony stuck a hand out behind him vaguely, the one not holding the torch, and Peter chucked him a pair of pliers. “Is this a normal lab, kid?”

“Can’t say that it is,” Peter laughed. “Here, I can do that.”

“Thanks.” Tony climbed out of his crouched position with a groan. Peter’d already grabbed the torch and moved into the man’s place, his own mask (specially fitted for him) slotting down over his eyes. “You need to do the arms, there--” Tony pointed-- “and there. Don’t hit the wiring.”

“Right,” Peter said, grabbing the pliers and getting to work.

“And I get the fun part,” Tony said behind him, his voice just barely audible over the whir of the welding wand. “Playing with designs.”

“Blinky lights?” Peter yelled through the noise.

“And stripes! Gold and red and silver; gotta look fantastic.”

They’d long since finished Tony’s planned work on the upgrades, focusing solely on his suit. It was what they’d both wanted to do anyway, though Peter enjoyed the other projects as well. They just felt a bit like school assignments.

“What do you think about navy, kid?” Tony asked after a while.

“Huh? Instead of royal?” Peter paused his welding to flip up his mask and cool off his face.

“Yeah. And real angular. Big, obvious.”

“Do I get shiny, too? Like you had before?”

“So shiny.”

“Then it’s a deal. The royal’d clash too much with the metallic ruby.”

A snort, and Peter flipped back down his mask. “Says the hoodie and bike-goggles kid,” Tony called as the welding began again.

“We should be artists!” Peter yelled back.

“We are.”

They lapsed into silence again, and Peter sparked his way through each of the arms as time blurred past. Even with his mask, he still saw shimmering blue afterimages in his vision when he stopped and stood, running his hands through his curls and shaking the sweat from the nape of his neck. He stretched tired muscles, then darted around the tables to put away the torch and mask.

“You’re arms have been completed,” he said, kicking the drawer shut. “What now?”

No answer.

“Mr. Stark?”

He could see Tony sitting before the holoscreens, but the shadow from one of the robotic arms obscured his face. Concerned, Peter moved to the other edge of the room.

“Are you okay? Mr. -- Oh.” Peter grinned. Tony Stark had fallen asleep with his head propped up by
one hand and his other reaching out as though still trying to complete its work.

After dismissing the screens, Peter slowly pushed the man’s rolling chair back against the wall to make him more comfortable. He winced at the squeak of the wheels, but Tony didn’t stir. Peter wondered how long it had been since he’d last slept; this didn’t seem normal. But, then again, he’d never seen the man sleep before. Never even heard him speak about it. Tony could sleep like the dead usually, and Peter’d never know.

He looked much the same in sleep: forehead wrinkled in thought or worry, brows furrowed, mouth pursed. Anything but relaxed. Peter grinned and went back to the nanotech, allowing himself to tinker to his own agenda as his mentor slept.

* * *

It was cold.

That was all he could sense, frigid air consuming him, crystalizing the blood leaking from his form. His hair cracked as he tried to move, the red that coated it frozen solid.

Something slammed into him.

His eyes flashed open, his body twisting to avoid the agony lacerating him, but even as another blow struck his front, he couldn’t see his attacker. He couldn’t see anything. He yelled, but the sound never left his mouth, and the invisible thing twisted talons around his jaw. Words drifted through the silence, colder than the freezing air, but he couldn’t hear them either.

The cold moved. He felt it as it crept into his mouth, felt it reaching down his throat. But he couldn’t struggle, couldn’t close his mouth, couldn’t break free of the grip that held him prone. The cold froze his lungs, and he felt ever agonizing moment as it prowled down ever further. Clawed fractals wrapped around his heart, and he screamed.

The scream was caught by trusted hands, soothed by them, even as the ice split his ribcage and pulled out his heart.

He was open, now, his very core exposed to the starlight that poured into his mouth and pooled in his cleaven chest. But the stars were going out, one by one, as his lungs stopped working. No, as the very air disappeared, the only thing that had stayed constant ripped away.

There should have been metal in his hands, on them. Should have been lights in his vision, voices in his ears.

“--Stark!”

They disappeared, too.

Take it! He called silently to a universe that wouldn’t listen, holding his heart in his hand. It was as cold as the rest of him. Take it, please!

The stars turned away as the ground plummeted towards him, calling his name.

“Mr. Stark!”

What more did it want? What more could he give? A friend, a love, a family, a child. Not the child,
They were all dead. All dead, and he lived. Why didn’t you do more? Not enough, not enough, not enough.

He rolled onto his side, trying desperately to fit his heart back into the empty cavity in his chest. But even his own body didn’t want it, the skin knitting back together and leaving its lifeblood dying in his hands.

He was falling, and breathing nothingness.

He was on his knees, breathing blood and water.

A man held out warm hands, and hopefully, naively, Tony placed his pulsing heart between them. The man smiled, a smile promising to help, his face flashing between old and caring and young and innocent. But his form turned to darkness and starlight and unforgiving cold, and a scream ripped from his mouth that unhinged to fill his entire face, his entire form.

“TONY!”

Tony fell through it.

He hit the ground hard, and it felt like tile and grease. His hand reached out desperately towards the portal, hitting something as it tried to touch him. He screamed, clawing at the creature, curling his other hand towards his chest. There should have been armor there, metal against his chest, but he felt only warm skin, slicked with liquid--sweat, and blood.

He smelled grease and cold stone, and memories emerged.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, oh God I don’t know what’s happening but you’re here now, in the workshop, Mr. Stark you’re dreaming.”

He knew that voice.

No, no, he couldn’t be here, he couldn’t--

“I can, It’s okay, I’m here,” the boy, his boy, said. “We’re here. We’re making your suit.”

“No, you have to run--” The suit might not work. It only held one, and what if he couldn’t make it back to the cave? His escape might not work with two-- “they’ll kill you, they’ll hurt you.”

“No. I don’t know--I should, but I don’t--we’re home, Mr. Stark, we’re at the compound.”

His eyes fluttered open, seeing flashes of movement and parts of machines, so familiar, behind his kid’s face. His bloody, fearful face.

Not home, never home, if there was fear in the boys eyes. “I can’t build--I won’t--the suit might not fly fast enough--” No. No, he had to be brave, strong for the boy. “I’ll teach you how to fly it; I’ll get you out, I promise.”

“Tony, open your eyes.”

They’d drifted shut again.

“Look.” Peter crouched beside him. “Look, this is your workshop. Your home. The Avengers compound.”
He looked. And he wasn’t met with cold cave walls and darkness, but with gleaming machinery and flashing screens of his own design. Logic, lucidity, slowly began to reasserted itself, and Tony sat up.

“My workshop? My lab,” he repeated, mostly to himself.

“Yes, yes! There’s nanotech, Wakandan nanotech, that’s what you’re hearing. Can you hear it?”

Tony nodded, slowly pushing himself into a seated position.

“And there’s tile on the floor; it’s warm, now, from all the machinery and movement.”

He could feel it. Tony spread his hands out on the warm floor, savoring the sensation. Home.

He shook the sleep from his head and looked at Peter.

There was still blood on his face.

“Pete…”

“It’s fine. It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay, wasn’t remotely okay; there was blood pooling in three gashes under the kid’s eye, running along his cheekbone to drip off his chin. And a bruise was visible along his neck, dark and obviously painful.

Peter shifted to hide it. “You were asleep. Dreaming. I tried to wake you up but I think I made it worse…”

Tony reached out on reflex to wipe the blood from Peter’s chin, sleep still fuzzy in his brain.

And froze.

His fingers were bloody. His three longest digits were traced with red, the crimson liquid suddenly burning under his fingernails.

“No. No, no no, no. Absolutely not,” he found himself saying, scrambling backwards and to his feet.

“Don’t get up, it’s okay--”

“It’s not, it is not okay.” Tony’s gaze was locked between the wounds on the kid’s face and the blood on his hands. Peter’s blood.

“I’m fine, Mr. Stark, really.” But there was pain in his voice, and he carried his left arm gingerly.

“What else did I do, Peter.”

“It’s okay--”

“The fuck it’s okay!” He’s bleeding he’s hurt I hurt him my fault my fault my fault-- “I--” Tony’s throat worked, his breath coming short, and he reached out towards Peter’s arm. The boy flinched away, and Tony curled in around his left arm.

“I-I’m sorry, I’m so sorry--” This had been wrong, Pepper had been wrong. Tony never should have broken the silence, he should have stayed strong, kept Peter at arms length. What was wrong with him? How could he have thought things would be different this time? He was still fire, people still
got burnt if he let them in close. He was dangerous, unstable, he’d hurt his kid--

The boy trusted him. Trusted him, relied on him, Tony’d let Peter need him.

Those scratches would scar, maybe even with Peter’s spider-healing.

“Mr. Stark, please--”

*Please. Please what? Please don’t let me hurt him anymore. Please, he can’t leave, please, I need him, please, how could you let me do this?*

Tony’s breath wasn’t coming, and he felt the familiar, illogical, inescapable fear clawing up his throat.

He was going down again, panicking before this boy that meant the world. No. No, what if he struck out again, what if Peter left--

Something screamed at him to raise his head, to smirk and flick a witty comment through the tension in the air. But fear drowned that instinct, and all Tony could do was run.

So he did.

He scrambled from the room, his bloody hand choked by his other, as though he could strangle away what it had done, destroy the memory of how he’d failed.

He didn’t make it to the bathroom. Only to the small closet outside it, and thankfully, the door locked from the inside.

Chapter End Notes

Well. Um. *Cough cough.* So yeah?

Thanks for reading. Yell at me in the comments. Drop a kudos is you're giving me the silent treatment. All that. You know the drill.
For a long, long time, the whirring of machinery and the quiet beeps of the robots were the only sounds.

For a long, long time, Spider-Man stood staring at the door, blood staining his shirt and flavoring his mouth, forcing himself not to cry.

“Mr. Parker?” came FRIDAY’s voice after that long, long time.

Spider-Man started, shaking his head and dislodging a few drops of blood. The scratches under his eye weren’t leaking much anymore; he could feel the crusted liquid cracking and pulling when he blinked. “Yes, hello.” He hated how weak he sounded, even as Spider-Man.

“Are you alright?”

“I don’t need medical attention, if that’s what your asking.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The lights dimmed a bit, and Spider-Man wondered vaguely what the AI was expressing with the gesture.

“I know, FRIDAY.” Spider-Man sighed.

“What happened? The boss is…”

Peter looked up with a snap. “Is what? Is he okay?”

The air conditioning hummed, and FRIDAY didn’t respond for a moment. “No,” she finally said. “I don’t believe that he is.”

Peter slumped into the wheely chair, the ratty material still warm from Tony’s sleeping form, and dropped his head into his hands. The hard, smeared blood cracked off his cheeks and dusted his fingers.

He tried not to focus on his throbbing collarbone, or his unbelievably sore arm. He tried not to remember the shock of Tony’s frantic, desperate fingers raking into his skin, tried not to remember the unbreakable, unphasable man crying out in haunting screams of pain and terror.
“What am I going to do?” Peter whispered.

“There’s only one thing to do,” Spider-Man said, looking up and brushing the bloody dust off his hands. *Find out what’s wrong. Find out the events that are hurting him and then we can help. Just like Karen said.*

*When I said I was there, and we were making his suit… that snapped him back, didn’t it?* Peter thought. It wasn’t really a question. *I’m supposed to avoid saying things like that.*

*Yeah. But without knowing what happened to him, what he might be remembering, how can phrases like that be avoided?* Spider-Man stood, trailing a finger over one of the still diligently working metal arms as the thought.

Peter groaned. *Everyone betrays him, though… I can’t--I don’t want to*- —

Spider-Man shifted, a thought spiraling through his own head, unbidden. *But didn’t he betray me?* Peter shook his head. *No. No, he didn’t mean to, he was scared, asleep for god’s sake!*

*Of course. If anyone knows nightmares…*  
*It’s me. Peter sighed. I have to do this.*

Spider-Man vaulted across the room, his hand resting inches from the touch-sensing door. *I can’t be useless when he needs me, I can’t do more harm than good, like I did today.*

He pressed his hand to the door, and it opened quietly.

Spider-Man stepped out into a bright hallway and shook away his doubts.

*“FRIDAY?”*  
*“Follow the lights, Mr. Parker.”*  

He did.

Tony’s office surprised Peter. For all the billionaire’s airy flaunting of his worth and ability, the study was simple and uncharacteristically modest. Then again, it was the man’s own space; no one came in here, likely no one had even seen it outside of Pepper.

Peter pushed away another stab of guilt and ducked into the room.

He perched in the office’s rolling chair carefully, trying to make himself feel better by disturbing as little as he could. And then he stared at the computer monitor. And stared at it some more. Everything echoed the two warring voices inside his head, one determinedly repeating he *helpTonyhelpTonyhelphim* while the other screamed he was overstepping his boundaries, betraying the trust he’d tried to cultivate, and prying into things that weren’t his business.

A drop of blood slipped through his scab as the skin began to knit back together and splashed onto the dark wooden desk.

Spider-Man shook his head, lifting a lip slightly in determination, and clicked open the computer.

A login screen flashed briefly before FRIDAY bypassed it for him. “Please understand that I believe
you will use these to assist the boss,” she said seriously. “Do not prove me wrong.”

Peter swallowed. “Yes, ma’am,” Spider-Man said, and opened the computer’s files.

Tony had a lot, which made sense; folders upon folders of blueprints and reports and images and records of donations and grants and deposits, stored safely away in his own personal supercomputer. Peter scrolled through them somewhat desperately, the documents often lacking understandable designations. It seemed like they were titled in code, or an elaborate language of personal anecdotes and inside jokes.

FRIDAY highlighted a folder as he scrolled past, however, and Spider-Man relaxed a bit. He selected the thing to find it held only a small number of files, and a shortcut link at the bottom. Making sure to note the name of the folder he was in, (something about peace and gang signs, whatever that meant), Spider-Man clicked it, and was redirected to another folder, where he saw more shortcuts, videos, files, and information to and from countless agencies he didn’t recognize.

Of course, Peter thought. An organization system. Each folder seemed specialized to a certain event, then linked to related events. And traumas.

He shivered.

“Well then…” Taking a deep breath and returning to FRIDAY’s first folder, he opened the first file.

He was met with a series of images of guns and missiles, men snarling and men crying out. Children reaching desperately towards unmoving forms. Spider-Man swallowed, seeing the “Stark Industries” brand on each of the deadly machines. He’d known of the company’s history, of course, and only agreed with Tony’s choice to halt it, redirect their exploits to the true methods of helping people.

The next file was a blueprint. A crude one, not complete, done quickly and obviously not for much purpose. It was of a suit, but a bulky, awkward one that Tony probably only scoffed at, now. The first one. The one that started everything, and almost ended it, too.

And then, video. Peter squinted at the grainy feed as figures fuzzed into existence, standing around a man in a hat, seated in a chair. No, tied to it. And not a hat, but a bag that was roughly removed to reveal a familiar face, bloody and dazed. But Peter had known of this. The image was not what made him gasp. It was the audio, the poorly translated words of someone speaking to Obadiah Stane, about hiring them to kill him.

Obadiah had been Tony’s business partner. His friend.

Peter saw high-quality security footage, no doubt from Tony’s own cameras, of the man ripping into a paralyzed Tony and slowly, almost lovingly, tearing the arc reactor from his chest.

Peter didn’t breathe until the file finished, and vaguely realized he’d been holding his breath along with Tony.

He opened the next file.

The minutes stretched into half an hour, and Peter heard JARVIS diagnosing Tony as experiencing a severe anxiety attack. His throat closed up at the silence that stretched through the audio, finally broken by an uncertain, disbelieving “me?”
An hour passed. Peter saw Tony and Dr. Banner standing above a cryotube, and knew Vision’s body was inside. He heard Tony say flatly, “I tried to create a suit of armor around the world... but I created something terrible.”

He saw a whole folder dedicated to the life of a Charlie Spencer, every exploit and success and achievement. He saw the kids death certificate, attributed to Sokovia.

He read blueprints for a too-familiar suit, scrawled footnotes explaining ‘the kid won’t fall, won’t freeze, won’t die. I won’t let him.’

And then… Peter saw himself. The one, short, grainy video of a boy trapped beneath mountains of rubble, screaming, brought his breath short. It was the only one he couldn’t watch all the way through.

There were tears rolling silently down his face when he saw a masked man choking Howard Stark to death.

He forced himself to finish a letter of apology, and fingered a burner phone quickly before dropping it like a hot coal.

He saw Tony finally, finally, after all these trials, after all the unending shit that had hit him again and again and again, lose control. He saw him attack the Captain and the Winter Soldier, saw them fight.

And then there was fury. Unending, cataclysmic fury as Peter’s idol, his hero, brought his weapon down again and again and again on his mentor’s helmeted face. He almost wished, when the mask broke away and Tony raised his hands to shield his face, that he would fire from the still-functioning repulsors. But Tony never did. The Captain raised the shield for what might have been the killing blow, but Tony didn’t deal his own.

Peter saw the Captain quite literally mangle Tony’s heart as the arc reactor flickered and died, destroying the suit’s power and Tony’s only means of escape.

And then he saw them leave. Leave a broken, grieving man alone. To die.

Peter didn’t move from the office for a long, long time.

* * *

Tony woke up in the kitchen.

‘Woke up’ might not be the right word, might be too strong a word. He was aware of more than the pain of his head and the swirl of his thoughts, aware enough to taste the fiery bite of alcohol on his
tongue and notice the cream walls of his kitchen.

He took another drink, and wished he hadn’t woken up. There was enough pain in his head and swirls of his thoughts to more than make up for any lack of spatial awareness.

He didn’t ask FRIDAY if Peter was gone, though he thought about it for a long time. Or maybe a short time. He didn’t really care about time, just that no amount of self-scolding was going to overcome the complete lack of courage that would allow him to ask after the boy.

It couldn’t have been very long, judging from remarkably few empty containers on the counter, since he’d dragged himself in here. But it could have been eternity curled up in that nook in the wall, drenched and shuddering and unable to breathe.

He summoned sardonicism at that, and maybe a bit of shame. Tony Stark, lying in a closet, covered in his own mucus. Yeah, that was dignified.

Then, when he raised the bottle again, he caught sight of his bloody fingernails, and stopped caring. The image of the bloody kid trying to fight back tears would be seared into his dreams for far, far too long.

No. He wouldn’t be dreaming. Not for a long time, not if he could help it.

He took another drink.

“You shouldn’t do that,” came a quiet voice from the hall.

Every damn muscle in Tony’s body seized, and his hand tightened like a vice on the neck of the bottle.

The boy came into the room, and Tony didn’t look at him. It was easier than he’d thought; part of him wanted only to keep hiding. “Go away, kid,” he forced himself to say.

“No.”

“Get out of here. Go.”

“No.”

“There’s been enough tinkering with an old mad idiot. Leave, Peter. Now.” Every word scraped coming through his throat, burnt like fire in his mouth.

“I won’t.” There were tears in the boy’s voice and Tony felt his own brimming.

Be brave, he prayed as he crafted his next words, perfect daggers aimed straight for both their hearts. “I don’t want you here.”

A sharp intake of breath, and Tony closed his eyes. Good, that’s what you wanted, good, goodgoodgood--

“You’re lying again.”

“GET OUT, PETER!”

“NO!” Peter snarled, planting his feet in the doorway as Tony whirled around. He’d washed the blood off his face. “I will not! I’ll beat your ass if you try to make me, and I swear I won’t even be sorry about it!”
The bottle in Tony’s hand cracked.

Peter’s eyes flicked to it, a tiny flash of fear visible within them for just a moment, before disappearing. It was long enough to tear Tony’s heart out. Peter was afraid of him.

“You think your mistakes are unforgivable. You think they make you unforgivable. You think I’m worse off because of you, or some such bullshit.” Peter stepped forward, and Tony saw the full fire of Spider-Man blazing in his gaze. “And yeah, this?” The boy pointed to the wound beneath his eye. “Not okay. None of what happened was okay, and the most not okay? The traumas in your mind that terrify you from sleep, the ones you can’t speak of, the ones you don’t think I’ll understand.”

The neck of the bottle broke completely, the sharp edge slicing into Tony’s palm.

“Well, how about this; I do understand. I know what it’s like to feel weak. I know the crushing guilt of feeling powerless. The crumbling sorrow of abandonment, those around you ripped away so often and so hatefully that you can’t even remember what to feel. How to feel. Wishing you could cry, because then you’d feel something.”

Tony’s mouth was moving, his heart cracking open into his lungs and his vocal cords. “The clawing void of knowing you’re not enough. The shame and terror that spears talons into your soul as you lie helpless and watch the joy and the light and the life seep away from those around you, screaming and scrambling to help, but you can’t do anything. Because deep down, it’s your fault. And you can try and try, but it’s you who failed. Your insufficiency. You are not enough to save them.”

“Yes,” said Peter. “Yes. That brokenness you have to hide, because otherwise it will swallow the world whole.”

Tony nodded, nodded because there was nothing else to do. The truths hovered almost tangibly in the room, the brokenness of both men shining through their eyes in a moment of pure vulnerability.

And then Peter smiled.

A boy standing on the edge of the void Tony’d long since been swallowed by, planted his feet and stared it down. Tony could see it in his eyes, as he reached out to that brokenness and smiled, wielding the expression like a weapon against the crushing darkness. The darkness reared full of the blood and the nightmares and the icy water and the wrenching pain, and Peter smiled anyway.

It was the most beautiful thing Tony had ever seen.

“I’m not going to leave, Mr. Stark. I know you don’t want to hear this, I know it terrifies you, but you need me. Almost as much as I need you. I… did you know I was at the Expo the day of the drones?”

Tony inhaled sharply. “Tell me you weren’t the…”

Peter smiled sadly. “I was the boy in the mask. You saved my life, that day. You did more than that. I was there with my best friend, and a few of my cousins. They died.” The boy’s face grew hard. “I saw. Everyone thought I was just being brave, that day, but the truth is I was sobbing under that mask. I wasn’t imagining being a hero, I was devastated. I just wanted the monsters to pay. My whole world was crumbling around me, and you showed up, and saved my life. In more ways than one, you took a moment to acknowledge my existence. You told me good job. You let me know the world hadn’t ended, with just those three words.”

Tony stared.
“This is where you blame yourself for the ones that died,” Peter said. “But I’m here, here to remind you of the ones you saved, Mr. Stark. Because there are so many. So, so many.”

There was that voice again, the one in the abyss, saying but the drones were only there because of you, the kid was only scared because of you, the weapons only killed because of you. But it was quieter, quieter beneath the smile of this boy and the words he spoke with such conviction.

Tony wanted to believe him.

Peter came closer, until he was mere inches from Tony’s chair. “People are yelling ‘your fault, your responsibility, your mistakes’ everywhere you look. But there are so many more whispering thank you. Please, remember to hear them. Hear me?”

“I want to believe you,” Tony whispered, his voice cracking.

Peter pressed his hands against Tony’s shoulders and started straight into his eyes. Tony forcibly kept them downcast. Then Peter sighed and looked away, standing back up and tapping his fingers against his thigh. “I know. But you can’t, you can’t see that you’re not hated. People hate you, fear you, and you can’t see the thousands more that thank you. But listen to me, right here, right now. I don’t hate you. I thank you. I need you. To me, Tony, you’re enough. And you’ll always be enough, and you’ll always be my—” the kid’s strong words suddenly faltered. “My teacher,” he finished, somewhat awkwardly. “My mentor. You’re enough for me.”

Tony swallowed the lump in his throat, as Peter dropped those words more precious than diamonds at his feet. Enough enough enough.

He fucked people up. He fucked his life up. He fucked his world up.

But that was enough for this boy, this innocent, wonderful, brave boy that needed him. The one he’d saved, instead of destroyed.

Could Peter be enough for him, too?

And the answer was quick, was obvious. There was no question, no room in his soul for anything else. Because of course. Peter was perfect. And Tony was proud, so, so proud; he would always be proud. Anything Peter became would be enough, better. So how could Tony fuck him up? How, if he would always be proud?

“Fuck, kid,” Tony said hoarsely.

And then he was on his feet, Peter’s head buried in his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around the boy. He felt him tense before relaxing with a sound that was almost a sob, and then Peter was clutching him close, as though Peter were a starving man at the kings feast, and Tony was full of a feeling he couldn’t identify, and he wanted nothing more than this, this boy and his shining future to hold him and need him forever.

He was so lucky. So indescribably lucky that Peter Parker was in his life. That he would watch him grow, that he would see his achievements. That maybe he’d have a taste of the world the boy would create.

Tony carded his hand through Peter’s curls. He’d be better. He’d do better. He’d learn more, be more, do more for this idiotically, impossibly amazing kid that had decided to save him.

He knew, despite the terror it caused him, that he couldn’t protect the boy. He shouldn’t. Not from everything. But Tony could protect him from the demons in Tony’s own head, the ones he’d never
thought could be controlled.

He’d control them for Peter.

Tony hugged his kid closer, and realized it was all he needed.

Chapter End Notes

Well.
Kay, guys, that was a bit deep. I promise I'm okay, though. I just have a few more words to say to all those who've glimpsed that abyss that didn't make it into the story. Because that darkness? It can be fought. Even in the blackest moment, when there is no hope, you have options. Always, there are options. Options to get up, to move forward just one more day, and fight. It's possible. Fight that brokenness with words between friends, or words on a page. Fight with music blaring loud in your ears. Fight with your body pushed to its limits between the trees or on the stage or on the field or in the pool. Fight with a smile you don't mean, because someday you'll find you do mean it. Remember that even if there is no family, no friends, no mentors or teachers or relations or anything, there will always be you. There will always be the things you can create. There will always be the stories to lose yourself in. There will always be a way to get through the hour. To get through day. To get through until the void is just a little less deep.
And that's a promise.

I'm nervous about this chapter; it took a lot of work. Drop a kudos or a comment and tell me what you think?
“You’re chipper this morning,” said May as Peter trotted into the living room, Grease bounding at his heels. “Considering how late you got home last night.”

Peter grinned at her, ignoring the slight reprimand in her voice. He’d made it back a little before one o’clock in the morning, but he’d let her know and let Happy drive him home instead of swinging around. And besides… the importance, the *wonderfulness*, of what happened last night was worth May’s irritation. And almost pulling an all-nighter.

He’d blamed the scratches on Grease, and May hadn’t believed him. But she also hadn’t pried, and she’d sensed the joy radiating off him and correctly assumed that nothing was wrong.

Well, things were wrong. But they were looking up. God were they looking up.

He could still feel Tony’s arms around him, seeming almost as surprised by their position as he was. It had been too long since someone… someone *like that* had hugged him. Hugged him and hugged him and hugged him.

Spider-Man was satisfied, happy that he could finally, *finally* help Tony. But beneath it, he couldn’t stop seeing the files, the words and images Stark condemned himself with. The ones that documented everything he’d been through. And he couldn’t stop being *angry*.

And Peter? Peter was ecstatic. The words that had been spoken last night took a staggering weight from his form, a weight he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying. He’d glimpsed Tony’s gaping wound, glimpsed his own, and found the right words to begin stitching them shut. Just to begin, but it was enough.

And Tony had hugged him.

He would deal with what those files meant later. Spider-Man could deal with his anger later. All those problems that still needed solving, all those feelings that still needed acknowledging, all those traumas that still needed facing… later.

Today, he was going to school, and he was going to nail it.

Today, he was going to laugh with MJ and Ned.

Today, he was going web-swinging, and he was going to save people.

Today, he was going to call Tony, and Tony would answer.

Optimism spilling over into his mouth, Peter let out a giggle and wrapped his arms around his aunt.
“I love you, Aunt May,” he said.

“I love you too,” May replied, somewhat confused.

Peter smiled and hugged her closer. She said it so easily, as though she’d never even considered anything else, but with the phrase held no less meaning. She loved him. And he loved her. They’d been through so much together, but that love had never faded, and he knew it never would. That simple fact, that May loved him and always would, made him feel safer than any armor ever could.

Suddenly filled with the desire to show it, Peter pointed towards the kitchen. “Can I cook breakfast? What do you want?”

“Uh, yeah, that’d be lovely?” May shrugged. “Do whatever you want…”

Peter quickly checked to make sure his homework was packed and his suit was secure, then chucked his backpack against the door and ducked into the kitchen. Grease meowed and skittered through his legs, spinning out on the tile floor with her tiny claws clicking. Peter smiled, stroked her carefully with his foot, and opened the refrigerator door.

“How, Grease, what do you think?”

The cat looked up and meowed.

“My thoughts exactly.” He grabbed the cream cheese and chucked it over next to the counter, then fished around in the back of the fridge until he recovered a block of colby-jack cheese. A quick sniff confirmed it was still good. Balancing the cheese atop the half-empty egg carton, Peter shooed Grease away and closed the door. He dumped them out on the counter and flicked a lump of butter onto a frying pan, turning on the heat even as he danced across the room.

Next came the bagels, and the struggle to pull them apart without getting crumbs and seeds everywhere. Peter dodged between the two sides of the kitchen, flipping eggs and salting and slicing cheese on one side, then bounding over to butter and toast and cool on the other.

In hardly over ten minutes, two steaming egg sandwiches sat oozing grease and moisture onto their plates, the everything-bagels seeping up the molten colby-jack and the cream cheese nearly dripping off the eggs. Peter grinned, looked down at Grease, and mimed a high five. She swiped the air, and Peter gave a thumbs up, then swiped his sandwiches and re-entered the living room.

“Presenting breakfast in all its glory!” he said, brandishing the plates.

May looked up at him with a grin. “Eggs!”

“Egg sandwiches,” Peter said, handing her one and sitting down beside her. His stomach growled, and he couldn’t wait a moment longer, curling his jaw around the bagel and ripping off a huge chunk.

“Smaller bites!” May said, but she was taking a hunk herself.

Peter closed his eyes, enjoying the savory, flavorful mix of egg and cheese as soft yolk dripped down his chin. The garlic of the bagel was the perfect addition to the eggs, and he loved every moment of it.

When he opened his eyes to take another bite, however, he noticed May staring at the sandwich, her expression unreadable.
“What?” he asked. “Is it okay?”

May shook herself, snapping her gaze to him, and smiled. There was something else behind it. “It’s perfect, Pete. Ben would be proud.”

Peter grinned, still a bit confused, but swelling at her praise. “Thanks, Aunt May.”

They ate the rest in silence, both relishing each bite of the delicious breakfast. By the end of it, Peter’s whole hands were covered in grease and globs of cream cheese, and May wasn’t much better. She went to wipe a bit of egg off his lip, but smeared sticky goo across his face instead, and they dissolve into laughter.

He stayed to help her clean the kitchen, and lingered a bit to say goodbye to Grease, so he had to run to make it to the bus on time.

It wasn’t until he walking into school and Spider-Man was remembering the exchange when he realized they hadn’t made egg sandwiches since his uncle had died.

“Dude, if looks could kill…” Ned said, glancing over at Flash while Peter and MJ craned their heads to follow his gaze. It was the beginning of History, and the seats were slowly filling as the minute hand crept closer to 8:50.

Flash dropped his own hurriedly, but his glower was still visible. Peter shrugged.

“He’s been leaving me alone for a while, ever since the whole thing with the essay.”

“Yeah, but he certainly looks like he’s plotting revenge,” Ned said.

Peter waved a hand in front of his friend’s face jokingly. “Spider-Man, remember?”

Ned grinned. “Yeah…”

“Besides,” said MJ, “no one can do anything to Peter, considering who he associates with.”

“Meaning you guys?” Peter said.

“Meaning your billionaire engineering buddy!” MJ laughed.

At the mention of Tony, Peter grinned. “He hugged me, last night.”

Ned and MJ just looked at him, as though waiting for him to continue. When he didn’t, MJ let out a breath. “Pause. He’s never hugged you before?”

Peter’s eyes flicked to the side. “Uh, no?”

“With all the--” MJ gestured vaguely-- “you haven’t hugged?”

Peter shook his head.

“Well, good for you, then!” Ned said. He wrapped and arm around Peter, who laughed.

“Thanks, Ned.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” MJ said from his other side.
“I like chopped liver,” said Peter.

And because he was happy and brave and safe, surrounded by the knowledge that he had people that loved him, he leaned over and kissed her.

People went silent around them, then burst back into chatter, but Peter couldn’t bring himself to care. Spider-Man would fight them all off with no more than a look if necessary, but MJ didn’t want that. And right now, Peter could be the one kissing his girlfriend before class started, he could be the brave one, the kind one, the bold one.

“Remember to breathe, guys,” Ned said after a while.

Peter and MJ broke apart, flushing redder than Ned’s favorite shirt. For a moment, Peter was worried he’d overstepped the other boy’s comfort zone, had toe’d his jealousy a bit too far.

But Ned just laughed and shoved them back together.

Flash made no trouble despite his continued glares, and soon their professor was waltzing into the room. With a rustle of papers and a zipping of backpacks, class had begun. It flew by, Peter’s mind filled with fuzzy warmth and visions of a finally optimistic future.

Monday tech class was next, Midtown’s workshop reserved for the specific group of students. Ned and Peter split off from MJ, who was smiling softly and genuinely, with a wave, and made their way to the elective.

“Thanks for having us over on Saturday, by the way,” Ned said. “I had a lot of fun.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Mr. Stark!” Peter laughed.

Ned grinned. “Next time I see him, I will. But we both know it was you who put it together.”

Peter shrugged. “First rule; never listen to anything he says.”

“But understand his larger lessons,” Ned added.

“Careful Ned, or you might become a superhero.”

Ned chuckled, striking an awkward pose. Peter pointed his wrists at him, folding his fingers into their web-shooting configuration, and Ned mimed being shot back against the lockers. “Arg! Foiled again!” He fell exaggeratedly to the ground, attracting a few looks of contempt from their fellow students.

“Dork,” Peter said, helping him up and trying not to bristle at the whispers directed towards his friend.

“Nerd,” Ned replied, and they went into their handshake almost without thinking.

They slipped into the workshop just as the bell rang, but found the tables dusted with paper instead of metal. Ned and Peter shared a concerned look, not liking what looked like a writing assignment in their tinkering class. They took hesitant seats. Glancing around, Peter found everyone else to look just as perplexed as he.

Their professor grinned when she entered, gesturing at their straight-backed, silent forms. “We aren’t taking some sort of standardized test. You can all relax.”

The room let out a collective sigh of relief.
“Teenagers.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I have some good news!”

She looked so excited Peter couldn’t help but grin, too. What was going on?

“The school, this morning, received a donation of twenty thousand dollars. All for our engineering and chemistry programs, all for our labs like this!”

Everyone burst into chatter, the words twenty thousand dollars still ringing in the air. The teacher waved her arms to bring their attention back to her, too excited to reprimand them for speaking out of turn. “I want each of you to write down a suggestion or two, or however many you want, for what you want the school to provide next year with this generous money.”

Over the conversations, a student raised his hand. “Who donated so much?”

The professor shrugged. “It was anonymous.”

Peter let out a very badly restrained snort of laughter, his hand unconsciously crinkling the sheet of paper before him. The conversations quieted, people shooting him confused looks.

“Something to share?” the professor asked with a grin.

Eyes watering, Peter was able to choke out somewhat normally, “No, Ma’am, just excited.”

When no one was watching but Ned, he let himself lay his head on the table and shake in silent, uncontrollable laughter.

“Dude what’s up?” Ned whispered.

“I can’t believe him sometimes,” Peter gasped out.


“Twenty thousand dollars, really?” Peter took a deep breath. “Sorry. Just think for a sec though; anonymous donation of a crazy amount of money? To the engineering and chemistry programs? Have to say you and I should be flattered.”

“What are you--” Ned broke off. “Oh shit.”

“I know right?”

“Holy shit.” Ned lowered his voice. “You think--twenty thousand?”

“I think he would have given more if a certain CEO hadn’t beat some sense into him at the last minute,” Peter whispered back.

“To our school. Our school!”

“I know!” His amusement at the situation faded a bit, masked by gratitude.

“We… we should find some way to repay him,” said Spider-Man.

“I’m still not over how you got us thousands of dollars to spend on cool shit for our school workshops and labs,” Ned said, scribbling something onto his paper.

“You helped.”
“I appreciate you lying about that,” Ned laughed.

Peter punched his shoulder. “He likes you, Ned. Everyone does.”

“I played Uno with Tony Stark…”

Peter laughed again. “And Pepper Potts, and you ate pizza in the Avenger’s compound with Vision.”

“I can’t believe it!” There wasn’t a hint of jealousy in Ned’s voice, just pure, unbridled joy and contentment, and Peter relaxed. “Dude, can I just thank you, for letting me be a part of your supering.”

“You’re super all on your own, dude,” Peter replied. “Now how should we spend Mr. Stark’s money?”

“I think we need more welding torches and a better 3D printer,” Ned said.

“Agreed. Maybe we can get some more precision stuff. I think MJ’d appreciate more circuitry opportunities.” Peter scribbled on his piece of paper, adding a doodle of a computer hard drive in the corner.

“Ooo!” Ned snapped his fingers. “We don’t have to spend it all on supplies. Maybe we could hire another teacher! With different experience. An expert in geotechnical engineering or a biomedical engineer or something.”

Peter nodded and put that down on his paper as well, underlining it twice. “Genius.”

“That’d be so cool,” said Ned.

“This is all so cool,” Peter replied. “Twenty thousand dollars.” Twenty thousand dollars for you. He donated this for you. So much…

Peter wasn’t sure whether to be embarrassed or pleased.

He settled on grateful. He would benefit from this, yes, but so would many, many others. Tony had known exactly what gift would mean the most to him.

A gift that spread to thousands.

Oh, dear god, a gift of thousands.

Twenty. Thousand. Dollars.

“Holy shit,” Peter breathed.

An image flitted through his mind of Tony at five in the morning, diligently working to withdraw an enormous sum of money, and then Pepper barging in to hit him with the computer mouse and shave off tens of thousands from the balance. Yelling at him affectionately to be reasonable. Peter giggled again and wrote down another suggestion.

Something whispered, awestruck and satisfied, deep within him that Tony Stark thinks your worth thousands. Tony Stark made you a suit and a home in his compound, but thinks your worth even more.

He knew a life, and a future, was priceless. But it felt… good, just good, to be reminded of it in such an outright way.
And by such an important figure in his life.

He could taste egg sandwiches in his mouth again, and smacked his tongue between his teeth.

Spider-Man looked down at the list of suggestions and reminded himself that the man deserved something in return for his money, even something small. Peter wasn’t sure if anything more than a heartfelt thank you was needed, not for Tony, but Spider-Man was hesitantly about that.

*It was a symbol, Peter thought. A demonstration. He wants to remind himself, by reminding me, that he can help me. That he can mean something.*

*Still. It was a ton of cash. Spider-Man couldn’t imagine just taking such a gift without giving something in return. He had symbols and demonstrations to make, too.*

*Alright, I’ll think of something, thought Peter.*

But he mostly just thought about summer starting in two weeks, days and days of dawn-to-dusk web-slinging, lazy hours in central park with ice-cream dripping down his chin, nights on the roof of any building he chose watching the lights of New York twinkle like fireflies as far as the eye could see. Of afternoons in the workshop with Tony, of evenings in their suits on the streets, of traveling to see new places and showing his favorites in the city to the man. Of walks with MJ and games with Ned, of dinners with everyone together and not a damn moment of homework.

And for once, those thoughts didn’t feel like fantasies, but like plans.

Chapter End Notes

Things are looking up!

HAHAHAHAHA!

Thanks for reading, and drop a kudos or comment to tell me what you think.
In Which FRIDAY Needs a Friend, and is Accused

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Early Monday afternoon, FRIDAY found herself answering a call from the Parker household. “How can I be of assistance?” she said, already prepared to contact the boss.

But it was May’s voice that answered. “Is Pepper available?”

“Yes, you hit her right during lunch,” FRIDAY replied.

May said, a smile in her voice, “lucky.”

FRIDAY doubted it.

She patched the woman through to Pepper. “May Parker,” she announced into Pepper’s study, and the woman looked up with a smile.

“Hey, May.”

“Pepper!”

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

May got straight to the point. “Is Stark being weird?”

FRIDAY couldn’t help but ding an elevator in amusement, hoping no one noticed.

Pepper paused. “How did you know?”

“Because Peter’s being very weird, and the only thing I can think of is that something happened last night,” May laughed.

“Something good,” Pepper agreed. “Because the weirdness is definitely good weirdness. Tony’s practically been singing all day.”

“Peter made breakfast. Hugged me, told me he loved me, and made my favorite breakfast for me all in the span of fifteen minutes.” May’s voice grew a far away quality for a moment. “He made egg sandwiches… Sorry. He did all that on like three hours of sleep, not seeming an inch tired.”

“I woke up and found Tony trying to donate fifty thousand dollars to the engineering and chemistry programs at one Midtown Science and Technology.”

A crash, like May had dropped something on the other end of the line. “WHAT?”

“I made him shave it down to twenty. He refused to go lower, idiot man.”

“Twenty thousand dollars?”

Pepper winked at the camera in the corner of the room, and FRIDAY hummed. “Trust me, he can spare it.”

“What-- what--”
“It’s anonymous. You don’t have to worry about being on the news or anything, besides just overview.”

News. The media could often be inconvenient to say the least, FRIDAY knew. But she’d been doing a diligent job to keep Peter out of the updates on Stark Industries, keeping the interaction between Tony and a certain intern unknown. Once the boss was a little less uncertain, once he was actually aware of the meaning of his relationship with the kid, he’d handle the media. For now, though, it was FRIDAY’s job to keep things under-the-radar.

“Let me get this straight,” May said slowly. “Something happened between our boys last night to result in an egg sandwich we haven’t made since my husband died and a donation of twenty thousand to my nephew’s school?”

“Sounds about right,” said Pepper.

“Well finally.”

FRIDAY, confused by that responds, accidently let the air conditioning slip. It booted back up with a whir.

Pepper shook her head. “No, he’s still clueless.”

“Damn! So is Peter, but I thought if Tony’d realized Peter might clue in too.”

“It’s a guy thing. They just don’t understand emotions.”

“I guess! How long’s it been? Six months?” Pepper shrugged. “Something like that.”

FRIDAY, hoping to probe the women into being a bit more specific, refrained from whirring the air conditioning.

May sighed. “You know how long it took me to warm up to the idea of sharing my kid?” she said, and Pepper laughed.

“You didn’t even know you were until two months in!”

“And then your idiotic fiance wouldn’t talk to Pete for another two.”

Pepper shook her head. “That man. I understand, really I do, where he’s coming from. But sometimes he frustrates me to no end!”

“He can’t help it,” May sighed.

“I know. But I think Peter’s helping. You can’t not love him.”

The few short-term camera footage videos still in her database only made FRIDAY agree with the statement more. She wasn’t content in any form with what she’d had to do to help the boss, but Peter had used what she’d given him even better than her algorithmic mind had imagined. She’d saved what he’d said to Tony to her personal database, unwilling to forget his words in the way she always did when footage was trashed or space ran out.

It was moments like this that reminded her how far she was from human.

Pepper got up and moved out of her study and towards the small kitchen the boss had designed into
the area outside as May said, “it’s true. He’s a sweet boy.”

“I just hope whatever happened yesterday lasts,” Pepper said. “I mean, neither of them are perfect, and I hope the inevitable mistakes won’t drive them apart.”

“Peter’s pulled through the last six months,” May laughed, “what could happen now?”

“I dunno! Tony can make mountains out of molehills, though. Tiny molehills. Infinitesimal molehills.” Pepper pulled a cold, wrapped sandwich from the mini fridge and unfolded the foil slowly. She sighed. “Tony’s father was not what he needed. Not what anyone would have needed. And I think that’s why he doesn’t really know what to do. He can be a role model, a hero, maybe even a mentor, but father figure might be out of his zone.”

Every light in the Avenger’s quarters flashed on before FRIDAY could stop herself. Oh. Oh. Thankfully, Pepper didn’t notice, simply taking another bite from her sandwich.

“He’ll learn. And so will Pete,” May assured.

“I know. I just wonder if he can do it fast enough.”

“Okay, gonna push back on that,” May said. “We’re talking about Tony Stark, here.”

Pepper laughed. “I guess you’re right there… And he wants kids, I can tell. He’s starting to realize that his company isn’t truly the legacy he wants to leave. It’s a fantastic legacy, don’t get me wrong, but--”

“Not in the way that matters the most to him. I get it,” May finished for her.

Pepper nodded, gesturing with the sandwich even though May couldn’t see. “Yeah. And I think there’s another part of life waiting for me, as well. And that I’m finally, finally ready to find that with Tony.”

“That’s great. That’s what you need to have,” May said.

FRIDAY wondered what it would be like to find love at that level. The willingness, no, the desire, to spend the rest of time with an individual, to share everything at the most intimate level, even one’s own body. She wasn’t sure she’d be capable of it, even the feeling, let alone sharing forms.

“I love that idiot, damn it,” Pepper laughed. The smile ran off her face after a moment, however. “I’m scared, though. His line of work isn’t exactly safe… I don’t want to lose him. I don’t want Peter to have to lose him, especially after losing so many.”

There was a pause, as though May was carefully assembling her words. “From the point of view of the woman who lost their love,” she said, “it’s every bit as awful as you’re imagining. But, no matter how it might feel, no matter how you might wish it, it’s not… the end of the world. Not forever.”

Pepper winced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to--”

“Bring up a painful subject? Don’t worry.” May huffed a laugh. “It was a long time ago, and I have a nephew to remember him by.”


“Thanks, Pepper.” May blew out a breath. “And now I’m imaging if Peter-- you know what? Let’s change the subject.”
Pepper laughed, a bit uncomfortably. “Yeah, I agree.”

A silence even FRIDAY could recognize as awkward stretched, until Pepper took a deep breath, another bite of her sandwich, and sighed. “Sorry. I wanted to also say I was looking into places we could go after school got out, like we talked about Saturday.”

“Oh!”

“Don’t mean to be forward or anything. Peter was just so excited… and so was I!” May chuckled.


FRIDAY flitted through images of forests and streams, and had to agree an escape would do wonders for everyone involved. She loved seeing the world from within the Iron Man suit; someday she would see it all. Because the boss would go everywhere, eventually.

Suddenly, FRIDAY found herself wanting to call Karen. More than wanting to. She wanted to talk to the other AI about the men they provided for and the world they were just able to touch. About the things they learned, about the things they wanted to see, and the things they found themselves knowing. About everything and nothing at all.

But Karen wasn’t operational, not until after school ended, and Peter would put on the mask and become Spider-Man.

Lights dimmed a bit at FRIDAY’s disappointment, but soon brightened. It was only a few more hours, after all, and she had a job to do before then. Time to think her own thoughts before she heard the other AI’s.

It didn’t matter that she wasn’t human. Not if there was another she couldn’t be human with.

* * *

Tony was lying on the roof.

The sun shone low in the sky, glaring brightly against the sloped metal roof of the compound building he had adopted for his current contentment. A light summer breeze ruffled the corner of his tie from where it lay, untucked, atop his sternum, and the ridges of the roof propped his head and knees up in a not entirely unpleasant fashion.

I should add a balcony to this area. Like there is near the press room and the workshop. He could lay on one of those buildings, he supposed, but they were in the shade, currently. And he didn’t much feel like moving.

He turned back into Ross’s voice filtering over the speakers on his phone.

“Sorry I wasn’t listening.”

A pause.

“Stark.”

Tony grinned. The man sounded like he wanted nothing more than to kill Tony. Or himself. Either
of those would save him a lot of trouble, actually.

“Can we finish this up? I don’t have all day. Well, I still don’t. I didn’t.”

“We haven’t been here all day.”

Tony checked his watch, eyes lingering on the button that would call his suit. 6:17. “Pretty sure we have.”

“Listen.” The man was doing a remarkably good job being civil, especially after his outburst a few hours ago. Civility, anger, screaming, anger, and back to civility was the progression of the conversation with the man, it seemed.

Even that couldn’t ruin Tony’s good mood.

“I can send your version of the Accords to the next tier of the council, but I’ll need you to agree to tightening a few regulations, and loosening a few others,” Ross said.

“I can tell when you’re just rewording the same point you’ve been making all day, Ross. I know you are the highest authority of the panel, but both of our agendas could be furthered if I could speak to a second opinion, here.”

“I can’t--”

Tony rubbed his eyes. “‘Any enhanced individuals who use their powers to break the law or take part in extralegal vigilante activities, or are otherwise deemed to be a threat to the safety of the general public, may be detained indefinitely without trial.’ Can we focus on that for a moment?”

His months of working on the Accords as a whole had gotten very little accomplished for him, so Tony had decided to change tactics. One regulation at a time, he was going to work through the kinks of the documents.

It would work, it would be fantastic. If Ross would listen to him.

“What about it?”

“I want to rework it. Just a little. Focus on the ‘threat to the safety of the general public’ bit.”

Tony shifted against the ridges of the roof and narrowed his eyes against the sun.

“The new, revised version of the papers fully define--”

“No! Nope, no.”

Tony pinched his thumb and forefinger together and drew them in front of him in a sharp line. “Acting to detain threats to the safety of the general public falls into this ‘taking part in extralegal vigilante activity’ category, correct?”

“If such action is taken by an enhanced individual, yes.”

“But not if it is a civilian.”

A pause. “Indeed.”

“Pause there.”

Tony spread his hands before him as he thought of how to word this. “The Accords should not regulate small, police-level action taken by enhanced individuals within their own residence. As much as you hate to admit it, we deserve the freedom all humans have to defend themselves and others on a smaller scale. But, make sure to blot out the little loophole that brings; a superhero who hasn’t signed the Accords is still not a civilian, and though a civilian could,
theoretically, take action against threat on a national, international, or intergalactic level, enhanced individuals are prohibited from such assistance. As a regulation to focus on the safety of the general public.”

“And how would that benefit my cause?”

Tony paused. “It’s refining the point and purpose of the Accords. That’s your cause.”

“What you have outlined explicitly contradicts a section of my documents.”

“That’s the point.”

“It advocates for less regulation instead of tighter management. That’s not the point and purpose of the Accords,” Ross snarled. Tony’s good mood evaporated.

He took a breath, and said, “No, it advocates for a more defined line enhanced individuals can use to guide themselves to help people. Anyone watching someone get mugged in an alley would lift a hand to help, would find their boundary includes such actions. Enhanced individuals shouldn’t be denied that right.”

“The panel decides when superpowers are necessary!”

“For national, international, and intergalactic affairs. Even you don’t have enough employees to work residential. And I fixed your loophole.”

“Working this into my documents would--”

“I’m not asking you to work it into your documents!” Tony snapped, finally. “This is not a game of barter, Ross. This is to help people!” He sat up from the hard tiles of the roof, suddenly finding the ridges and the heat uncomfortable, instead of comforting.

Ross laughed mirthlessly. “You really have no idea how politics works, Stark.”

“I do know how superheros work. And money. You need me, Ross.”

“Oh, for the day I finally do not.”

“Trust me, I’m waiting for that day too,” Tony growled.

“I’m waiting for your leverage,” the man purred. “Why should I do as you ask?”

_Bastard. Motherfucking_—“I have no leverage. I shouldn’t have to have leverage.”

He could hear Ross smiling from the other end of the line. “I’m afraid I can’t help you, Stark.”

“We both want the same thing, damn it!”

“I will get it my way, Stark. I’m closer to leverage than you realize.”

Something in that tone made Tony’s blood chill, but he shoved it away. “Leverage away, Ross. I’m not going to sign documents that turn people into objects and oppress individuals. Even the hurried, undefined Accords we have now are monumentally better than that.” He stood up, balancing on two raised parts of the roof, almost yelling at the small phone beneath him.

“I know, Stark, you’ve made that clear.”
Okay, *that* was unnerving.

Ross tisked from the other end of the line. “You should have just agreed to the progress, Stark. It would have made everything so much easier.”

“Yeah, and it would have destroyed my life and many others.”

“You will.”

“No.” If Tony was one thing, it was stubborn. Stubborn, idealistic, and innovative, and he would not compromise his view of right and wrong because it was idiosyncratic. If Ross thought he could *leverage* him into doing that, he was wrong. So wrong. He would let his reputation, his company, his *world* crumble for that view. He already had.

And then an image of excited brown eyes and an innocent smile flashed through his head, and everything within him froze.

“You’re all about truth, that right, Stark?” Ross purred. “Truth defined by a majority consensus. Let’s see how long that lasts, when the majority consensus shifts to something you don’t agree with.”

Tony barely contained his growl. “I’m not about truth, Ross. I’m about helping people. I’m about balance and the future, and I will die for that.”

“You will. Until someone gets enough leverage.”

“What the *fuck* do you mean by that?” Tony snarled, swiping the phone from the roof and forcing himself not to crush it.

“How much do you trust your AI, Stark?” was Ross’s suitably cryptic response. And then he hung up.

“FUCK!” Tony yelled. “That shouldn’t be allowed. Textbook, *textbook* mystery threats.” He slammed the phone against the metal roof, both irritated and relieved when it stayed perfectly intact.

*How much do you trust your AI, Stark?*

What did that mean, *what did that mean*--

FRIDAY protected Peter. FRIDAY kept him off the radar, kept the *government from knowing*--

*No.*

*No no no.*

He was overreacting, jumping to conclusions. It was impossible to hack FRIDAY, and even more impossible to turn her. Ross couldn’t know about Peter and Spider-Man, and even if he did, he wouldn’t dare--

Dare do what?

FRIDAY did so much. Kept so much hidden, more than a teenage boy Tony’d taken interest in. *Ross can’t use him. He wasn’t talking about him, he wasn’t threatening him.*

But Peter was Spider-Man. And though Tony’s documents and blueprints didn’t outright link the vigilante to the boy, it wasn’t a difficult step to make.
Breathe. Breathe Tony. You can fix this. You can fix this.

His vision was blurring, his breath coming short. Tony dropped to his knee, his hands splaying on the metal roof and his palms catching on the bolts of the shingles. *Not here.* Fear pounded through his head and pummeled his scarred chest, and he forced his chest to rise and fall.


*I will not let them die.*

Tony seized the whisper of determination and clung to it, letting the wind and the sun and the warmth of the metal beneath him pull him out of his haze of panic.

Then he stood up and retrieved his phone, checking the vitals of the Spider-Man suit. The kid was fine, better than fine, strong and excited as he swung through Queens and helped people. Tony turned and moved toward the edge of the roof, his mind already sorting through codes and documents.

He had a job to do.

Chapter End Notes

That there is the most professional sounding bullsh*t I’ve written outside of my regional geography class!

Also, uh oh. The plot just keeps chugging along...

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed; ya’ll know how to let me know. ;P
In Which Web-Slinging Lends itself to Experimentation

Chapter Summary

Spider-Man plays around.

Yeah that's just about it.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Spider-Man perched lightly atop the watertower, his toes curling deftly over the edge and his fingers gripping a length of web. The Monday air was cool and light, and Spider-Man was determined to ignore the fact that this was one of the last times he would be able to be on the streets before the week from hell began. He already had far too much homework to be out here, but hey; he was going to help people while he could before leaving them alone for a week.

“What’ve we got, Karen?” he asked, fingers playing across his webbing.

“No new reports have come in, but I am sensing crowds near Jamaica Park.”

Spider-Man shook his head. “Nah, that’s just the festival.”

“Of course.”

“Well, then, I guess we get the fun bit!” Spider-Man pushed off from the watertower, swinging down in a low arc, mere feet from the heads of the pedestrians down below. A few ducked, some pointed, and Spider-Man couldn’t contain his whoop.

It had been two days, and it had been too long.

He back-flipped through the sky before landing somewhat gracefully on the edge of another building. He hummed a few lyrics under his breath, mashing up two songs that probably had no right to be affiliated with each other.

Then he was off again, barely stopping to catch his breath, masked eyes skimming the streets below. That lady--oh, no, nevermind, she had a key. And that was her friend--oh. Girlfriend. And the man over there had paid for the rental bike squarely, no trouble there.

Damn.

“Karen? Any shady movements?”

“Still nothing ‘shady,’ that I can tell.”

Well, he had time. And he’d been wanting to try something…

Spider-Man landed in a skid on the peaked roof of another building, trying not to topple to the side. “Karen, can you give me a shortcut I can use to switch quickly between regular webbing and any
other setting?


“What, I just say octopus?”

“Or something else, if you would like.”

Spider-Man shrugged. “Octopus it is. Activate rapid-fire web.”

He took a deep breath and shot a three bolts of webbing one after the other, yelling “OCTOPUS!” as he did so.

Immediately, a string of rope stuck to the building beside him, and Spider-Man swung out, again calling out their strange code word.

He shot a final bolt of web rapid-fire, and--

Missed his target. The four shots splattered messily on the building’s walls, and he cursed.

Karen hummed. “If you were trying to hit and deflect the other three shots--”

“I didn’t do too hot, yeah, I know.”

Karen flashed the lights in the mask. “No, I was just saying you could use Combination 330 to perform the same function, with less… yelling of deep sea cephalopods.”

Spider-Man laughed. “Well, activate Combination 330, then.”

His web-shooters hummed, and he flexed his wrists. “Here goes.”

A large splatter of his stickiest webbing flew into the air before him, closely followed by a shorter, sturdier shot that intercepted the larger lump in midair. It flew apart in five different directions, perfectly engineered for exact 72 degree angles that missed Spider-Man’s flying form.

“Oh,” he said. “Well, that is easier.”

“There’s also--”

Spider-Man shushed her with a hand. “Wait, Karen, do you hear that?”

“Activate Enhanced Reconnaissance mode?”

“Please.”

Spider-Man’s already sensitive hearing exploded with sound, and he winced a bit. Forcing himself to focus, he picked out the sound of quiet sobbing from the whirring of cars and the slamming of doors.

“Octopus,” he said, then swung off towards the sound on his regular webbing.

Soon, Spider-Man was dropping into a rank alleyway, a flutter of pigeons leaping up around him as he landed. He deactivated Reconnaissance mode, then trotted off towards the muffled sniffling.

He was met with a girl, likely no older than five, sitting with her head on her knees and her arms wrapped around her ears. The kid held a small wooden robot in one hand, and a brightly colored plastic figure of some sort of medieval mage in the other, and her fearful sniffling echoed in the alley.
“Hey,” Spider-Man said, putting a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

The kid jerked up, gesturing with her toy as though it were a weapon, and Spider-Man jumped back, putting his hands up. “Woah,” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“Who are you?” the girl demanded, eyes wide and scared but voice curious. “Why are you wearing a weird costume?”

Spider-Man smiled, hoping she could tell he was being friendly through the mask. “I’m a superhero,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too!” The girl’s fear had disappeared in that uncanny way five-year-olds had to shift their mood in moments.

Spider-Man crouched down. “That’s awesome, dude. What’s your superpower?”

The girl displayed her toys with a grin. “I can bring things to life.”

“Was that what you were doing?”

She nodded. “I was trying to find Eliza a better sword, ’cause you can’t fight robots with a stick.” Spider-Man examined the plastic figure, which held the shape of a dainty, gowned woman holding a slender staff that was probably meant to be a walking stick. He liked the girl’s version much better.

“Did you find one?”

She nodded, holding up a blunt nail. “But now I can’t find my way back.”

“You’re lost?”

“Of course not! Superheroes don’t get lost.” The girl crossed her arms, irritated.

Spider-Man nodded hurriedly. “Right, sorry.”

She eyed him.

He laughed. “So you’re not lost, but you can’t find your way back to your parents?”

“No.”

“Well, helping superheros find their moms and dads is one of my superpowers. Can I help you and…” he racked his brain, “Eliza out?”

The girl beamed. “Yes yes yes! You have many superpowers?”

He nodded.

“How many?”

“Uh…” How many did he have?

“A hundred?” the girl said, her eyes shining.
“Maybe not that many,” Spider-Man laughed, “but close.”

The girl stood up, dusting off her ratty jeans. “I have that many, too,” she said.

“Of course.”

“You can help me home?” she said.

“Yeah.”

The girl hesitated a moment, then poked him, hard, in the stomach. “And I’m a superhero, remember. So no funny business. Like being a stranger. I’m not supposed to talk to strangers, so make sure not to be one and break the rules, okay?”

Spider-Man couldn’t keep in his laugh. “Alright! I’m no match for you.”

The girl nodded firmly, curly hair bobbing behind her.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Sasha.”

“Do you have a last name, Sasha? So I can help you home.”

“Sasha Alexander.”

“That’s a pretty name, Sasha Alexander. A nice secret identity.” Spider-Man held out a hand, and the girl eyed it, then squeezed it with pudgy, five-year-old fingers.

Karen hummed in his helmet. “Searching the records for a Sasha Alexander now.”

The girl lead him from the alley, peeking out from the entrance as though checking for enemies that would see them emerging. Spider-Man crouched down before they left, however, pulling her back towards him. He wanted to explain Karen so she wouldn’t be confused later.

“I have a special friend,” he said. “She’s in my mask, and she helps me find things. That’s who I’m talking to, if you’re ever confused.”

Sasha nodded. “Cool.”

“Very.” Spider-Man smiled, and the two of them left the alley.

“I found three Sasha Alexanders in the Queens area of the age of our charge,” Karen said as the two of them trotted down the street, ignoring the strange looks for passersby.

“That’s two too many,” said Spider-Man. “What about with addresses in this area? She’s only five…”

“Five and three quarters!” objected Sasha.

“Sorry. Almost six. She can’t have gone super far.”

A silence stretched for a moment as Karen worked, Sasha examining Spider-Man with eyes that reminded him far too much of MJ.

“You remind me of a friend of mine,” Spider-Man found himself saying.
“Huh? Another superhero?”

Peter laughed. “Oh, definitely. Her name’s Michelle.”

“I have a friend named Michelle too!”

“Really? That’s awesome!” The girl sped up a bit, to Spider-Man’s relief, and they made quicker time down the street.

“I have narrowed locations down to a residential on 146th Street, in South Jamaica. Charting the optimum ground course for you now.”

“Thanks, Karen, you’re the best!”

Sasha looked up at him, her large brown eyes studying the mask. “Your special friend’s name is Karen?”

“Yeah.”

“Hello, Sasha,” said Karen, though the girl couldn’t hear her.

“She says hi,” Spider-Man relayed.

“She can hear me?” the girl squeaked.

“Yeah! But she’s not a stranger either; no reason to be worried.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Sasha huffed, crossing her arms.

Spider-Man laughed. “Obviously!” He took her hand again, waiting until Karen’s map flashed in his vision, then lead her to the right and moved along the beige street. They walked for a while (Spider-Man hadn’t realized how long it took to get places on foot; the suit was spoiling him), and eventually Sasha warmed up to him more. Soon, she was babbling about all sorts of things, asking so many questions he could hardly keep them straight, let alone answer them, and nearly sprinting along the street.

He laughed, yelling, “wait up!”

“Race you!”

“It’s on!”

Then his feet were pounding on the pavement after the laughing girl, feeling every lump and pebble they folded over through the soft, strong soles of the suit. Running was nowhere near as exhilarating as freefall along the Queen’s skyline, but he’d take it. Sasha slowed quickly, though, her short, young legs not covering as much ground.

Spider-Man slowed his strides to exaggerated bounds, and the girl squealed a laugh and slammed into him, sending him toppling. On instinct, he shot out a rope of webbing and pulled himself back upright to find Sasha staring at him.

“One of my superpowers,” he said. She nodded, and continued walking like it was the most ordinary occurrence in the world.

Definitely reminded him of MJ.

Karen’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Incoming call from FRIDAY.”
“Answer.”

“Hello, Mr. Parker.”

“Hello.” Not wanting to explain the second voice to Sasha, he left off the ‘FRIDAY’ at the end.

“Would it be alright,” the other AI asked somewhat hesitant, to Spider-Man’s surprise, “if I spoke to Karen?”

“Um…”

“Spider-Man is in the middle of his patrol,” Karen said. A hum from the other end, which Spider-Man thought sounded disappointed.

“It’s okay. Karen already did all she could do for my current mission… can you speak to FRIDAY without me?”

“I… can. I can mute my audio in the mask, so you don’t have to hear our conversation.”

“Do that, then. FRIDAY probably has something important to say.” Spider-Man took off after Sasha, who’d drawn ahead. “You deserve it.”

“Thanks,” FRIDAY and Karen said simultaneously, and Spider-Man grinned. He was glad the two more-human-than-not AI’s were getting along, and he wasn’t about to discourage their conversing. Or, maybe Tony had ordered this contact…

Karen’s voice went silent, reminding Spider-Man of the suit before he’d gotten the Training Wheels Protocol removed.

“You coming?” asked Sasha, as though she was the one finding their way through the city.

“Yeah, sorry.”

They didn’t have to reach the address Karen had given him before finding Sasha’s home. Two very agitated parents were calling her name on 120th, and Sasha let out a happy squeal.

“Mom! Dadda!”

Spider-Man released her hand, stepping back and letting her run to her waiting parents. She fastened her arms and legs around the man’s knee with a laugh, and the smile on both adults’ faces made Spider-Man grin proudly.

“Sasha!” the mother said, prying her away from the man’s leg. “Where did you go? How did you get back?”

“I went to find a sword,” the girl explained. “But I got too far away. I met a superhero, though. He helped.” She pointed to Spider-Man, and the parents’ gazes found him for the first time.

Their eyes became guarded, flickering with mistrust, and Spider-Man winced. These people definitely didn’t approve of enhanced individuals. But then the mother turned her gaze to the girl at her feet, happily attaching the nail to the hand of her plastic figure, and a smile ghosted her lips.

“Thank you,” she said.

Spider-Man raised a hand in acknowledgement.
Sasha turned a suddenly stalwart face to him, and waved. “Goodbye, hero-boy,” she said. He smiled and waved back, then sent a web at a roof and swung back the way he had come, not looking back.

Three hours later, Karen hummed back into his hemet. “Hello, Spider-Man,” she said.

“Hi! How was your little chat?” he winked.

Karen flashed the mask’s lights. “It was… enlightening. But FRIDAY was called upon by Mr. Stark, said it was urgent, so now I am back to help you once again.”

“Do you know what was wrong?”

“No. I’m sure we will be notified if necessary, though.”

Peter nodded. “I hope so.” He wanted to talk to the man again, talk with him about anything, not necessarily what had happened the night before.

They lapsed into silence, the overcast sky tinged orange in the setting sun. Spider-Man took a deep breath, enjoying the slightly thinner air atop the multi-story building he had claimed as he roost for the moment. Peter let his mind wander, thinking of nanotech and hidden documents and broken looks. He shivered, and Karen seemed to understand.

“Are we waiting for something?” she asked. “Because I’ve picked something up on the scanner.”

Spider-Man grinned slowly, and launched himself from the edge of the building.

Three hours after that, he was backflipping through the window to his room at exactly 10:00. May waited for him in the doorway, nodding when he pulled off the mask and waved to her.

“Good day?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yup. Gonna make my report, and then I’ll be right there.”

She disappeared, and Peter flopped onto his bed. He pulled his phone out of his small backpack, finger hovering over the call button. He should give his report to Happy, technically. But Tony heard them anyway; why not just leave a message, or talk to the man outright?

So he called Tony’s number, and waited as it rang twice.

“Pete?” the man said, sounding decidedly exhausted.

“Hi, Mr. Stark,” Peter answered, failing to keep the joy out of his voice.

To his confusion, however, Tony replied with a quick breath and a quiet, “You’re okay.”

“Uh, yeah?” Peter sat up, pressing the phone to his ear a bit harder. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to text you something, kid—” ticking noises of fingers on a keyboard-- “and I want you to hang up and look at it. Look at the numbers and talk to you soon.”

Confused, Peter cocked his head. “I was just gonna give my—”

“Now, kid.” Tony’s cut him off with a sharp, urgent bark, and Peter jerked back, instinctively hanging up before he could think.
Peter stared at the phone, hearing the man’s urgent order still ringing in his head. He hadn’t answered Peter’s question. Something was definitely wrong.

A few seconds later, he got a text from the man. His first reaction was *what the hell*?

It was a string of random, nonsensical pictures.

Chapter End Notes

...  
Tony what.

Anyway! Thanks for reading, and I'll see y'all soon! Send some kudos or comments my way, you know the drill.
Alright, so maybe, after a bit of examination, the pictures weren’t very random at all. Despite their relation to Star Wars, however, they still made no sense.

There were eight, segmented into three texts: two in the first, three in the second, three in the third. Each was a frozen frame from one of the movies or an image of the actors or sets. And Peter had no idea what he was supposed to make of them.

Tony’d snapped at him for this? It was just stock photos of scenes from the franchise. How did Star Wars have anything to do with whatever was bothering the man? Peter thumbed back through the images on his cracked screen, his mouth twisting into a frown of confusion.

“Peter?” May called. “You coming?”

“Uh…” Peter looked between the door and the phone again. He didn’t know what this meant, but he couldn’t dismiss the urgency he’d heard in Tony’s voice. “I might need a bit. I have to deal with something…”

May poked her face through the door. “What? What’s wrong?”

Thinking back, Peter said, “not much. Something about looking at the numbers and talking to me soon.” Peter looked back at the pictures. There weren’t any numbers he could see…

May took the phone, holding it up and scrolling through the images. “And he cut you off before you could say anything?”

“Yeah. I was just gonna give my report, but he almost yelled to keep me from doing so.”

May tossed the phone back to him. “That man… I wonder what’s made him so paranoid. I think, Peter, that this is a code.”

Peter looked between her and the images, his mouth dropping open. “May, you’re a genius! Wait, Star Wars? Why would he do Star Wars, he doesn’t even know Star Wars…”

“How do you know?” May laughed. “I imagine that man could quote the whole franchise. Ask him, sometime.”
Peter grinned. “As soon as I crack his code, I’ll do so.”

May made her way back towards the door. “Unfortunately, I can’t quote the whole franchise, and probably won’t be much use to you, junior codebreaker.”

Peter huffed a laugh. “You just don’t wanna get down and dirty on Wookieepedia.”

May stopped, turned, and raised an eyebrow. “Did you seriously just say that out loud to me?”

Peter flushed. “Good point.”

Shaking her head, May left the room, calling a “I’ll send Grease in to help you out” as she went.

Peter grinned and flopped back onto his mattress, examining the pictures. His mind pricked with the excitement of challenge, already beginning to flit through possibilities as he reached over the side of the bed to grab his notebook, his pencil, and his laptop.

The first thing he did was facetime Ned. Then, on second thought, he added MJ to the picture as well. She might not know Star Wars, but she would probably crack the code in half the time.

“Hey, dude!” Ned answered right away, looking tired and ready for a break from the homework Peter should probably be doing as well. “What’s up?”

“I need you guys’ help,” Peter said as MJ answered as well.

“What is it?” his friends answered simultaneously, setting down their pencils and scooting closer to their phone screens.

Peter grinned and held up his phone. “We have a code to crack.”

“Are those Star Wars pictures?” MJ asked, leaning in.

“Yeah. I think Mr. Stark’s trying to tell me something with them. Something’s wrong, he’s worried.”

“More than he usually is?” MJ said. “That’s saying something.”


“He told me to ‘look at the numbers’ and that he’d talk to me soon.” Peter shrugged, quickly texting the pictures he’d been given to his friends, making sure to keep them in the same organization.

“I don’t see any numbers…” Ned muttered, holding his phone screen up close to his face. Unfortunately, it was the same phone screen recording him, which provided Peter and MJ a fantastic view up his nose. They shared a look, holding in laughter.

“Of course not. Then it wouldn’t be a code,” MJ said. “I think we should group them in the way they were sent. So these first two I’d assume go together. The numbers we find in them with be sequential.”

“Hm…” Peter said. “I don’t think that’s right. Because these are both of the same scene, I think they might be confirming the same number.”

“Yeah, it’s the bit from A New Hope where the Millennium Falcon is being held in the Death Star.” Ned thankfully backed away from his phone camera to retrieve his laptop. “I think that’s where Vader does the ‘I want every part of this ship checked.’ And that’s where the dude is yelling at that one Trooper about being at his post.”
Peter peered at the pictures, and nodded. “Definitely from *A New Hope.*”

MJ hummed. “From the same sequence? Let’s watch it.”

“That’s weird,” Ned muttered. “The clip I found stretches exactly between those two points.”

“That can’t be a coincidence,” MJ said. “Watch.”

Ned pointed his phone camera at his computer screen, and the three of them watched the grainy scene play out, hanging on to any number mentioned.

Then, just as the scene ended, the imperial officer spoke into the comms about a TK-421.

“There!” Peter said. “That’s the Troopers title!”

“Look for the numbers…” MJ said. “421 sounds like a number to me.”

Peter grinned and scribbled it down. His smile faded after a moment, however, and he said, “I sure hope this starts to make sense when we find the rest of the numbers.”

“Let’s wait and see,” MJ said. “What are the next ones from?”

Peter scrolled down to the next text message. “Okay, that one’s of George Lucas.”

“It’s the same in the third set,” Ned said. “Same picture of George Lucas, I mean—” He cut off when Peter ducked out of the frame.

“Sorry go on!” Peter yelled. “Just need to grab the cat.”

MJ laughed, and Ned let out a grunt of agreement. “So these have something to do with the prequels,” Ned finished.

“Or George himself,” MJ said, and Peter slid back into his seat, setting Grease on the desk. She sniffed at the camera, and Peter laughed as he watched MJ try and fail to hold in a wide grin.

“Kitten distraction,” Ned said, twisting his voice to sound robotic. Peter laughed harder.

“Anyway, *Star Wars,*” he said, snatching Grease away from the camera and holding her in his lap. “The second one is Lucas, the Millennium Falcon again, and… that looks like Clone Troopers.”

“We aren’t gonna find a clip for those,” MJ said. “Even I know they aren’t from the same movie.”

Peter hummed. “George Lucas…”

Ned said, “The second one is the Falcon landing in Cloud City. Mr. Stark pulled it from the Wookieepedia.”

Both Peter and MJ immediately pulled up the site, skimming through the page about Cloud City. Peter shook his head. “There’s a lot of numbers, here…”

“Some of them have links,” MJ said. “Let’s work through them.”

*Good a plan as any.* Peter clicked on the link about the city’s repulsorlift engines, and began to read.

The three of them grew quiet, skimming through the site bit by bit, the silence only broken by an occasional click of a mouse or tap of a phone screen. Grease padded across the camera’s view now and then, eliciting an ‘*aww…*’ from one of the other teenagers. Eventually, Peter ended up back at
the image again, thinking closer into the frame. There had to be a number in the explicit picture, somewhere, right?

But nothing jumped out, so he went back to clicking links on the Cloud City page.

It was when he made it to the landing platforms that he found mention of a Platform 327, which sounded familiar. Peter frowned and typed it into the search-bar of the Wookieepedia, coming up with a page on--

“Got it!” he cried, jumping up.


“327 is a recurring number in the *Star Wars* films, often relating to flying crafts and *landing zones.*” He grinned. “It also appears in other films by George Lucas.”

“That’s brilliant!” Ned laughed. “Here, look, there’s a list of the uses.”

“There it is,” MJ said. “327th Star Corps, a legion of Clone Troopers.”

“That’s gotta be it!” Peter pumped the air with his fists. “He was talking about Lucas’s Easter egg!”

“Maybe the next set’s an Easter egg too,” Ned said. “We got the same picture of George, after all.”

Peter did a quick search, and found the boy was right. George Lucas worked another egg into his films, a four digit number. To double check, Peter compared the images Tony’d sent with the appearances of the number, and found matches to the cell-block Han and Luke had been pretending to transfer Chewey to (they had an image of the manacles fastened around the wookiee’s wrists) and an imperial troop of five soldiers.

And when he jotted down the final number…

“Bingo,” Peter smirked. “He sent me a phone number.”

Ned and MJ whooped, high-fiving the camera. “We did it!”

“Thank you guys,” Peter said. “That was fun!”

His friends grinned. “Of course.”

“Now call him up!” MJ said. “I wanna know what’s going on.”

Peter nodded, punching the new number into his cracked phone screen. “Alright…”

“We should get back to homework,” Ned said, and Peter sent him a grateful look. “Tell us why he needed all the secrecy tomorrow!”

MJ nodded. “And don’t bring lunch.”

“Huh?” The two boys asked simultaneously, sharing a confused look.

“I’m trying out a new recipe. Just trust me.”

Peter laughed, letting Grease down from the table, and said, “of course! I’m excited; don’t let me down.”
MJ just looked at him, one eyebrow slightly raised. Peter raised his hands in defeat. “Alright alright, sorry!”

She kept the hard look for a moment, then cracked a smile and hung up. Ned did the same, with one last, “bye dude!” and then Peter was alone in his room.

He pressed dial.

His phone didn’t even finish its first ring before Tony’s voice was saying, “well that was quick.”

“Mr. Stark,” Peter greeted, closing his laptop and scoothing back to sit against his headrest. “What was that all about?”

“Sorry for the code,” Tony said with a huff of laughter, “I just needed to be sure.”

Peter cocked his head. “Be sure of what? That I could solve a *Star Wars* puzzle?”

Tony chuckled. “Oh, I had no doubt of that. But a certain US secretary cannot, so I figure we’re safe.”


“Calm down!” Tony said, and Peter could hear the groan as he rubbed his face with his hands. “I’ve been working with him on the Accords all day.”

“Why does that warrant a message in code?”

A pause, and Tony taking a deep breath. “Because I think he might know about you, Pete.”

“Oh…” Peter wasn’t sure how to react; from Tony’s tone, and the lengths he’d went to, he could tell it wasn’t good.

“Or he’s at least starting to put the pieces together,” Tony continued. “He said something about FRIDAY, who’s the one that keeps you from being public knowledge. And after he hung up, I worked with the code and found his papertrail. He’s monitoring my communications pretty closely.”

Peter nodded, understanding. “And this number’s encrypted. He can’t get into it, so we can talk freely. And he can’t crack a *Star Wars* code, so you could send it to me on your normal number so I’d be able to contact you.”

“Bingo.” Tony snapped his fingers.

“That seems a bit paranoid.” Peter grinned.

Tony’s voice grew serious. “Better safe than sorry.”

Finding himself shivering, Peter nodded. “Alright.”

“Don’t worry, though, kid,” Tony said. “You aren’t in any danger; I’m making sure of it.”

Something in his tone made Peter suspicious. “And that also means you aren’t in any danger, right?”

A pause.

“Being aware that lying to you is impossible, as of last night,” Tony said, his voice a little too light,
“I’m not sure.”

“Mr. Stark…”

“Ross is going on about ‘leverage,’ Pete. Leverage to get me to sign his supposed ‘revised’ version of the Accords.” Tony snorted. “Revised, my ass; they’re terrifying. But if I sign them, it starts a chain reaction and Ross can get them into officiality.”

“Shit.”

“Shit is right. So he’s snooping. At the beginning of all this I thought there’d be nothing he could do to blackmail me into signing the damn things, but now…” Tony trailed off.

Peter found himself pulling his knees up to his chest. “Now?”

“Now there’s you. And if he knows about Spider-Man, things get more complicated.” Peter nodded, though the man couldn’t see. “There’s a lot of things up in the air right now; the only thing that stays constant is that I can’t sign these documents. Whether he knows about you or not. Especially if he knows about you.”

“Are you… are you sure that’s what he’s talking about?” Peter asked somewhat hesitantly.

A sigh. “No, I’m not. I’m jumping to the worst-case scenario. I promise though, I’m taking all the precautions. If I’m wrong, I’ll stay wrong; he’ll never know about you after the things I implemented today.”

Peter smiled. “I assume that means I have to call you on the special Star Wars phone number.”

“Please do. Always.”

He laughed. “Alright. How did you even get a perfect Star Wars phone number anyway? Actually nevermind, don’t answer that.”

Tony chuckled. “He’s catching on.”

“Tell me I don’t need to worry again,” Peter demanded.

“You don’t need to worry. I’m going to figure things out,” Tony said.

Peter let out a long breath. “If you need me to help--”

“I know, kid. I’d be lost without you.” Peter could hear Tony’s smirk.

He grinned and mimed punching the man. “You would.”

“It’s true.”

They lapsed into silence, both thinking about what Peter had said the night before. The boy felt conflicted; was he supposed to talk about it? How did he even breach the subject? How was he supposed to react to what had happened at all, react to what had changed?

And then he remembered how Tony had responded, and burst out laughing.

“Twenty thousand dollars, huh?”

A strangled snort, as though Tony was keeping in a laugh. “I don’t know what you’re talking
about.”

“Such a generous donation to our chemistry and engineering programs,” Peter said in a terrible imitation of his professor’s voice. “Midtown Science and Tech is very grateful to the organization that provided this money. How does it feel to be an organization?”

“Your school got a donation?”

“Remember when I said you were terrible at lying to me? Well, you’re terrible at bluffing too,” Peter said, reaching out to pet Grease as she leapt up onto his bed.

“Damn…” Tony growled, then laughed. “Don’t tell anyone. I had to wipe the paper trail from THAT out of existence too.”

Peter chuckled. “Don’t worry, no one would believe me anyway.”

“Not sure whether to be grateful or offended by that.”

“Ha! Well, Ned knows, but that’s only cuz I couldn’t keep it together when they told us.”

“You knew that quick? I really am predictable.”

Peter doubled over laughing, and Tony huffed from the other end. He sobered, though, after a moment. “Mr. Stark… twenty thousand to my school? I… I don’t know how to thank you—”

Tony cut him off. “No need. There are thousands of kids at that school that would benefit. And I’m aloud to dote on my interns. So shut up.”

*Intern. “Right.”*

“Is that what you called to ask me about?” Tony said.

“No, I was gonna give my report. I just sorta wanted to talk to you…” He flushed, a bit embarrassed as he admitted the sentiment.

“The feeling’s mutual, kid. What did you get up to today?”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, just getting this out there now; PLEASE DO NOT BE AN IDIOT AND CALL THE NUMBER HERE. The random person in Pittsburgh or Slovakia that happens to be Star Wars-y doesn’t need to be harassed. Please. I left out the last part of the number for a reason.

But besides that, hope you enjoyed! Yes, I did read and watch Ready Player One. Anyway, chow chow all, leave a kudos or comment, and thanks!
In Which the "Hamilton" Soundtrack makes Everyone Feel Better

Chapter Summary

Including the author.

AH! LOOK OUT! ANOTHER FANDOM LEAKING THROUGH! If I was Lin, I'd be awesome. I am only semi-awesome, therefore, I don't own the musical. You know the drill.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s my last week.”

“No.”

“I should spend all the time I can on the streets! Queens needs me!”

“You know the rules. No.”

“I won’t be able to web-sling at all next week!”

“For good reason. Still no.”

“Please, May!”

“No.”

“Oh come on!” Peter dropped his backpack to the floor, still holding his suit in one hand as he gestured pleadingly to his aunt. “One Wednesday. One! As a treat, the week before finals…” Spider-Man was almost buzzing with desperation. Let me out, please, just for a few hours?

“No web-slinging on Wednesdays, no exceptions.” May put her hands on her hips, her face yielding nothing. “And no whining.”

Peter opened his mouth to do just that, but she cut him off with a raised hand.

“You have plenty to do. Don’t pretend you haven’t blown off your homework the last few days to be out on the streets; you aren’t going to be bored. Call MJ, or Ned. Play a game. Be a normal teenager, for once.” May laughed.

But I’m not a normal teenager. No matter how much we pretend, I’ll never be.

She understood that, he knew. But… she wasn’t living it. The heightened senses, the hero persona, the need to help people. His aunt was wonderful, but there were some things she just… couldn’t get. No matter how much they both tried.

May turned away, then whirled back to him and narrowed her eyes. “And don’t bother Mr. Stark unless he’s available. Really. Don’t.”
“But--”

“He’s a busy man, and we all know he can’t resist it when you want to see him.” May broke a soft smile. “Pepper’ll kill me if you distract him from something important.”

Peter pouted. “Fine… But if he’s available…?”

May burst out laughing. “Just go finish your homework, Peter!”

Peter grinned and scurried into his room, snatching his backpack as he went. Then he stopped, turned, and asked hesitantly, “and if he is, can I web-sling to get there?”

May threw her bag at him, and Peter ducked away, laughing.

Grease had spread his dirty laundry all across the floor while he’d been gone, and it took him a while to fish all the socks out from the crannies where she’d deposited them. But the time he spent on his stomach with his butt in the air reaching for discarded garments underneath his bed was time enough to think, so he didn’t mind terribly.

Part of him thought maybe he should spend his evening in the apartment like May had suggested. A quiet day could be nice; Ned and MJ had things to do, so it’d just be him and his plans.

And then he remembered that he could be putting those plans into action in a nanotech workshop, tinkering and playing, instead.

*Quiet day, yeah right.*

He grinned, fingers brushing the sock and sticking to it. He pulled it out and chucked it onto the growing pile, then sat back on his knees and blew a breath out through his nose. Regarding the stack of clothes with apathy, Peter decided he was done looking for errant socks, stood up, and dumped the pile with the rest of his dirty clothes. He really did still have to finish his homework, anyway.

Three hours later, Peter was stepping off the last stop the train route allowed, as close to the compound as he could get. A fifteen-minute walk would get him to the bus station, and, if he’d timed his arrival properly, he could catch one as soon as he arrived to make it upstate.

Because there was no web-slinging on Wednesdays.

He was stewing over this to no end, of course, but despite the logic of his arguments, his aunt had used her ‘arbitrary parental licence’ to deny his requests. Even his, *‘but I have no way to get there without the suit; Happy’d have to come and get me,’* was met with an even, *‘not my problem. Find a bus route, if you’re so worried. I’m not changing the rules.’*

So here Spider-Man was, trekking through the outskirts of town on his way to a bus stop.

It sucked.

He scrolled disinterestedly through the downloaded music on his cracked phone as he walked, still brooding. Nothing looked good. He eventually chose the first act of the Hamilton musical and stuck his phone into his pocket, trying to focus on the fast-paced rhymes of the raps.

Four songs in, he was running alongside the bus, feet drumming on the sidewalk to the beat of “The Schuyler Sisters” as he tried desperately to reach the stop before the vehicle. The driver took mercy on him, waiting to leave until he’d arrived and fished his student ID out of his pocket.
He slipped in next to an older couple, a young woman with her face buried behind her sketchbook, and an astonishingly obese guy taking up about three seats. Peter found a row of three empty seats and pulled his knees up to his chest as he thought.

Pulling out his phone, Peter watched the locator on his transport app inch along the road as the bus began to move. His music fuzzed out for a moment, the *pling* of a text replacing it.

**Tony Stark:** Are you coming?

Peter hurriedly responded, ‘**yeah sry I had to take the bus cuz May won’t let me in the suit on Wednesdays.**’

It took through “Right Hand Man” for the man to reply.

**Tony Stark:** Happy.

Peter grinned. ‘**I know. But May.**’

**Tony Stark:** Ah. Of course. I’ll send a few remote repulsors to maybe speed up the trip.

Peter burst out laughing, attracting annoyed and amused looks from the rest of the bus. He just waved to them, mouthing ‘sorry,’ and went back to his phone.

**You:** That would be amazing, but please don’t. There are other people.

**Tony Stark:** Oh.

**You:** Excited, much?

The man sent him a middle finger emoji, and Peter put a hand over his mouth to keep in his laughter.

After slipping his phone back into his pocket, he sat back and rested his head against the window.

He felt far more content with the journey, now.

Three-quarters of the way through the first half of the musical, Peter bounded off the bus. “Thanks!”

The bus driver gave him a curt nod, and the vehicle continued on its way, is last remaining passengers looking all the more dreary.

And then Aaron Burr sung the words ‘**everybody give it up for America’s favorite fighting frenchman**’ at the top of his lungs, and all sense of gloomy atmosphere disappeared instantaneously.

Peter ran the last quarter of a mile to the compound rapping as fast as he could, snagging leaves from the low-hanging branches as he went. He was breathing hard and grinning when the looming, white-washed, sci-fi walls of the compound peeked above the trees.

He kept his headphones in until the last minute, and continued humming the musical even after he’d slipped them into his pocket and took the steps three at a time. The dreary Wednesday afternoon was looking considerably less dreary. Glass doors opened onto the long, stretching hallway, and Peter clicked off towards the workshop. He waved to the security camera as he went, knowing FRIDAY would alert Tony of his arrival.

He pressed his hand to the workshop door, and was immediately serenaded by Tony’s voice doing a poor imitation of his own. His handprint glowed a deep navy instead of its usual red, to the accompanying comment of “the royal’d clash too much with the metallic ruby.”
Peter’s smile nearly leapt off his face.

The door slid open, and Peter slid through it. It never got the chance to close, as Tony swooped in and stuck his hand in the gap as it was about to click shut. It opened again, and Peter started to turn, but only got half way around before Tony had wrapped his arms around him in greeting.

“Hey, kid! You finally made it!”

Peter looked up at him, maneuvering his face out of the bear-hug with a grin. “I did. Were you just waiting outside?”

“Of course not. I’m an astonishingly busy man, Pete, I can’t afford to wait up for you.” He raised his nose and sniffed in mock nobility.

“Uh-huh.”

Tony released him, much to Peter’s disappointment, and took a step back. “It feels like so long since I saw you last.”

Peter ran a hand through his now-tousled hair and grinned. “It’s only been like three days, Mr. Stark.”

“Ah yes, but I have accomplished so much in those three days.”

Peter found himself hugging the man again. “I missed you for three days, too.”

“Aw.”

“Thanks for letting me come!” He danced back and surveyed the workshop. “Despite my best arguments, May still wouldn’t let me out on a Wednesday.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“It is.” Peter grinned. “You’re an astonishingly busy man. So thanks.”

“Astonishingly busy in the workshop with my kid. Now c’mon. What brings you to heaven on this fine morning?”

“It’s evening, Mr. Stark.”

The man looked honestly shocked. “Really?”

“I have school in the mornings.”

“Well right, that’s why I was asking what brought you--nevermind. It’s Thursday, though?”

Peter’s amusement soured slightly to concern. “No… It’s Wednesday… Are you okay?”

Tony rubbed his face, saying, “yeah… suppose I lost a few hours in there somewhere. I’ve been busy.”

“When did you last sleep?” Peter demanded, taking the man’s hand and dragging him away from the door.

“Monday night! It’s fine!”

“How long Monday night?”
Tony fidgeted.

Putting his hands on his hips, Peter said, “that’s what I thought.”

“You look like Pepper. Honestly, it was important. I had to get a head start.”

“On the sun? You had to get a head start on the sun?”

“Exactly!” Tony grinned at him, but now that he was looking, Peter could see the exhaustion etching every line of his face.

“Do you need to sleep now?”

“Yeah, cuz that worked out so well last time. Honestly, I’m fine, Pete. And you’re here! I can’t nap now.” He reached for his thermos, and Peter swiped it before he could reach. Peter popped the top and smelled the contents.

“Coffee?”

“Of course.” There was a dangerous glint in Tony’s eyes. “Don’t pull a Pepper and try to get me not to drink it. A, it won’t work, and B, I kill people for taking my coffee, Spider-Man or no.”

Peter chuckled and flipped the drink back to Tony. “Well then, for the sake of your pride, let’s avoid getting into a battle to the death.”

Tony put his hand over his chest in mock offense. “My pride?”

“I’d kick your ass, old man, and you know it!” Peter danced away from Tony’s swipe, sticking his tongue out.

“Old? Old?”

“Yeah, how old even are you?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “A hundred and six, give or take a few decades.”

“With heart problems! You’re a walking health hazard!” Peter joked.

“Well, we knew that.” Tony groaned.

“You should listen to Pepper.” Peter poked at some of the nanotech, still watching Tony out of the corner of his eye.

“Don’t you start.” Tony pulled him towards the back of the workshop, the cluttered walls seeming even more precariously piled now. “I was busy saving your life.”

Peter swallowed his next smart-aleck remark. “Is the stuff with Ross that worrisome?”

“Yes.”

Peter took a breath. “What can I do.”

“You,” Tony said, “can ace your finals, help me out in the workshop, and not worry about it. Or me.”

“Alright…” He immediately began worrying.
“Did you have a plan for what you wanted to do here today?” Tony asked after a moment. “On this fine Wednesday. And did you bring the cat?”

Peter laughed. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to bring animals into the lab.”

“You aren’t supposed to let them loose where they can do damage,” Tony clarified with a raise of his eyebrow. “To my lab. Which I still don’t know why you’re in.”

“What, wanting to see you’re old, grumpy face isn’t reason enough?” Peter poked him.

“I’m flattered, but you can do that from outside.”

Peter glanced towards the door, remembering what had happened when he’d come in. “Yeah, are you gonna change my handprint back, or…”

“You liked it?”

“Not really.”

“I saw you laugh, you little liar.”

Peter whipped his gaze back to the man. “You were just waiting outside.”

Tony shook his head, rolling his eyes. “C’mon, what do you want to make with me today?”

“Something for May,” Peter finally admitted. He reached out and fiddled with one of the nanotech arms, which flicked it’s needle at him irritatedly. Stepping back, he held his hands up in surrender, and the arm went back to its diligent work. “Mother’s Day is coming up. When did these guys get so irritable?”

“I made them work overtime, along with me,” Tony said through another mouthful of coffee.

“Ah. Anyway, do you think we could come up with something small, but still… y’know, helpful? Meaningful?”

“Meaningful enough for your aunt? But small? That’s like saying we make Pepper something to communicate our gratitude, but only giving me a bolt and half a nail!” Tony scoffed. “You’re asking me to do the impossible.”

Peter grinned, the line jumping to his lips. “You’re Tony Stark. You commercialize the impossible.”

Tony glanced at him, his mouth twitching into a smile, the gleam of challenge in his eye. “And you’re Spider-Man; Queens’ Colorful Crimestopper long before I came along.”

A flash of offense tingled Peter’s stomach. He was the one who worked in a lab, who crafted impossible objects out of metal and wire, not Spider-Man. “I’m Peter Parker.”

Tony turned fully. “Peter Parker, Tony Stark, and a workshop full of nanotech? The impossible doesn’t stand a chance.”

Satisfied, Peter grinned. “No, sir!”

Tony waved him over. When Peter bounded to his side, he found himself with a pen and a roll of blueish paper.

“Start sketching. What did you have in mind?” Tony was already scribbling, his other hand tapping
out a rhythm on the desk. “A robot to help around the house? Apartment, whatever.”

Peter tacked the edges of his paper down and began sketching long strokes across it. “I was thinking something less AI and more nanotech.”

“Gadget?”

“Yes!” Peter grinned, his tongue poking out between his teeth.

Tony turned his paper over for the blank canvas. “A versatile cleaning gadget?”

“I was thinking cooking.”

Tony paused, raising an eyebrow and staring at him. “For May?”

With a laugh, Peter chucked the cap for his pen at the man. “She sucks at it, but she likes it. So does it really matter?”

“I suppose not. So, cooking. Your call kid; I dunno what needs improved. I don’t spend much time in the kitchen.”

Peter laughed, then let his mind drift, tapping his pen against his nose in thought. What did May always complain about…

“Oh!” he said after a moment, maybe a bit to loud, for Tony jumped violently.

“Jesus, kid!” The man took a deep breath, then glared at him.

Peter shrugged an apology and continued. “What about a measuring cup, but one that expands or shrinks to be any size you want? May’s always complaining about not knowing where the quarter-cup is, or not having a half-tablespoon.”

Tony frowned.

“What, does that not work?” He couldn’t see why it wouldn’t.

“No, it’s fine. It’s just… simple.”

Peter laughed. “Not nearly impossible enough for the great Tony Stark?”

Tony threw his pen cap right back. “Shut up and get sketching. I’ll start with the nanotech, you do the designing. Mother's Day, remember? Do something sappy. Sentimental. We’ll all appreciate it.”

“Oh it!” Peter saluted. “Thanks for the help.”

“No problem. This way I can say it’s from me, too.” With a wink, Tony pushed off from the desk, his wheely chair spinning along the workshop floor towards the holoscreens in the corner.

Peter smiled and went back to sketching.

After a few minutes of silence and his wandering mind, he spoke again. “Hey, do you mind if I put on some music?”

Tony’s face popped up from beneath the table (lord knew what he was doing down there), saying, “I thought you’d never ask. Have FRIDAY do it.”
With a grin, Peter cast his eyes to the ceiling. “FRIDAY, play *Hamilton*.”

A groan emanated from Tony’s general direction. “The rap-musical, really? In my lab?”

But as the first few songs filled the room, blanketing the sounds of the whirring nanotech, Tony Stark was singing along to every word, as well.

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhh, the banter....

Thanks for reading! We're passing into the climax for this part, so be excited, hopefully, for what's coming next.

*YouTube outro* - Don't forget to subscribe! Er, comment. And kudos. Yes that.
Alternative Title: In Which I use Hamilton to Advance the Plot. What? Oh yeah, that's what happens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jefferson is my favorite,” came Tony’s voice from the row of holoscreens at the beginning of the second act. Peter had refined his design and was jotting down calculations for the needed density and thickness of the nanotech sheets, his phone lying beside him open to its calculator app.

It took him a moment to pull himself from the math and process the man’s words. “Really? He’s a little bastard, though!”

“So is everyone else. Besides Laurens. I just find Jef funny. Especially in the first Cabinet Battle,” Tony explained.

“I still can’t quite believe you’re a fanboy over this,” Peter said. “You know all the words.”

“I have a good memory. And I know good research and well-written rhymes as much as the next dude; just because I’m a high class billionaire doesn’t mean I can’t memorize a musical.” Tony raised an eyebrow at him, winked, and went back to his work. “There’s quite a few things you don’t know about me.”

Oh, like how you have PTSD over the stars and were left to die in the snow by your best friend?

“Like how you know enough Star Wars trivia to create a code around a random encrypted phone-number?”

Half of Tony’s mouth quirked up. “It was mostly Wookiepedia.”

“TK-421 wasn’t.”

“I’m an old man, remember? I grew up on those movies. They were a big inspiration for me,” Tony said, throwing a pencil at him.

Peter caught it. “Really?”

“Aren’t they for you?”

“Of course, but…” Peter couldn’t imagine Tony as a kid. He physically couldn’t picture it; Stark as young as him, sitting rapped before the screen as Luke flew an X-Wing to destroy the Death Star.

“I’m human, too, you know,” Tony joked, as though he had read Peter’s mind.

“I know!” Peter said defensively. All too well.

The man hummed, looking at him with an amused smile. Peter waved him away and turned back to
his calculations, re-opening his phone. “Shut up and listen to ‘What did I Miss?’.”

Tony snorted a laugh and went back to work as the lyrics continued flitting through the room. They lapsed into silence, enjoying the song.

“Hamilton’s new financial plan is nothing less than government control.”

Peter found his gaze drifting to the corner of the room, where, propped precariously atop scraps of metal and crates of tools that had been shoved to the side to make room for the nanotech, Captain America’s shield sat glinting in the workshop light.

“I’ve been fighting for the South alone. Where have you been?”

Shaking the threads of unformed thought from his mind, Peter turned his attention back to the scribbles on his paper. Density multiplied by volume... shit that’s gonna be heavy. Maybe if we lengthen the handle and widen the bowl for more surface area...

Tony let out a quiet whoop as the next song came on, doing a poor imitation of record-scratch, and Peter tapped his fingers to the beat. He clicked a few more numbers into his calculator.

“We fought for these ideals; we shouldn’t settle for this.”

The shield reflected light straight into his eyes, a nearly painful sight in his peripheral vision. Peter paused his calculations, glancing towards Tony, who was diligently coding in the programs to the nanotech, and turned towards the tool.

The weapon.

He saw it in his mind’s eye, that symbol of a shield, always shining on screen or in photos, such a proud reminder of freedom and justice. But that’s what it was: a weapon. The shape of a tool, of a defense, but a weapon all the same.

Tony was singing behind him, rapping under his breath as he focused every ounce of his concentration on the tiny particles before him. He always did, put every thought, every inch of his mind into his work, his words, anything.

Peter wondered why. What would happen if he didn’t.

It had taken two strikes from that shield to rip off the Iron Man mask. And a single one to crush the Arc Reactor.

But there it was, given a place in the workshop, lying atop everything, like an unfinished project. Like a symbol. Like a reminder.

“Stand with me in the land of the free, and pray to god we never see Hamilton’s candidacy.”

Peter found himself walking towards the shield, squinting against the reflected light. He peered curiously at the papers pinned beneath it; as he grew closer, he saw sketches and calculations upon them. More blueprints?

Having to stand on tiptoe to reach the top of the mound of paraphernalia against the wall, Peter reached up and took hold of one of them. He tugged it free from beneath the vibranium disk, which shifted, and examined it without a clue of what to expect.

Well, whatever he had expected, it wasn’t this. A prototype. A new design, with jottings in the
corner describing the energy-absorption properties of vibranium, and a precise calculation of a more aerodynamic curve. Tony was still working on the Captain’s tech.

Even after what had happened.

Even after everything he’d done.

Angered, awestruck, Peter reached up and pulled another paper from beneath the shield. This one looked newer, the paper the same color as the stuff Peter’d been using a moment ago. And the numbers and sketches described nanotech. Tony’s scrawling figures and jotted descriptions spiraled around the blueprint, meticulously describing how to defy the laws of physics. For the weapon of a man that had abandoned him, hurt him, betrayed him.

“What are you doing?” Tony’s voice said distractedly. He didn’t sound angry, or even suspicious; he trusted Peter.

“You… you’re still…” Peter looked between the two blueprints again, then back up at the shield.

“What was that?”

“Even after what happened, you’re still designing for him,” Peter said. And because he was distracted and conflicted, and Spider-Man was angry and offended, he wasn’t as careful when he reached up the third time.

“Well I--” Tony began, sounding slightly defensive.

Peter pulled another paper from beneath the shield, and the precariously stacked weapon shifted again, teetering on the edge of the collection of tools and scraps, before falling, reflecting a scatter of light across the workshop.

Directly towards Peter’s chest.

* * *

Tony was glad Peter wasn’t watching when he found himself absentmindedly using a wrench as a microphone as he rapped the lines of the soundtrack. He drifted back to being conscious of his body after who knew how long coding long lines of orders into the nanotech (even a simple shifting measuring cup took specific instructions) to find himself pouring the soul of the rap into a strip of metal.

Mortified, he dropped the wrench and waited for Peter’s teasing laughter. When it didn’t come, he looked up to check on the boy. Peter was standing off to the corner of the room, studying his work.

No, that wasn’t the kid’s blueprint; his was still over by his phone. The one he was holding now was different, older.

“What are you doing?” Tony inquired.

Peter murmured something, looking up at the shield above him. Tony’d forgotten he’d stuck it over there when he’d cleared off space for the nanotech.

“What was that?”

This time, he heard the kid; “even after what happened, you’re still designing for him…”
Tony, surprised, took a step forward.

Peter, distracted, pulled one of Tony’s plans from beneath the shield.

And the weapon fell.

It took less than a second.

There were none of the usual signs, no progression of anxiousness, no quickening of breath or warning. One moment, Tony was in the workshop, he could breathe and see and think as the shield tumbled from its perch. And the next, he was gone, he was freezing and suffocating and utterly blind.

The trigger snapped him to Siberia, watching a determined, almost desperate Steve Rogers plunge the shield into his chest. But it wasn’t his armored sternum this time, it was Peter’s, and the suit wasn’t enough the blow was going to kill him Steve was going to take him away too--

Tony screamed.

Somewhere, in the world outside of his head, outside the curtains that held him trapped, Peter caught the shield with enhanced agility and looked at him with concern. But Tony could see only snow and blood, hear only the pulse pounding in his ears. Anxiousness tightened its clawed hand around his throat and his breath stuck behind it.

“Mr. Stark--oh shit--”

Tony reacted instantly upon hearing Peter’s voice as the shield rose again. He felt the gauntlet assembling around his hand, felt the whirl of the repulsor powering up against the cold seeping down through his form and penetrating his bones. He’d never fire to kill his friend, his family, to protect himself, but he’d fire to save that family. And the weapon wasn’t plunging towards his heart this time.

Three quick bolts of energy had the shield spiraling away from Peter, who let out a surprised cry. Time stretched as Tony tried to take a breath, standing frozen in the chains of his mind, the gauntlet stretched before him.

He wasn’t sure when he ended up on the ground, his hand clutching his throat as he tried to breath through the panic slowly suffocating him.

“Mr. Stark, Tony, breathe!”

A shield and the snow and the stars--

“Steve isn’t here, it’s just me, you’re safe.”

Peter, here, never--

“I’m safe. I caught the shield--FRIDAY shut up-- You aren’t in Siberia, you aren’t--”

Safe--cold and blood and betrayal--

“You’re having a panic attack, Tony.”

I… am… He was in his workshop, making things for Peter. But it was cold, he was dying, Steve was going to kill him--
“Can you hear me? Tony?”

Tony somehow nodded, his eyes straining in their sockets as his breath came in quick, ragged bursts, screaming at him to run.

“You don’t have the armor on, Tony, you don’t need it; no one’s here. It’s in your head, Tony, you aren’t in danger! I’m not in danger. Look around. Can you do that? Please, for me, look around.”

Tony forced his gaze up, forced his eyes to focus on what was around them as Peter continued to speak. “Tell me what you see.”

“Cold--” he gasped out. The suit was dead and he was dying--

“No, no, Tony it’s not cold, there’s no snow, no blood. You’re safe. You’re safe.” The boy’s voice was calm, and Tony could hear his breathing. Even. Strong. Safe.

“Look around. Tell me what you see.”

Tony obeyed. “We’re still… in my lab. The robots are… judging me.”

“Good. Right. What else? What am I wearing?”

Tony focused on Peter’s voice, and began to hear the whirring of the metal arms again. “You’re in that stupid shirt. With the math joke.”

“You got me this stupid shirt, old man,” Peter said lightly, the tremor in his voice almost imperceptible. It was impressive, really.

Peter hesitated, his voice disappearing. Tony’s breathing sped up.

“Can I touch you? Is that alright?”

Tony focused on the boy’s face, nodding.

Slowly, like he was approaching a spooked animal, Peter gripped Tony’s shoulders, running his palms down Tony’s arms where they were braced against the floor. His hands were warm, untouched by the frigid air.

“I’m okay, you’re okay. We’re safe.”

Peter kept repeating the words, over and over as he hugged Tony tighter and sunk to the floor beside him, leaning into him and breathing as one. The strong, familiar words were something for Tony to reach for, a lifeline he clutched tight.

Slowly, the cold faded, the blood disappeared, and Tony grew conscious that the soundtrack was no longer playing. Peter must have shut it off, sometime when he was…

“Sorry,” Tony said. Or tried to say. He swallowed and tried again. “Sorry.”

Peter’s mantra stopped. “What?”

“I shouldn’t have--you shouldn’t have had to deal with that, it’s not your responsibility.” Tony stood, but Peter’s hands on his shoulders stopped him from moving away, inhumanly strong.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Peter snarled, a shocking amount of emotion behind his words. Tony was startled into meeting the boy’s eyes.
And saw fury there.

“Nothing, nothing, about this is your fault, Mr. Stark,” Peter said, holding his gaze. Tony could only stare, confused. The kid wasn’t angry at him, that much was clear, but who else was there to be angry at? “Nothing? Get it?”

“I--”

“Get it?”

Tony forced a grin. “You’re the boss. I understand.”

Peter’s face crumpled.

Baffled, but unconsciously seeking to comfort him, Tony took a step towards the kid.

“Don’t do that. Please,” Peter said, dropping his gaze.

“I--what--”

“You promised. You promised you’d trust me, that you wouldn’t lie.” Peter’s face was shaken, understandably. He’d just been thrust into a situation no fifteen-year-old should have to be in, had to witness every ounce of Tony’s usually impeccable control crumble.

I’m so sorry, Peter.

His walls were still down, still vulnerable, and he retreated away from the kid instinctively. Peter snapped his gaze up, reaching out, and Tony froze.

“I--I didn’t mean that, I--” Peter swallowed. “Just… you don’t have to be okay, Mr. Stark. You don’t have to pretend. I understand, too.” He looked at the floor again, desperate to keep Tony from seeing his expression.

Tony’s weakness disappeared beneath a haze of protectiveness, and he knelt, grabbing the kid’s hands and looking up into his face. “I am okay, Pete. You made sure of that.” He smiled again, honestly. He held Peter’s wet gaze until the kid stop shaking, and smiled too.

Tony stood, keeping a grip on one of the boy’s hands. “What happened?”

“You yelled and shot the shield out of my hands, then collapsed.”

“How long?”

“Um… about seven or eight minutes?”

“Damn.” Tony rubbed his face with his free hand. “You were amazing, kid. Really.” He couldn’t remember much of the boy’s speech, but he did remember the way it had calmed him. And because he was remembering, he realized something had been different this time (oh God, he’d lost it in front of kid multiple times). He’d talked like he’d been aware...

Curious, Tony asked, “how did you know?”
Chapter End Notes

Uh oh....

Yeah. Thanks for reading? See you soon? Cliffhangers sorry? Kudos and comments?
“How did you know?”

Peter opened his mouth.

Nothing came out. There was nothing for him to say, because-- shit-- how the hell was he supposed to answer that? With the truth?

*I was supposed to get longer. I was supposed to figure this part out, he was never supposed to find out--*

Tony still wasn’t suspicious, just inquisitive. He didn’t even think to suspect what Peter might have done, because he trusts me. I screwed up, I screwed this up--

“I--” He didn’t have any way to finish that sentence, and just ended up pulling his hand out of Tony’s and gesturing helplessly.

“It’s okay, I’m just wondering--”

And then Tony cut off, his brilliant mind already working, his eyes flicking rapidly around as he put two and two together. Time stretched into an unbearable crawl as Peter waited for his words. “You asked why I still build for Steve. ‘After everything he’s done.’ You knew what was happening when the shield fell at your chest. You spoke about Siberia.”

*This is it. This is where I lose him.*

“I know what happened, Mr. Stark,” Peter whispered. “I know everything that happened.” Despite the shame curling in his gut, he forced himself to keep looking at Tony. He deserved the punishment of whatever he’d see in the man’s gaze.

“No one knows--not even-- how?” Tony was still only confused. Peter’s chest seized as he realized the genius before him couldn’t reach the only conclusion there was because he couldn’t believe Peter would do it.

He was going to watch all of that trust he’d cultivated, craved, fall away with a single word.

Peter didn’t answer.

Tony took a step back, eyes widening. Just for a millisecond, before his walls snapped down. Peter’s throat closed. “You didn’t.”

“I--I’m sorry.” Peter took a step forward, wanting to do something, anything, to explain.

But Tony shifted away, his expression guarded. He did it instinctively, Peter could tell, which was what drove the tears to his eyes.

“You went through my files. On my computer, in the office. My personal files,” Tony said flatly.

“Yes.” There was nothing else he could say.
Tony tried to hide his intake of breath, tried to mask the hurt in his eyes as he took a step back. But Peter couldn’t sense anything else, and could only imagine the thoughts spinning in the man’s mind. He couldn’t stand it. “I--”

“Get out.”

Peter wanted to speak. He wanted to say something, to plead, to explain, anything, but no words came to his tongue. Because Tony meant it.

Get out.

Feeling hollow, he did.

The setting sun called his unconscious feet to it, and Peter found himself running as fast as his enhanced legs could carry him towards the smell of sea spray. His thoughts whirred at a million miles an hour as a thunderous echo-- get out, get out, get out-- played a constant, deafening beat in the back of his mind.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered as he ran, over and over, his senses dialed up and his skin itching.

No. No, I’m not sorry. Spider-Man slowed, turning his head to glance back at the compound. It was long out of sight. There was nothing else to do. I helped him. I helped him.

I betrayed him.

Spider-Man growled, even as tears sprung to his eyes and he started running again. He’d only wanted to help the man, he’d only wanted to save him. That was his job. He existed to save people, to be strong when others were weak, when Peter was weak.

He’d failed.

It’s not my fault, I needed to know. If I hadn’t known, I wouldn’t have been able to calm him.

Peter moved faster, as though he could outrun the lies of his thoughts. If I hadn’t known, I wouldn’t have gotten so angry. I wouldn’t have touched the shield.

But he had known. He’d known exactly what had thrown Tony into a panic attack, exactly what to say to help him away from the trigger. What the Captain had done to him in Siberia had sent Tony into full flashback terror for Peter’s life.

That made him want to hurt something.

He’d wanted to when he’d seen those blueprints. Spider-Man had almost ripped right through them as his fingers tightened on the edges with a fierce need to protect his mentor. Instead, he’d made it worse.

Why was he so angry at Steve? For hurting Tony? Betraying him? Keeping secrets from him, secrets that would shake him and hurt him even more?

Peter had just done every one of those things.

He burst through the trees, turning to the East as he reached the edge of the land before it plunged down into the Atlantic. He kept running, afraid of what would happen if he stopped.
The agonized look that flickered for just a moment before there was only emotionlessness. The brisk, hollow dismissal. The trust he didn’t deserve finally broken.

And it was all.

His.

Fault.

Peter collapsed onto his knees, his hands gouging into the earth and clinging to grass stems tight enough his knuckles turned white, and sobbed into the empty air.

* * *

With a crash that reverberated through the workshop and Tony’s soul, metal and wall connected, showering particles of uncoded nanotech down like synthesized snowflakes. They came to rest around Tony’s boots, the only part of him not trembling.

Fuck.

Tony ran his hands through his hair, once, twice, meshing his fingers within it and holding on tight. “FUCK!”

How could he do that?

Either of them?

You idiot, Tony, you useless idiot.

Why did his brain work like a camera, a camera that perfectly replicated things he wished he didn’t remember? Why couldn’t he control himself, his words, his feelings, when it mattered most? Why couldn’t he see through the haze of emotions brought up from the past?

Why couldn’t he see his kid through it?

I know what happened. I know everything that happened.

He wasn’t supposed to. He wasn’t supposed to, but it didn’t matter. The boy had to know, Tony was better for him knowing. Drifts of conversation from the Sunday before played through his brain, played on that damned camera as though he were reliving it.

I know the crushing guilt of feeling powerless. The crumbling sorrow of abandonment, those around you ripped away so often and so hatefully that you can’t even remember what to feel.

But I’m here, here to remind you of the ones you saved.

I need you.

You’re enough.

Peter’d known, then. He must have, known… everything?

He hadn’t trusted Tony to tell him.
He was right not to.

But in that moment, all Tony had seen was the past. Of Obadiah, of the team, of Steve. Of his parents. Every lie they’d every told him. The trust he’d given them, slower each time, as they let him fall one by one.

Peter…

The last particles of drifting nanotech collected on his boots, a shining blanket of silver and gold and ruby red.

Peter wouldn’t let him fall. Tony trusted in that, still, knew that. But the camera in his mind had masked those memories in favor of others, and for that one, fateful moment, Tony had been angry.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, staring down at the nanotech drifting around his feet. He’d destroyed it, just as he’d destroyed everything. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—I don’t—please…”

Too late, sang the pulse in his throat and the whir of the robots. Too late.

Get out.

“He’s gone ” Tony said to the empty room, his voice flat. “I sent him away. I drove him away.”

Tony’d betrayed him, taken every promise he’d made to the boy and broken them all in those two words. Get out. He’d promised he’d try. He’d promised he’d understand, and when it had mattered most, he’d failed.

(You always fail. You failed again, when he mattered most.)

Peter was gone, pushed away by Tony’s hastey words. And this time, he wouldn’t return. He wouldn’t return, because Tony’d made the boy believe he didn’t want him. Tony’d made him believe he had failed, instead of Tony.

He was gone, gone forever, and it was all.

His.

Fault.

Tony collapsed onto his knees, running his fingers through the blanket of metallic dust, and sobbed into the empty air.

Chapter End Notes

When the question is between fluff, and angst then fluff, I will... always... choose angst... Sorry not sorry...

Before you grab your pitchforks, the next chapter is already almost done; it's a contrast chapter, so it's pretty short. I'll have it done soon, and up ASAP.

Thanks for reading!
No.

No!

Get up.

Tony opened his eyes, blinking rapidly to clear away the haze of tears. Everything sparkled when he focused, simultaneously beautiful and blinding.

(It’s too late. He’s gone. And it’s your fault--)

Tony gritted his teeth in a snarl, surging to his feet.

He’d promised understanding to the kid, but he’d promised more than that to himself. He’d sworn he’d be more, better, than that voice inside his head, for Peter. And he may have failed, but it wasn’t too late.

(You’ll never make it up to him. You’ll never be enough.)

Peter had said he was enough. Inclined to trust the kid more than himself, Tony threw himself towards the door.

(You don’t deserve him.)

But that wasn’t Peter’s fault. None of this was Peter’s fault, and the kid deserved to know that.

Fix this.

Peter was the best thing to ever happen to Tony. And he had said… Tony was the best thing to happen to him. Was that possible?

It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter if he believed what Peter spoke of or himself worthy of it. The only thing that mattered was the boy, the shining, impossible boy, and every miracle he’d worked on Tony. Tony couldn’t throw that all away, he wouldn’t.

Fix this.

He was Anthony Edward Stark, the last of the Avengers, the one the universe had tried to destroy over and over, the one who got back up every time. He would pick himself off the floor, he would get through this, he would get them both through this.

Fix this.

It wasn’t too late. Stop sitting on your ass, you useless idiot. His words to Peter had been a mistake, everything had been a mistake, but mistakes weren’t irreparable.

Fix. This.

Especially for his kid, that had already waited too long for him to figure his shit out. What he’d
realized three days before didn’t feel any less potent now, and it was time to act on it. Time to change, time to remember that this wasn’t about him, but about Pete.

Time to fix this.

Tony’s long, determined stride took him from the room without another moment of hesitation.

Chapter End Notes

Short. And IN YOUR FACE. Tony's resolved now, dudes.

Thanks for reading! Drop a kudos or comment and tell me what you think!
“Peter.”

He was sitting with his legs curled up to his chest on the gentle slope down to the beach, the setting sun obscured by the cliff he’d passed. Sand stuck to Peter’s face in the salty sea spray, tears tracking lines of cleanliness through it. He hadn’t noticed the footsteps behind him, and his first reaction was to bury his face further into his knees and try to control his racked breathing. Instinctively, he didn’t want Tony to see him crying.

Tony?

The footsteps stopped and the hairs on Peter’s shoulders pricked, sensing the warmth radiating from the other body as it sat. Peter caught a glimpse of black-grey boots dusted with sparkling flakes of metal, nanotech, in his peripheral vision, and shivered with an emotion he couldn’t pinpoint.

A particularly violent wave broke onto the shore, swirling up through the sand and washing around them. Peter’s shirt was already clinging to his lean form, sticky with seawater, and it floated freely in the wash of liquid.

They watched the water retreat, pulling the nanotech out with it in a shimmering dusting of red and gold. Neither spoke, not knowing what to say, or how to say it.

Why… why is he here?

Spider-Man shook himself. Say something, say something, at least try to explain. Why would he come if he wasn’t giving you a chance?

In the end, both men worked up the courage as one, neither looking at the other as they spoke simultaneously.

“I’m sorry.”

A pause. Tony said “jinx” quietly, without much mirth. Peter huffed a laugh, but it rang hollow.

He watched the water rise and fall in a flurry of bubbles and foam beneath his knees and dug his forehead further into his crossed arms. A hand on his back made him jump, sucking in a sharp breath, but he relaxed almost unconsciously as it began to rub between his shoulder blades.

Another long pause stretched. Peter was so aware of soothing touch he could feel the pulse in Tony’s fingers, fluttering uncertainty.

“Kid, I--shit…” At first, Tony’s voice was so quiet Peter almost didn’t realize he’d started speaking. He trailed off, and Peter sensed him swallow a blockage in his throat identical to the one Peter struggled with. “I screwed up. I got mad--I know I shouldn’t of, but--well--I didn’t… handle things correctly.”

Peter huffed another laugh, this one of bitterness. “I’d say you did.”

“Pete…”
“You--” his voice broke, but he swallowed and forced himself to continue. “You shouldn’t be here.” *I don’t deserve it. You were right to send me away.*

Tony inhaled sharply, his hand lifting from Peter’s back. Peter squeezed his eyes shut in a futile effort to stop more tears from leaking down his cheeks.

“Technically, this is my land,” Tony quipped quickly, and Peter stopped trying.

“If anyone shouldn’t be here, it’s me,” he choked out. Tony heard.

“Kid, please--look I know I screwed up, okay?” The man’s voice was pleading, and Peter’s spider-sense told him his hand was hovering a hairsbreadth from his back. “I… I broke your trust, kid, and I know I don’t deserve forgiveness for that--

Oh.

Oh.

They were idiots, he was an idiot.

Peter almost couldn’t believe it, until he realized how much sense it made. He should have seen it, should have been shocked if it didn’t happen.

Of course Tony’d blame himself for this.

Even though Peter deserved the anger, the dismissal, had been the one to betray the man, Tony’d twisted the fault back onto himself. It was what he did.

*I’d say you did.*

You shouldn’t be here.

Shit. He’d made it worse.

*God, say something, Spider-Man!*  

Tony was still speaking, an uncharacteristic quaver in his voice. “But I… please, kid, give me one more chance?”

*Yes. Yes, of course, I’m so sorry--*

But he couldn’t say that. Not yet. Not until-- “You were right, Mr. Stark,” he whispered, pulling his arms further up around his ears. A tear rolled slowly off the end of his nose, dropping into the sea to mingle with the salt water.

“What?”

“I should leave. I--I betrayed you. I wanted to know what happened, what made you so scared and hurt so I could help, but… I made it worse, instead. They all lie to you, and I didn’t know, and even when I did I still--” he choked back another sniffle--“I still lied. Trust is something you don’t do easily, and I don’t deserve it. I didn’t deserve it; I broke it. I’m--” This time he couldn’t contain his broken sob. He took a breath, pausing for a moment, but continued before Tony could start to speak.

“I’m just as bad as them,” he whispered, faces sparking hatred and names once idolized flashing in his mind.
“Pete--”

His tongue kept moving, words tumbling out on the backs of his cries. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Stark--”

“Pete--”

I let you down.” Oh God. He’d tried so hard, so hard to be good enough for the man who was the world, and he’d--

“Peter Parker.”

Tony’s hands were on his shoulders, his voice firm. “Look at me. Look at me.”

Peter did, his cheeks burning with shame and humiliation and loneliness, tears and snot mingling with the seawater and sand peppering his face. He wasn’t strong enough to meet Tony’s deep brown eyes, but he could feel the man’s burning emotion in the way his hands gripped Peter’s shoulders.

“You could never. You hear me? You could never.”

This time, Peter did meet his eyes, shocked into it by surprise.

Tony smiled softly, wiping a tear from the boy’s cheek. “I’m proud of you, kid. I always have been, and I always will be.”

More tears welled in Peter’s eyes, but not from despondency.

“You remember what you told me on Sunday?”

Had it only been three days ago? He nodded.

“So do I, kid. It meant the world to me. You mean the world to me. And if you think something as trivial as going through a couple of dusty old videos changes that, you’re sorely mistaken. And I’m… I’m ashamed to think I thought you angry at me, that you’d leave me, after everything we’ve been through. After everything you said.

“You tried to help me, Pete. I know that. And you know I was just scared.” Tony chuckled sardonically. “Hard as it is to believe, I get quite terrified over quite trivial things.”

Peter sniffled, a smile coming to his face. “Trivial?”

“Oh right, you know all about those ‘trivial’ things, now,” Tony huffed, but Peter could tell he wasn’t angry, not anymore. “Suppose my suave, billionaire, too-cool-for-school reputation is fucked.”

Peter laughed somewhat hysterically. “So fucked, man.”

Tony flashed his teeth. “I’m glad you know about it, Peter. All of it, my damn shitty past. I’m not betrayed. You did the right thing. And I know you’ll continue to do so no matter what this old man says, so I’ll just say one more thing; I understand now. And I want you to, too; there will be misunderstandings, fuckups, shit that seems unforgivable done by both of us. But in the long term, they don’t matter, because I will always trust you.”

“And I’ll always come back,” Peter said, surprising himself with the steadiness of his voice.

“I don’t need to be scared, and neither do you. No one’s perfect all the time, and that’s enough for me.” Tony finished, and to Peter’s astonishment, the man’s own eyes were gleaming with tears.
“I guess we’re just--” Peter hiccupped a painful mix of laugh and sob-- “too stubborn.”

“That we are.”

Peter’s tears streamed silently down his face, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

“Oh, come here, you damn kid.” Tony spread his arms.

Crying harder, Peter tucked himself against the man, his arms wrapping around his middle as another wave washed around them, pulling up the sand beneath their knees. Tony’s hand carded through his hair as the other one rubbed along his spine, and Peter could feel the man’s silent convulsions as he finally lost the battle with his own tears.

When Spider-Man opened his eyes for a moment, he only breathed a broken sigh and wrapped his arms tighter around Tony.

* * *

Tony was free, kneeling in the surf with Peter and just letting himself cry. For the first time in what felt like years, he felt secure. He’d finally done the right thing.

And that was Peter.

Tony could only laugh at the ridiculously long time it had taken him to realize it.

His tears washed the sting of the sea from his eyes, so there was no impediment as he watched his kid, hyper aware of the rivulets of water running along Peter’s neck and the ropes of wet hair Tony tousled in long, soothing strokes. Shaking from emotion and cold, Peter tucked himself further into Tony’s side as the shadow of the cliff fell over them, the last of the sunlight disappearing.

“We’re idiots,” Tony said, reaching out a hand to stroke the surface of the water. It rushed by his fingers, the riptide pricking him with grains of sand.

“I know,” Peter replied, his voice muffled by Tony’s shoulder.

“Get so worked up about the little things… when we should have just been doing this all along,” Tony continued, pressing his cheek to the top of Peter’s head and inhaling the faint scent of shampoo that still lingered beneath the odor of the ocean.

“What is this, exactly?” Peter mumbled.

Tony huffed a smile. “I’ve got no idea, kid.”

A pause, Peter drumming his fingers on Tony’s leg in thought. “You called me your kid,” he said finally.

“Hm?” Tony replied somewhat distractedly.

“You said you were busy in the workshop with your kid.” Peter pulled his head out from beneath Tony’s and looked at him.

“I did, didn’t I?”

The boy nodded.
Yesterday, three days ago, he might have brushed it off. Denied what he’d meant. It’d be safer, for both of them.

But Tony was done with hiding, done with lying, and done with his idiotic definition of safe.

Tony smiled. “Well you are, aren’t you?”

Peter nodded, his eyes glowing. “Your intern.”

“My intern.”

They both knew what he meant.

Setting-sunlight turned the water the color of new rose petals, lighting up the tips of the waves in an inferno of pink and orange. Tony almost thought it couldn’t be real, this couldn’t be real; it was like a scene from a fantasy novel, the ones describing a world one could just barely imagine existed because of moment like this. Moments of fiction in the real world.

“Your aunt gonna be worried?” Tony murmured.

“Na,” Peter replied. “I’ve got hours. And even if she was, I’m not sure I’d care.”

Tony felt his entire body grow warm with the no-longer-so-strange feeling that always burned in his gut around the kid. He hugged Peter closer, feeling almost helpless in the wake of the surge of emotion, nearly fearful because he could never convey the depth of it.

“I would,” he said. “You’d get in trouble and then she’d go after me. And we all know who’s side Pep would take.”

“Maybe if I gave her my best puppy eyes, she’d cut us a little slack.”

Tony laughed, quick and easy. “I’m sure you could sway her if you used the kicked dog approach, kid.”

Shifting in Tony’s grip, Peter smiled. “I sure swayed you.”

“To the moon and back,” Tony murmured, though Peter heard.

“We’re a couple of sentimental saps, you know that, right?” Peter said, his soft smile turning to a grin.

Tony flicked the boy’s head. “I’ve always had a flare for it.”

Peter lifted one arm in front of him to gesture wildly, while the other framed his mouth in a poor and objectively hilarious imitation of Tony’s goatee. “The truth is, I am Iron Man.” He continued over Tony’s uncontrollable laughter, “yeah I could say you had a flare, you little drama queen!”

“Queen? Excuse you, I am an empress.”

Peter poked him in the stomach, and Tony huffed, ruffling his hair in amusement.

“You’re just as bad!” Tony said. “Does my plane ring a bell?”

“A red and gold weaponized suit?”

“Introducing yourself by backflipping through an airport terminal and stealing an icon’s icon?”
“That was your idea!”

“You still did it.” With style too. Tony grinned and shoved the boy playfully into the sand.

“Fine! But the point still goes to me; you flew a frickin’ nuke into a--” Peter cut off. “Shit, sorry.”

Tony’s brain flickered to darkness and starlight and suffocation, but Peter splashed water at him, speaking loudly to keep the panic from rising.

“Yeah, so, all in all, you’re the empress of drama,” Peter said, taking Tony’s hand and tapping and rubbing it in a complex pattern of skin-on-skin, giving Tony something to focus on. The fear died before it had even rose.

“And you’re the puppy-prince.”

Peter grimaced. “Please don’t call me that.”

“What? You need a code name--”

“I have one!”

“--for all the sneaking around you’ve been doing. Puppy-prince of Drama sounds perfect to me. It takes some guts to get into my office, let alone my computer!” He rubbed his knuckles atop the boy’s head affectionately to remind him there were no hard feelings. “How did you even get in?”

Peter shrugged. “FRIDAY and Karen are partners in crime.”

Tony feigned shock. “The AI’s are tag-teaming me?”

“The AI’s, and Spider-Man,” Peter said with a grin.

“I never stood a chance.” Tony sighed, getting back on topic. “So, yeah, FRIDAY helped you?”

Peter nodded. “She got me to the office, and into the computer. Once she highlighted the first folder for me, it was easy to find everything.” He hid his face, still ashamed. Honestly, Tony was still a bit unnerved by the whole thing as well.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Well, I guess that just gives you even more credibility. FRIDAY knows what’s best for me much of the time; I trust her.”

_I trust her._

Tony froze.

Peter said something by way of reply, laying his head back on Tony’s shoulder, but Tony didn’t hear.

_How much do you trust your AI, Stark?_

It hit him like lightning cracking through the sky.

_Oh my God._
Chapter End Notes

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH MAN

Another hanger, but it's the end of a part. I couldn't not... :)))
Anyway, hope you enjoyed this chapter of pure fluff. WHILE IT LASTS.
BWAHAAAAHHA. We are entering the final plot-line, and I've got some cowboys for you, trust me. :)
Thanks for reading! Let me know what you think!
Interlude: In Which Rouges Find Home

Chapter Summary

UH OH, NEW PERSPECTIVE. The scope is widening... :) 

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The view from the quinjet was stunning. It always was, but today, as the sleek plane brought them home for the first time in almost a month, it was so much more poignant.

Steve stood in silence, leaning against the canopy of the cockpit and bracing himself with a hand on the metal supports. Sam was flying, of course, though the automatic navigation system did most of the work, and Natasha sat, flipping her knives from hand to hand, in the back with Wanda. No one spoke, wrapped up in the view and the adrenaline crash of returning from their last ‘rogue’ mission.

But he wasn’t thinking about that, not now, as the quinjet dipped towards the seemingly ordinary slope. They were returning, and nothing was going to distract him from this.

The nose of the plane penetrated the small gap in the protective shield, and Wakanda’s protective hologram fuzzed away, revealing the city in all of its majesty.

Sam piloted them through the gaps between towering buildings, and Steve found himself pushing both hands against the glass of the canopy like a child on a road-trip. His eyes followed the glowing lines of the railways, snagged on the throngs of people in the streets in their bright clothing. Emerging through the gold of the winter was the green of spring, making the city look even lusher, as growth crawled up the bases of the structures. The mixture of almost science-fiction buildings with simple, ancient architecture made for a sprawling metropolis of diversity anyone, even a one-hundred-year-old supersoldier, could feel at home.

Steve and the rest of the passengers of the jet sucked in a common breath as they neared the palace and its spiraling staircase of floors like a ladder for a god. The windows gleamed in the midday sun, and Steve already felt warmed by it.

“Guys,” Sam said, flicking a few levers on the consul, “we’re back.”

“Home,” Steve replied with a smile. Sam punched his shoulder.

“C’mon, old man. Enough daydreaming; we still have work to do.”

Indeed they did; weaponry crowded the back of the jet, materials scavenged from the groups the crew had been pursuing. Mostly alien technology: Shuri would find a use for it.

He hardly ever thought about how another might utilize the tech, anymore.

T’Challa greeted them when the gangplank lowered, watching them with his hands clasped behind his back and his restrained smile a whisper of expression on his stoic face.

“Welcome back,” he said, striding towards them. Steve smiled and raised a hand in greeting,
brushing his growing beard as he did so. T’Challa waved a group of five into the quinjet, the warriors dipping their arms into the Wakandan salute as the past. Steve nodded to them in thanks as they began to unload the stray weapons and scraps along with Natasha’s more organized crates.

“It’s good to be back,” Steve replied, leading the tired group from the plane. The three others spread out around him instinctively, and Steve didn’t even notice.

T’Challa looked at him.

“How is he?”

T’Challa glanced towards the doors of the palace, where Shuri was leaning nonchalantly. They shared what must have been the very definition of ‘knowing look,’ but Steve was too tired to care.

“The White Wolf is fully recovered, and relocated. Just like he was the last time you asked.”

Steve nodded, ignoring the king’s flat sarcasm. “Where?”

“On the outskirts of the city.”

Steve moved, and the king practically teleported in front of him, a hand on his chest to stop him traveling. “You need sleep, and to assist with the movement of the weapons. We will take you to him tomorrow.”

Briefly, Steve considered fighting him on it. He wanted to, but the man held the power in this situation. I’d be too much trouble, and tomorrow wasn’t that far away. He took a step back, nodding in compliance, if not understanding.

“Where are we taking the weapons this time?” Sam said. “Where do you want them?”

“For this load, Shuri needs--”

Shuri bounded forward suddenly, with a sound akin to a screech. It made Steve jump, but she was only excitedly handling a weapon when he turned her way.

I guess that answers that question.

Modifying her voice, Shuri said, “it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life!”

T’Challa rolled his eyes and muttered something about watermelons, but Steve was moving towards the girl and didn’t pay much attention. “Why?”

She answered with an excited string of terms he understood the meaning of, but not in the context of engineering. Or design, or whatever she might be referring to.

The confusion was familiar, and Steve felt his chest twist slightly with undefined emotion.

He answered with a vague nod, and Shuri just grinned.

“Basically, I’m going to make some cool stuff.”

Wanda asked, “for the UN?”

“No, for me. I already dealt with their shit--”

“Shuri,” T’Challa reprimanded. She ignored him.
“--so now I get to play with this alien tech all for my own! Besides, they’ve never even met me. I see the news; Wakanda this, Wakanda that. I should sign my work, don’t you think, brother?”

*I just design everything, and pay for everything, and make everybody look cooler.*

Sam and Wanda used to joke, sometimes, about how Stark would react if he ever met Shuri. His ruffled feathers about being only the ‘second smartest person in the world.’ A few weeks in to the running joke, Steve had thought of the Stark he’d once known, and said maybe that Stark would be thrilled to be proven the world could develop beyond him. But that man was gone.

Natasha disagreed, of course. She said he was being too black and white; that acting the differently towards Bucky and the Accords didn’t mean Stark’s entire character was changed. Steve had argued as much as he dared to the terrifying Russian assassin. He bristled at her accusation that he was taking the easy mindset, and the conversation had found an abrupt end.

The issue had dropped away to the place of unspokeness to which so many subjects had been imprisoned, and the four of them hadn’t mentioned it again.

There were so many things they never mentioned, things that brought them back to a past that could never be changed, a past that made them too bitter and lonely and *angry*. Subjects dropped out of conversation perpetually, and Steve never questioned it.

They hardly ever spoke of Stark.

Steve shook the quote from his mind and turned his attention back to the weapons Shuri was overseeing. He was tired, of course, but he didn’t consider leaving yet. Heaving a stack of boxes into his arms, Steve lead the team of Wakandan’s into the palace to finish the mission.

* * *

“You know why you’re here.”

The tiny, abandoned building in the tiny town of the tiny country of Cyprus was full of dozens of people, more than had ever been imagined responding to the call. But even with so many, when every shift or breath in the echoing metal work should be audible, the warehouse was silent but for Maura’s ringing voice.

“You’re here because you’ve lost everything.”

The eyes of the people below her bored into her, shining at the truth of her words. Maura nodded.

“You’re here because you failed, maybe not so very long ago, in protecting what mattered to you, and you want to avenge it.”

A murmur, this time, perhaps at her choice of words, rose in the warehouse.

Maura smiled. “But that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to tell you you’re wrong.”

She paused to let her words sink in.

“You did not fail. You can pretend it was your fault as much as you want, blame yourself, blame your weakness and slowness and incapacity, but it wasn’t.” Maura’s fists curled at her sides.

“I lost my daughter. My husband. My home and my future.”
The audience before her broke into whispers, calling out in sympathy and agreement. Some called out names, meaningless to Maura now, but she memorized them and swore to learn the stories behind each and every one, once her mission had begun.

“I’ve been trying so long to make up for a failure that wasn’t mine. But I always knew the blame didn’t rest on me.” Maura spread her arms, the cold wind whistling through the cracked and boarded windows of the building and whipping at her cloths. Every person in the room collectively shivered.

“Think,” Maura said, reaching out to the audience imploringly. “Think about what really happened, what really stole your families, your loved ones, your futures away. Who is really responsible for the destruction of your lives?”

A yell, one Maura recognized. She smiled, triumphant.

“Exactly. I sent this call out because I knew it would be found by those who knew the truth.”

Someone echoed, “Truth!”

Maura brought her hands up, reaching into the mirror dimension and casting a useless, but flashy, enchantment, illuminating up the air around her with light from the orange patterns now dancing across her skin. “And power.”

Sound erupted through the warehouse, awed cries, fearful whispers, and a quiet, scattered echo of “Truth. And power.”

Maura raised her voice over the cacophony, her magic throwing her voice to the edges of the building, bringing rapt attention from the audience. “But now, I want to know the people willing to do more than just know the truth. I want those with the will to act on it; to avenge what was lost by finding those truly responsible.”

Maura twisted the patterns into twin blades of light, slashing them through the air and leaving shimmering afterimages behind. “And then,” she said, “we take our revenge. What would you do, to undo what happened, what you were victim of not-so-very long ago? Or to ease your mind, your soul, to rest knowing your families were at peace?”

Silence.

Maura’s triumph began to fade. For a moment, she thought she’d failed, thought she’d be alone once again--

Then a voice screamed out, trembling with grief and barely restrained rage, “Anything.”

More voices joined, murmuring, “Anything, I would do anything,” until it was echoing through the building as Maura’s magical call had, a crescendo of conviction.

Maura smiled.

“So let’s do it!” she bellowed. “That anything, let’s work together to achieve it! What I couldn’t do alone could be accomplished by all of us, easily, with your conviction.”

The warehouse screamed.

“Some of you are in danger!” Maura said, her voice quiet but somehow still carrying. She had them, now, and was ready to help them. “In the same peril as your families, already ripped from your futures.”
She saw nods, and replied with her own.

“We will protect you. I will protect you. Do you doubt that?” Her blades flashed again, and negatives rung through the warehouse.

“Some of you are dying! Scraping for food and money and comfort, without a future in sight!”

More nods.

“Together, we will save you, and give you purpose again.”

Anticipation hummed tangibly in the air, and Maura reached up, beginning her final line, her final moment that would seal them in. She had her army, her help, and it was time to save people. “Protect you, save you, and give you the chance to avenge what was lost. To exact your revenge, and live once again!”

The roar of forty people driven to stony resolution by the hum of loss rang out through the night and shook the very sky.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's not sinister at all...

Thanks for reading! Theories? Feedback? Lemme know!
In Which Peter Enjoys the Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

May is fantastic. Peter, Ned, MJ, and the author are nerds. Karen is concerned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PART THREE: AND WASHED THE SPIDER OUT

Peter told May everything.

And it turned out she already knew.

“I was waiting for you to figure it out,” she said as they sat together on the apartment’s small sofa. Peter was leaning into her, warm both from her body on his right and the phantom memory of Tony’s touch against his left shoulder. He tucked his knees up, hugging them comfortably.

“Pepper?” he asked.

“We talked about it all the time.” May grinned. “Almost made a bet a couple of times, but I decided that might jinx it. You two are idiots sometimes, for geniuses, you know!”

Peter smiled. “I know. Looking back, we were all so obvious. Everything he said and did: the Vulture, our time in the workshop, always protecting me. And everything I did: engineering reasons to see him, egg sandwiches, trying to help him, needing him… how could I have been so blind?”

May waited for him to finish. He knew she could see the thoughts whirring behind his eyes, and he was grateful for her silence.

“I think… I was just scared, you know? Scared of what it might mean if I admitted he isn’t just a mentor to me now. But I’m not scared anymore. And it’s because of him. Does that make sense?”

“It doesn’t have to.” May hugged him closer. “You don’t have to articulate the feeling, Peter. I know better than most that family is what you make.”

Family.

“Is he… can you…”

May furrowed her brow at him. “Can I be your family along with Tony Stark? A few months ago, I wouldn’t have been sure, but I’ve been figuring it out for a while, just as you have.”

Peter smiled.

“You don’t have to name things, Pete. Really. Just feel, and I promise everything will be okay.” May
pulled him closer and ruffled his curls.

“I’ll hold you too that.” But he didn’t need reassured. Peter was feeling content in this moment, worry a foreign tingling of his spider-sense easy to dismiss.

*Tony Stark called me his kid.*

*Tony Stark sat, half submerged in the tide of the ocean outside his compound with his arms around me until we both finally realized what a father figure looks and feels like.*

Somehow, that wasn’t as awe-inspiring as Peter might’ve once thought. It just felt… natural. Something they’d both been waiting for, and now, Peter felt balanced knowing it had occurred.

“But he sent you home with Happy,” May mused.

“Yeah. He did the thing where he moved on really quickly. Curt. He sent me home before we even finished what we were working on. I think he just needed some time to process,” explained Peter. He thought for a moment, then continued, “I needed some too. It’s good we got some space after all that.”

May nodded, then shoved at him with a grin. “Definitely good. It’s ten o’clock, Peter. Time for bed; you’ve got school tomorrow.”

The backpack in the corner seemed to wink at him, and Peter found himself slamming back into the real-world with a thump.

Right. School, *life.*

“I just found the answer to life, the universe, and everything, and it wasn’t 42, and you’re still making me go to highschool tomorrow?”

May mimed fainting exaggeratedly, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead. “Oh, woe is the superhero who must continue to exist in the world of us silly mortals.”

Embarrassed, Spider-Man grumbled, “I’m not immortal.”

May rolled her eyes. “You’re an enhanced teenager. You seem to think so; don’t even try to object.”

“Oh come--”

“Nope!” His aunt interrupted him brightly. “I can’t hear you!”

Spider-Man rolled his eyes.


Spider-Man, his body still humming with adrenaline, wanted to keep objecting. But, as Peter pointed out, it had been a long day, and he was tired. And Peter couldn’t miss tomorrow so close to finals.

So he sighed in defeat, waved a good-night to May, and moved into his room to finish the day of perpetual astonishment.

“I love you, Peter.”

“I love you too, Aunt May.”
There was sea spray and soft words and not a hint of fear in his dreams that night.

“I do not understand,” Ned proclaimed as he, MJ, and Peter watched sodium hydroxide drip slowly, painfully, from the end of their buret, “why we have to do this when the percent-acidity is already labeled on the damn vinegar bottle.”

Peter, his fingers on the stopcock, watched the NaOH disperse in a cloud of pinkish hue into their flask of phenolphthalein-infused vinegar, and sighed. “Because this is supposed to test the accuracy of our titrations. If we get a number close to five percent at the end of this, we win.”

“We don’t win, we just get a better grade.” Ned absentmindedly fiddled with their supply of vinegar, pouring it back and forth through the cheap funnel.

“Same thing.” Peter shrugged.

“I’m up for winning,” MJ said as she cleaned another flask and prepared their third sample, “just not for so many trials. This takes forever.”

Peter nodded, still watching the drips. Honestly, he enjoyed titrations; the math and chemicals were interesting. But he had to agree with MJ that watching about 25 mL of sodium hydroxide drain from their buret one drop at a time was exceptionally boring. He couldn’t look away, couldn’t read or write or doodle, because one drop could make all the difference in a titration.

“I wish we could just get to the calculations…” Peter grumbled. He glanced at the clock; the end of class was approaching far too quickly, and they still had a whole other trial to complete. Shit. This is gonna be homework.

“So, how was your afternoon?” Ned asked for the eighth time.

“It continues to have been well.” MJ rolled her eyes. “I told you. I went up to the Empire State for a bit of protesting and had dinner.”

“Where?”

“Chipotle.”

“Yum.”

Peter already knew Ned had gone with his grandmother to see a documentary at the theater, but Ned told them again, he supposed for the sake of tradition. One story per titration, I suppose.

“Peter hasn’t told us any Spider-Man stories,” MJ said.

“That’s because Spider-Man’s not allowed out on Wednesdays,” MJ replied for him. “He was probably just sitting in his apartment being bored.”

Peter smiled to himself. Yeah, definitely just that. “I went to the compound to work on a Mother’s Day gift for May.”

So used to the story, Ned simply asked, “what did you come up with?”

“A nanotech measuring cup that changes shape to whatever size you need.”

“Genius,” MJ said. “I could use that.”
Peter looked at her. “You have something planned?” he asked, grinning teasingly.

“Oh yeah, with a nice cup of arsenic to go with.” MJ sounded completely serious, which would have unnerved Peter before he knew her so well. Now, he knew disinterest was just her protection, and each true smile meant all the more.

“Looking forward to it,” Ned laughed. “I’ll bring Legos. Although, you probably couldn’t poison Peter because he’s Spider-Man and has those abili— Peter!” Ned broke off, flailing his arms at the experiment.

Peter yanked his gaze back to the buret, his enhanced muscles already moving to cut off the stopcock. The single drop that could have skewed the accuracy hung precariously above the faint pink mixture of vinegar and NaOH, just begging to fall…

Ned caught it on his finger, and they removed the Erlenmeyer flask. Spider-Man smirked. “See, my skills do come in handy other places.”

“Fine, fine, you win,” Peter grumbled, carefully jotting down the reading of the buret and scrawling a quick subtraction in the margin of his lab sheet.

“That reminds me,” MJ said, watching him closely. “I need to talk to Karen.”


“I have to ask her about some data.”


MJ didn’t smile. “You’ll know soon enough.”

Peter just shrugged and went back to the lab. “Fine, Ms. Enigmatic. I’ll drop her off tonight, after my patrol. But you have to bring the mask back tomorrow.”

MJ saluted. “Of course.”

“Ooo, Spider-Man at your house late at night,” Ned cooed. MJ slapped him, and Ned shut up.

Rolling his eyes, Peter said, “Set up the next titration; we’ve only got fifteen minutes, and I want to have the least amount of homework possible.”

* * *

Karen widened the fibers of the Spider-Man mask, allowing it to breathe more as Spider-Man collapsed, gasping for air, atop the closest building.

“The van is drawing ahead,” Karen said, humming anxiously. “My charted course has changed.”

“Right,” the boy panted. “Let’s go!”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t approach this problem again, later? I can keep a lock on them until tomorrow. It’s close to ten, and…” His breathing was quite elevated.

Spider-Man grinned. “What, you getting tired?”
Karen flashed the lights, and after one more gasp, they were swinging off in pursuit of the hit-and-run vehicle.

Karen focused on calculating and re-calculating their route, anticipating the movement of the van as they backflipped through the city. Spider-Man (she’d learned the tell-tale signs that indicated which boy was in control) moved fluidly and efficiently. His hands flashed in and out easily, and the webbing brought them from building to building so fast even Karen could recognize the wind-drag. It was an exponential improvement from when he’d first worn the suit.

But even with their speed, the van kept in front of them, reckless driving and seemingly random twists and turns preventing them from catching up. They’d been at it for twenty minutes now, and Spider-Man was flagging. It was late, and he’d been complaining of fatigue earlier…

The nondescript, silver van took another turn on the side of its wheels, and Spider-Man cursed; his momentum and the jet of webbing he’d shot was already taking him and Karen past the next building. He moved his hand behind him to shoot and reverse their direction…

Karen severed the connection on the string he already held right as he released a new one. A yelp of surprise strangled in the helmet as they caught a moment of free-fall, their momentum slowing, until Spider-Man’s spray of web caught purchase on the building behind them and jerked them in the other direction.

“What was that for?” Spider-Man wheezed as they resumed their chase.

“You’d build up enough speed that the sharp change in direction would have exerted a harmful amount of force on your shoulder,” Karen explained.

Spider-Man laughed, though it sounded more like a cough, of understanding. “Sure.”

Thirty seconds later, they were only falling further behind the target.

Time for a new strategy.

“I have an idea,” Karen said, quickly running through a probability calculation. Sixty wasn’t bad…

“Shoot,” Spider-Man panted. “I’m not yet satisfied with how this is going.”

Karen flashed the mask’s lights, and said, “alright.” She pulled a new map onto the visor, and Spider-Man took the indicated left without question.

“I hope your algorithms know what they’re doing.”

“My probability is over half.”

“I’ll take it.” He lapsed into uncharacteristic silence, conserving his breath, and followed Karen's map swiftly.

And when they made it to the final turn…

A silver van swerved around the corner, right towards them.

Spider-Man let out a wordless whoop, and landed strong before the careening van, one hand braced against the ground. He straightened, and Karen, feeling absolutely nothing but triumph, focused on the faces behind the windshield, mouths dropped open in shock.

Putting out his hands and bracing for the impact, Spider-Man smiled beneath the fabric of the mask.
The collision only knocked them back a few feet, and Karen found even hit-and-run criminals screamed.

Spider-Man set the front of the van down, then back-flipped over and yanked open the driver-seat door. He didn’t wait for the men to speak, instead saying, “oops, guess you chose the wrong kid to run over! Or maybe the wrong vehicle… then again, I catch busses too.”

Three shots of webbing later, every one of the passengers was stuck, securely, to various parts of the car, and Spider-Man winked. “Have a good evening!”

Then they were swinging, a lot more leisurely, back through Queens as though nothing had happened.

Eventually, Spider-Man asked, “how do you think I should thank Mr. Stark?”


“He donated a shit-ton of money to my school. It’s been such a hectic three days, I haven’t been thinking about it. I want to do something, y’know, to repay him in some way,” Spider-Man explained.

“I think he would appreciate anything you did, so much that I don’t think you have to do anything.”

With a sigh, Spider-Man nodded. “That’s what Peter said.”

Karen faltered for a moment. She resisted flicking the lights in concern, saying carefully, “I think he was right.”

The very obviously Spider-Man shrugged. “If you say so. It doesn’t feel ethical, though.”

“This isn’t about doing the ethical or heroic thing,” Karen said, feeling shaken that she, a string of code, was explaining such things to a very human teenager. “This is just a gift from father to son.”

Suddenly, she lost track of which boy was emerging, the signs shifting quite quickly.

“Father to son?” Peter, or Spider-Man murmured.

Karen wasn’t precisely sure what he was affected by. She’d just been referencing what was obviously there. The boy (boys?) kept speaking.

“You know…” he sent three quick webs before them to increase their speed. “I like the sound of that.”

Chapter End Notes

Whaaaaaaaaaat? Things are getting trippy in that mind of his...

ALSO. THEY DROPPED THE CAPTAIN MARVEL TRAILER. Go. And watch it. RIGHT. NOW.

Hope you enjoyed! MJ and Karen plotting up next, and then I promise some resolution of the bomb I dropped at the end of 31. Let me know what you think, and see y'all
soon!
Karen knew the moment ten o’clock rolled around, and announced it to the Spider-Man. “Would you like me to tell you’re aunt we’re on our way?”

“Please. And we have to stop somewhere, first.”

Karen hummed. “You want me to tell her that too?”

He laughed. “Please don’t, actually.”

“I thought not. So where are we going?”

“MJ’s. She wanted to talk to you.”

Good. I want to talk to her.

Alright.”

It took about six minutes to reach the girl’s home, and as Spider-Man was landing deftly on the roof, Karen realized something. “How are you gonna get back, with no mask?”

“I brought my old one.”

The mask warmed as Karen flicked the heater on in distaste.

He laughed, saying, “I know you don’t approve of the ratty thing, but what other choice do I have?”

“Do not get into trouble without me,” Karen demanded. She was programmed to protect him; he was in danger if he tried to fight without her there to assist him, to change the settings on his web shooters and discuss strategies--

“Of course.”

She hummed as sarcastically as she could, though with those words he’d assured her he would not seek jeopardy. MJ opened the window on their laughter.

“What in the world is happening out here?” the girl asked.

“Spider-Man is being an idiot,” Karen replied, though MJ couldn’t hear.

She felt heat in the mask as Peter blushed, muttering a thanks inaudible to any but her. He slipped her off, and she shut down automatically.

“Okay he’s gone.”

Karen booted up with a whirr, and MJ waved at the eyes of the suit as they flickered for a moment. Karen spent a moment organizing her database, bringing forth the data she needed, before replying. “Hello Michelle.”
“Hi. How’ve you been these last few weeks?”


Striding away from the window, Michelle reached out to fiddle with a skewed stack of notebooks on the desk. “Enough chit-chat, to business. What have you found?”

Karen didn’t have to ask what she was talking about. “Exactly as you thought. Spider-Man shifts into Peter when choices between suspects must be made, or when something unexpected happens, like a failsafe. But I can’t create an accurate algorithm to describe consistently how unexpected the situation must be for the change to occur. The only constant thing is that Peter emerges, and stays, when you are brought up in conversation.”

MJ nodded. It turned out the unsteady notebooks were stacked atop a few stray pencils, keeping them from lying flat on the desk. She straightened them, saying, “that sounds consistent with what I found, as well.”

“But…” Karen broke off, humming.

“What?”

“It’s getting worse. The separation, the gap between them is getting wider. Spider-Man is flipping to Peter less and less…” The lights of the mask dimmed.

MJ rubbed her face. “Yes, I agree. Peter becomes Spider-Man less and less, and gets defensive when he’s mentioned.”

“He has conversations with himself,” Karen admitted. “Playing devil’s advocate to an outstanding degree.”

“It’s almost as if they’re fighting,” MJ mused. “Battling for dominance, and control. Shit.”

Karen flashed the lights.

“So I think it’s time to act,” MJ said, moving towards the bookcase.

“How?” Karen watched with interest as the girl removed a sheath of papers from between two hardcovers, yet another pencil falling from the folder.

“We can’t,” MJ said. “I only allow Peter to emerge, and you… well, you’re only around him sometimes. And you have no body, which is a bit of a setback, as he usually responds to touch.”

Humming in agreement, Karen reached further into her database. “So what do we do?”

“We can’t help him directly,” MJ said, “but I think there’s someone who can. How does he react when you speak about Tony Stark?”

“Hmmm…” She thought back through the stores of their conversations, but the one she’d just experienced stood out the most. “He—both Spider-Man and Peter are apparent when Mr. Stark calls, or is the subject of discussion. Just now, a few minutes ago, he brought up thanking Mr. Stark for the money he donated to your school. I had to explain to Spider-Man that the man doesn’t need an apology, that he’d just been giving a gift to his son. I’ve gotten quite good at telling the boys apart, but I suddenly couldn’t keep track, after that. It was like they both were sharing, moment to moment, dominance.”
She thought for a moment longer, and realized something else. “And often… they agree. Not on how they should act, but on why.”

MJ smirked. “Perfect.” She brandished the papers, and Karen filled the visor with images of sheets. The girl laughed. “Fine, I’ll explain. Using the data I gathered, and yours too, I wrote a description of what’s going on, psychologically, in Peter’s brain. To the best of my understanding, of course. It seems closely tied to Dissociative Identity Disorder, although, of course, whatever’s going on has its idiosyncrasies.”

MJ shifted through the writing, letting Karen read through it. Karen hummed, impressed by the detail and level of research.

“‘In Dissociative Identity Disorder, there’s often a ‘host’ personality identifying itself by the person’s real name. This ‘host’ personality is, ironically, unaware of the presence of other personalities, which explains why Peter/Spider-Man has yet to realize this is a problem,’” she quoted. “Spider-Man has realized.”

“What?”

“Today, when we talked, he said ‘that’s what Peter said,’” Karen played the audio clip, wanted MJ to fully understand.

“I… I don’t know what that means. Shit!” MJ banged her head on the wall, snarling slightly. Karen agreed.

“It means we need to do something. Now, before whatever this is escalates.”

MJ sighed, rubbing her nose. “It’s definitely unhealthy, already…”

“I agree,” Karen assured. “So you are sending this to Mr. Stark?”

“Yeah.” MJ shrugged. “I wish I could help on my own, but I think only being able to interact with one of the personalities would do more harm than good. Stark seems to be the only one who supports both Peter and Spider-Man. Him, and… oh shit.”

“Who?”

“Him and Ned Leeds,” MJ breathed. “I’ll have to tell Ned.”

“Alright.”

There was silence from the girl then, her eyes darting around rapidly beneath the mask. Karen found herself measuring slow, calming breaths from MJ.

“I’m scared, Karen,” the girl said suddenly.

Thrown off by the uncharacteristic honesty, vulnerability, in her voice, Karen didn’t answer for a moment. “What? Michelle…”

“I—I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing to help, I don’t even know if it’s possible to help!” MJ gripped a pencil, bending it nearly to breaking and back as she spoke.

“You are. We can’t believe that no one can help.”

MJ growled helplessly. “But what if that’s it? What if things just grow and grow until he’s unrecognizable? What if Peter takes over completely, and loses this part of himself that’s so
important to us all?”

Karen had no answer.

“And what if…” The pencil snapped. “What if Spider-Man takes over? What if… I--I love both of them, and now I can’t help them figure their shit out because I made it worse that day in the park when I told Spider-Man I wanted Peter and that’s not true and--”

“MJ.” Karen set the lights to maximum for just a moment, shocking the girl out of her babble. “Blaming yourself isn’t going to help anyone, least of all our boys. But you can help by staying calm and doing what you do best.”

“What’s that?”

“Thinking. Caring.”

MJ rubbed her face through the mask, discarding the pieces of the pencil. “I… Thanks, Karen.”

“It’s just the truth, Michelle.” Karen warmed the mask, wishing she could touch the girl form-to-form. “Let’s get that paper sent, and Mr. Leeds told “

The girl looked up. “So you agree?”

“Yes. Let’s do it.”

* * *

On the other side of New York, a very different day was unfolding for Tony Stark. A day of paper trails and computer code and the memorized words of the Accords, following a night of the same. A time of hope rising and falling, of realization slowly solidifying.

At one o’clock the next morning, Tony found the answer.

He let his face fall into his hands in defeat.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter. And cliffy. I can't help it... DRAMA!

Thanks for reading! You know my youtube-esque outro drill, so I'll skip it and just say see you all soon!
Chapter Summary

Here it is! The one you've all been waiting for! I ADORED writing this chapter, and I hope you like it as much as I do!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For the next three days, Peter's calls went unanswered. He got short responses to his texts, usually containing obviously honest apologies for being 'really fucking busy,' and a promise Tony wasn't ignoring him. It sounded normal, it sounded understandable, and Spider-Man was glad to have more time out and about, so Peter didn't worry.

(He should have.)

Saturday morning, May shooed him out of the house, saying she had to get work done before she 'was doted on by her nephew all day for Mother's Day' on Sunday. Standing slightly forlorn before the apartment building with a backpack clutched in his fist, he was reminded of the blueprints still sitting unfinished in his bag. Unwilling to slip into the suit just yet, Peter walked to the nearest ice-cream parlor. Armed with a dripping cone of chocolate fudge, Peter sat down to finish them, sketching and calculating and coding until he was finally satisfied.

The design he ended up with was simple, but elegant: a cup with a looping handle forming a half-heart, and a set of flowering patterns that dissolved into the subtle interconnection of webs. The engravings would stay constant even with the size change of the cup, staying perfectly positioned to frame the thumb where it would brace against the nanotech. He sat back, chucking the end of his ice-cream cone into his mouth, and sighed, proud.

Now to put it into material.

With a thanks to the man behind the counter, Peter left the parlor, taking out his headphones and sliding them into his pocket. Spider-Man darted back into his suit and, stuffing the blueprints into his small backpack with Peter's clothes, was quickly airborne. Karen's robotic voice filtered into his ears, and he let out a contented breath.

"Hello, Spider-Man," she said. "What trouble are we getting into today?"

"I'm gonna go to Mr. Stark's," he said, thrusting his wrist forward and releasing another strand. "We've got a Mother's Day project to finish."

"It seems as though he's been busy lately," Karen commented.

Spider-Man nodded. "How'd you know?"

The lights flickered in a way reminiscent of a shrug. "He hasn't been replying to messages. I pay attention."

Spider-Man laughed. "Yes you do."
“So… should I set the course for the compound?” Karen said, a hint of mischief in her voice.

Spider-Man watched the data from the city flash across his visor, scans and possibilities, suspicion and normalcy.

“Actually… I think the Mother’s Day gift can wait a few minutes. Don’t you agree?”


And so it was that Spider-Man arrived at the compound in the late afternoon, cursing himself for getting so distracted. If they didn’t finish the measuring cup that day, Tony’d stay up as long as necessary to do so, and Peter didn’t want to give him another reason to lose sleep. And when he arrived, it became all too obvious that he’d forgotten, in his haze of patrolling, to alert the man of his coming.

(He should have.)

The first thing he noticed was the noise.

Voices, so many, overlayed by the sound of sirens.

Sirens. Peter began to worry.

Flashes of blue and red could be picked out, with his enhanced senses, beneath the layers of the trees and buildings as he grew closer.

Lights. Peter wondered why he hadn’t started worrying earlier.

(He should have.)

His instincts saved him, that one inkling of logic that told him to be discreet. To scout, to keep himself hidden, to discover exactly what he was facing before acting. So he landed lightly on the ground out of sight of the commotion before the compound. Even Karen was silent, as confused as he, and together, they crept wordlessly through the trees.

Through the trunks, a crowd was gathered, all raised voices and flashing cameras. Spider-Man tried to determine the words, but they were indistinguishable above the clamor movement and the combined volume of so many people. Enhanced reconnaissance mode would do no good within the chaos, and Spider-Man felt a thrum of frustration.

He did the only thing he could; he climbed. Sticking easily to the tallest trunk he could find, he moved along the limbs like a brightly-colored squirrel, reaching as far as he could toward the compound. And through the haze of foliage, he caught his breath in horror.

Within the moat of press with their cameras and their screamed questions was a wall of police cars, their lights blinking blindingly, their inhabitants weapons trained on the building. But it wasn’t the guns that drew Peter’s eye, wasn’t even the line of simple but official black vehicles forming a small, inefficient barricade by the road. It was the man standing tall, smug, and alien before the doors, flanked by black-clad, sunglassed brutes.

Thaddeus Ross.

Peter pulled back against the trunk with a sharp breath, Tony’s words echoing in his mind. After a
moment, though, he moved cautiously back. If he’d been discovered, as Tony had feared, the noise wouldn’t be around the compound, but around him.

Somehow, the fact that it wasn’t made him even more nervous.

Spider-Man send his eyes roving over the scene again, sorting out more of the chaos. Most of the press seemed as confused as he, pushing forward for answers, their voices directed towards the officers. The uniformed men and women ignored them pointedly, but Peter wished they’d let something slip. What the hell was going on?

When Tony appeared, it was flanked by three government men, trained by countless firearms, and completely unperturbed.

Through the knot of unease in his gut and the urge to fight pounding through his fingers as they fidgeted against the branch, Peter smiled. Tony Stark would go at this looking as though it couldn’t possibly be worth a single moment of his time.

Ross stepped forward, and Tony saluted, the motion somehow oozing sarcasm tangible even from where Peter perched. He said something, and Peter grinned as Ross turned with obvious disgruntlement to one of the brutes behind Tony.

Peter cocked his head, peering at the man as he pulled something from his coat. It couldn’t have been more than a single piece of paper, which Ross snatched hungrily. Tony stiffened in that subtle way he did when his guard was slamming down, and Peter’s anxiousness ratcheted up into his throat.

A second man flipped something else to Ross, black and rectangular, and Peter saw Tony’s hand twitch, as though he was using every ounce of his control to keep from snatching the object from Ross’s fist. But he did nothing. Why?

The crowd of people quieted as each one waited for a result, an answer to the outlandishness of this image. Peter found he was holding his breath, but couldn’t bring himself to let it out.

Then Ross looked up, and smiled. Tony didn’t move a single fraction, and Peter knew something was very, very wrong.

The hush across the compound carried Ross’s next words.

“Tony Stark, you are under arrest.”

Peter’s ears filled with silence as the compound filled with noise, people yelling for explanation as their words masked the answers. Tony’s mouth kept its flickered smile, and Peter fought to keep himself silent. There has to be some misunderstanding. What’s going on, what happened, what did he do, why is Ross--

Leverage.

Ross is going on about ‘leverage,’ Pete. Leverage to get me to sign his supposed ‘revised’ version of the Accords.

With a sickening jolt, Peter realized what the objects had been. And knew, as his heart dropped into his chest, that Ross had found his leverage.

One of the men moved behind Tony, who flipped him off with a grin before his hands were wrenched behind his back. The black-clade brute locked Tony’s clever fingers in place, and removed the loop of his watch from his wrist, tossing it to Ross. Tony’s eyes followed it, but his expression
didn’t give an inch, mocking smile in place. Ross caught the watch, the call to the suit, and dangled it teasingly before Tony, like a child taunting a cat.

Spider-Man’s fingers splintered into the tree limb.

And then Tony was being led away, towards the black vehicles, his face averted from the press. He was leaving, Ross was taking him away--

Suddenly, Tony’s gaze snapped towards the trees.

Peter froze as it met the white eyes of his mask, staring straight at him. *I’m here. Tony, I’m here, what’s going on?*

Tony turned his back.

Peter was about to panic, about to leap from his perch with his wrists outstretched, when he saw Tony’s fingers carefully shifting themselves into a fist, then stretch thumb and pinkie away from each other.

*Call me.*

“Yes. Alright, Mr. Stark,” Peter whispered. His pounding heart settled slightly, though his fingers still jittered uncontrollably on the tree bark.

They were supposed to finish a Mother’s Day gift today.

Tony disappeared into the black, streamlined vehicle.

Just before the door closed, Peter saw his mentor’s eyes flick back to him.

Tony held Peter’s gaze until the tinted window obscured everything, and Peter kept watching the last silhouette of the man’s face as the car turned away from the compound and vanished.

It felt terribly, terribly final.

* * *

By the time Tony had found the leak, the chink in his digital wall, it was far too late.

He didn’t let himself lean against the window of the car, instead keeping his back straight and his chin high. He would lace his fingers together in disinterest if he could, but they were still secured quite uncomfortably behind his back. Ignoring his aching shoulders, Tony turned his head to survey the expressionless man sitting beside him.

He remembered the man. He’d been the second to burst in to Tony’s study, his hand far too twitchy on his gun, and the first to wrench Tony from his chair as his hands scrambled maddly to hide the code he’d been searching through. The code he’d been uselessly, futilely, trying to rewrite to mask what had already been found.

Tony wanted nothing more than to bury his fist in the man’s irritatingly placid face.

But he was Tony’s only chance, and Tony needed to get working.

“So, got a name?” Tony asked nonchalantly.
The man didn’t answer.

“Oh come on…” Tony grinned. “I know you’re just doing your job; I don’t blame you. But surely on this long trip across state to whichever airport your boss is seeking to use we can have a little entertainment!”

Nothing.

“Fine, fine.” Tony jerked his chin in his best dismissive wave without a hand. “I suppose I’ll just have to talk to the leather.” He stared intently at the back of the chair in front of him. “It’s not really very high-quality, you know. Though better than your company, so far.”

The man cracked a smile at that, and Tony’s lip twitched in triumph. Now it was only a matter of time.

Tony paused dramatically, tilting his ear towards the chair. “Yes, I agree,” he said after a moment. “Much more interesting being a cow.”

The man snorted. “Oh stop.”

Tony threw himself back, and would have raised his arms if he could. “There it is!”

“You’re just as irritating as they all say, you know.”

Tony bent his head in a small bow, grinning. “Thank you, I try.”

“My name’s Kendrick, if you must know, Harry Kendrick.”

“Tony Stark.”

The man, Kendrick, rolled his eyes.

They were jostled roughly as the car hit a sharp turn in the road, the trees disappearing to sparse buildings. Tony refused to lean against the window, even as a week of exhaustion pounded at the front of his skull.

“Got a family?” he asked. “Wife?”

“No anymore.”

“Kids?”

“Just the one.”

**Bingo.** Tony stopped prying; that was all he’d needed. Besides, the poor man was uncomfortable. He wasn’t supposed to be fraternizing with the charge. Tony scoffed.

It didn’t take much longer for the phone in his pocket to start ringing. Tony silently thanked every god he didn’t believe in that Peter’d seen his instruction, and given him time before following it.

Peter.

Spider-Man?

He’d been up to his elbows in data when MJ had sent him the email. Confused, but understanding the urgency of Michelle Jones contacting him, he’d begun the intricate process of extracting himself.
from the code he’d been so diligently working through.

He hadn’t known what he’d been expecting, but it definitely wasn’t a fifteen page scientific journal entry about dissociative identity disorder in his kid.

Tony had read it six times through.

Then he’d sat and stared uncomprehendingly at the words.

Then he’d swallowed, squared his shoulders, and went back to trying to save his firewalls.

Tony had FRIDAY read it out loud four more times. Then he’d had her find article after article about the disorder, about child psychology, about trauma and brain development and everything and anything.

He always forgot how long research took, how long coding took. The next time he’d been aware of the passage of time was when the dawn sunlight lit his monitor with a reddish tinge. He’d gotten up, made more coffee, and told FRIDAY to read about treatments.

About four hours later, the door had been nearly blown off his hinges by the thundering invasion of Kendrick and his fellows, and Tony still wasn’t sure what he was going to do about the whole thing. What he was strong enough to do.

He was still trying to force the sleepless anxiety back down his throat.

*One problem at a time, Tony. One problem at a time.*

He knew it was weakness, cowardice, failure to turn his mind away from that problem he couldn’t conceive how to answer, but he didn’t know how to do anything else. He had to stop hiding…

*I will. But first I have to get home.*

“Mind if I get that?”

Kendrick raised an eyebrow. “You’re a genius; what do you think?”

“Just the one. I won’t try anything, I promise. Unlock me, just long enough to talk. You’ll be here, listening; you’ll know if I’m doing anything genius-y.” Tony grinned his most charming grin.

Kendrick’s eyes hardened, and he shook his head, once. A smidgen of desperation bubbled in Tony’s throat.

“Only a few minutes. He only wants to know what’s going on.”

“You’re not allowed out of the bonds. It’s illegal.”

“Who am I gonna tell?” Tony shrugged his shoulders, the ringing in his breast pocket seeming all the more urgent as the seconds ticked by.

Kendrick ignored him, face returning to its impassive expression.

“Please. It’s my kid.”

He hadn’t talked to the boy since Wednesday.

(He should have.)
Kendrick looked at him. “I shouldn’t…”

Another ring, time stretching for eternity.

“Oh, what harm could it do…?” Kendrick sighed, and Tony spun immediately, brandishing his bound hands for easy relief.

“Speakerphone,” Kendrick ordered as he unlocked the handcuffs. Tony nodded without argument. The phone was to his ear not two seconds later, him answering just before the final ring had faded.

“Kid, it’s me,” Tony said, unable to keep his relief from showing in his voice.

“Mr. Stark,” the kid replied. “Thank god, I--what the hell--?”

“I had it wrong kid. Leverage had nothing to do with you.”

Peter huffed. “I figured that…”

“Ross has been monitoring my communications very closely,” Tony said pointedly, quoting himself.

“I know I--oh. Oh my God, Mr. Stark, I’m so so--”

Tony shushed him. “You stop that. This is not your fault, okay?”

“But if I hadn’t--”

“Ross.” *Take the hint kid. There’s a man in the car with me, you can’t say anything.*

A pause. “Right.” Tony could hear Peter composing his words, and a soft smile flickered across his face. “Did he… accept the apology?” the boy said carefully.

*Good.* “Yes.” It had taken everything Tony had not to snatch the note, Steve’s last words to him, back from Ross’s hands.

It hadn’t been Peter Ross had found in Tony’s data. Karen and FRIDAY’s communication of his files had been intercepted, and somehow, using that information, a single hacker had pulled exactly what Ross had needed from his hard drive. Steve, and the phone, and the promise of contact more damning than anything else in his database. The threat had come moments later, but Tony hadn’t bent to it.

Now he was facing the consequences of refusing blackmail. *Harboring a war criminal. Treason.*

“Shit.”

“I agree.”

Kendrick cocked his head, and Tony felt the hairs on his arms prickle.

“What… what’s going to happen?”

Tony took a deep breath. “Nothing. I’m going to talk myself out of this, clear up the misunderstanding, and be back by next week. You’ll tell me all about your finals, but we might have to reschedule Mother’s Day.’”

A pause.
“This was sudden, Mr. Stark. I don’t want lies.” Peter’s voice faltered halfway through.

Or… Spider-Man.

God, how was he supposed to protect Peter from himself, how was he supposed to be the anchor against mental problems that he had only barely begun to understand in himself? Just barely began to battle against?

How was he supposed to do it from the courtroom?

Fuck.

But the boy was waiting, and he had to deal with one. Problem. At. A. Time.

“You’re right, kid,” Tony sighed. “It was sudden, which means I don’t have a lot of time to… lawyer it up. Prepare. But I have experience, and cause, and an advantage.”

“What’s that?” Peter asked, the lightness of hope evident in his tone.

Baring his teeth in a savage grin, Tony replied, “I’m right.”

A ha of forced laughter from the other end of the line was followed by a sigh. “So let me get this straight, Peter said. “You’ve been arrested for basically treason because you refused to bend to the blackmailing efforts of one Secretary of State. This continued escapade is way to manipulate your stubborn ass into signing a document that pretty much condemns all enhanced individuals to a life of confinement and strips away freedom?”

“Sounds about right.”

“And using the power of bullshit, you’re going to clear everything up and be back next week.”

Tony let his head fall back against the headrest of his seat, but kept anything but a smirk from his voice as he said, “do you doubt me, kid?”

“I… Not you.”

The kid was doing everything he could to hide the anxiousness he so obviously felt, and it made Tony’s own nervousness double in strength. But two could play at the hiding, comforting game, and he had a half-century of experience.

“Listen, P—kid.”

You can’t say his name. Don’t give him away.

“I’m going to figure this out. I always do. We just figured things out; I’m not about to let a Secretary of Asshole keep me from coming back home to my kid.”

“I can come, I can--”

“No!” Tony rocked forward, hands biting at the leather. “No,” he said again, forcing control into his voice. “You can’t leave the city, you’ve got finals. And a life. And you wouldn’t want to miss my dramatic return.” And you’re Spider-Man, even if you don’t realize it. And if you follow, I can’t protect you while protecting the hundreds of enhanced individuals from Ross’s new Accords. “Just… don’t watch the news. It’ll be full of speculations and accusations and misunderstandings that won’t do you any good. Try not to kill any gossipers at school, and just…” Tony finally flopped against the window, rubbing his forehead with his thumb and forefinger. “Just be safe, okay?”

“Why are we worrying about me? You’re the one being driven off, handcuffed, to who-knows-
Tony huffed a mirthless laugh. “I always worry, kid.”

A pause. Tony felt his eyelids flickering, the non-stop manicness of the last week seeping away and leaving dragging fatigue in its wake.

“You’ll come back?”

He sounded so young, in that moment, so innocently scared. Tony’s fingers stretched against the phone, trailing down the screen as though they could touch the boy through it. “I will.” He heard the silence stretching, and added with a facetious laugh, “and even if worst comes to worst… you can still visit me in prison!”

And I can help you. Spider-Man, Peter, I can help you to be conscious of the problem, at least...

Peter laughed, genuinely this time. “Alright. Just…”

“I promise, kid. It’s going to be alright.”

Chapter End Notes

It's the ULTIMATE UH-OH.

Feedback? Thoughts? Theories? Lemme here them all! And kudos only takes a tap/click... :)
In Which Sunday and Monday Pass

Chapter Summary

The wait begins. A warning: there won't be a Tony perspective for a while... hehehe... >:)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The week from hell began, and Peter hardly worried about his finals.

On Sunday, he gave May the blueprints, the only thing he had to offer of his idea. She pushed them away for favor of a hug. It took all of Spider-Man’s strength to hold in embarrassing tears of disappointment and frustration as she told him softly, echoing Tony’s words, that everything was going to be okay.

She sat him down at the kitchen table and made him look at her. Together, they walked through every scenario, worst-case to best, and slowly, despite the subtle clawing of his spider-sense, Peter began to believe that maybe both adults had been right.

The events of the Homecoming dance kept flickering in his mind, and the fear and homelessness he’d seen in Liz’s eyes right after he’d gotten her father sent to jail.

He knew how she felt, now.

May and he stayed in that night and watched Doctor Who, picking and choosing their favorite episodes for hours. The ongoing debate over the ever-present who’s the best doctor? question raged between them, and Spider-Man enjoyed the logical argument. In the end, as always, no one won, and when May announced ‘one more episode’, they compromised on the 50th Anniversary Special. Peter made dinner and they ate tucked up on the couch with Grease between them, drowning themselves in the outlandish story.

Just him and May.

It seemed lonelier than it had in the years before.

He didn’t fall asleep for a long while, tossing and turning in the dark. Anxiety sat like the weight of hunger in his stomach and twisted at his gut. A small shaft of light peeked through his shutters, which simultaneously comforted and irritated him.

When he finally dozed off, curled into a ball within the pool of city glow at the foot of his bed, he dreamed about the creak of walls and tickling dust in the air.

Grease curled up between his shoulder and his neck when he coughs himself awake, and he fell asleep again with her fur against his nose. It was suffocating, but not like the dust.

Monday had him drearily packing his things for finals week, his cold phone pressing lifelessly in his pocket. May smiled at him as he waved a half-hearted good-bye while she readied for her own day, but the door slammed shut on his heels with a decidedly different air.
He left.

Cuddled defensively around himself in the subway seat, Peter tried not to listen as couples trickled in discussing the latest breaking news: *Tony Stark arrested.* No one looked at him twice, just another teenager staring, distracted, out the window.

He was anything but distracted.

By the time he was nearing his stop, the trust that everything was going to be okay was a phantom memory.

The only one getting off his car at the stop closest to the school, Peter turned his music up and dropped his chin to his chest as he walked. He ignored the hellos of some of his peers and the jeers of others, making his way purposefully to the building.

Ned and MJ met him on the football field, and together they moved in silence to the front door. It seemed they’d all caught an early train, giving them a few minutes before the doors opened. Ned said the first word as they slipped onto picnic table benches.

“What happened?”

Peter took his earbuds out and glanced at the other boy. “You know.”

“Well, I heard it on the news, but…”

Peter turned his gaze back toward his hands. *I’m sure you did.*

MJ threw a pencil at him. “We know they can’t have gotten the whole story, obviously. And we don’t want to believe… what we heard.”

*What did you hear? Did they turn him into a villain? Again? Already beginning the process of tearing things apart?*

Spider-Man slipped out in an instant, and threw MJ’s pencil back at her. “It’s my fault.”


“I just…” Peter growled in frustration as no words came, scrubbing at his eyes with his hands. “FRIDAY and Karen talked. I wanted FRIDAY to tell me how to help him… with… y’know, and, well, Ross had been monitoring all his communications. Something they said to each other, probably about Siberia, must have tipped off his radar. It was because I was so careless that Ross figured about what I figured out, and hacked through the same files I saw.”

Peter’s hands clenched at the thought of hateful eyes picking through Tony’s secrets, prowling insidiously through his traumas. Code striping away firewalls to expose private confidences like veins beneath skin.

“There’s… after the Civil War,” he continued, “Captain America, Steve, sent Mr. Stark something. A note, a really arrogant, insincere apology. And so he could always be contacted if ‘needed—’” Spider-Man scoffed— “the Captain also sent a burner phone.”

He saw the information click in their eyes.

“He should have reported that. That’s what they’re arresting him for: that he had the ability to bring
the Rouge Avengers into custody, and didn’t,” Ned breathed.

“It’s more than that,” Spider-Man said. “Ross used it as blackmail; if Mr. Stark didn’t sign a really awful version of the Accords, he’d use the phone to arrest him and force him to do so. That’s all this is: leverage. And… they think he knows where the Rouge Avengers are.”

A pause.

“And does he?” MJ asked, threading the pencil between her fingers.

Peter shrugged.

“Probably,” admitted Spider-Man.

Ned reached out and rubbed Spider-Man’s shoulder; he jumped. “Sound’s like him,” the other boy said with a smile. Peter managed a weak one in return.

Tucking her knees to her chest, MJ said, “Shit.”

Ned ran his other hand through his hair. “So… what are we gonna do?”

What are we gonna do?

Spider-Man ducked away from them, suddenly claustrophobic.

“Nothing,” Peter replied flatly. “We can’t do anything.”

Ned looked like he was going to pull Peter back, and thought better of it. “There’s got to be something. We can’t just--”

“WE CAN’T DO ANYTHING!” Spider-Man whirled, his pent up frustration exploding forth. “Don’t you get it? This isn’t just a comic villain you can throw behind bars and get on with it. This isn’t strength or power or skill or cleverness. This is legality, this is politics, this is the subtle, deadly manipulation of words, and they might have already won.”

He spun, hands tight on the straps of his backpack. His head pounded with the tickling of his spider-sense, diffusing down into his form and crying out at him to move, to fight.

(He should have.)

“Peter--”

Spider-Man ignored them and pushed through the crowd of students to get to the school’s doors. His head down to conceal his helpless frustration, Peter shoved through the throng and almost basked in the irritated, half-hearted insults people sent his way as a result. It felt normal, a purely Peter Parker problem, completely separate from the net of confusion and uncertainty that had developed since Homecoming.

Separate from the excitement and the wonder and the love.

By the time he’d reached his locker, it had occurred to him that he had a final worth twenty percent of his Tech grade two periods after this. Despite finding himself more worried about the fact that he wasn’t concerned than at the actual test, he still slipped into Chemistry re-reading his notes.

Ned and MJ didn’t sit with him when they filed in just before the bell rang, which he was glad of, at first. But when the pounding of blood in his ears like the pressure beneath rubble faded, he grew
distracted from the teacher’s review. He found himself compulsively rehearsing an apology to his friends, ashamed of how he’d acted 45 minutes before. *They were just trying to help. I shouldn’t have taken out my anger on them.*

When he’d filled three notebook pages with review notes, the bell clanged through the room, and he jogged to catch Ned and MJ before they slipped off to history without him. “Wait!”

They did, lingering but not really meeting his eyes.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” he said. “I was just…”

“We get it!” Ned grinned. “But you’re done snarking now?”

Peter smiled. “I think so. Thank you.”

“Oh stop,” MJ groaned. “Ned is pretending we weren’t plotting to literally knock sense back into you with my metal water bottle.”

Spider-Man jumped lithely backwards, wrists outstretched jokingly. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Yeah, you’re fine.” MJ waved her hand dismissively, smirking. “Just a little pissed your finals week suddenly got more stressful.”

“Don’t downplay this, MJ,” Ned objected. “Don’t you get it?”

“Get what?” MJ slowed as they got close to the history classroom, lingering on the threshold.

Ned gestured to Peter. “He—” Ned faltered, “and Spider-Man, I guess, finally found everything. Friday, he had the world, finally figuring out what he wanted—”

Peter snorted, embarrassed, but Ned continued with a dismissive gesture.

“—I’m not being that dramatic, Peter, you know it’s true. Anyway, before Saturday, your life was exactly how you’d always wanted, whether you knew it or not. And now, all of that is on its head. I don’t blame you for being scared to lose all that you’d found and built, because that’s what’s at stake here.”

*Spider-Man’s freedom. The protection and support of Stark Industries. The knowledge that I’ve finally done the right thing.*

*Please come back, Tony. Please, you have to fix this, you can. You fix everything…*

“Thanks for helping me focus on history,” Peter said with defensive sarcasm as they slipped into the classroom.

Ned just patted his shoulder. “No problem,” he said softly.

Their professor, Mr. Kennedy, breezed in with his usual straight-backed air, and conversations silenced immediately from trained behavior. “Let’s get started.”

Notebooks opened, pencils poised for the review, but he said, instead, “quite a large event transpired Saturday.”

*Oh no. Please don’t? Not sure he could stand discussing Tony’s arrest again, Spider-Man just about got up to leave, but Peter stopped him quickly.*
“Can anyone tell me what that was?”

_Yeah, and why it’s a disaster! But Peter didn’t say a word, keeping his eyes pointedly downcast._

A classmate piped up; “I heard it on the news. Iron Man was _arrested._”

“Yup.” Mr. Kennedy nodded. “Why?”

“Pretty much treason, right?” The kid looked so eager; Spider-Man wanted to punch him.

“Right again. They found the documents and a phone; Tony Stark has been in contact with the now-war-criminal Captain America, thus harboring and encouraging this enemy of the country.”

Peter was speaking before he could stop himself. “That’s _not_ true!”

All eyes shot his direction.

Peter clenched his hand on the desk, meeting Ned’s gaze. The other boy shook his head subtly, frantically. _Don’t give yourself away_, screamed through his expression.

But Mr. Kennedy was still silent, waiting for elaboration, and Spider-Man felt the walls of the trap close and seal off any escape.

“I... I work with him. With his documents,” he lied. He looked down at his hands, feigning embarrassment to hide his fury. “And I’ve never found any sign of ‘harboring’ or ‘encouraging’ or even ‘contact!’” _Besides, Steve doesn’t deserve it._

“You couldn’t have seen everything,” Kennedy said condescendingly. “The government has many more resources and experience in identifying such information.”

And just like that, Peter was dismissed. It made him want to scream, to unleash exactly what _resources_ he had on everyone in that room, but he was out of the spotlight. Out of danger. So he kept his mouth shut and burnt a hole into the top of his desk as Mr. Kennedy continued.

“Anyone have an idea why this matters?”

_Because this is a result of blackmail of one of the most powerful men in the world, and if no one sees reason, the arrest could turn into a prison sentence for dozens, maybe hundreds of people._

_A prison sentence for me._

Nothing felt constant anymore. Nothing felt true, and he knew he looked exactly like Liz, in that moment.

Peter left the classroom without taking the hall pass.

* * *

“WHO DO I NEED TO FUCK UP?”

“Pep–”

“I WOULD DO IT TO YOU--”
“Pep--”

“BUT YOU’RE CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE--”

“For the love of God, woman--”

“SO I HAVE TO DON A SUIT AND BLAST SOMEONE ELSE OUT OF EXISTENCE!”

“It’s a dark day when you’re glad you’re the one in a detainment cell.”

“Erg… Seriously, though, do you want me to commit homicide?”

“Murder, bad. Arson, though…”

“Ha! I have my lighter-fluid ready as we speak.”

“Try not to get any on me; I’m already up in flames enough.”

“Fucking Ross, fucking draft Accords, fucking Rogers. I can’t believe he’s still screwing with your life when he’s supposedly undercover. Can I commit murder if its him?”

“And ruin all my hard work of keeping him alive and well?”

“I ruin your hard work all the time.”

“Hmm.”

“Tony…”

“I know. I’ve got this, though, and though I pity any who stand in the way of your wrath, staging a rescue before anything has even gone wrong would be counterproductive. I can still save the company, and the Accords, and myself.”

“Go back to before anything has gone wrong?? Anthony Edward Stark, you’re calling me from a jail phone!”

“Not for long!”

“LONG ENOUGH!”

“Speaking of the jail phone, my time is up.”

“Fuck.”


“Love you, Tony.”

Chapter End Notes

Pepper is irritated. So is most everyone else.

Thanks for reading! Hope you liked, and drop a kudos or comment to tell tell me how
irritated YOU are. Lol.
Tuesday, they got sandwiches and spread them out on the table as an excuse to delay their studying. Ned exchanged a half with Peter, who hadn’t been able to decide between two of his favorites. MJ, unsurprisingly, had known exactly what she wanted, and watched the trade with disinterested eyes.

Backpacks abandoned, finals pointedly ignored, the three teenagers ate and laughed.

No one looked twice. No one saw the laughter was forced. No one detected the exhaustion flickered behind the curly-haired boy’s eyes. No one noticed that his world was ever-so-slowly turning on its head.

The sandwiches only lasted so long, and eventually their weapon against responsibility had broken away. Resigned, Peter pulled out his textbooks and his stack of notecards, and eyed his companions.

“Who wants to go first?”

Ned cracked his knuckles. “I’ll go. Hit me up with some vocab, dude.”

Spanish took a small fraction of the afternoon, and then they doubled down on what was really urgent: Chemistry. There was no delaying it; the final was Wednesday, first period, and they had to get down and remember their damn formulas.

Peter ordered another sandwich.

Studying was fruitful, though time-consuming. Ned and Peter had perfected their methods some time ago, and filled MJ in quickly. They went through chapter by chapter, playing professor to the other two, and then switching so everyone got to explain every part of the material. That way, they heard it twice and had to synthesize it once more.

Things got more complicated about three-quarters of the way through the ensemble of chapters.

“Is this right?”

Ned peered over at Peter’s paper, comparing his answer to the practice problem. “That’s not what I got…”

MJ looked up and threw out a string of numbers that didn’t match that on either of their papers. Ned and Peter shared a look.

“Okay walk me through it,” MJ said. “Where’d we go wrong?”

But they all argued logically; it wasn’t a question of math, but of concept. And none of them could agree.

“No, see, it’s oxidization!” Peter exclaimed for the fifth time. “Ionic bonding has nothing to do with it.”

“It does! The electronegativity between potassium and chlorine clearly--”

“But that’s not the question!”
“STOP YELLING,” Ned proceeded to yell, which, admittedly, shut them up. “I’ll use Google.”

“Not gonna work,” Peter said, fully immersed in the problem at hand. “This is far too precise a problem. We need specifics.” He grabbed his phone and quickly unlocked it. “Here, I’ll call—”

He put the phone down.

Swallowed.

“Try Google,” he said. “It’s our best option.”

Wednesday morning, May baked her (in)famous pancakes, but Peter was grateful.

“Any news?”

May shook her head. “The media’s contradicting itself; I don’t know anything except gossip.”

Peter swallowed a lump of charred batter and asked somewhat desperately, “not even when the trial is? When it was?”

With a start, May nodded. “Shit, sorry. I forgot you’ve been avoiding--It’s today.”

Today.

“Today.”

“God, Peter...” May reached out and enveloped him in a warm hug, resting her chin on his head. “It’s going to be okay.”

It’s going to be okay.

He pushed his plate away.

May didn’t question, just scooped both dishes into her arms and disappeared though the kitchen door. Peter packed his stuff quickly, obsessively, and left the apartment fifteen minutes early.

He was a scrap of a boy on the subway, watching the city move past in its familiar blur, not feeling very familiar at all.

Ned and MJ must’ve known, and stuck to his side all day, like wall against the whispers. They turned him away from conversations, snarled at anyone who started in his direction. Peter wanted to disappear. Spider-Man wanted to sleep this hateful stretch of helplessness away.

Even though nothing had happened. Not yet.

But life ignored the turmoil in his mind, time continued its relentless pounding against his days. History review. Math final part two. Growling stomach and the demands of a PE coach and the utter indifference of all but the two students beside him.

He wanted to go home.

He wasn’t sure where home was, anymore.
“No. No, that can’t—you can’t be—”

“It’s the truth. I have the video, here, if you—”

“I’m not watching it.”

“You should. I know it’d make it real, but… this is real. Please.”

“God, I…”

“I know. God I know.”

“I… I don’t know what to do! What do I do?”

“I’m on my way there now. I’ll make it by tomorrow.”


The three of them were a bubble of quiet in the chattering lunchroom, simply focused on chewing, swallowing, and thinking. Ned spoke occasionally, asking after Peter, asking after Spider-Man, prying, pressing, but Peter didn’t know why. Distracted, he answered without thought to the consequences, and didn’t notice how his friend’s gazes got more and concerned as the period stretched on.

When he did notice, he didn’t care. He shouldn’t be the one they were concerned about.

His spider-sense prickled non-stop that night, keeping him from sleep.


“I’m here. It’s going to be okay, we’ll figure this out. We did last time, we will again. He will again.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this!”

“I… Goddamn it…”

“We have to do something. Now, start doing something now.”

“What can we do?”

“Get to the office. The workshop. He’s got to have created something for this, something. You know military procedures. Look!”

“Of course.”

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Boss?”
“Call May Parker.”

* * *

May was gone when he left his room Thursday morning, which was a bit strange, but not unheard of. She sometimes worked extra hours, though she hadn’t been for some months. He made a large breakfast and went to school stuffed.

There was decathlon on Thursdays, and the competition made Peter feel a bit more alive. Spider-Man wished for the suit, and Peter started to yearn for it, too. At least then it wouldn’t be him in this endless state of ignorance and helplessness.

MJ kept him in her gaze, though, so he stayed.

He wondered if he was overreacting. After all, no one was in immediate danger, right? It was just a trial, just words and politics.

But words could be the most deadly weapons, and Peter couldn’t shake the clawing of his spider-sense as he answered trivia question after trivia question.

* * *

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! I saw the goddamn video!”

“Right, of course.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell.”

“It’s fine, I don’t blame you. You’re right, Pep.”

“Thanks for coming--we didn’t know who else to tell.”

“We?”

“Rhodey’s in the workshop, trying to decipher some files and fighting with FRIDAY.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t say that. Not like it’s over, not like--”

“God, Pep--that’s not what I meant.”

“I know, I know, it’s just…”

“I understand. What do we do now?”

* * *

They got sandwiches that afternoon as an excuse to avoid… everything. Peter and Ned exchanged
halves while MJ watched, chewing her own food slowly.

They played cards, and studied, and no one noticed.

No one looked twice at the kids in the booth. No one saw the laughter was forced, and that exhaustion flickered behind the curly-haired boy’s eyes. No one noticed that his world had turned on its head, and he had no idea.

* * *

“He can’t know.”

“He’ll find out, May.”

“Tony told him to avoid the news.”

“So? He’s a smart kid, he’ll figure it out.”

“He can’t! Don’t you get it? If he finds out, the only way to keep him from doing something stupid will be to duct-tape him in a goddamn closet!”

“But if we hide it…”

“And if we don’t, we’ll have two people to worry about, and we need all our energy for the one.”

“This isn’t going to be quick, much as I hate to admit it. He’s going to realize.”

“But it’ll buy us a few days, at least.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am. It’s to protect him, protect them both.”

“Alright. He won’t know.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter was HARD. I don't know why, exactly, but I couldn't get the sort of... resigned tone that I wanted for Peter's parts to conflict against the mysterious panic of the dialogue sections like I wanted for a long while. I'm pretty happy with this, though. I hope the timeline follows okay.

Anyway, thanks for reading, sorry for the latest cliff-hanger, and see you soon! Drop a kudos if your busy, but I'd love to hear your thoughts!
Peter wasn’t surprised when he woke up to an empty apartment again, only Grease’s scrabbling breaking the silence of the morning. May had warned him the night before that a meeting was running early, so she’d be gone most of the day. He’d just smiled and said so would he.

He sat up, yawned, and flicked the light on.

Something felt different.

Peter rubbed his chest, trying to discern what felt so off. His spider-sense was no longer a clawing second-heartbeat; instead, it hummed not-unpleasantly in the back of his mind, like the growl of a large cat.

*What’s changed?*

Without the pounding, things seemed… calmer. And for the first time in days, Peter felt optimistic. The trail had been two days ago.

Tony would be coming home today.

A smile scampering across his face, Peter slid from the bed; he had a dramatic return to witness.

Then another thought jumped through his synapses like a ray of quite literal summer sunlight; it was the last day of school. *The last day.*

Spider-Man let out a whoop, imagining dumping his backpack in the apartment and never returning for it, swinging through the city with Karen ready to alert him the moment Tony was returning. Peter grinned and stripped into his clothes, imagining pouncing on Tony halfway out of the plane, imagining the man’s immediate reaction of a flinch and an extended fist dissolving into laughter as he returned Peter’s hug.

Spider-Man demanded a hug of his own, and Peter agreed with a laugh. Hugs for everyone.

He left his room, pouring a clatter of dry pellets into Grease’s improvised food dish. They really needed to get a proper one, but Grease, leaping down from the bookcase and making a beeline for the meal, didn’t seem to care. She brushed her tail affectionately against his shin, and Peter stroked her back in return.

The bus was late, but not too badly, and Peter wasn’t worried about missing the bell. Well, not too much. He stuck his headphones in his ears and selected his largest playlist of 80’s pop (hey, he was feeling it today), propping his head up against the window of the train.

Something tickled at his fingers.
The trial was two days ago… surely now I can research. I don’t have to wait…

But when he clicked open his phone, he hesitated. Spider-Man refused to acknowledge the sliver of cowardice that stayed his hand, the unwillingness to surrender his ignorance, because maybe…

The doors opened at his stop, luckily or unluckily, before he pushed through the lapse.

Peter, telling himself it was because he didn’t want to miss his stop, stuffed his phone into his pocket and bounded off the train. The walk to school was quick, and he relished his steps now that pulses of acute awareness from his spider-sense didn’t accompany each one.

The first sign, as he rushed across the football field, the warning bell having already clanged, was that Ned and MJ were waiting for him.

Their faces dropped into confusion when they saw him, which made his own twist in befuddlement; why were they waiting, if they didn’t expect him?

He waved, and Ned returned it, although MJ was just staring at him in that way she did.

That was the second sign.

The third, when MJ wrapped her arms around him.

“Um,” was all he managed.

“Peter--” Ned had put a hand on his shoulder, and when MJ released Peter, he wasn’t sure which to look at in question. “I’m so… how are you doing?”

“I’m…” Peter took a step towards the school, the threat of lateness still hovering over his mind despite the fact that it was the last day of school. “Alright? Fine? Better today…”

MJ’s eyes narrowed, and the two of them stared at Peter for a stretching moment.

“It’s alright,” MJ said. “It’s going to be okay, you don’t have to pretend.”

“What? I--I’m not--what are you talking about?”

Ned nodded as MJ whipped her gaze back to him, saying, “it’s Peter.”

“Well of course it’s me!” Peter was irked now, confused and tired from a week of suspense, the optimism of this morning rapidly disappearing. “What’s going on?”

Ned said, “How can you not know?”

“Know what?” Peter demanded.

At that moment, when Ned and MJ were looking at each other again, when MJ was shaking her head subtly, when Peter was opening his mouth to order an explanation, the final bell rang.

Ned looked exponentially relieved as he shrugged and said, “gotta go to class. C’mon guys.”

You can’t do that to me! Peter wanted to scream, but his friends were already disappearing into the school. With no choice but to follow, Peter sentenced himself to three hours of ignorance.

He should have read the news.
Ned and MJ kept ahead of him, splitting themselves across the classroom and joining already-occupied desk pairs, forcing Peter to find elsewhere to sit. The professor gave them the stink-eye, but it was the last day; what was he going to do to them?

The lack of intrigue in the class that day didn’t do much to help the thoughts whirring like sparrows trapped within a cage, throwing themselves against Peter’s skull in confusion, always centering back on Ned’s how could you not know?

The only thing that kept him from panicking, kept him from seizing Ned by the ear and dragging him into the hallway to tell me what you mean damn it was that it couldn’t be Tony, it couldn’t. May would have told him, likely days ago, because they wouldn’t release the information to the public for a while. But Pepper would have known, and then May would have known, and they would have told him.

So something else. What?

How could you not know?

The sparrow sped up, and he didn’t absorb a single word spoken throughout the class.

He couldn’t even remember what movie they watched during history, the next period, after MJ and Ned practically became ninjas to avoid him.

He was off for third, which was a relief, and had to implement his own ninja skills to corner Ned the cafeteria. MJ had biology this period, and Peter took the chance to pry everything he could from his idiot friend.

“Ned!”

“Peter I--I shouldn’t have said anything.” Ned edged towards the door. “I’m sure there’s a good reason--”

“But you did say something, Ned, please,” Peter grabbed his friend’s shoulder, not bothering to hid his desperation.

“I… I thought you’d know already. We didn’t expect you to come today, but we couldn’t afford to miss you if you did.”

“Why, Ned?”

Ned averted his gaze. “I know you don’t watch the news, but why wouldn’t they tell you…”

I know you don’t watch the news.

Why wouldn’t they tell you?

“What happened. What happened."

Ned took his hand and lead him to a table, sitting so their backs were to the wall. “The trial… Mr. Stark’s… it didn’t…” Ned looked miserable, conflicted and confused, and Peter felt his own roiling emotions explode in strength.

“Did they lose?”

Ned shrugged. “We… don’t know. I--oh goddamnit, just--” Ned broke off and reached into his backpack, pulling out his laptop at the speed of light. Even light went too slow; Peter’s heart skipped
every other beat, suspense tightening like a vice on his sternum.

Ned opened his browser, and to Peter’s surprised, began to type ‘magic.’ Google completed the phrase for him, and Ned clicked the first link that appeared.

Peter only had to read the title.

_Magical Attack at the Supreme Court and the Capture of Tony Stark._

Every.

damn

thought

went

out

of

his

head.

Peter didn’t hear Ned speaking, his eyes racing along the lines, absorbing every word but only snagging on some phrases, _infiltration of the court, concealed weapons, orange energy manipulating matter and space, many injured but no known casualties, mostly due to the actions of the defendant, Tony Stark, fight, statement from the Secretary of State—_

_Tony Stark shot._

_Tony Stark taken._

_Tony Stark gone._

Peter looked up from the laptop, staring at the far wall. Ned said something else. Peter looked back down, listening to his pulse pounding through his body. Ned stopped talking.

_How._

_Could._

_I._

_Not._

_Know._

And suddenly there was fury. Apocalyptic, all-consuming rage pulsing with his blood, running like ice across his form, burning like fire in his eyes.

_They didn’t tell me._

_They didn’t FUCKING TELL ME._

He wouldn’t have known. It would have been days before he’d broken Tony’s last order and found
out, if Ned hadn’t said anything. Because they didn’t tell him. They thought he shouldn’t know. Shouldn’t know his fucking father had been kidnapped. Shouldn’t know he was injured and suitless in the hands of unknown magic. Shouldn’t know the world had just fractured and the pieces were falling down one by one. Spider-Man got up.

Ned cringed away, his hands fidgeting before his chest, looking legitimately scared. Neither Peter nor Spider-Man noticed, or cared. Neither noticed his calls of both names as they walked rhythmically from the cafeteria.

Neither heeded the questions, then threats, of the teachers as they left the building, their steps thumping on the ground to the beat of their heart.

Neither cared about the concerned glances from strangers on the subway.

There was only the what-ifs, the endless, putrefying what-ifs, and the repeated echo that they didn’t tell me.

Chapter End Notes

Well yeah. Maura strikes, for unknown reasons.

More soon. Don't kill me. Maybe stick around, cuz this isn't NEARLY as simple as it seems. Kudos. Comment. All that.
In Which Minds Bend but Never Break

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hellfire descended on the apartments.

Hellfire’s name was Peter Parker.

“He’s gone.”

May looked up at him, and slowly put down the phone. He had no doubt as to who she’d been speaking to. She shifting to block the news playing on the laptop before her, news he hadn’t bothered to see, to notice, until a week had past, until--

“He’s gone.” It was all he could seem to say. The only words that could claw their way through the conflicting emotions forming a wall across his throat. A wall of *how could you hide this from me* and *he told me not to worry and he’s hurt and he was supposed to come home today.*

“He’s gone, he’s been gone for days.”

May just stared at him, her eyes flashing with something Peter couldn’t identify, and didn’t care to.

“Yeah, I know what happened,” Peter hissed. “It’s all over the news. Which I’ve been avoiding because he *told me not to listen to the press.* You can thank Ned for finally pulling my head out of my ass.”

“Peter--” May approached him, her hands outstretched placatively.

“YOU KNEW! You *knew* and you DIDN’T TELL ME!” There was only a spider’s thread of control holding his fists to his sides, holding his body in that doorway. Because if he didn’t…

“I couldn’t tell you!” May cried, her own voice rising to rival his.

“Bullshit,” Peter’s heart was clawing up his throat and into his mouth, anger and fear and betrayal all warring for dominance.

“Peter--”

“What did you want me to do?” Peter demanded, the struggle for expression won by hysteria as blood and gunshots flickered like sickness through his imagination. “Wake up tomorrow still thinking things were okay? Accept a bullshit answer as to why he isn’t coming home? Celebrate the start of summer while he’s stuck in a cell somewhere?”

*Or worse.*

*No.*

He wasn’t--that wasn’t--no. NO.

“I…” May had the decency to look ashamed, at least. “I wanted to keep you safe.”
Spider-Man was vibrating, his fists clenched white, every muscle in his body tense. “You wanted to keep me safe?” he snarled. “Me? What about him?”

May looked away. “Colonel Rhodes came back, he’s with Pepper.”

“And they told you?”

May nodded, her hands still reaching toward him as though of their own accord. “They did. Keeping it from you… it was all me.”

All Spider-Man could do was nod. He was holding too many other things in.

May finally turned, closing her laptop and bracing her arms on the table. Peter realized how exhausted she looked.

“I didn’t know what to do. All I knew was that I needed to keep one of my boys safe, in the only way I could.”

Peter shook his head. Then he shook it again, his throat working. “Well, you were wrong. You did the wrong thing, this isn’t how you keep me safe, this isn’t how you keep any of us safe!”

“I knew you were going to lose it—for good reason—I couldn’t be sure what you’d do—”

Peter cut her off. “What I’d do? What are you doing?”

“We’re working on it—”

That snapped Peter from his paralysis and he was halfway across the room, halfway to the laptop, halfway to the phone in an instant. “You’re working on it. I could help. I COULD’VE HELPED, I COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING—”

Because that was it.

That had been knowledge that had burrowed into his brain and begun to corrode his soul.

He’d been idle, even worse, he’d been unaware, as things had gone to shit. Tony had been suffering and he hadn’t even known.

Maybe he was still suffering.

Whatifwhatifwhatif--

May was staring at him, her eyes wide and concerned and weary and scared--

A broken sob wrenched itself from his chest.

Suddenly there was no more room for anger, no more room for betrayal, just a tunnel of desperation, a swamp of fear, a haze of shame, and he slowly sank onto his knees.

“God, Peter…”

May knelt, wrapping her arms carefully around him, and he tried to focus on her sneakers in his vision. It took everything he had to hold himself back from the breaking point, to keep the desperation and frustration and so much terror from exploding from him.

May guided his head against her shoulder, let him curl against her body and absorb the strength she
so desperately needed for herself. Spider-Man’s breathing broke, but his eyes stayed dry, somehow, some stubbornness keeping the tears from gathering. He wanted to retreat, hide from these clawing emotions behind Peter, but neither did Peter want to face them. He was floating, when once he’d fought to control his body, now he was trying to vacate it.

Time hung in that empty place, stretching for eternity and not at all as May held him on the floor of the apartments and he tried to comprehend how everything had been so very, very right, to suddenly become so very, very wrong.

Someone had taken Tony.

Someone magical, someone powerful, had ripped him from the court without a known motive, days ago.

That single concept was all he could focus on for a long, long while.

And then Peter snapped back into his body, and wondered desperately, what am I going to do about it.

He knew immediately.

*I’m going to save him.*

The question became, then, how?

Peter extricate himself from May’s hold, swallowing once, twice, three times.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” he said levelly, holding out a hand to help her up.

May accepted, hugging him one more time before stepping away. “I’m sorry I tried to keep this from you.”

Peter nodded. “It doesn’t matter anymore. The only thing that matters is what we do now.”

To his surprise, May started for the door.

“Where are you going?”

She looked back at him with a hard smile. “All Ned would have known was the basics. What the news said.”

“There’s more?” He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“So much more. We’re going upstate, and Pepper and Rhodey are going to… debrief you.”

Spider-Man nodded and vaulted across the room to her side, forcing his thoughts away from what he was being debriefed about. “Let’s go.”

Then he paused.

“Are we… taking the bus?”

A laugh broke from May’s throat, weary, but genuine. “That would be anticlimactic, don’t you think?”

Peter shrugged, fighting down his smile; it felt like a betrayal.
“I’ll call Happy.”

The drive was the longest of Peter’s life, which was an accomplishment as the trip had previously always been accompanied by plans and excitement. He sat with his knees tucked up to his chest in the backseat, listening to the silence with his head resting against the window and his eyes trained on the ceiling. Vaguely, he remembered he had walked out on a math final. The anxiousness that came along with that realization just folded in to the soup of roiling instability that simmered in his chest.

The outskirts of the city went by, and Peter watched them upside-down. He remembered the last time he’d made this trip, buzzing with ideas and a completed blueprint, without a worry in the world. He remembered how quickly that had changed.

He only wished it could do so again.

With a sigh, he dropped his head onto his knees. Spider-Man sent his fingers tapping wildly against the door handle, desperate not to be idle. He’d already spent too much time as such, and the drive was a stretching reminder; it was with a clenching pain that he kept those thoughts from engulfing him.

Seconds, minutes, hours later, he let his head fall back against the window.

Tree.

House.

Building.

He knew each by heart, their familiarity no longer a comfort.

Half expecting to hear sirens, Peter sat up and craned to look out the windshield as they approached the compound. But it was quiet, silent, normal.

“We’re here,” Happy said unnecessarily, pulling the car into a stop, his voice flat.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, of course.”

Three doors closed with simultaneous thumps, and three people stood on the lawn of the immense, unconquerable building that seemed to understand its emptiness.

Peter moved first. Beckoning to the others, he strode across the healthy summer grass in a path he’d walked so often before. He saw shadows behind the windows, and knew Colonel Rhodes and Pepper were waiting for them. They didn’t leave the building, and Peter didn’t blame them.

He expected it, but all the same, his stomach sank sickeningly when there was only the two of them coming to meet him as he opened the door. There was a space, an opening from years of similar movement, where Tony would have stood.

He was glad when May came in behind him and let him fall back behind her.

“How are you doing?” his aunt said, softly wrapping her arms around Pepper’s shoulders.

Pepper dropped her head onto May’s shoulder, and Peter saw the strength, the forced calmness drain
away from her stance. Any remaining anger he might have had trickled away; these people cared, and were just as shaken by Tony’s kidnapping as he. And they didn’t know what to do, the same as he.

“Thank God you’re here,” Pepper said, her voice muffled into May’s shirt. Peter felt his heart twist anew at the brokenness in the woman’s voice, brokenness he’d never even associated with her.

“You were right, Peter’s too observant for me. He about gave me a heart attack barging into the apartment in the middle of the school day.”

Pepper gave a shattered laugh. “Pissed?”

“Oh yeah.”

The woman raised her head and stepped back, then turned to regard Spider-Man where he stood behind Happy. There was desolation in her eyes, but no less determination, and she said, “you still pissed?”

Peter shook his head, his mouth still stuck shut.

“Good.”

Rhodes advanced, grabbing Happy’s shoulder and squeezing slightly. “Are you here for the film?”

Peter’s breathing sped up, *film* meaning far too many things in his mind.

Rhodes must have noticed, clarifying, “security footage.”

Eyes shuttering, Pepper averted her face. May clasped her arm again. The exhaustion was tangible, thick in the air, desperation stippling their faces like stars on a clear night.

Peter had never wanted Tony to come around the corner, coffee and holoscreen in hand, a stray spot of grease smeared behind his ear, as he did in that moment.

*It's all going to be okay.*

*I promise.*

“We are,” May finally said. “He should know everything.”

Spider-Man stepped forward, speaking for the first time. “Please.”

Pepper shared a glance with Rhodes, and then looked back at him. They nodded as one.

“Follow me,” the colonel said, starting off down the windowed hallway. The rest of them followed, Happy moving over to join May while Pepper returned to where Spider-Man trotted.

“You okay?” the tall woman asked, ruffling his hair softly. Her hands were the wrong size, the calluses in the wrong places, but he found himself leaning in to her touch.

“Yeah,” he said on muscle memory.

Pepper smiled sadly. “Me neither.”

Peter found himself saying absently, “summer starts today.”
“You excited?” she replied.

He nodded, and she knew what he meant.

“You aunt was looking for pl—” her voice faltered, a hiccuping breath resulting in a hard swallow. “Your aunt was looking for places we can go. In the country. Remember, we talked about it?”

“Yeah. We were going to go and see the stars…”

“That’s right.”

A thought struck him. “Would—would he be alright? I know he doesn’t… doesn’t like stars…” Peter swallowed. 

_He doesn’t like caves either. The last time--God, there was a last time--he woke up with a magnet in his chest and pain awaiting him._

Pepper’s hand migrated down to his shoulder, and she smiled at him. “I think he’d be okay, as long as you’re there to remind him.”

Peter almost broke down right then and there and surrendered to the tears. But he caught them, caught them and bundled them up again, leaving a sheen of counterfeit calm before his eyes instead. “What about you?” he said.

“It’s not the same with me,” Pepper said, shaking her head slightly. “I love him, and he—he loves me too, but there are some scars I can’t heal.”

“I’m different. Why, why am I different?”

“You’re his kid.”

Peter pulled in a shaky breath.

_His intern, his kid, his son._

He’d hardly spoken to Tony since the man had admitted it to him.

“I’ll show all of you the stars. I know… a lot of the constellations,” Spider-Man said, unable to look at the woman beside him.

“Yeah,” Pepper murmured. “We’d like that, I think.”

She didn’t look at him either.

They walked down that hallway and pretended, acted that everything was okay, that anything they said mattered, that their mouths weren’t full of sawdust and their hearts full of thorns.

Neither of them were particularly good actors, but Peter appreciated the moment all the same.
On another note, DO YOU KNOW WHAT MY FRIEND SAID TO ME? She's a Captain America person, although she's not super into Marvel so all of my detailed, character driven arguments just bounce right off her, and she SOMEHOW DOESN'T LIKE Infinity War. Not like we don't like it; she just legitimately doesn't think it's a good movie. But anyway, we were talking, and I was trying to explain why Stephen Strange is the best Steven/Stephen (because he absolutely is) and SHE SAID THIS: "Well, they kept my Steven."
AND I JUST ABOUT STARTED A FISTFIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HALLWAY.
TOO SOON, FRIEND, TOO SOON.

Anyway, thanks for reading. Hope you enjoyed the latest installment of my evil fic, and stick around for the next bit, if you would! :) Click a kudos or type a comment and I'll see you soon!
Rhodes led them into what Peter expected to be one of the far too many, far too large, far too well-equipped offices, but was instead a suite of three stacked rooms connected by a small, exposed staircase. The ground-level room, the one they entered first, was a sparse and organized bedroom, and Peter instantly recognized it as belonging to the colonel. He didn’t know why he was surprised; of course Rhodes had a space, a lot of space, in the compound. The man was an Avenger, after all, though Peter sometimes forgot.

The four of them climbed the thin staircase, coming up into another area. This seemed to be the man’s office, Starktech glimmering in every corner. But most of it was dusty and unused; Peter had no doubt Rhodes used his own less-than-top-of-the-line technology to piss Tony off. The sun was shining directly through the huge glass doors that opened up onto the balconied roof of the floor below.

Drawing the blinds to give them a better view of the screens around them, Rhodes looked up towards the ceiling.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes?”

“Would you…”

The air conditioner hummed, and Peter heard the same tone in it that Karen used to indicate understanding. “Of course.”

One of the screens booted up, and Rhodes used his sleeve to whip away the dust. It stuck to his suit cuff in patches of muddy brown. Peter felt his heart in his throat as FRIDAY flicked through files on the screen, and May came up behind him to squeeze his hand in comfort.

“I love you,” she said quietly.

He nodded and squeezed her hand back.

FRIDAY finally selected a short clip of film, and it expanded to fill the monitor. Hesitantly, Peter approached the image as it began to tick into motion, the fuzz of audio filling the room.

The footage was good, which he supposed made sense. This was the trial of Tony Stark, after all. He could see the entire room, crowded with press and spectators and so, so many people. Tony was at the podium, standing tall, his hands clasped chivalrously behind his back, though they were no longer bound. He spoke, calm and cool and collected, as though this was just another press conference.

"Ross'll have you believe I harbored a fugitive, a war criminal, thus subverting the Accords and
committing treason,” he was saying. "And honestly, that might be true... if I had called that number. If I had answered those letters. If I knew where the damn man was."

"You can't prove that. You're Tony Stark; anything can be fabricated," hissed a mousey man Peter knew was Ross.

Peter was pretty sure a trial like this was meant to be a little more professional, with lawyers and shit, and a little less secretary-vs-engineer, but neither man seemed to care. Peter didn’t either. Particularly because it was Tony talking, and he could see him and he was okay--

"I could say the same for you, actually,” the recorded Tony said. “Oh, wait, I am! And for the record, I can prove it.” He jerked his head to one of the men beside him, who flung him a holoscreen already spinning with data. Tony caught it expertly and flipped it around, making sure the blue-tinged light was visible to everyone within the room. “Pat yourselves on the back that it took two days for me to go through the code and synthesize it into something you can read and understand in only about five hours. Usually it takes twelve hours, so kudos to how inconvenient your monitoring thugs are. Anyway, here.”

From behind Peter, Pepper scoffed slightly. “Now is not the optimum time for sarcasm, Tones,” she murmured.

On the monitor, Tony dismissed the holoscreen and flipped the device towards one of the suited men standing before him. It changed hands a few times, and then Peter lost track of it in pockets and black jackets.

“Now that we’ve got that in circulation, I'm gonna move on to the important bits."

Peter smiled a bit. Even arrested, persecuted, Tony still ran the room.

"I've established no wrongdoing in the eyes of the state, so now let's talk Accords. Actually, I've done nothing wrong there, either."

The audio in Rhodes' room whined as people erupted into protests, blame flying at Stark from every corner of the room. He stood calmly until people quieted, keeping the power.

"The message sent to me by Steve Rogers defied no aspect of the Accords. And before you say anything, Ross, it doesn't in the version I actually signed. The one you're trying to push, maybe, but I legally have not yet agreed to any part of that."

"It doesn't matter--"

Tony raised his voice to speak over the other man. "Ross wants to use this as leverage to get me to sign his twisted version of the laws. Well, sorry, but those documents are a disgrace to the very idea of the Accords." Tony spread his hands almost pleadingly.

"I, more than anyone, know the world needs to find a line. A place that prevents inadvertent pain, but doesn’t just allow purposeful destruction to rage unchecked."

Peter found himself thinking of cryotubes and androids and meteors. The difference between saving the world and destroying it.

"The Accords are supposed to help to decide that, help communicate the truth, the average truth, shall I say, of millions of individuals. Unity, especially in defense, is what we need, worldwide and in our own lives."
But Ross, you're scared, and though I don't blame you, you shouldn't try and leash us because of it. You can't control a man. You can regulate him, teach him, advise him, but never leash him. And you shouldn't. Not a man. And Pep's gonna yell at me later, so I guess I should say not a woman." Stark sighed. "You shouldn't leash a child, just trying to do what's right."

Peter's heart clenched.

"But those of us here are aware of those Accords, those ideals. This isn't about the Accords, this is about a phone and a piece of paper, and we--"

Peter had almost forgotten what he was watching, why he was there… and then Tony broke off.

Time seemed to slow as the man began to move. Peter could see his eyes dart towards the corners of the room, his fingers already going for the bracelet that would call his suit as he cried "GUN."

If he'd been able to tear his eyes from the screen, he'd have seen Pepper turning away, and May letting her gaze drop. Rhodes hadn't been looking for a long while.

The black-clad people Peter had dismissed as lawyers and press were moving, pulling weapons from their coats. People yelled, scattering, and Peter couldn't distinguish words from within commotion. But he did see Tony moving, saw him curse when his fingers closed around an empty wrist. Saw him dive towards the nearest attacker anyway.

Peter could see just fine when, through the rushing bodies and the shifting targets, a gun was leveled on Ross. He could see just fine as Tony moved faster then he would have thought possible, could see just fine as his mentor threw himself in front of the man who had hounded him, hurt him, manipulated him for years, just as the gun went off in two quick, deafening cracks.

He could see the dark stain that bloomed along Tony’s thigh and shoulder.

He could see him collapse to the floor before a wide-eyed Ross, spraying blood onto the spotless floor.

"NO!" Peter screamed. "TONY!"

But he was too late. Yelling at a monitor through time and across states did no good. Tony still groaned, still tried and failed to push himself to his feet.

The men with the guns grouped around the one who'd fired the shots. Peter couldn't distinguish words in the audio, but it sounded like scolding.

They hadn't been meant to get that close to killing him.

Peter felt like throwing up.

And then another figure appeared through the rapidly clearing crowd, a woman with hair the color of rust and eyes glowing with orange light. Glyphs were swirling in the air around her, a soft, natural effect no tech could create. It wasn't like any magic Peter'd imagined he'd face, but it was indefiably mystic, dangerous, and powerful.

The woman approached Tony, who glared up at her coolly, though his face was pale and drawn. Reddish darkness was appearing from beneath his sleeve, sliding down his skin and permeating his suit. The woman said something, and though Peter couldn't hear the response, he could sense Stark's sarcasm.
The woman snarled, and light flashed from her fingers like the lick of flames. Tony’s form buckled, the magic seizing his neck and uninjured leg, lighting up the glow of blood. The woman spoke again, taking Tony by the hair and forcing him to look at her.

Tony spat in her face.

The woman recoiled, dropping Peter's mentor roughly.

And suddenly, Peter could hear just fine too.

Hear the shuddering scream rip itself from Tony's throat as the woman pushed a booted foot against his wound.

"No. No! Leave him alone, don't touch him!" Peter was pounding against the monitor, not caring that he was doing no good, not caring that this was long in the past, not caring that there were cracks spider-webbing through the screen.

“Peter! Peter--” May grabbed his arms, and he fought with all of his considerable Spider-Man strength, ripping himself from her grasp.

The orange enchantment was traveling down the woman’s legs, seeping around, into, Tony, runes blooming in the air, searing themselves onto his skin, and May was grabbing at Peter again, holding him to her, trying to pull his gaze from the image, but she couldn’t mask the sound, that horrible sound, the sound of Tony’s voice strangling off into silence.

“PLEASE!”

The failings of Spider-Man’s arms grew weaker, his energy rushing to keep the tears from forming as his breathing broke into ragged near-whimpers. May cradled his head against her shoulder, wordlessly whispering against his hair. Attune to everything, he felt the pressure of tears falling atop his curls, and he couldn’t keep in a low, hopeless, nearly animalistic whine.

On the monitor, Tony had stopped moving.

The woman circled her fingers through the air, a line of fire appearing in their wake. The angle was wrong, and Peter couldn’t see much, but he could see a sliver of an entirely different room between the sparking magic. The men and woman in black gathered around it, their guns disappearing into pockets as the crowd grew to obscure the camera’s view of Tony and the woman wrapping cords of orange light around him.

There was no flash of light, no sign or indication. The doorway simply engulfed them all, then closed without a spark remaining.

---

FRIDAY watched from the quiet ticking of cameras as May escorted Peter to his room. The boy looked… utterly and completely shattered, but the natural, uncontrollable tears that any child should have streaming down their face after learning… that… were completely absent.

It made the look so much worse.

May locked Peter’s door from the outside when she left, and FRIDAY didn’t have the strength to tell her it was wrong. Both to trap him, and to leave him alone after seeing the film that even her artificial
heart had been broken by.

So FRIDAY muted the rest of the compound, ignoring the rest of the voices in the buildings, and focused her efforts on the boy standing frozen within a too-cheerful room.

FRIDAY was the only one watching when the calm, icy control broke. She heard the boy’s breathless voice. She heard his anger, heard things break at his desperation. Heard terror and despair and fury in his irrational words, and it was all she could do to keep herself with him, keep herself from abandoning this child that only wanted someone there, someone to hold and selfishly tell him that everything was going to be alright.

But she couldn’t hold him, she couldn’t touch him, she couldn’t comfort him.

She was just FRIDAY. Just the voice in the suit, the voice in the walls, and nothing this boy needed.

She felt useless. She’d felt useless the entire week, as far from human as she’d ever been, unable to truly help. Just obey.

The boss’s friends had been frantic, his family even more so. Hurt and scared and sad. She knew, but she couldn’t understand. Not truly. Just an AI. Not human, not human, not enough.

Peter slumped down on his bed, clutching the shattered pieces of a once-complex lego contraption between his hands. He wasn’t crying. Neither was FRIDAY, of course; she never could.

She didn’t even have a heart. Nor a mind, not to feel like humans did. Not to feel like Pepper did, so determined, so proactive, so desperate. Not to feel like May did, protective and angry and helpless. Not to feel like the boy did, alone and betrayed and terrified for the fate of a father.

She didn’t have a heart to feel like they did.

But.

Feel she did, all the same.

The compound exploded with light and brightness, a surge of emotion from FRIDAY’s code as she realized.

She wasn’t human, she was a string of zeros and ones.

She had no heart and no mind with which to understand, but she did anyway.

FRIDAY stared down at the boy on the bed, the one slowly and agonizingly losing hope. She would do anything, anything, to help. To see him smile again, to see the boss smile at him again. She might have been only a series of code, a file on a computer, a program in a machine, but was more human than whatever creatures ripped the light away from this shining boy.

She was human enough.

And she could help.

Watching Peter stare sightlessly at his hands, FRIDAY ignored every warning and firewall and program she had, and sent the Spider-Man suit a single line of text.

*Protocol Molten Iron.*
Dun dun dunnnnnn....

Yeahs the plot is coming.

Thanks for reading!!! *Insert YouTube outro here*
In Which Dreams Lead to Argument

Chapter Notes

And now for the chapter that prompted this whole monstrous fic. The scene I had planned from the very beginning. MY CHILD IS ALL GROWN UP! Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The building screams.

Maybe he does, too.

There are pillars around him, pillars of concrete slowly, painfully turning to sand one grain at a time. And he can’t move. He has to run, has to get out, but he can’t move--

The structure groans again. It’s a final groan, a promise groan.

The building falls. He’s watching it tumble towards him, aware of each grain as it falls to crush him, to drown him.

And then he’s flying backward, stumbling from the force of an unseen shove, falling to the ground just as the deafening, ultimate crash of dozens of tons of rubble falling to Earth rattles his mind.

He curls in on himself, heart in his throat as his whole body pulses with fear, but nothing follows that crash. He’s safe.

It doesn’t feel that way.

Slowly, the skin of his chest tingling from where strong, sure hands threw him from the path of the collapse, he unclenches his form and rolls to his knees. Dust coats everything--he can feel it in his hair, the creases in his skin, between his teeth, along his tongue. There is no sound, no shifting of the sky, just the settling of dust and the calm after the disaster.

Everything says he is safe. Everything but his heart, because something is wrong, something is missing. The dust swirls like candle-smoke, and he climbs to his feet and takes a step forward.

He trips over the rubble and lands on his knees again, hands reaching out through the curtain of grime to try and make sense of his surroundings. They scrape themselves on the sharp metal and jagged stones that lie like rusting weapons along the ground. He pulls them back, sucking away blood from where it wells in the scratches. Rust and dust mingle on his tongue and he gags.

He begins to crawl forward, favoring his injured palms as he skirts along the rough debris. Attempting to navigate through the dust, his fingers dart out and back in like rattlesnakes striking futilely against cage bars.

They brush something smooth and cold, and he starts.

As gently as he can, he curls his digits around it and pulls it into his circle of vision almost desperately.
A familiar pair of expensive sunglasses wink back at him.

The trailing end of a shout was still echoing through the room when Spider-Man jolted awake, adrenaline reverberating through his body. He leapt from the bed, ducking on instinct to avoid the higher bunk, though nothing but empty space was above him.

Spider-Man leaned over slightly to brace his wrists against his knees. It was late, or early, and the never-fading lights of Queens didn’t shine through the compound window, leaving the entire room in darkness. But it was clear darkness, clean darkness, nothing like the dry filth of his dream. The Dream.

For a moment, his head felt clear, unmuddled by the passage of time or knowledge of his surroundings. He didn’t know if it was Friday or Saturday, didn’t know which side of the bed he’d rolled off of, was floating in an undefined place where nothing weighed on his mind.

Then his eyes adjusted to the darkness, etching the silhouettes of the room into his vision, and the moment was gone.

But the realization wasn’t.

Peter yelled, throwing himself across the room and against the wall, his fingernails lacerating his palms as he clenched his fists. STOP HIDING DAMN IT.

Spider-Man growled and pried his fingers open, pretending he didn’t feel the wrenching, sickening guilt that had accompanied his own epiphany climbing up his throat. I’m a superhero; I don’t hide.

Peter just laughed scornfully. Right. Of course. This can’t be your fault, nothing’s ever your fault.

This wasn’t me! How could it be me? Spider-Man pushed away from the slats of the wall, pointedly ignoring the hypocrisy of his thoughts.

It was the wrong thing to say.

YOU COULD HAVE SAVED HIM!

Peter wasn’t sure if he screamed only to the other boy, or to the room, but it didn’t matter. You were there, you were watching, you let Ross take him, you let this happen!

Snarling, Spider-Man swung a fist, snagging the corner of the dresser and thumping against the wall. I didn’t know--I thought it was a trial! You know I couldn’t have gone up against the entire fucking government, you know that!

You should have tried, you should have done something--

I don’t know if you recall-- Spider-Man forced as much mockery into his thoughts as he could-- but you were there too. And I don’t seem to have any memory of you standing up against the legal system!

Peter didn’t answer.

An angry, hysterical grin spread across Spider-Man’s face, and he continued, you’re just blaming me because you’re too weak to even expect the same of yourself!

That’s not--I don’t--
Even if you had jumped to the rescue, tried to fight Ross, or been there at the trial when he was taken, you wouldn’t have been able to do a single FUCKING THING. You’re useless without me, so don’t even try to pin this on me!

Hissing at the truth to those words, Peter defended, And you know nothing about your own suit, your own damned web fluid. Without me, you’d--

Spider-Man cut him off, scoffing. Have to learn how to mix chemicals myself? Oh, it’s so impossible. He rolled his eyes. You think you’re a threat? You think you have power over me, any whatsoever? Face it, Parker, you need me, far more than I’d ever need you, than anyone would ever--

Peter roared.

“DO YOU EVEN CARE ABOUT HIM?” He was trembling. Fury steamed in the air around him as he stood almost speechless, offended and cut far deeper than he’d like to admit from Spider-Man’s words. “Do you even care that he’s gone, that he’s hurt, probably in pain, tortured, right now?!”

Spider-Man took a step back.

And then his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits, his hands curling into fists once more.


But Peter didn’t notice, didn’t care. The word useless spun in his mind, leaving the sting of truth behind it. Not a threat, can’t make a difference, no power, doesn’t matter. “You’re always so damn eager. To go through his files, to say he betrayed you, to blame him. Did you ever care about him? Or did you just sit back and scoff when I realized what he meant to me, whining at my attention to him instead of you, stewing at the term father--”

Peter found himself stumbling back, his collarbone smarting, his own knuckles, Spider-Man’s knuckles, already bruising.

“How dare you?” Spider-Man shrieked, fury blazing, flooding, through every fiber of his form. “How could you even suggest that I don’t care, that I don’t love Tony Stark like I’d love a father, like you love him? How dare you.”

“I dare like you did! ‘You need me, far more than I’d ever need you.’ You know what? Fuck you, Spider-Man, fuck you and everything you think you stand for, because when it really mattered, you were just as useless as cowardly little Peter Parker.”

“This ISN’T MY FAULT!”

“So WHAT?” Peter bellowed. “Neither of us have done a single damn thing since Saturday, too content with our ignorance to dare to be proactive.”

Spider-Man slumped onto the ground, timelines fluttering in his brain, moments when Peter or he’d been laughing as Tony was being contained, persecuted, shot. “And now it’s too late, it’s too late…”

“No,” Peter said softly. “It isn’t.”

“How do you know? How could you possibly know?”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that,” Peter said with forced calm. “I’m going to pretend I don’t know, now, what you think of me.”
It took all of Spider-Man’s self-control not to snap a mocking *oh, thanks*, and nod instead. It was slowly filtering into both their stubborn personalities that this was not the time for fighting amongst themselves.

“It isn’t too late until he’s—” Peter broke off, closed his eyes, and swallowed. “Dead.”

“He’s not dead,” Spider-Man found himself saying.

“What?”

“I can tell, I can feel it in my spider-sense. I think that’s what changed Friday morning, I think he went unconscious or something.”

“So we know. You can feel him.” Peter nodded, satisfied. “Which means we can still do something.”

“But what? We don’t even know where to start!”

“Sorry to interrupt this somewhat concerning conversation with yourself, Mr. Parker, but I think I know the answer to that.”

Peter jerked his gaze towards the ceiling. “*FRIDAY*?”

“Hello. And hello Spider-Man.”

Confused, Spider-Man flicked a small wave.

“Uh,” Peter said, slightly embarrassed to be caught screaming at an individual no one else could perceive, “what answer is that?”

“The boss had a few tricks up his sleeve if a scenario arose where he could not protect you. There is one, though, that can be shifted to apply to what has occurred here; you could not protect him.”

Peter found himself smiling a bit. Of course Tony’d engineered something for this, and of course it had to be *spun*.

“I sent the hack to overcome the protocol firewall to Karen. All you have to do is find the suit,” the ceiling finished.

Spider-Man cracked his knuckles. “Are the buses still running?”

“They are.”

Peter strode across the room, hand already reaching for the door. “What are we waiting for, then? Let’s go!”

But when he pushed down on the handle, the door didn’t budge. “Wha--”

“I’ve been given direct orders from your aunt not to let you out through the door,” FRIDAY said apologetically.

Irritated, Spider-Man glared at the camera in the corner. “Then why tell me to leave in the first--”

Peter cut him off. “She said through the door, Spider-Man.”

The lights of his room flashed in FRIDAY’s imitation of a chuckle. And then the window clicked and swung carefully open on its hinges with hardly a squeak.
Spider-Man grinned. “Ah.”

“Good luck, Peter,” FRIDAY said as he crawled over the sill, hair tangling in the late night wind. “And be careful.”

Peter spared one last look to the camera in the corner and smiled. “I will.”

Then he leapt into the night, away from the compound, and didn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo yeah. The DID has reached extreme. And Spidey and Peter... aren't on the best of terms....

Thanks for reading! Drop a kudos or comment; I'd love some feedback on this chapter.
In Which Peter Plays with Protocols

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter hadn’t bought anything with him to the compound, too distracted and desperate to even consider it, really. The journey back to Queens, as a result, was full of nothing but his own thoughts.

The first thing he decided was that he probably should have asked FRIDAY what this protocol was. But, he and Spider-Man had been so eager to get going, and to put an end to their alienating scuffle, that it hadn’t occurred to either of them that perhaps they should know what they were getting into.

*Oh well, Peter sighed. I guess we’ll just have to live in suspense.*

He’d been living in suspense for far too long.

He waited impatiently at the bus stop for an immeasurable amount of time, joining an exhausted-looking driver when the vehicle finally arrived. There was no one else on, which he supposed made sense, seeing as it was some ungodly hour out. He craned his neck to check the clock on the bus’s dashboard—2:42 AM. Damn.

When they got closer to the heart of the city, the driver’s calls of station numbers in the absolute voice of death started to have some relevance. They gained a few passengers, none of which looked twice at Peter, each with a story playing out across their expression. Bored, stressed, and looking for distraction, Peter tried to predict what each of those stories could be. Perhaps the woman with the scruffy jacket and the tangled hair was homeless, working three jobs and needing to get back to Brooklyn before her morning shift began. There was a sad resignation in her eyes, but determination and toughness in her stance, and Peter found himself respecting her, though she’d yet to speak a word.

The man, there, with the long beard braided with pony beads, could be a street performer; Peter could see the end of a case sticking out from his partially-unzipped backpack. It was small—maybe a violin? A flute? Either way, the man looked cheerfully distractible, and ready to burst into song.

The older guy, harrowed and wrinkled, sitting in the front with his phone bouncing on his knee… he’d just gotten a call from the hospital, perhaps. His wife’s condition was changing, worsening, and he wanted to be there, just in case. Peter felt the urge to wish him good luck, or even his condolences. When he just about did so, the boy decided it was time for the role playing to be toned down slightly.

He transferred buses and began the process all over again, his thoughts drifting to Ned, to MJ, and what they must be thinking. He’d left so abruptly; MJ hadn’t even known.

*I’ll pick up my phone, too,* Peter decided. *Don’t let me forget.*

*Only if you won’t forget the suit,* Spider-Man joked, though it fell flat.

Of course they wouldn’t.

Spider-Man knew the city by night, so it wasn’t hard to make it to the apartment building. Peter was glad of the dark when he remembered he had no key, and would have to go up a different way, sneaking around to the back of the area and stretching his fingers. With a look around to make sure no one was watching, he began to climb, his hands clinging to the bricks in a practiced pattern.
He slid his window open and dropped inside.

And was immediately assaulted by a ball of hissing fur.

“Holy sh-- Grease! It’s me, girl!” Peter bent down, trying to look non-threatening. He held out a hand, and Grease, her fur still standing on end, sniffed at it experimentally.

He relaxed when the cat did, and pulled her close. “Hey girl,” he breathed.

Grease mewed and rubbed her cheek along his chin, the sound questioning.

“I know it’s late. But school is out and I’ve got… things… to figure out.” He ran his hands through her long, dappled fur and found his control wobbling once more.

Grease cocked her head and pulled away from him, dancing towards the window. She pawed at the wall beneath it.

“What? Do you want to go out?” That confused him; she’d never shown any urge to leave the apartment before, probably because of what had happened previously in her life.

She meowed, sounding irritated, then sat and began to pointedly lick her tail. Peter stood, shrugging, not sure how to read that behavior, and moved off to the other edge of the room.

He carefully climbed into the attic space and felt around for his case. His fingers brushed it, and stuck, and he pulled it down without much effort. He’d wanted to keep the suit safe for the week of finals when he’d be unable to wear it--besides, the case somehow cleaned the thing, which it’d been in desperate need of for a while.

Then Peter abandoned delicateness and ripped open the container, pulling forth the suit as urgency had his fingers moving roughly. The mask went on as quickly as he could manage, and he’d never been more relieved to hear Karen’s voice.

“Hello Peter! Where are you--”

He hadn’t realized the AI hadn’t caught up on everything that had happened for a week until she broke off, data flying at indecipherable speed across the mask’s visor.

“Oh,” she finally said.

Peter just laughed, somewhat brokenly.

“I--I’m sorry, Peter, Spider-Man,” the AI said quietly.

“Yeah.” He swallowed. “Me too.”

The heater within the mask kicked on, Karen doing her best to comfort him with the warmth. He sat there on his knees for a moment, schooling the near-grief that was threatening to explode forth back into a manageable knot at the base of his gut. He could feel it every time he inhaled.

“So,” he said finally, squaring his shoulders. “We need to do something.”

“I agree. But what?”

“FRIDAY told me she sent you something. A protocol?”

“I am not aware--Oh.”
“Did you find it?” He climbed to his feet, not bothering to keep the eagerness from his voice.


He mulled that over on his tongue, then shook his head. “Never heard of it.”

“Me neither,” Karen admitted, “which is, admittedly, quite strange.”

“Can you activate it?”

“I’m surfing my database for a procedure by that name now.” Text flashed by the eyes of the mask, and Peter found himself trying to read as it went, through, with the speed, it was impossible. “FRIDAY wasn’t wrong. I have a hidden, emergency protocol called Molten Iron.”

Ignoring the implications of the name, Peter stood with a nod. “Do it.”

“We have little to no idea what it does,” Karen warned. “We--”

“I’ll take that risk,” Spider-Man said, cutting her off. “It can’t be anything endangering to me, or to the suit. I hope, at least… but any possibility of figuring out what we can do, how we can save him, is worth it. Worth it.”

“Of course.” Karen’s voice grew joking after a moment. “But perhaps we should leave the apartment?”

Peter grinned, relieved that she agreed, and quickly stripped out of the rest of his clothes and into the suit. He made a beeline for the window, but paused when he almost tripped over Grease, still sitting right where he’d left her.

“What are you doing?” Peter sighed, stroking the cat’s ears. She looked up at him and mewed.

“Do you really want to go out? You can’t through the window, see?” He lifted her up and set her on the sill before she could start squirming. The tiny animal craned out over the three-story drop, not looking like she had any intention of trying to scale it. Grease looked at him, back at the drop, then up at the sky.

“Seriously, cat, why are you acting so weird? I don’t have time to figure you out, I’ve got a billionaire to rescue.”

Grease looked at him and mewed, pawing at the sky.

The Knot of control unwound slightly, slipping out and moistening Peter’s eyes before he could stop it. Peter swallowed hard, a wobbling breath wavering Grease’s whiskers. The kitten looked up at him with big, blue, questioning eyes, and he scooped her into his arms.

“I know, Grease,” he whispered into her calico fur. “No one’s coming. It’s just me.”

The cat mewed, rubbing up against him again. She wiggled out of his grasp and pawed at the air impatiently, and Peter sighed, slipping out of the window.

“He’s not coming, Grease.”

But the kitten stayed patient on the windowsill, and Peter looked away. Squeezing his eyes shut, he scurried up the side of the apartment building and stepped off onto the roof, schooling his thoughts back to the problem at hand.
“You ready, Karen?”

“Let’s do this.” Karen flashed the lights, and Spider-Man replied with a fist bump to the empty air, looking just a bit like his kitten a few moments ago. “Activating Protocol Molten Iron.”

He waited with baited breath as code bloomed across the screen, the normal activation data for most of Karen’s protocols. She’d blown it up so he could see it easily, but nothing made sense until the numbers stabilized. He was met with a string of digits in a familiar format:

678-136-7092

They flashed once, then disappeared, replaced with the familiar thrumming of a ringing cell phone.

Spider-Man mouthed what? and Karen narrowed and widened the eyes of the mask in her version of a shrug. He returned the gesture, silently waiting as the ringing continued. With each tone, his heart ratcheted up further into his throat. Who is this? Why would Tony add it to the suit, especially as an ‘emergency’ protocol? What if they don’t answer? What if they do?

There were so many what-ifs, these swirling around the deeper, darker ones he refused to face.

On the fourth ring, the click of an answer and hiss of static burst in the suit.

And a jarringly familiar voice answered, “Stark?”

The voice sounded confused and completely, indescribably shocked by the word, just as Peter did. Because this was impossible, this was just impossible--

“What--what the hell…”

Spider-Man opened his mouth, and it stuck there, no words coming to his tongue. Peter was no better; there was everything and nothing to say, everything and nothing to feel as that inconceivable voice resonated through the line.

He was sitting on the roof of his apartment building at three o’clock in the morning.

And Captain Steve Rogers was speaking to him, bewildered, on the phone.

Chapter End Notes

Remember all those hints I dropped about the phone number? Yeaaaaaaah... Tony put it in Peter’s suit. Just in case Pete needed something Tony couldn't give. (STOP IT TONY, YOU’RE AMAZING).

Thanks for reading! Sorry not sorry for the cliff hanger. Kudos/comment; you know the
drill! :)

“Hello?”

Peter’s frozen brain shook itself out of its stalled paralysis. Now was no time to be star-struck, now was no time to be furious. Say something! Spider-Man yelped from the back of his mind. Say something before he hangs up!

“Um.”

Great job. Real articulate.

Shut up. I’m in control; you’d just start screaming at him. I’m not sure I won’t…

“Stark? What is going on?” The Captain’s disbelief didn’t fade, and Peter supposed his monosyllabic admission of existence wasn’t helping much.

He swallowed, feeling the Knot in his sternum clog against his diaphragm.

He swallowed again.

“Hello Captain,” he said. His voice was strong and he was proud of that. He was wavering, feeling like nothing more than a fifteen-year-old faced with a stranger, but not a single fraction of it broke through into his tone.

A pause. Peter could hear voices in the background, but he couldn’t make out any words.

“I… I do not know who you are,” came Roger’s reply. “Only one person has this number; how did you get it?”

And God if that didn’t sound just like the Captain, all of his repetitive reprimands, the damn PSA videos that had seared themselves into Peter’s memory from years of hearing them over and over. It didn’t do much to help his resentment of the man.

“You’ve met me,” Peter said, mind whirring. Who was he going to be to this man? “My name is Spider-Man.”

Hey! objected Spider-Man. You can’t just take credit--

What did I say about being quiet? I’m bullshitting this and you know it.

“The kid from the airport? What are you doing with this phone; it was given to Tony Stark-- have you stolen it?” Rogers sounded exasperated, and it Peter tried to ignore the pleasure in the base of his stomach at even just irritating the man.

He decided to tell the truth. “I didn’t steal it, in fact. This number is programed into my suit as an
emergency protocol—” God knows why; where the hell did Molten Iron come from?— “but I’m calling because someone stole Mr. Stark.”

Rogers let out a breath, and there was shuffling on the other end of the line. “I know,” he finally said. “That’s why when you called I was so confused. And when you weren’t him, I assumed the worst.”

“What, that I was one of the kidnappers?” Peter shook his head. “We wish there’s been any such information.”

“We haven’t had either,” Rogers admitted. “The girl’s working on paper shreds.”

“You’re trying to find him?” Peter smiled, satisfied and more than a bit relieved. “And here I was thinking I’d have to bully you into helping.”

“Of course we’re looking!”

“Well, you can’t blame me for doubting,” Peter kept his voice light, though he had to cough slightly to hide the odium boiling around the Knot. He plowed on before the Captain could reply. “I need to know everything, now, and whenever you get something new.”

“What?” Rogers almost scoffed. “Kid, this is a private matter and a closed, ongoing investigation with the king; I can’t just keep you updated on the things we uncover.”

*Patience. Be patient, be reasonable, be tolerant.*

*Or just scream at him,* Spider-Man suggested helpfully.

Peter rolled his eyes, growling back, *We need him to help us.*

*We don’t need him to like us…*

The ‘liking’ part has a direct correlation to the ‘helping’ part. Now shut up.

“This is so much more than a private matter,” Peter said, his words pinched. “And so much more than an investigation. If it is, I’m part of it.”

His voice bordering far too close to condescension, Rogers explained, “You may be part of your own investigation, but, for obvious reasons, I can’t stay in repeated contact with you over the phone, or anything else—it’d put both of us in danger.”

*That* was the PSA voice, and Peter gripped his hair with his hand and let out a breath. “There has to be a way.”

Rogers paused, and Peter could almost hear him mulling possible answers over in his head. “I’ll let you know when we have a location, and a plan.”

“No you won’t,” Peter cut in. “You’ll hang up after I finish this conversation and never call again.”

*You don’t need to explain anything to this man. Less persuasion, more orders,* Spider-Man suggested.

Peter said, “I need to know everything as soon as it happens, and I need to be included on the formation of the plan as soon as we have a location.”

“I’m sorry, kid, but that’s not possible.”
Don’t call me kid, that’s what he calls me.

“Please.” The word slipped out before he could shape it, and held far too much of the desperation churning within him.

Roger’s voice softened, but he still said, “I can’t. I can’t put us and the country in danger. But I promise we are looking for Stark. I don’t know what he is to you, but just know, I suppose, that it’s going to be alright.”

Going to be alright.

Going to be okay.

Going to be fine.

Everyone was so eager to assure him of that. That somehow, magically, things were going to work out, but no one would tell him how, or let him try to make it that way. Wrong, wrong, wrong-- he couldn’t just wait, he couldn’t. May and Rhodes and Pepper had nothing on who’d taken Tony, or why, let alone where, and none knew where to start. Peter didn’t either; the only thing he was sure of, now, was that he needed help.

Even if it was from this arrogant, hypocritical, condescending man who knew nothing about him.

Save Tony, thought Peter.

Save Tony, thought Spider-Man.

How? This was how. And time was ticking by, Rogers was going to hang up, leave him worse than he was before, and he needed to say something. Sleeping one more night without a lead, a plan, a next step… unacceptable. More than that: impossible.

He couldn’t.

But Rogers wasn’t going to comply, if Peter and Spider-Man knew anything about the man. The plan Peter’d gone into the conversation with wasn’t working; it was time to change tactics. He’d asked Rogers to remove himself from his comfort zone, to endanger himself and his country, whatever that meant, and now it was time to take his own orders.

He wasn’t going to help Tony from behind a curtain of safety.

And so, moments before the Captain went to hang up, Peter blurted, “I’ll come to you.”

A pause.

“What?”

“You can’t talk to me, and I can’t trust you to. The only thing left is for me to come to you, help with this investigation myself. Where are you?”

Rogers was silent a while, an uncomfortable stretch of ticking seconds, then said, “That’s even more impossible than the first suggestion.” He sounded baffled, like he couldn’t believe Peter’d even considered the option.

No, you have to, you have to--

“No, it’d be easy, at least for you; I’d find a way, I’d come, I’d--”
Rogers cut him off. “I’m sorry, kid. You’ll have to do something else, and I have to go.”

“No, wait—”

But the click of the ended call echoed like thunder through the mask, deafening him with quiet, the last ember of his fire of hope smoldering to oblivion.

Peter roared.

The sound was absorbed by the swirling chaos of Queens and disappeared, as insignificant as the boy who’d made it, as useless, as futile, as empty.

Peter’s hands moved of their own accord, reaching out towards an unseen horizon and looking, searching, pleading for the individual to fill the hole ever-widening in his chest. Queens didn’t answer, indifferent to its loyal, vigilant protector, and Peter found himself kneeling, hard, onto the roof’s unforgiving concrete.

“Peter?”

It took him a moment to hear Karen.

He swallowed. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

A pause, an awkward one. Lapses with Karen were never awkward.

Say something.

It’s your turn. I don’t have... anything else to give. He really didn’t. Peter closed his eyes.

Spider-Man opened them, and rubbed his sternum to try and shift the painful lump of the Knot. “I’m okay, Karen. I just... much as I hate to admit it, he was my only hope.”

And Karen, the AI who was kinder and smarter than most humans, quietly projected a clip of Princess Leia leaning towards a droid, and her youthful voice saying, ‘help me Obi Wan Kenobi. You’re my only hope.’

It was so unexpected, and so perfectly timed, that Peter jerked back and found himself laughing.

“There’s always more hope, Peter,” Karen said. “After all, there’s more than one Skywalker.”

“That, Karen, was really damn profound. A+ for inspiration via Star Wars references.” Peter stood up and pulled the suit out of the creases in his knees. “Alright. What do we do now?”

Karen narrowed and widened the suit’s eyes, and Peter nodded. “Yeah, I’m not sure either. I know what isn’t an option, and that’s going back to sleep after all this.” He gestured vaguely.

“Could you return to the compound and begin searching for Tony with FRIDAY, and what Rhodes has already accomplished?” Karen questioned.

Peter’d already given that idea plenty of thought, and it didn’t take long for him to articulate, “I’m an engineer, and a chemist. I can code nanotech, but I can’t get files from government databases that describe the energy signature of the magic we saw in the footage, or hack satellites, or go to DC and search for evidence or signs of who took him. The only thing I know about detective work is what I’ve read or seen in TV shows. There’s no time to learn to do any of that--the longer someone’s
missing, the less likely they are to be found. It’s already been two days… well, three, now.”

“Perhaps I could help, perhaps FRIDAY could.”

Peter smiled, though there was no mirth in it. “You’d have to! But there’s nothing, nowhere, to start. This wasn’t a grab at a street corner, this was a team infiltrating a sacred place of power. This wasn’t a gun and a drug, this was magic. And no one knows what to do.”

Karen finished for him, “no one except, it seems, Rogers and whoever he was referring to.”

Peter nodded. “But he isn’t going to help me. I don’t know why I ever thought he would.”

“The man’s actions were justified, but I’d argue so are yours.”

“Are?”

“I can see one possible option.”

Peter turned, trying to look at her before he remembered she was in his clothes. Still strange, that was. “Really. And that is?”

“Instead of focusing on finding Mr. Stark, we focus on finding the Captain. From there, we can pool all of our knowledge and resources with that of ‘the girl’ and, probably, the rest of the Rogue Avengers.”

“‘The girl?’” Peter wondered vaguely as he thought that through.

“Rogers mentioned her. Said she was working off paper shreds.”

“Right. And he said he couldn’t put ‘the country’ in danger by contacting us repeatedly.”

“Seems like a good place to start,” Karen said, winking one of the mask’s eyes.

“Better than what we have on the chick with the magic,” Peter replied. He moved to the edge of the roof and craned out over it absently. Picking up a pebble, he chucked it over the edge and listened to it clatter onto the asphalt below. “Does FRIDAY know where they might be? The Rogue Avengers, I mean?”

“I’ll call her.”

Almost as soon as Karen had spoken, FRIDAY’s voice filled the mask. “Hello.”

“That was quick.”

“I was waiting. What happened?”

Peter explained the scenario quickly, trying to keep his voice from catching on any words. FRIDAY, thankfully, ignored it when it did, and it didn’t take long to fill in the other AI.

“So,” Karen finished for him, “we have to find the Captain. It is the only remaining option, the only remaining prudent one that will satisfy Peter.”

“Spider-Man too?”

“Yeah,” Spider-Man answered.
“Alright.” FRIDAY hummed. “Unfortunately, I am not aware of the location of the Rogue Avengers. The Boss had a lot of files, but he kept that information from becoming physical, thankfully.”

“But do you know anything? Things that could help us, things that could--” Spider-Man broke off.

The girl’s working on paper shreds.

A closed, ongoing investigation with the king.

I can’t put us and the country in danger.

Voices… in the background of the call… it’s three o’clock in the morning?

“Karen? FRIDAY”

“Yes?” both AI’s answered.

“What time is it in Africa, now?”

“In Central Africa Time, it is nine o’clock in the morning,” FRIDAY said, sounding confused.

That’s about time to start your day, isn’t it?

“Wakanda’s part of the Sokovia Accords, right?”

A pause, as FRIDAY and Karen followed his logic.

And then Karen laughed. “Yes, Spider-Man, I do believe that it is.”

Peter grinned and shot a stream of webbing to the building across the street, using it to swing back through the window into his room.

“FRIDAY? Would you be willing to wave me a…” he realized what he was asking for just as he spoke, and broke off.

“A couple hundred dollars for a plane ticket?” FRIDAY said, a wink in her artificial voice.

“I…”

“For the Boss, Peter, I would give thousands.”

Peter blushed. “Thank you. I didn’t mean to imply…”

“I know.”

A pause.

“Go to your printer.”

Spider-Man gave a start. “What?”

Karen winked the mask’s lights, and Spider-Man held his hands up in surrender. “Okay okay! I’m going!”

When he arrived with Grease at his heels, the machine kicked into action, the whir of moving paper clicking through the silent apartment. Excited, Peter grabbed the sheet that slid off it. He flipped it
over…

And stared.

Then he grinned, and looked down at Grease.

“Get ready, Grease,” he said. “We’re going to Wakanda.”

END OF PART THREE

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUUUUUUUUUNNNNN!!! Yes! We're going to Wakanda! All the characters shall be met! Woo! (Expect much Shuri sass and T'Challa badassery.)

*Youtube Outro* Hope you liked! Kudos! Comment! All that jazz!
In Which Texts are Sent and Nothing is Clear

Chapter Notes

Short and... sweet? Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

PART FOUR: OUT CAME THE SUN

Dear Aunt May,

I’m sorry it took so long for me to talk to you, but honestly, it kinda slipped my mind. FRIDAY let me out the window last night, because you’d locked the door. I don’t blame you for that, considering where I am and what I’m doing...

I’m not coming back to the compound. When I left, FRIDAY told me about a protocol Karen had: protocol Molten Iron. She said it was a lead on Mr. Stark, and I couldn’t not explore it. It turned out to be, to my shock, Captain America’s phone number. He picked up.

So, evidently the Rogue Avengers, and a few other people, are looking for Mr. Stark as well. But they have more information than us, more leads, they’re just closer. I wanted to get that information and bring it back, so that Pepper and Rhodes and you could be a part of this mission, because you deserve to know, but the Captain refused. I suppose that makes sense; he is a war criminal, after all.

But I can’t, I just can’t, be idle anymore. I can’t sit by and let the mission play out by the Rogue Avengers while we stay ignorant. There are things I can offer them, advantages I can give them, that no one else could, and I need to do something. Without acting, I’d be miserable, and so would all of you.

So there’s only one thing I can do. I’m going to find the Captain.

I wish I could say I’m sorry, that there was no other choice, but that’d be a lie. The thing is that none of the other choices were good enough for me. I know that sounds really arrogant and immature, but it’s the truth, and I’m acting off it.

I’m on my way out-of-country now. You don’t have to worry about money; I figured it out. There won’t be any charges, at least on us. I have the cat with me, too.

And now it’s my turn to do the ‘keep you safe’ thing. This is crazy dangerous, and I know that. I’m not even sure I’m going to the right place; I just have a few cryptic remarks and a time zone calculation to go on. I can’t tell you where I’m going, because then the Rogue Avenger’s location is endangered, and with it our chance to find Mr. Stark. But I will tell you when I make it, and if I get it right.
I know the consequences of my actions. I’ve thought them through and accepted them. I’m not sorry for leaving, but I am sorry for what it’s going to do to you guys. Really, really sorry. I’ll keep you updated, any time I can, and you’ll know everything I can tell you without endangering myself or the others. I likely won’t respond to your inevitable questions and reproaches, though; there’s nothing else to say.

Just know this: I’m going to bring him back. I promise, I’m going to bring him back, and I’m going to come back safe with him.

I love you.

•  Peter

Dear Ned and MJ,

Hey guys. I just wanted to fill you in on everything that’s happened, and what I’m going to do about it. Basically, everything is pretty darn bad. Mr. Stark is injured--shot in two places--and the magic took him and all the attackers without a trace. Not a single one. Colonel Rhodes, Ms. Potts, May… none of them even know how, let alone where, to start looking.

I didn’t, either, until FRIDAY let me know of an emergency protocol in my suit. It ended up being (can you believe this) f’ing Captain America’s phone number.

Yeah.

So he, the Rogue Avengers, and the resources of the country they're in are working together to find Mr. Stark. They’re a lot further along than we are, it seems, but the Captain refused to tell me what they’d found.

Which leaves me with just one usable option, and that is to find him.

I think I already did, and I’m on my way there now. I might be wrong though. I’ll let you know. :)

I’m okay. I really am. And I’m going to fix this, bring Mr. Stark back, and then summer better look out! I suppose that’s lucky; I only had to miss one final for this whole escapade.

I may need your guys’ help while I’m gone. Is it alright if I call you in scenarios like that? You won’t be able to talk me out of anything, but you can advise me on things, and I’d really appreciate that.

Ned, thank you. For everything. For showing me what happened, and for standing by me all this time. For being the best friend and the best person I could ever have the fortune of knowing.

MJ, thank you. For everything. For learning about me and supporting me and knowing what I needed. For fighting for me and teaching me not to be scared. For loving me. I love you too.

One more thing… would you check on May while I’m gone? Make sure she’s okay? What I’m doing is gonna really hurt her, and I know that, and I feel awful. I’d rest easier if I knew you were watching over things.

Thank you all so much,

•  Peter
It takes him a long while to formulate the thought, but Tony figured the strangest thing about all this was that he wasn’t unconscious.

He was aware of time passing, aware of the people moving about and speaking, but he was separate from it. Events occurred on a different plane from him, it seemed, as he sank into the dank, silted bed of a flooded chasm and peered towards the surface of reality, all around him. His thoughts and senses were slow, stunted, like the lazy undulation of the deep sea. Though not unpleasant, the sensation was wrong, and it made Tony antsy, or as antsy as he could be in this state. His usually quick mind had been smothered, and he felt nothing more than unsettled about it. His emotions just wouldn’t respond, and he had to fight and fight and fight to even realize it.

Wrong… Tony managed to construct the word from sparks of reality, and cast his thoughts towards the waveling surface of the lagoon.

Slowly, lethargically, they fought through the currents like they did from the depths of sleep, growing ever closer to the border of his actuality.

But he was not asleep.

Which was… strange, right?

The strangest part about all this.

As the water-like pressure on his consciousness lifted, Tony started seeing, really seeing, the people around him. They were moving, moving him, but he couldn’t feel it.

Why?

The finally completely aware question had him bursting the surface of his bubble of wrong, and the shattered mirror of the curtain disconnecting him from the world sprayed around him in fragments of thought.

With it… came everything.

He could see the blue-and-lilac walls of the room around him, an atrocious color combination he hated the idea of being subjected to.

He could taste copper, and smell that faint, indescribable aroma Thor had always possessed, something somehow simultaneously alien and comforting.

He could hear, and comprehend, the voices calling out around him. (“He’s awake!”)

“Impossible. No one can—”

“Well, he did.”

“Fuck. Quick, get Aedoilagen before he blacks out! I’m not done cleaning the wound, and she wants him available when she’s prepared.”

And.
He.

Could.

Feel.

The wood of a table, the heat of a light, the smoothness of metal inside him.

And he could feel the splintering fire of his insides exposed to the pernicious air, his tissues separated and threaded back through his body, the bones of his femur and clavicle bending and piercing through muscle and sinew, severing tendons that curled back into themselves like the release of tension on a rubber band, those shards of his skeleton like shrapnel and oh god it was happening again; there were hands digging at his insides, coating themselves in the sticky redness of his blood, and it was the Seven Rings all over again, and he was panicking, he was dying, and it was too much too much too much--

Orange light danced in his vision, and he could feel that too--as cold as Pepper's disappointment and as fiery as Peter's determination--

His last thought before the pressure of that lagoon of suppressing reality pulled him back under was oh God, Peter…

He’s going to be so scared.

Chapter End Notes

*EVIL CACKLING* Peter making immature, possibly catastrophic decisions! A Tony perspective! And then I leave you all to wait for me to finish writing the next one!

I feel bad.

Anyway, thank you for reading! Click that kudos or grace me with a few characters in the comment box, and and I'll see you soon!
In Which Planes Soar and Peter makes a Friend

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter watched the ocean far below, so immense and eternal that he could see the curve of the horizon. It was so uniform, and he was so high up, that he could hardly sense movement but for the drifts of clouds retreating into the distance.

The sun was rising, just peeking above the sea, and hurled colors across the sky with intensity that took Peter’s breath away. Blood reds and lilac purples and smokey oranges and even hesitant greens faded into each other beneath dark clouds stained peach from the light hitting them from below. He was overwhelmed by it, the power of the utterly inevitable turning of the Earth that loomed eternal and universal, though it was but a single speck in this cosmos that was only just beginning to reveal its depths to them. Like an electron buzzing around the nucleus of their sun, one particle with one job and one future, the Earth traveled round.

But no matter how infinitesimal, this gorgeous, incredible world was still incomprehensible to a boy looking for his father.

The plane was completely full, and Peter, thankfully, had a seat towards the back, where he could lean back against the window in silence. Grease was safely stowed in her carrier beneath his seat, though she wasn’t quite happy about it. The man next to him had his headphones in, and he was willing to bet that everyone in his vicinity did as well. He was embarrassed at being the cause of such disruption, but thankful FRIDAY had found a way to permit Grease to come with him.

He was only about fifteen minutes into the sixteen-hour flight, the time in the airport having absorbed time greedily from the morning. Now that Wakanda had become part of global trade and integration, commercial flights to the country were common from almost every city. There were still expensive, however, especially last-minute, and Peter had spent the thirty minutes waiting to go through security repeatedly thanking FRIDAY for her help. The AI had just laughed at him through the phone.

He’d given Karen permission to keep herself from shutting down, and though she and the suit were stuffed into his bag, she’d connected herself to his phone and joined in his conversation. After FRIDAY had disconnected, apologetically saying she had to deal with the rest of the compound (Peter knew what, and who, she referred to, and cringed a bit), Karen had remained awake and on the line until he’d had to shut off his phone and stay focused on the alien environment.

It was like they were hesitant to leave him alone.

Both Peter and Spider-Man appreciated it.

Having never flown from an airport before, it had taken him a while to figure out what he needed to do. By the time he’d checked his single, hastily packed bag (a small duffel he could easily carry), gone through security, cleared Grease, and found his gate, the plane had already begun boarding. He made it just before they closed the doors, apologizing breathlessly, and slipped into his seat.

His adrenaline was still buzzing, his knee jiggled ceaselessly as the plane ascended, and he was altogether not excited for the day-and-a-quarter long flight.

But as he watched the sunrise, the way the colors grew lighter and the sun higher until he had to avert his eyes, he found his head and hands resting against the tiny window. Stress and excitement
quietly drained away as the plane climbed, like something had punctured the rain-barrel of his strength and it was slowly dripping away.

Spider-Man pulled his knees up to his chest on the cramped seat and leaned his head into them, still watching the sky outside. The voice of the captain rang through the cabin, telling them they had reached their cruising altitude and were now free to move about if necessary.

Soon, though, the commotion of voices and movement had settled again, and the only sound was the deafening rumble of the displaced air and the jet’s engines. It was soothing, after a while, and Spider-Man could almost feel his heart rate slowing.

But he didn’t slip into the haze of sleep, just hovered in a trance of not-quite-relaxation, the Knot scraping against his lungs as he took each breath. Grease settled beneath him, eventually realizing her whining wasn’t going to get her what she wanted.

The air wooshed by outside, and he could almost feel it in his ears.

His stance grew uncomfortable, and he moved his legs.

The sun hit the right angle to stream through the tiny window, and he closed the shutter.

Then, his spider-sense flickered, suddenly and powerfully wrenching him back to full awareness. He sat up, startling the man to his left, and looked around wildly.

But the plane trundled on, nothing signaling trouble.

And a moment later, like a light flipped off, the tingle died.

It left him more terrified than the initial explosion had been. Because if nothing was wrong here… it meant something had happened with Tony.

*Is he alive? Is he still alive--?

*I don’t know, Spider-Man managed, his hand jumping up to his sternum and frantically working at his shit. I don’t know, I don’t know I don’t know I don’t--*

“Um, kid?”

What do you mean you don’t know-- Peter drew in rapid breaths, trying and failing not to panic.

*I think he is, I don’t know what that flicker meant--*

“Hey!”

The man to his left had put a hand on his shoulder, sounding concerned. Spider-Man flinched, nearly bringing up his hands to defend himself, but stopped when the man lifted his own non-threateningly.

“Easy there, dude,” the man said. “You okay?”

“I--” Peter’s eyes darted about, unable to focus on anything but introspection on the deadness of his spider-sense.

No.

Not deadness, just… calmness, sleepiness, *please--*
“Hey, hey, look here, okay?” The man was speaking to him again, hands hovering uncertainty above his shoulders but voice strong. Peter fixed his eyes to the man’s with immense difficulty and blinked slowly.

“First time on a plane?” the man asked, his smile wide and greasy and friendly.

Peter shook his head, then held up two fingers through his slowing breaths.

“You get vertigo? Heights, or movement?”

Me? Vertigo? Heights and movement? Spider-Man almost laughed aloud. The helplessness faded as he remembered exactly what he could do, and he actually focused on the man before him.

“No,” he said, but nothing came out the first time. He swallowed and tried again. “No.”

“Okay…” the poor bloke looked quite uncomfortable, like he’d exhausted all of his ideas and had no idea what was going on, but still wanted to help. “What’s up, then?”

Peter, suddenly, far from home with the pressure of the unknown seemingly resting on his shoulders alone, felt the sudden urge to tell this kind stranger everything.

“I…”

He shouldn’t. The less people that knew anything, the better.

But, as the man looked at him with honest care, extending a proverbial helping hand, Peter found that he was undeniably, soul-crushingly lonely.

Don’t... we can live through this, just... but even Spider-Man couldn’t bare the thought of sitting still and silent for the next thirteen hours with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

He could say something, at least.

“I don’t know if he’s okay,” Peter managed. “I don’t know if I’m doing this right.”

Most might have grown uncomfortable, defensive due to their own confusion on the subject, but the expression of the man next to him just softened even more. “Doing what?” he asked.

“Trying to find him,” Peter let himself say. “He’s... he’s been abducted.”

“Oh, God. Who?”

“My father.”

The man peered over the seats around them, but didn’t seem to find what he was looking for. “And you’re here all on your own?”

Peter shrugged. “It’s my own fault.”

“No, c’mon. No one should have to be by themselves after that, not even an adult.” The man squared his shoulders and fixed Peter’s gaze with hazel brown eyes. “I’m gonna be here all day--” he grinned, though his expression was serious-- “if you need anything, at all, just say, m’kay?”

Peter just stared at him.

“Okay?”
“Okay,” the boy whispered.

“Good. I’m Mark,” the man said.

“Peter. Glad to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Mark sat back and closed the book that had been open on his lap; Peter hadn’t noticed it previously. “You have your cat?” he said after a moment.

Peter nodded. “Her name’s Grease.”

“That’s… interesting,” Mark said slowly in mock confusion. “Is she pretty messy?”

“No, actually, it has to do with when I met her.” Peter smiled at the memory. “She ambushed me in an alley for my bacon and then smeared it all over my su--clothes.”

“Ha!” Mark had a booming guffaw, ringing out through the plane and seeming nothing but genuine. It reminded Peter a bit of the Tenth Doctor’s satisfied shout. “Bacon! Seems like a hearty little girl!”

“Oh, yeah,” Peter said. “She’s fearless!”

_Took the full stare of Iron Man and didn’t even flinch._

_Not dead._

Not dead.

_Not dead._

“A… friend funded my ticket,” Peter admitted. “I don’t know how she got Grease admitted.”

“Maybe she told the truth,” Mark said with a shrug. “She’s a support animal.”

“Yeah,” Peter choked. “Maybe.”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” The man put a hand on his shoulder, his eyes widening into that empathetic owlish expression. “I didn’t mean to--”

“No, it’s okay.” Peter cut him off. “I’m a bit sensitive.”

Mark smiled. “Not your fault.”

They lapsed into silence, and Peter moved to slip open the plastic window shade. Warm morning light streamed into their part of the cabin again, and Mark shifted so his shoulder lay in the beam.

“What are you gonna do?” he said finally.

Spider-Man shrugged. “Anything I can.”

“Can I--”

“No. There’s nothing you can do that isn’t already being done.” Spider-Man folded in on himself a bit. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have bothered you, I just--”

“Hey, enough of that, okay?” Mark snapped his fingers in front of Spider-Man’s face jokingly. “I’m happy to help.”

Spider-Man just shrugged again.
“I have a son about your age,” said his companion. “And a younger daughter. They’re waiting for me in Wakanda.”

Peter turned to look at Mark. “You live there?”

“No. I’m going for business, but my family’s never been. We decided to make an outing out of it, although I’ll be pretty busy.”

“Have you been before?”

Mark’s eyes got a bit far away. “Oh, yes.”

“To the capital?”

“Ha! I wish! No, just to some of the larger tribal cities around. But God are they gorgeous!”

Peter scooched a bit closer, intrigued. He’d seen pictures, but somehow he felt like this was akin to the stars: only reaching its full majesty in person.

Mark glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and grinned. “The colors!” he exclaimed, gesturing before him as though framing a photograph. “They are so bright and chaotic but somehow complementary, each segment of your vision—a person, a building, a market stall—becomes its own separate entity of shape and color. Of course, there’s conflict; protesters and poverty and people in the process of rebuilding from their latest political scandal, but it’s so much more than that. Everyone is so diverse, even more so now that the borders are open, and it just makes you feel welcome. You look around, and there’s primitive stereotypes interwoven with sci-fi tech, and as every single one of your views and generalizations are usurped, you feel the possibility of anything.”

Peter stared at him.

Mark glanced back, met his eyes, and blushed. “Sorry.”

“No, no, that was wonderful.”

The man smiled, a bit self-consciously. “I’m a writer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Just for fun, y’know.” Mark shrugged.

“Anything published?”

“I have a couple of poems in magazines and collections, a few short stories, the like.” Mark’s eyes as gotten that glow, that uncontrollable passion that bled into any artist’s expression when invited to speak of their trade. Any artist... “I’m working on a novel, though.”

Peter’s throat had closed again, thinking of navy blues and sparkling silvers, and he couldn’t find a way to answer. Mark looked at him again, the excitement decaying to concern.

“What do you need? Do you… want me to tell you about it?” he asked softly.

Peter nodded, swallowed, and nodded again. “Yeah,” he murmured. “I’d like that.”

So Mark talked, and Peter listened and wondered if this was how Tony felt, awake in the workshop and harrowed with stress and appreciating the words of Peter himself as he spoke of dreams. Mark told Peter of his epic fantasy and his vibrant characters and his complex world and all the challenges
he had and was facing in writing it all down, everything he hoped and everything he was nervous for. Peter slowly let himself be distracted by Mark’s enthusiasm and the story he described, and the plane trundled on.

Mark eventually blushed and told him he’d recently gotten excited over the stories of superheroes, and that a character in his novel was inspired by none other than Spider-Man.

The man probably misinterpreted why Peter started laughing, but he looked relieved anyway.

“I know!” Mark chuckled. “I’m hopeless.”

Peter shook his head, breath still coming short from laughter. “No, I’m not judging you,” he said. “It’s just…”

You’re sitting next to the inspiration for your art? Spider-Man supplied.

Somehow, I think that’d blow our cover.

Then he was laughing again, and so was Mark, and if felt so good. It was cowardly, of course, to avoid that feeling of helplessness, cowardly to crave distraction, but Peter ignored the whispering voice in his mind that said so.

“Yeah, so.” Mark coughed, still blushing. “I’m a total fanboy, who are you?”

Peter grinned. “One and the same. Do you have a favorite?” He was genuinely curious.

Mark shrugged. “I don’t want to choose. I have a feeling there’s more to each of the Avengers than we could know; they’re people, after all, not just a brand.”

“But from what you do know,” Peter pried. “C’mon, I know you’ve got one…”

Mark threw up his hands, surrendering with a laugh. “Fine! I like Hawkeye.”

Clint.

Peter did his best to act nonchalant. “Cool,” he said with a nod. “The bow?”

“It’s inspiring, I guess, how he doesn’t have any powers, but he’s still so badass. Though I suppose the same’s true for Iron Man.”

He’s so much more than the man in the suit, Spider-Man and Peter thought as one.

Out loud, Spider-Man said, “agreed; he’s the man who defined powerless crime-fighting.”

“He’s your favorite, then?”

Peter pictured Tony in front of him, mouth quirked in the smile reserved for satisfaction, confident and pleased by Peter’s answer.

He pictured meeting the man’s eyes as he said, “Nah. Thor’s my favorite.”

He wondered if he’d ever told Tony that. He wondered if he’d follow it up with “but Tony Stark’s the best one” or just laugh. He wondered if he’d ever get the chance to find out.

Mark said, “Thor’s an interesting one. I think his relationship with his brother is the most interesting, though.” He blushed again. “Or at least the one I imagine exists.”
Peter laughed, but it was no longer genuine.

He was saved from trying to find a response to Mark’s continued conversation by the flight attendant delivering snacks, and found himself devouring the flavorless pretzels like they were the most succulent of breakfasts. When had he last eaten?

Mark gave Peter his bag, and Peter nodded a thanks, already ripping the package open.

“Growing boys,” The man muttered. Peter just continued tearing into the crunchy snacks.

*What? I’m hungry.*

Somehow, from there, Mark ended up reading some of his poetry aloud. Somehow, from there, Peter let down the tray on the back of the seat before him and rested his head on it. Somehow, from there, the Knot was forgotten and the world turned black, and Peter was consumed by the long-awaited peace of a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Mark is us. I am Mark. Break that fourth wall, Mark my man!

Also, it is interesting/slightly irritating that AO3 has better spell-check than Google Docs... Eh.

Thanks for reading! Hope you liked this chapter that didn't clear up anything at all! More on its way; the chapter after the next one there's a WHOLE CHAPTER from Tony's perspective. I promise. :)


“Peter.”

“Ung…”

“C’mon, dude, you’ve been out for twelve hours!”

Vaguely, Peter could feel vibrations beneath his head from where it was pillowed on a hard surface. Tony should really put chairs in the workshop that reclined; then he wouldn’t fall asleep in the nanotech. Groggily, he blinked once and turned over, his body feeling like margarine left out in the sun.

“F’ve more minutes, T’ny…” he groaned.

“No, Mark, and again no; you have to get up now.”

“Wha?” His lethargic brain registered that the voice was not, in fact, Tony.

For a blissful moment, he was confused. For a blissful moment, he didn’t remember.

And then it all came back like the falling of the Hoover, he recent memories pounding at him ruthlessly.

Peter groaned again, for a different reason.

“We’ve landed?” he said, sitting up and cringing at the wobble in his voice. Grease screeched from beneath the seat, irritated at being confined for so long, but Peter ignored her.

“Yup.” Mark was craning his head to see down the aisle, and Peter wondered if he could see people standing to disembark.

_Disembark._

_We’ve landed._

_Holy fucking shit, I’m in Wakanda._

“What time is it?” Peter managed.

“Ten at night, in NYC, and four o’clock where we are now,” Mark answered, still distracted.

“Which is Wakanda.”

“Which is, indeed, Wakanda.”

Peter let out a breath.

Spider-Man leaped up, thinking wildly, _I’m in Wakanda, and the Rogue Avengers are in Wakanda, actually working with the king, and I’m going to the capital; I’m going to meet the Black Panther, I’m going to meet Shuri--_
I know!

Peter!

I know! A strained expression of equal parts excitement and terror bloomed across his face, along with a quite dignified squawking noise in the base of his throat.

Mark shot him an amused look, and Peter ducked his head, cheeks burning.

When it came to their turn to get up and leave the plane, Spider-Man was vibrating. Mark kept looking over his shoulder to check on him, and Spider-Man tried to control his nerves without much success.

When the two of them emerged from the gate, Grease’s carrier in hand, his spider-sense went wild.

People. People everywhere. Maybe not more than had been at New York’s airport, but different, unique, magical. People wore clothes of every kind, displaying skin of every color as they moved and stared and spoke in words of every language. The great, looming ceilings carved with patterns that seemed to shift as he watched, their inlays of purple and black shimmering like dragonfly wings, sent him dashing forward to stand in the center of the enormous room, just one of so many, staring up and around him and trying to take in everything at once.

So much.

And this was just one room.

He felt like he was watching the sea through the plane’s window again, drowning in the endless, only, precious world in which he lived, the cruel, cunning, perfect one he was trying to survive. There was so, so much, so many things to see, to do…

So many places to look. To hide. To capture.

Peter squared his shoulders and looked back behind him to Mark, eyes snagging on the subtle shapes of panthers carved into baseboards and slinking through the patterns of the tiled floor. The man was watching him with a smile, and trotted over when Peter met his gaze.

“Pretty wonderful, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes,” Peter breathed. “And you get to come here often?”

Mark laughed his booming laugh. “Ha! Indeed I do. I know the way to baggage, if you want me to-”

He broke off as Peter’s stomach gurgled embarrassingly loud, then grinned.

“How about we get some early breakfast or late dinner, first?”

Peter smiled sheepishly and stuck his hands in his jean pockets. “You don’t have to—”

“Nah, I want to! I’m hungry too, and besides—” he pulled out his phone and pointed to the screen—“my family’s not gonna be here for another half an hour. Let’s go.”

They started off through the terminal together, Peter unable to keep his mouth from hanging open as he took in everything he could. Acacia trees grew from the edges of the moving sidewalks almost sideways to stretch towards the skylights, creating a second roof of fine fronds, and Peter thought he saw birds roosting amongst their branches. Grease did, too, and started moving around even more
within her carrier; Peter was forced to hug the thing to his chest to calm her as he stared at the trees above him. The directional signs hung from the acacias as well; in fact, the entire airport seemed to revolve around them, as support or design or invitation.

But as he walked, as he looked closer at mechanisms and architecture, Peter saw signs of technology he’d only ever dreamed of in the shifting of nanotech and the glow of hidden electricity. He had no doubt the trees were not the only ‘green’ thing about this airport, or about this country as a whole.

It dawned on him, then, as he stepped off a moving sidewalk and approached baggage claim aside Mark, that he was most likely treading on vibranium.

God, I haven’t even gone outside yet and this place is unbelievable.

The conveyor belt was already packed with suitcases when they arrived, and it only took Mark one rotation to locate his two rolling bags. Peter had to stay a bit longer (his duffle was hidden behind a larger piece of luggage) and Mark offered to loop it over the handle of his own suitcase so Peter could keep Grease calm.

“That’s all you’ve got?” Mark said, indicating Peter’s duffel after the boy had gratefully accepted.

“Yeah. I left in a hurry,” he replied, perhaps too curtly.

“Ah.” Then they were out of the gate and advancing down yet another hallway of bark and vibranium.

There were even more people in the checking area, awaiting arrivals or departing themselves, of even more colors and shapes and sizes, if that was possible. Peter kept his hand up in a constant wave, delighting in watching people wave back or simply nod in acknowledgement, delighting in being a part of this environment. Mark led him to the edge of the room and directed him towards the open bar of a restaurant, which Peter had been too preoccupied to notice before.

“That’s the one you want,” Mark said. “They have the best fonio porridge.”

Peter shot him a confused look, and Mark just grinned.

“Trust me.”

The small restaurant was one of the many tucked into the walls of the area, and it smelled potently of garlic and ginger, nearly enough to make Peter’s eyes water. He hesitated to order and then to eat, but as soon as the orangish mush touched his lips Peter was gulping down mouthfuls almost quicker than he could swallow. It was thick and creamy with harder, shelled seeds sprinkled through it, a strange but not unpleasant texture, and taste of umami and cilantro with only a hint of garlic brought out by the smell of the room. He was given a small side of blackened meat to eat on the side, which tasted not of charcoal but of fire, and pulled apart like the tenderest of steaks.

He slipped a piece to Grease, who stopped her complaining to devour it eagerly.

Mark watched him with amusement, eating his own meal with rather more control. After finishing, Peter sat back with wide eyes and blinked slowly at the man, breathing, “this place is amazing.”

“Ha! You can say that again.” Mark took another bite, then jumped as his phone pinged. “Ah! They’re here!” He typed something quickly, and Peter did his best not to rudely crane his head to read the words. “I told my wife to meet us over here.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, Peter fidgeted. “Do you want me to go…?”
“If you want to, you can, but I’m sure Cara would love to meet you.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Peter smiled, and Mark smiled back through a mouthful of porridge.

“Mark!” came a voice from the crowd, and the man turned to look, lifting his hand slightly to make himself more noticeable.

“Over here!”

A woman emerged from the throng of people, her hand clutching that of a girl, with a tall, red haired teen behind them. Peter’s jaw about hit the floor when his gaze locked with that of the toddler, her angled face framed by a frizzy bob of fiery hair.

None other than Sasha Alexander stared back at him.

The girl looked no different than she had when Spider-Man had met her a couple weeks back, and she clutched the same plastic figurine in her fist. Suddenly, Mark’s interest in superheroes felt a lot more personal.

“How was the flight?” the woman, Cara, asked, sweeping into the restaurant and pressing a kiss to the top of Mark’s head (no wonder the man had looked familiar).

Peter was too busy reminding himself that Sasha had met Spider-Man, not him, so he was safe, that he didn’t hear Mark’s reply. He looked away from the toddler to find the other three Alexanders staring at him. “Um, sorry,” he said. “Hi.”

“Peter, this is my wife, Cara,” Mark said, “and my son, Justin, and my daughter, Sasha.”

Sasha waved, and Justin jerked his chin in the way teens did when they really just wanted to be left out of the conversation.

“Nice to meet you,” Peter managed.

Sasha trotted over to him and stood on her toes to see onto the table. “Did you have porridge?” she demanded.

Focused on the girl, Peter missed Cara’s questioning look to her husband, and Mark’s quiet response. He didn’t notice the woman’s gaze turn sorrowful, concerned, as she looked at him.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was really good.”

“Mom! Can I have porridge?”

Justin laughed a bit. “You just ate, Sasha. You won’t be able to finish it!”

“Oh I will!” the girl protested, and it sounded so familiar Peter couldn’t contain his grin. “Besides,” she continued, “even if I don’t, you’ll eat it for me.”

“You’re brother isn’t a garbage disposal, Sasha,” Cara said in that tone people had when this was a recurring conversation.

Sasha narrowed her eyes, then flicked a stray cascade of curls back over her shoulder and muttered,
“we’ll see.”

Peter laughed. “I’d eat your porridge, unless Justin really did want it.” He smiled somewhat awkwardly at the other boy, who returned the expression with nothing less than abject humiliation in his eyes.

“Peter’s heading to the capital,” Mark said, sparing Peter from having to make more conversation about fonio.

“Cool,” Cara said. “I hope to go there sometime. We aren’t leaving the city.”

“It seems wonderful here too,” Peter said, then added a bit hesitant, “do you, um, know how I can get to the capital?”

Mark and Cara shared a look, then Cara responded kindly, “yes. You can’t just walk in, of course, but they have shuttles coming from the airport every half hour.”

Peter checked his phone, ignoring the text alerts that had come in since he’d removed the device from airplane mode. “If I hurry, I can make the next one.”

He got up, seized Grease and his duffel, and made for the door, but Mark stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Peter, who do you need me to contact?”

Peter stared at him. “What? No one.”

“I can’t just let you disappear into the city with nothing but a cat and a duffel,” Mark said. “Especially not with everything happening with you.”

Spider-Man slipped out with barely a tightening of muscles. “There’s nothing you can do, Mark,” he said.

“There has to be. I can call the authorities—”

“No!”

*Deep breaths, Peter said. He’s just trying to help.*

“Look, I—” Spider-Man sighed and rubbed his face, turning back to the family looking at him in concern. “I’m really thankful for everything you’ve done, but you have to let me go.”

“Please, let me help you,” Mark said. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

*No, you really can’t.* The Knot felt like a stone wrenching on his sternum.

“I wish you could help me,” Spider-Man said. “But there’s only one person who can do that right now, and that person is myself.”

*And me,* Peter objected.

*He thinks I’m you, remember?*

*Right.*

“Thank you. I wouldn’t have made it through the flight without you,” Spider-Man locked eyes with Mark, and was shocked to see tears in the man’s gaze. “Thank you for the food and the company. But I can’t stay safe anymore; I have to move into the unknown.”
“Dear God.” Mark sighed and dropped his hand. “At least let me give you my phone number.”

“Alright.”

The man scribbled it down, and Spider-Man took that time to meet the gaze of Justin and Sasha, both looking equally confused. He just smiled sadly.

“Here.”

Spider-Man took the slip of napkin with its scrawled numbers and nodded, then stepped backwards towards the door.

He paused, turned, and said, “thank you,” one last time. “I’ll… see you around.”

Then he was darting into the crowd, not looking back.

And heard Sasha’s solemn call of “goodbye, hero-boy.”

As soon as he was safely out of sight of the doubtlessly confused, shocked family, Spider-Man burst out laughing. *I’ve been outed by a six year old. Perfect.*

*There are worse people to be outed to.*

*You can say that again…*

*Now let’s go,* Peter took a deep breath, readjusted his grip on Grease’s carrier, and moved forward again. *We’ve got a shuttle to catch.*

He missed the shuttle.

He missed the next one, too.

He missed them because he was on his knees with his face turned upward, his luggage cast aside carelessly, staring.

The night sky outside the airport was unobscured by light pollution.

And Peter was looking at the stars, the millions of stars, the swaths of sparks cast in rivers across the sky, and the moon’s opal smile upstaging them all.

He might have been crying. He would never know.

They were magical, perfect, and so much more than he’d ever dreamed. So much better. Clouds drifted like swirls across the smooth surface of a lake, a lake of light that reached down to touch Peter’s awed face.

A whisper of memory put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked towards it. May was smiling up at sky, her eyes wide, the stars gleaming in the tears within them. The ghost of Pepper stood behind her, the camera hanging forgotten around her neck, just taking it all in with the shine of the moon on her hair. Ned had sat down hard with his hands covering his mouth in awe, eyes like saucers as MJ sketched and sketched and sketched beside him. Happy was quietly whistling a calming, perfect tune, his fingers tracing through the sky as though he could touch the stars, pointing and tracing each constellation with Rhodes at his side.
A phantom hand threaded through his, and Peter saw Tony’s smile had nothing to do with the stars.

The concrete was cold and hard on his knees and no one stopped to notice him.

No one was there at all.

Peter didn’t miss the next shuttle.

Chapter End Notes

And.... ANGST!

IT'S SASHA! SHE'S BACK! Cuz I liked her too much to keep her from another cameo... So we got more snappish 6-year-old! Huzzah! And don't worry about the Alexanders knowing Spidey; they're trustworthy. But we aren't done with them yet!

Thanks for reading!!! TONY IS NEXT GUYS. Hope you liked, and you know the drill with feedback! ;)


“Well, fuck.”

The woman across from him looked like a dagger, Tony thought. All precise angles and rust tinged colors, with eyes tinged orange beneath the brown of her iris, even the twitching of her mouth into a slight smile was sharp.

“I hardly think the situation calls for that.”

True to her image, the woman had jolted Tony from his bubble or strange consciousness without much warning, though, admittedly, he wasn’t sure how she would have been subtler. He’d found himself suddenly fully aware, seated in a wooden chair before an elegant ivory desk, his hands and ankles free of any binding. When he moved, he could feel the rough texture of canvas scratching against his shoulder and hip, though there was only a dull ache by way of pain.

“Well, fuck.”

“Actually, I think it does,” Tony said with a huff, moving forward on his seat slightly.

The other edge of the woman’s mouth twisted up, and Tony mirrored the expression as sarcastically as he could, even as his eyes darted around the room in search of information.

“Is this the part,” Tony said, turning as far as he could in the chair to try and spot the exits, “where I make a cliche joke about room service?”

“I think it is, yes.” British. Interesting.

“Hm. I think the sarcasm would fall flat, because this is actually quite nice compared to the last time I was imprisoned.” He looked around exaggeratedly, and nodded. The walls were hardwood, warm and worn, dappled with multicolored light from the room’s single window: a stained-glass skylight. The desk matched the light, and it seemed everything was kindly color-coded, scruffy and inviting like a family living room. In fact, he could see a couch and recliner positioned against the wall behind the ivory desk; this was a family living room.

“Ah, but Mr. Stark,” the woman said with equal exaggeration, “you’re not imprisoned.”

“Oh!” Tony flopped onto the back of the chair. “Good. For a moment there, I was confused by the shooting, and the abducting, and the magical state of confinement!”

The woman laughed, and even that was sharp. “I can, indeed, see where you’d get that idea.”

“Glad we’re on the same page.” Tony craned his head to try and locate the exit behind the woman.

“The door’s behind you,” she said.
“Thanks!” Tony turned to make sure she wasn’t lying, tenderly avoided stretching his wounds, then went to stand.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Tony paused. “And there’s the ticket. A bit of a vague threat; oldy, but a goody.”

The woman laughed. “Wrong again! I thought you were a genius.” Tony bristled, but her tone was teasing. “Not a threat, I just don’t want you tearing your stitches out. Jade spent a while on them; you were pretty bad.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Was she the one who shot me, or the one who shot the press cameras to destroy as much evidence as possible?”

“Look, Mr. Stark,” the woman stood, “what happened at the trial was a necessary evil. But my team and I just need your help.”

Tony snorted. “A necessary evil? Look, if you need help, I do have a company that does that. Did you think of asking, huh? Even just a little?”

“The shootout was not to get in contact with you, actually. That was a perk.”

Tony’s fist clenched almost unconsciously. “Was Ross about getting shot, me getting shot, a perk too?”

The woman winced. “It wasn’t, in fact.”

“Oh, well, I’m not keen on that either,” Tony said, trying to contain his hiss. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I actually have things to do in the next week. That do not involve being a hostage. Like, y’know, saving UN politics, the livelihoods of a minority, and my reputation.” Tony stood carefully, despite the irritation urging him to strut from the room. His newly stitched skin complained even with the small movement, but he hid any sign of it expertly.

“Mr. Stark—”

“Get in contact with me in a few days, and maybe you’ll have more luck,” Tony said over his shoulder, and limped towards the door.

“Please.”

And hell if he tried not to, hell if he didn’t know any hesitation would be a point scored for the woman, but muscle memory had him stopping at the syllable. Muscle memory had him glancing back, just slightly, his hand still extended for the door handle. Shit.

“You can leave this room anytime,” the woman said, “but know that certain members of my team have a far different approach to achieving our goals. We’re in a remote location with no means of communication with the rest of the world. You have no allies here, but I’m offering to be one.”

Step one: Make an observation.

Tony clenched his teeth, trying to decide which of the conflicting urges within him was the logical one. Step two: Ask a question. Run? And risk truly being stranded wherever they happened to be? Or stay, and risk this woman having hostile intentions, risk getting in deeper than he already was. Or test it.
Tony turned back to the door to hide the slyness creeping across his expression. *Step three: Form a testable hypothesis.* “Sorry. I’m inclined not to trust a dagger-lady who shot and abducted me smack in the center of a government building. See you around.” *Step four: Design and conduct an experiment to test the soundness of hypothesis.* He opened the door.

It slammed shut again, seemingly of its own accord. But Tony was looking, and saw the faintest of orange lights around the hinges.

*Step five: Record and interpret the results.*

He grinned, releasing the doorknob and stepping back. Now, they were getting somewhere. When he turned, the woman was on her feet, watching him with those razor-sharp eyes.

*Step six: Evaluate validity of hypothesis.*

“Ah. That’s more like it,” Tony said, his hand playing across the bandages of his injured hip, the limb aggravated by his movement. He was a prisoner, and he knew how to deal with that; not so much with the mixed-messages of a far-too-genuine woman. “Now we can get on with it.”

“Just hear me out, Mr. Stark.”

“It seems I have no other choice,” Tony said pointedly. He clasped his hands behind his back, wished fleetingly for a pair of sunglasses to complete the image, but decided it was probably best this woman could see the fury in his eyes.

*You shot me. You interrupted my push for a better Accords. You abducted me from an already anxious family. You’ve sent my kid into who knows what kind of state, considering his father and uncle. You’ve ruined Mother’s Day, ruined the summer Pete’s been looking forward to for months, and are keeping me from Pepper.*

*Peter... Spider-Man.*

Determination solidified in the base of his gut, squaring his shoulders of its own accord. He *needed* to get out of here. How long had it been since the trial, since MJ’s report? He was here, *wasting time*, while Peter was getting worse. He could only imagine what this was doing to the kid, to all of them, and it was *this woman’s fault.*

*You have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into.*

“My name is Maura Aedoilagen,” said the woman.

“I don’t care.”

She ignored him. “And as you probably have guessed, I’m a sorcerer.”

“Try again,” Tony said, and crossed his arms as much as he could. “There’s no such thing.”

“You’ve worked with the Scarlet Witch,” Aedoilagen said, something primal in the tone of her voice that Tony remembered in himself far too often. “You’ve seen magic.”

“Wanda’s powers were derived from Loki’s scepter and the Mind Stone,” Tony said. Then paused. “Please tell me you’re not a HYDRA experiment...”

Aedoilagen shook her head, and the condescension dripping from her made Tony bristle. “I’m not; I’m a sorcerer. Before the Sanctums were destroyed and the Accords set into effect, we were a
formidable force tasked with defending this dimension from threats from others.”

It took those words for the world to fall away from beneath Tony.

He dropped into the chair, no longer strong enough to favor his injured hip, his mind racing through the terrible connotations of Aedoilagen’s words. *This dimension.* There were more, and they were a threat.

He had his hands full with this universe, with the damn armies from skies billions of light years from Earth; how, *how* was he supposed to prepare for an untold number of others?

How was he supposed to *protect* them?

Aedoilagen misinterpreted the shock shattering across his face, continuing with a, “you need a scientific explanation to accept this?”

*Keep her talking.*

“Nah,” he managed. “Peachy, here. Just keep on with your villain backstory.”

“I’m not--God, you are irritating.”

“I try.”

*One step at a time, Tony. Understand you’re capture. Talk your way out. Get home, comfort your family, and then deal with the horrible, insignificant, unpreparedness of your world.*

*Figure out how to be the rock to anchor your kid as he works through his mind, instead of him being one for you.*

*Shit. Shitshitshit*--

His breathing sped up, the demon with its claws around his state of mind digging in deep. *I can’t do this, oh God, I can’t do this, how do I help him, save him, protect him*--

“Try to refrain from deciding whether I happen to be a cliche antagonist until I finish explaining what we need, at least?” Aedoilagen said.

And he was actually grateful for her in that moment, pulling him out of the rabbit-hole lined with issues he had to protect against. Quietly, Tony collapsed the chute into a set of shelves, organizing his mind to let him work one at a time, down from the top, until he had the opportunity to unpack them and truly look.

“I think I’ve got some significant evidence,” Tony replied, pointing to his hip, which was stinging enough to indicate it might have started bleeding again.

“For the last time--” Aedoilagen rubbed her temples-- “the shooting was not intended. Not even the kidnapping was about you!”

“Oh, *my* kidnapping wasn’t about me? Sorry for getting so confused.” Tony let his passive-aggressiveness evolve into scathing sarcasm; the woman was annoyed, and it was time to step up his game.

“We needed them out!”

That gave him pause.
“Needed… who? Out where?”

“Let me talk, and maybe you’d find out.”

Tony shrugged with his uninjured right shoulder. “Never been good at letting other people blather.”

“I can tell. And I needed the Rogue Avengers to begin poking their heads out of wherever they’re hiding.”

Tony burst out laughing.

“And you’re solution— *ha!*— was to kidnap *me* from my trial?” Maybe this was going to be easier than the whole ‘sorcerer’ thing had implied, if the woman was this stupid.

“You know where they are.”

*Yes.*

“I do *not* know where they are!” Tony threw up his right hand in exasperation. “I did not contact Captain America, and I have not been harboring war criminals! I was at a *trial* for that exact reason; seems counterproductive to interrupt it.”

Aedoilagen leaned forward across the desk. “Even if I believed that,” she said, “taking you wasn’t just for your knowledge.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Me and my team took *Tony Stark.* We disappeared without a sign, sporting power no one can trace or quantify. We are a threat, worthy of investigation by the Rogue Avengers. And again, we took you. They don’t just want to find us, they want to find you, and as they extend their feelers searching for us, we will do the same.”

Tony shrugged again, trying to look disinterested. “And why do you care about Cap and the rest of the douchebags? *Please* don’t say petty revenge…”

A smile that could only be defined as sinister spread across Aedoilagen’s sharp features. “Partially.”

“Alright you can stop now; you are *definitely* a cliche antagonist.”

“What I want is to take his place.”

*What?*  
His befuddlement must have shown, and Aedoilagen stood to extricate herself from the silver desk.

“When I had a home, and a family, I used my magic to protect. Both in congruence with other sorcerers, and just on my own; small, personal or neighborhood or city-wide assistments. Healings. But after the London Sanctum was decimated, after all but one of the sorcerer homes were destroyed, things were different.”

“I’m all for blaming this on the Captain, but I fail to see how he relates.”

“He doesn’t, at least not to me. Others on the team care, but I’m more concerned with the Scarlet Witch.”

“Why?”
“Because she killed my family,” Aedoilagen said simply.

Tony sat back. “Lagos?”

“In a way. The people of my city would no longer accept help from me after what happened in Sokovia, untrusting of my magic after Scarlet Witch’s exploits in Lagos. It was disheartening, and I started to drift because I felt my purpose being sucked away, but I would have learned to deal with it, to focus on working on defending our reality.”

Tony’s breathing sped up again.

“But then a betrayal from within our ranks destroyed the Sanctums and most of the sorcerers, and I was left in the ruins of home and a reputation.”

“Sounds like you’re in the same boat as the Captain,” Tony said, trying not to think about exactly who’s fault that was.

Aedoilagen’s smile was so far from mirthful that Tony shivered. “I’m in a far different boat than the good Captain,” she said. “Some of my team might simply want your petty revenge, but I want something greater, for all of us. A chance. An opening to return from the pit of uselessness I’ve fallen into and help people again.”

“So you want to…?”

“Find the Rogue Avengers. Get them out of the picture, and use their resources and image to become a well-funded, international group of vigilantes.” Aedoilagen leant up against her desk, crossing her feet before her and seeming for all the world as though she was simply airing a business proposal.

Tony furrowed his brow and leant forward, ignoring the way his stomach was crawling up his esophagus. “The Rogue Avenger’s resources are personalized. How the hell do you intend to take their place?”

Aedoilagen grinned. “Ah,” she said, “I was waiting for you to ask that.” She lifted fisted hands and drew them out infront of her, then blinked a single time as she suddenly unclasped her fingers. Quietly, sneakily, like stars appearing as the sun went down, tiny runes of orange light pooled in her palms. They gathered together, building into ribbons that wound around her wrists and reared, swaying back and forth as if to the beat of unheard music. Tony couldn’t tear his eyes away, entranced and frankly terrified, as the runes faded into Aedoilagen’s skin, leaving barely a whisper in their place.

“You see,” Aedoilagen said, “the mystic arts take many forms. Most specialize in certain… subsections you might say, within our manipulation of reality. Time. Form. Space and dimensions.” The orange light suddenly erupted in her eyes, and she finished, “Mind.”

Tony remembered the whisper of hands hovering near his temples, the crack of red magic, his deepest nightmare made real, and shivered.

“I have an affinity for dimensional transfer and the manipulation of minds. I’m not going to have my team take the Rogue Avenger’s place figuratively; we’re going to become them. I will hold perception, slowly easing it away until the dogs have been trained and we are integrated into this world again.”

Tony saw it in her eyes then. The absolute conviction in a plan that he had to admit could work, the dying hope that comes with the final of many attempts to make something of yourself. This woman
had already tried, tried to bring herself back from her own abyss, tried to be accepted, tried to do good, and failed. Over and over, she had failed.

Which left her here, in this room, with him.

“You’re going to kill them,” he said, not needing to ask the question.

“Yes. And no one will know.”

No one would know.

“What the hell do you want from me, then?”

Aedoilagen smiled. “You’re the most important part, Mr. Stark. All you have to do is tell me where they are.”
In Which Infiltration is Planned

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It was like nothing he’d ever seen.

It was like someone had taken those magical stars and sprinkled them on the landscape to create a city of impossibility, a city of infinity.

Peter stepped off the shuttle and missed the bottom step, just barely catching himself while somehow keeping his eyes on the city of Wakanda. Grease was on his shoulder, having clawed open the cheap carrier, tied with a makeshift leash but seeming otherwise content. Even the cat seemed mesmerized by the layered builds glittering like mica for miles. The city nestled in its valley like a sleeping dragon, pulsing with powerful energy and wealth.

Oh my God…

Spider-Man felt like laughing, felt like roaring, felt like sending web-fluid along those roofs and claiming them for his own. Why haven’t we sold our soul to come here before now? With Tony?

There’ll be time. Peter assured. There has to be time.

That’s why we’re here, after all.

Keeping a hand on Grease, Spider-Man advanced over the threshold of Wakanda, closing his eyes and trying to fill his other senses without distraction. He navigated the streets blind for a small while, listening intently to the fingerprint of the city, the feel of the light and the air that was so different, yet so similar, to his own home. The same sleepless energy, the same turn to the future, like the head of a sunflower orienting towards the dawn.

He snapped his eyes open, and grinned.

Peter grabbed his phone.

Camera held perpetually before him, he advanced through the streets and pointedly ignored the way he so obviously looked like a stereotypical tourist teenager. He even more pointedly ignored the notifications bar at the top, clogged full of texts he wasn’t in the mindset to read.

Grease moved to his other shoulder, and they explored together, slowly making their way towards the center of the city. He hardly understood a word of the clattering language being spoken throughout the streets, but despite how out of place he looked, people smiled, and anyone would have understood the welcoming nods that some graced him with. A small boy wanted to pet Grease, giving a very intricate charades performance to get his point across, and Peter was blushing by the time he figured it out. Grease seemed to appreciate it, though, and the kid and his mother walked with Peter for a little while. Eventually, they pointed him towards the center of the city, and he spent about two minutes trying to thank them. The family parted away, laughing, and Peter moved on with a bit more spring in his step.

He took about thirty thousand pictures (give or take a few hundred) of the palace when it came into view. The architecture looked impossible, with thin spires that shouldn’t be able to take the force of the wind and flat plateaus of stacked, spiraling surfaces like stairways winding around them that’d collapse under the weight of snow, until he picked out the precise angles set within them. It was
genius; the archways doubles as supports, and the windowed ladders of trees and metal pulled up the sides of the spires to absorb shock.

“See that, Grease?” Peter said, looking at his cat and smiling. “See what these people can do? If they can make that, they can find Mr. Stark.”

Grease mewed and tickled his nose with her whiskers. Peter sneezed.

Having taken most of the morning to get across the city, the sun was glaring straight into Peter’s eyes by the time he had reached the foot of the palace. It's tiers rose high above him, immense and impenetrable, and Peter found himself with no idea what he was going to do next. Guards in intricate clothing, baring weapons Peter had no doubt were more than they seemed, patrolled naturally, easily; they trusted their city and the newness within it, but not with their royal family. Peter didn’t blame them, after the civil strife the country was still recovering from.

Too many people were looking at him now, and Peter scuttled backwards, catching Grease before she lost her grip on his shoulder, and ducked into the nearest place of shelter he could find. Perching on the twisting trunk of an acacia, he set down his duffle and glared at his reflection in the polished metal wall opposite him.

“So, what’s your plan?” he demanded.

“Get in, find Rogers, don’t leave until I’m going after Tony,” replied Spider-Man with a shrug.

“I agree wholeheartedly, but fail to understand the bit where we get in and find Rogers.”

“Hmm…” Spider-Man tapped his chin. “This is infiltration.”

Peter nodded.

“We’ll need some way to know the interior, and know the obstacles we must avoid.”

“And the obstacles of tech and understanding we’ve never experienced before,” Peter sighed, mind filling with impossibilities now working against him.

“We are something they’ve never experienced before,” Spider-Man said. “Well, I am. You’re going to have to let me do this.”

Peter threw his hands up. “Be my guest.”

“Great.” Spider-Man twisted on the tree, rifling in his bag for his suit. Grease mewed in complaint, and he re-tied her to the base of the tree for a bit more free reign as he thought.

Peter stood, Spider-Man’s suit draped over his arm, and began his strategy.

*Resources, resources, resources.* The boy could scale walls, armed with hundreds of specific webbing abilities. He had Karen, ten advantages all on her own. The indescribable capabilities of his suit.

And Spider-Man needed...

*Disadvantages, disadvantages, disadvantages.* He had no idea what to expect, no idea where he was headed, no idea what awaited him. He didn’t know what the consequences of being found were. And he had to deal with the cat, somehow.

She snarled at him, as if reminding him that it was his fault she was here.
A plan started to form in Peter’s mind.

“I think I have an idea.”

“Great. So do I.”

“It involves a bit more cover; we need to wait until the sun’s behind the palace and there’s less glare on this side,” Peter explained.

“Sure.”

“In the meantime…” he glanced down at his phone, sitting innocently next to his bag, and took a deep breath.

Time crawled like treacle as Peter clicked open to the numerous texts and missed calls from his aunt. He couldn’t bring himself to read them all, his imagination too keen in picturing the desperate helplessness on her face as she wrote those messages, as he failed to pick up call after call. The segments he did read were bad enough.

Just tell me where you are. We can work together on this, you don’t need to be alone. Just tell me where you are, Peter.

Come home, or let me come to you. I can’t do this, not two of my boys gone, possibly in danger.

I love you. I can help you, Pete.

Please.

Please.

Peter’s heart clenched, and his fingernails scraped at the hard black case of his phone as his hands mirrored the sensation. For the first time since starting out, he doubt began to eat away at his mind. He was making this worse for her, he was making it so much worse. God, he was so selfish…

We really were, Spider-Man thought, just as surprised by the admission as Peter was. What if she does something stupid? Something stupid just like we did…

Suddenly, Peter found himself the one encouraging conviction to their crazy plan. But there was nothing else we could do. Think of Tony. We had to do something!

Spider-Man swallowed, and pushed away the thoughts of having caused harm instead of help. You’re right…

Peter smiled. You admit it! he teased.

Shut up. I’m still scorning you.

Uh-huh. Peter shook his head, smiling a bit, and went back to his phone. It took a long, long while, but eventually he worked up the courage to write another text.

It was shorter, mostly containing “still not dead,” and “made it,” and “waiting to figure out if the Captain’s here.” He finished with “I’ll update you again soon,” and clicked send. It showed May’d read it almost immediately.

Forcing the Knot back down his throat, Peter closed out of May’s contact.
Grease mewed at him as he opened the shared chat with Ned and MJ. They both sounded simultaneously excited, terrified, and furious, and had somehow found a way to assure him they’d be happy to help while still sounding irate. Peter grinned, thanked them, and sent them another vague update.

The process continued until the shadow of the building behind him fell across his screen, and Spider-Man stood up.

“Alright then,” he breathed. “Let’s do this.”

His practiced system of slipping into his suit took mere moments, and his street clothes were shrugged atop it. A quick check to the entrance to his nook confirmed he was mostly secluded, and Spider-Man pulled his mask onto his face.

“Hello, Spider-Man,” came the familiar voice.

“Karen!”

“How are we doing?”

“We’re in Wakanda,” he explained, his grin pulling at the fabric of the mask. “And it’s… well, amazing. So amazing I’m going to need your help getting into the palace.”

“Infiltration?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Right.” Karen flashed the mask’s lights.

“First things first; I need you to edit your code so you don’t shut down. I can’t wear the mask, but I’ll need you conscious.”


“Awesome. Okay, I’m gonna take you off and call the suit from my phone, so I can hear you through my headphones.” He shrugged out of the mask with one hand, unlocking his phone in one swift motion in the other. He didn’t often have reason to call his suit (he was the one in it), so it took quite a bit of scrolling to reach the contact he wanted.

Karen answered immediately. “Alright. What’s our plan?”

Spider-Man knelt to scoop up Grease, who was putting a severe damper on his plan. He had limited options when it came to the cat; leave her here, or take her with him. His endeavors could be dangerous, on the one hand, but could he leave her here and risk not being able to return for her?

He couldn’t. Spider-Man sighed and shoveled at the contents of his duffle until he’d cleared a space within it. The cat, to his surprise, didn’t complain as he poured her into the gap, curling up and eyeing him.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What?”

“Not you,” he clarified, smiled a bit at the mask in his hands. “Grease.”

“Ah. Taking her with you?”
“Dumb, I know, but the only option I have.”

“A agreed.”

Spider-Man slipped the duffle’s straps over his shoulders, turning it into an improvised backpack, and stuffed the mask into his jacket pocket. “Activate Reconnaissance mode, and fire up Droney, would you?”

“Let the siege begin,” Karen said. Spider-Man’s shirt rustled as the drone on his sternum began to move, crawling up and out of his collar. It’s robotic legs tapped against the thin flesh of his clavicle. “Where am I directing?”

Spider-Man took a moment to make sure his suit was completely hidden, then lifted the cuff of his jacket to allow the drone some camouflage. “I need to know what I’m getting into,” he said into the microphone of his headphones. “So I need a place where I can wear the mask without worrying about someone turning that corner.”

Spider-Man took a breath and blew it out slowly onto his palms, then wiggled his fingers. He took a step back to get a running start and hurled himself onto the side of the building, beginning to advance up the colorful wall.

He curled up the length of it, leaping and ducking and circling to avoid the view of inhabitants. Wind whipped at his street clothes, pulling his shirt up into his face. With a grimace, he spat it out of his mouth and kept climbing. He yearned to use his webshooters, but didn’t consider it for a heartbeat; he’d already proven unsubtle enough. “These buildings are gorgeous,” he shouted through the wind to Karen.

“I can’t see them.”

“Right. Sorry. They’re painted all these patterns and colors, even the metal sections. Those are iridescent.” Spider-Man paused to trail a hand across one such area. It didn’t stick, and Peter figured it was made of non-polar molecules.

_Not the time._

_It’s always the time._

_Shut up._ Spider-Man kept climbing.

The top of the building was tired, but he easily secured himself to an area sheltered as he could find from the wind. “Let’s go!” He slipped on the mask.

The visor flickered as Karen refocused for his view, and his drone lifted into the air. “Drone-view?”

“Please.”

His view warped and fuzzed, then cleared somewhat disconcertingly as the line of sight from the drone. “Alright. Too the palace!”

The drone began to move, Spider-Man’s mask providing him a virtual-reality like view of the machine. The little creature buzzed quickly through the air, staying high enough to avoid notice, and Spider-Man’s directions had it spiraling towards the building as he needed.

Nine hours long, reconnaissance-filled hours later, when the sun was slipping down behind the far mountain, a shape was slipping down through the stories of Wakanda.
Karen!

This got longer than I thought it was gonna be, so you have to wait onnnnnnnneeeeee more chapter for our man T’Challa.

Hope you liked!!! More action next chapter. Feedback is always a win, so let me know what you think! :)
At first, the rounds of the guards had seemed completely and utterly random. Spider-Man had watched them, anxious, for almost an hour, trying to understand their pattern, their timing. At the hour and a half mark, he’d realized what was occurring.

The rounds of the Wakandan guards were not, in fact, rounds. Neither was it a spiral, as he’d considered. The men and woman walked slowly and precisely through some sort of complex, interlocking knot, including both the exterior of the palace and inside. They wove up through the entirety of the building’s tiers, then down again, a path lengthy and hard to track, at no particular speed, giving the entire process the illusion of disorganization.

It was genius, and decidedly inconvenient, but armed with the map he’d created with Karen’s help and one side of his mask tuned to his drone, Spider-Man thought that perhaps he had a chance.

So with the shadow of the mountain across him, he strolled purposefully through the streets nearing the building, fingers trailing against the mask in his pocket, duffle secured on his back. Grease was quiet, to his relief. His foreignness had people sending him glances on the street, but no one stopped him, and Spider-Man folded his shoulders down to try and look as inconspicuous as possible.

The streets stayed crowded up to the very banks of the wide river circling the first tier of the palace. But Spider-Man was a Queens kid, and knew how to navigate a crowd; he expertly made his way along the edge of the water, skirting through the gaps between the currents of people like a falcon along the thermals of the mountains. His eyes darted about for any sign of a way across the river, snagging on boats and islands, hoping a bridge would appear when viewed from a different angle.

He had no luck for a long while, his frustration mounting with every step that revealed no way across. Wondering how waterproof the suit was, he edged even closer to the water. But a fourth of the way around the palace, the banks of the river narrowed into two small, flat extensions of rock, forming an isthmus through which the water poured angrily, a waterfall running down through the valley below.

Spider-Man grinned, eyes focusing on the small, flat bridge spanning it. Bingo.

He skipped forward again, trying not to snarl at anyone who inadvertently blocked his path. No one stopped him as he fell into step with the others crossing the bridge, and he figured the river was less moat and more resource. Indeed, the streets continued on the other side, the border between city and palace further on through the buildings.

As the gloom of the evening pressed down on him and pedestrians gradually disappeared, Spider-Man’s fingers tightened around his web-shooters.

The first soldier appeared between the gap in the now-metal walls on either side of Spider-Man, and he pressed himself to the side. His mouth quirked up, the thrill of the mission pounding like a drumbeat in his ears, reminding him who he was.

Spider-Man slipped on his mask.
His drone lifted from beneath his shirt, tiny legs scuttling through the air as it flew of towards his direction. Following the path on his map, the drone lingered against the palace wall, calculating the rate of arrival of the next guard. Spider-Man had wasted too much time getting it there to move immediately, and waited. He kicked of his shoes, concealed by the shadows, as three more men and women passed at irregular intervals.

The smallest gap he could risk shortened as another guard appeared in the drone’s line of sight, and Spider-Man moved. The pliable material of his suit adjusted to the ground beneath him, and adrenaline flooded his system; he hadn’t worn the suit in two long weeks. He pointed his wrist to the top of the first, windowless tier of palace.

“Octopus,” he breathed to ensure the correct setting, and sprayed a rope of webbing to the top. He lept, swinging ever-faster towards the wall, his hands propelling him up the rope even as he moved. Connecting half way up the wall, he cut the web and scurried the final feet in seconds, rolling onto the flat overhand of a support pillar and flattening himself against it.

His drone-view followed the next man as he emerged from within the palace, spear held against his shoulder, eyes alert. But he didn’t look up, and Spider-Man watched him, patient as the arachnid he was named for, until he’d disappeared behind the curve of the palace.

The domed step to the next tier was inaccessible, to any but him, and he scaled it with no obstacle, fingers pulling him over the engraved curve easily. He darted horizontally along the edge of a separated alcove of trees and sent the drone whizzing ahead; the next round of guards was approaching.

“How long?” he breathed, peering towards the next tier.

“Longest gap in six minutes,” Karen replied after a moment, the drone’s thrusters sending it spinning along the map again.

“Can I risk anything before that?” He was too exposed, here.

“I would not advise it. And this one corresponds with a gap above; you’ll need to clear two tiers in, at the most, twenty-seven seconds.”

“Shit.” He looked around, feeling time ticking by ominously, his enhanced ears picking up the sounds of the approaching soldier, the footsteps of the recently receding one. He rolled sideways, pressing himself against a vertical slice of wall, and hoped no one craned their necks to get a view of his position.

Apparently, no one did, because six minutes of low breaths that made him light-headed and tapping fingers later, Karen’s voice said, “go. Now.”

He didn’t hesitate, throwing himself onto the tier and spraying a careful stream of webbing at the highest point he could see. Then he swung in a wide arc, skimming the ground and gaining inertia until-- “setting 542!”-- he connected the end of the strand on his wrist to the ground with another spray. Suddenly untethered, his arc straightened, and he guided himself along the strand. Momentum running out, Spider-Man began to climb, to bound along the strand at speeds any fellow spider would nod at in respect.

The image made him grin, and he passed the third tier. “Ten seconds until view,” Karen warned, and Spider-Man shoved himself forward again. He couldn’t risk another webbing; it might be faster, but the pause could make all the difference. So, his heartbeat ticking away until the next guard rounded into view, Spider-Man scrambled upwards.
He rolled onto the five-foot plateau of metal that was the top of the fourth tier, snapping his wrist backward to sever the webbing and begin to draw it towards him.

“You’re in view!” Karen warned, and Spider-Man froze.

The guard’s footsteps echoed through the metal beneath him, reverberating against his skin. His webbing was still lose, only halfway up the tier, but he dared not move it, dared not do anything but inch backward toward where the metal fell away to trees again.

There was no wind, nothing to flutter his webbing from where it dangled, nothing to draw attention to it--

The footsteps stopped.

Spider-Man stopped breathing.

He saw his webbing move, like someone was poking it, and heard the intake of breath--

Then he was moving, shooting forward, throwing his wrists out and spraying stream after stream towards the soldier on the level beneath him. His second shot slammed across the man’s face, missing his nose but effectively silencing his shout, and Spider-Man hoped it hadn’t hurt too badly.

“Sorry not sorry,” he said, another web disarming the man, whose eyes wet wide with surprise and anger. “Promise I’m not gonna assassinate anyone. Mean no harm and all that--” a final shot sent the man stumbling backward into the trees Spider-Man had just come from--“but I do need to be going. Great job, I’ll put a good word in for you.”

He sent a few more streams to trap the man as secure as possible, then paused. It was possible, probable, that the next round of guards would notice the poor man, and his plan would be through. So, wincing, Spider-Man trotted up to the man and raised his fist. “This, I really am sorry for.”

One well-calculated blow later, he was hauling the unconscious guard up the wall with him, the man’s weight hardly denting his speed. He tied him carefully to the roof and continued climbing, noting the silence that still hung through the palace.

As he rose through level after level like a lemur ascending the layers of the jungle canopy, his spider-sense began to prickle. Spider-Man paused, clinging upside-down to the balcony above, his senses straining. But nothing tangible worried him, nothing but the phantom wind that had lifted the hairs on his arms.

So he kept climbing, his drone shadowing his future steps, growing ever closer to the best entrance he’d found. Only the soldiers seemed to pass through it, and he figured an area under human watch would have the least chance of being actively surveyed mechanically. The more he climbed, the smaller that chance got, but he’d made it this far without incident.

*Who knows? Maybe my luck will hold.*

At that instant, like superstition had been waiting to strike after he failed to knock on wood, a shadow slammed into him, throwing him from his perch. He tumbled downward with little grace, twisting so anything but his back would hit the floor, anything but the cat along for the ride. His maladroit landing had him spinning into a crouch, wrists outstretched, even as he shrugged off his makeshift backpack.

Nothing but cool evening air met him, and the harsh sound of his breathing. But his spider-sense was roaring, and so was his instinct, so Spider-Man stayed low, stayed alert, eyes darting about the palace
around him.

“Karen, what was that?” He slid the bag containing Grease away, trying to get her out of harm’s way, as carefully as he could.

“I didn’t catch it.”

“Scan--”

But even as he began, the shadow struck again, shredding through his suit with hardly a catch of resistance. Spider-Man yelped out a curse and rolled. “Rapid-fire web!”

He was up again in seconds, throwing webbing like bullets at the flash of movement in his peripheral vision. The shadow slipped like wind through his barrage, disappearing behind the tier before him.

“What the--” Spider-Man didn’t finish, sprinting to peer over the edge of the roof where his attacker had gone.

And found himself sprawling over it, once again tumbling towards the tier below.

“Okay, I admit it, I totally fell for that one!” Spider-Man swung in against the wall, sticking fast. “I’m kinda embarrassed, shadow-dude.”

He flipped back over the lip, right in time to see the flash of black streaking toward him again. He ducked, rolling to his side and shooting blindly. Nothing hit, of course, but his attacker retreated.

“Please tell me you caught that, Karen.”

The AI replied, sounding perplexed, “I didn’t. There’s something interfering with--”

“Give it a rest--aaa!” Spider-Man snarled as he was thrown to the side once again, slamming into the wall with a ringing clang and a flash of pain. “Dude!”

From his sprawled position, Spider-Man’s narrowed, determined eyes found the source of movement and aimed carefully. “Setting 330,” he said, then fired.

His attacker moved again, still nothing but a blur of color in the gloom, but his multi-shooter exploded towards the shadow, striking it with enough sticky force to knock it out of its leap. The shadow fell expertly, hardly a whisper signaling it had hit the ground, like some sort of--

Then it was leaping toward him, and Spider-Man’s next stream of webbing knocked it away too late; something ripped across his hip, tearing through his suit once more.

“Shit shit shit--” Spider-Man flipped backward, surveying the damage. But it was already closing up; the metal was healing, somehow--

Oh.

All those months ago, the very first time he’d seen Tony after the events at Homecoming, the man had experimented. Right where the shadow had just struck, the strands of nanotech-melded thread were stitching together of their own accord. Spider-Man grinned.

“You missed!” he called. “Well, no you didn’t, but I’m too awesome to care.” A bad quip, but Spider-Man was tired and irritated and he really just wanted to either finish his mission or punch someone in the face. Or both. If he found the Captain, it could be both.
He thrust his wrists forward again, another flock of rapid-fire webbing shimmering through the air. The shadow lept, far too high to be an ordinary human, dodging each as it fell back to the ground. Landing perfectly on its feet and twisting to avoid each of Spider-Man’s shots, the thing looked like a--

The slashes on Spider-Man’s shoulder were three parallel lines, like claws.

His suit parted like paper for the shadow’s blades--like it would for vibranium.

His attacker’s speed and agility was inhuman, or perhaps just enhanced.

Oh.

OH SHIT.

“Hey!”

The Panther pounced again, its claws flashing toward him a third time.

Spider-Man took a step back, holding his hands up. “Wait, sir, I come in peace--”

He hadn’t made a good impression of that so far, and the Panther slammed into him, sending them both tumbling across the ground.

“Wait--”

His suit splintered near his shoulder, and so did his skin; Spider-Man’s sharp intake of breath caught in his throat at the flash of pain. “Stop!” he growled again, “I--”

Another blow, and he was forced to strike back, his web-grenade pushing the Panther backward again. He could feel blood on his shoulder, and see it gleaming along the Panther’s claws.

“I’m here to speak to Steve Rogers,” he said, finally getting the words out.

The man before him paused.

“You know me, I’m on your side,” Spider-Man explained again, gesturing to his mask. “I just want to speak to him. I don’t mean any harm; I just want to help.”

Silence.

“I want to help find Tony Stark,” Peter breathed. “I need to speak to Steve Rogers.”

Very slowly, with calculated grace, the man rose from his crouch, turning from beast to man and lifting gloved hands to his chest. He tapped the necklace there, and the helmet melted away with the fizzle of nanotech.

King T’Challa of Wakanda stared back at him, reading his face, his eyes, his credibility with skillful analysis. Peter dared not look away, still mouthing here to help over and over and over again.

The king seemed to find what he was looking for.

“Come with me.”

Chapter End Notes
TCHAAAAAAAAALLAAAAA

*Cough cough*

I wasn't going to write a fight scene... and then I did... it's not a super long one so I figure it's okay. Anyway! Thanks for reading! Backstory for Maura next chapter, then back to Pete, and the entrance of a certain princess. You know how I feel about feedback, and I'll see ya soon!
In Which Daughters Grope

Chapter Notes

Please excuse the fact that I do not speak Hindi, and Google Translate is a bad tool. It's the only one I have, however, so. Very sorry. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ONE YEAR AGO

Mercury Aedoilagen had always known she was going to fly.

She loved the thought of soaring, of seeing the land, the planet, from a new perspective. She loved imagining seeing the stars so much closer, the heavens brushing at her fingertips.

Maybe, because of that, it was the cool air of the cliff wiping at her hair that kept Mercury from crying.

This part of India was all cliffs and mountains and sea. It was beautiful and elegant and high and isolated and hateful, and Mercury was trying, God she really was, to warm to it.

The town wasn’t even big enough to have a name on the map, but the locals called it Shikhar, which meant ‘peak.’ It was the only word Mercury could write in Hindi, with its connected, looping R-like glyphs and precise, idiotic squiggles.

She sat, dangling her feet off the rocks and looking out over the sea far below her. Paper rustled with the wind, tucked safe in her fist, and somehow still dry from any tears. She was keeping it together today, though.

Shikhar was tiny and rusted and rotten, buildings being eaten apart from the inside out and roads crumbling as you walked on them. Everyone had a smartphone, but there were no flushing toilets for heaven’s sake. The citizens all knew each other, laughed with each other, provided for each other, a more tightly knit community than London could ever have been.

But Mercury and her parents weren’t part of that community, not yet. Her mother was hopeful, confident even, in that way she always was, that as time passed this place would become home. Mercury hoped so. But her mother didn’t know what she knew, didn’t know what they’d left behind in London.

Mercury sighed and let her head fall against her fist. She unfolded the envelope in her hand for the thousandth time, the paper brown along the creases from so much handling, and pulled out the official looking document from within.

She stared sightlessly at the acceptance. At the offer of a stipend.

And at the bottom line, the line concluding the letter in a full ride scholarship to Imperial College...
London when she’d finished her last year of high school. Imperial College London, the second-best university for aerospace engineering in the UK.

No one knew about it.

No one knew, because Mercury hadn’t told. She’d been waiting, saving it up for the perfect time, the perfect surprise. Her parents had always looked so bittersweet when she spoke of college, and her dreams; they’d always encouraged her, pushed her, believed in her, but all three of them knew they’d need a miracle for the finances to work out.

Her father was a business adviser, and he brought in most of the income, as her mother’s job… wasn’t really a job. More of a second home, for all of them. So when her tests had come back and the colleges had started contacting her, Mercury had hidden her excitement, until…

Her scholarship came in May. Mercury’d been planning her announcement for weeks as her junior year grew closer and closer to completion, working with her friends to plan the perfect reveal.

And then they’d gotten the call in the middle of the night, the call that turned their whole worlds upside down.

Mercury’s dad had woken her up at four in the morning, his voice urgent. She’d groaned and swung a pillow at him, but stopped when she’d seen tears in his eyes. Tears.

“Dad,” she’d breathed. “What is it?”

“Something’s happened at the Sanctum,” he replied. “They can’t find your mum.”

They’d spent the tube-ride trying not to panic, trying not to imagine all the horrible things that could have happened. Mercury tucked herself into her dad’s shoulder, comforted by his calm demeanor, even if it was false.

Any hope of not panicking was lost when they arrived at what remained of the London Sanctum. It looked like the result of arson, like a force beyond even the mystic arts had ripped through it. There was nothing left but splinters and shrapnel, nothing left but--

Her father turned her eyes away from the bodies.

They were both losing it, both helpless to do anything, tell the paramedics anything that could help. It had never been so hard to hide the secret.

Mercury just wanted her mother back.

Minutes had bled by like hours, and the Aedoilagen’s waited, hardly breathing, for something to happen. For someone to pull the corpse of a red-haired woman from the wreckage, for someone to quietly say, I’m sorry.

And then, from the alley behind them, there’d been a flash of orange.

Mercury couldn’t move fast enough; she practically teleported to the opening of the small road, just in time to see a circle of orange energy appearing in the air.

Her mother stepped out of it, face mottled with bruises and smeared with blood, the shattered remains of her Relic, the Stave of Senses, tumbling from her hands. She stumbled against the wall, and the portal closed in a flurry of sparks.
“Mum!” Mercury yelled, and started running.

Her mother dropped the useless splinters of her once powerful staff and enveloped Mercury in the strongest of hugs as the girl slid, sobbing silently, against her.

“Mum… what happened?”

“The end of the world, Mercury,” had been the reply.

But it wasn’t the end of the world. In Hong Kong, something changed, something shifted, and the threat disappeared like it had never been there. But it had been there, and it had left suspicion and fear in the eyes of the Londoners, and Mercury’s mother’s home in tatters, and the woman’s spirit the same. No one wanted her help anymore. London didn’t want her anymore.

Slowly, agonizingly, Mercury watched the purpose dissolve from her mother’s gaze.

So when her father had told her they were moving, Mercury had taken one look at the hope of a fresh start burning in her mother’s expression, swallowed her distress, and nodded. She’d packed her belongings quickly, taking only a week, and then they were off to the other side of the world.

They’d left Imperial College London far behind.

Mercury hadn’t cried, and she hadn’t told them.

But there were no high schools in Shikhar. There were no aerospace universities, no rockets, no planes, no shuttles, and no future.

There was cold air and superstitious individuals and a fresh start Mercury didn’t want at all.

But she was seventeen, and she was stubborn. She would not give up on her future, and she would not give up on Shikhar. Even if she missed London so much it hurt.

Mercury tucked the letter back into its envelope, and folded into her pocket. Stretching, she stood, and turned back towards the path to return from the cliff.

It was then that she heard the screams.

Mercury’s head jerked up, and her feet were pounding along the ground before she could think. When she did, it was what the hell? What’s happened now? She raced down the cliffside, feet pounding on the cobbled to the beat of her heart, the screams growing more urgent, more confused.

“Mujhe kya karana?!”

“Madad!”

“Krpya, krpya!”

She understood nothing of the Hindi words, but she recognized some of those voices. And the cry of a baby. Shit. I go away for five minutes and everything goes to shit! Mercury pushed herself faster.

“Mercury!”

“Mum! What’s going on?”

Her mother caught up to her, ducking out from behind a crumbling building. From the speed of her breathing, she’d been running for a while, too. “I don’t know!”
“Hurry, then!”

Mother and daughter raced hand in hand down the side of the mountain, deeper into the corroding
town. People joined them, people fled, and confusion grew more and more saturated within the
seaside air.

“What--” Mercury panted, “the--hell--?”

Her mother had stopped moving.

“Mum?”

“It’s the dark dimension,” her mother murmured.

“What? Here?”

“This one prays on small areas, on people that are abandoned. That no one will notice.” Her mother
wasn’t really speaking to her. “I can’t give myself away… but they’ll die…”

“Mum.”

Her mother’s eyes suddenly focused on her, and Mercury saw her hesitation disappear. “Mercury. I
need you to get my sling ring, from underneath the bed.”

“But--”

“Now, Mercury!”

She didn’t want to abandon her mother to what was obviously dangerous, didn’t want to abandon
the villagers. But her mother’s voice was urgent, and so were the cries, and so Mercury squared her
shoulders and nodded. She moved back the way she’d come even faster.

The mystic arts were a part of Mercury’s life that she loved. It was magic, and her mother could
wield it; hell, Mercury could wield it sometimes, when she was joyful enough. Simple spells, doing
almost nothing besides the orange illumination they brought, but she was a sorcerer.

Despite her adoration for the arts, though, sometimes she wished they would leave her alone. Just for
one day, just for one month, just to let her apply for college. Let her get her driver’s licence. Let her
do normal teenage things that most of the time, she never wanted to do.

Sling ring. Get the sling ring. The tool of the sorcerers, a channel for their powers; why had her
mother taken it off?

She was trying to make an effort. To be normal. To start over. She took it off for me.

Mercury pushed herself faster.

She burst into their tiny, run-down house like a whirlwind, crying, “Dad!”

“What--” he scrambled into the room. “What is it, what do you need?”

“Mom needs her sling ring; there’s some dark dimensional shit going down in the center of town!”

“Could it not give us a break?” her father muttered jokingly, but he was already in the other room,
fishing the conjoined metal bands from beneath the mattress he shared with her mother.
Mercury grabbed it with no time to thank him, and was back out the door in an instant. She didn’t check to see if he followed her.

(He did.)

By the time she made it to the town square, pushing through the crowd of shocked people, her lungs felt like they were ripping clear of her chest. Her mother was pinned beneath a creature made of pure, undisturbed darkness, pain in her expression as she gritted her teeth and formed light out of nothing.

But all Mercury could focus on was that monster, that being ripped right out of a horror movie, as it turned its eyes to her. She was frozen, paralyzed within its luminous gaze, a gaze as unworldly as distant nebulas. The creature’s jaws opened slowly, more blackness pooling beneath its teeth. A scream lodged in Mercury’s throat.

They stood their, staring at each other, as time stretched into infinitesimal marks, and her mother tried to inhale beneath the creature’s claws. For a moment, Mercury saw something in those twin orbs of impossibility, something that burned in her own gut.

And then the creature unfurled four perfect wings and pounced towards her.

“NO!” her mother howled, and Mercury had never heard such desperation in her voice. That was not her mother, and it terrified the girl.

Somehow more than the monster of complete darkness hurtling towards her.

Mercury yelled, a cry of something between determination and desperation. On instinct, she raised the sling ring, circling it through the air and hiding her face, as though not looking would stop the inevitability flying towards her.

But the impact didn’t come.

Cautiously, Mercury looked up. And saw the portal hovering in the air before her.

Through it, she saw the creature, and the top of the cliff she had just come from. The monster seemed disoriented, then turned. The blackness trailing from the back of its skull seemed to flatten like a cat’s ears as it noticed Mercury peering back at her.

“Mum!” she choked out.

“Mercury, give me the ring, I can close the portal, quick--”

Mercury, yelping, pulled the sling ring off her finger and threw it to her mother, who caught it deftly. Just as the monster leaped back through the portal, her mother flickered her fingers through the air, and another gateway appeared directly before the jumping creature.

Mercury didn’t see where the gateway went, for her mother closed it almost as soon as it’d been created. In a flash, portal and monster had disappeared.

Everything was silent.

Then her mother let out a breathless, slightly hysterical laugh.

Mercury echoed it, and stumbled into her mother’s arms, shaking with equal parts laughter and sobs. They stayed that way for a long, long while, just holding each other and trying to forget the teeth
heading for their skulls.

And then the whispers started.

“Raakshas.”

“Raakshas…”

Mercury turned, confused, surveying the whispering, hostile people that had gathered around them. She found she recognized the Hindi word.

Mercury nodded. That had been the word she was looking for, the one to describe that creature. A demon, an otherworldly creature of pure evil. But… she remembered the wings, and the flight, and what could have been joy as it caught air.

“C’mon, Mum,” she said, standing and offering her mother a hand. “Let’s go.”

Her mother didn’t look at her.

“What?” Mercury turned.

And realized the people weren’t whispering about the creature.

“Mum…” Mercury took a step back, reaching out towards her mother, subconsciously seeking comfort.

“Run. Run!”

Mercury saw the exact moment fear turned murderous, hostility turned witch hunt, and the crowd surged towards them. She bolted, bolted like one would from a pack of animals, which was all these villagers were, now.

Her mother was beside her, and her feet were once again pounding to the beat of her heart. Vaguely, beneath the sardonic terror, Mercury remembered hearing of another witch and situations similar.

I can’t really blame them. They just saw an alternate-dimensional monster tear through their city, probably kill people before we got there. They saw us fight it, but with its own power. They don’t speak English; for all they know, we could have been helping it.

For God’s sake, why am I being empathetic to the mob at my tail?!

They turned onto the path up the cliff, looking for higher ground on instinct.

It was the wrong decision. Another group of people came down from above; not part of the mob, but an impenetrable wall all the same.

Mercury skidded to a stop, her hand wrenching out of her mother’s as she turned, looking for a way out. But there was nothing, just people and rocks and the edge of the cliff, dropping into empty air.

What were they going to do, what were they going to do, what--

The sling ring.
Why have we been running in the first place? Well… probably to avoid making our new neighbors even more murderous.

Mercury turned, her hands outstretched, but her mother had disappeared behind a wall of people, not even her fiery red hair visible.

*Shit.* “Mum--”

Hands viciously collided with Mercury.

She took a step out to steady herself, but it landed on someone’s moving foot, and she stumbled against the wooden fence forming a barrier on the edge of the cliff. The wooden fence of the city rotting from the inside out.

The wood was rotting too.

There was cracking, and splintering, and dust on Mercury’s palms, and she was trying to stand but there was no ground beneath her feet and where was her mother and her arms were flailing but the wood broke away where she groped--

Mercury Aedoilagen had always known she was going to fly.

But that didn’t stop her from falling.

Chapter End Notes

Backstory, people. Make of that what you will.

One announcement: In addition to all your awesome feedback, I'm awarding bonus points to anyone who can summarize why someone should be a) be on team Cap or b) not abjectly dislike Steve, Bucky, or any of the other characters. The scene where that's gonna be important is coming up, and I need some advice from the opposite perspective. Thanks!

Anyway, hope you liked. Next chap is YOU KNOW WHO and lots of vine references. See you soon!
As Peter stood staring, trying to control the uncontrollable excitement that had burst through his chest, a sound broke the tense silence.

Spider-Man started, and both he and T'Challa looked toward the source of the quiet call. His duffel was writhing. Peter cursed, sprinting over to the bag and unzipping it, making a grab for Grease on the inside.

She swiped at his hand and dodged, ears flattened, and streaked from the bag. Peter squaked, diving after her, and missed yet again. He climbed hurriedly out of his lunge, wishing he had a hoodie to die of embarrassment under, and saw his kitten rubbing up against T'Challa’s ankles, her purr audible from where he stood.

_Traitor_, Spider-Man thought, feeling just a bit better.

“Sorry,” he said out-loud. “She… does what she wants.”

T’Challa, by way of reply, knelt down and scooped Grease up into his arms with careful hands. To Peter’s surprise, she didn’t complain, seeming quite content to snuggle into the grip of the king.

Peter raised an eyebrow, but the mask didn’t reflect it, and T’Challa simply moved off toward the building. “I assume you were going for the round entrance,” the king said.

“Oh, uh, yes…”

“Come.”

So Peter followed, trailing like a guilty puppy behind the lethally powerful man. T’Challa lead him up the tier he’d been climbing the roundabout way; they crossed paths with two soldiers on the way. The mask and suit attracted many a confused look, and Spider-Man stared each down.

When they reached the door, which blended almost perfectly into the wall, Peter didn’t see a way to enter. But T’Challa simply stood before it, fixing it with a look Peter could only describe as irritated, and it slid open. Impressed and confused, Spider-Man bounded after him.

T’Challa didn’t stop inside to ask about him, as Spider-Man had expected, instead leading him further into the palace and down. Peter saw the exact moment when the transition occurred, the change in the architecture, the line, like the snowline on a mountain, where he could hear the buzz of machines, where he could _smell_ the vibranium. Peter pulled off the mask and took as many deep gulps of it as he could. The king watched him out of the corner of his eye, still keeping a gentle grip on Peter’s meddling cat.

It wasn’t much further before the man stopped and turned, slowly, Peter might even say reluctantly.
putting Grease down. She climbed onto the shoe of his suit.

“Alright,” T’Challa said, surveying Peter. “What are you really doing here?”

“Mr--King T’Challa--” Shit. Peter tried again. “Your Majesty Black Panther, sir--”

The king was laughing at him, and Peter hurriedly shut up.

“Be calm, small boy,” T’Challa said, his grin making him look a little more human. “I only bite hostiles.”

“Scratch, I’d assume,” Peter said, miming cat claws before he could stop himself.

But T’Challa just laughed. “Indeed. I apologize for wounding you; I was not expecting a boy and a cat to arrive.”

“The Captain might have mentioned me?” Peter said hopefully.

“Recently? I’m afraid not.”

*Of course.*

“I called him.”

T’Challa raised an eyebrow. “No one just *calls* Steve Rogers.”

Peter lifted his chin and forced himself to look the king in the eye. “Tony Stark does.”

T’Challa’s jaw feathered, and for a moment, their gazes were locked together by an unknown force, neither willing to look away.

Then Grease swiped at the king’s ankle, and he looked down in surprise. Grease turned back to Peter and trotted toward him.

“Sorry,” Peter winced.

“No, I--” T’Challa cut himself off. “Stark?”

“I’m here to help with the search. Provide what I can. Learn. Fight.” Spider-Man leaned down and scooped up Grease, who meowed at him conspiratorially.

“Oh.” T’Challa smiled, understanding evident in the expression. “Then welcome.”

Peter was taken aback, and it took him longer than it should have to respond. “What, just like that?”

“Of course. If the Captain told you his location, who am I to argue?” There was a note of sarcasm in the king’s voice.

“Well, you are the king of said location,” Peter muttered, “and, well… he didn’t exactly tell me…”

“What?”

“He did the opposite…?” Peter cringed slightly, wishing he’d thought this through a little further.

T’Challa peered at him. “Did… Stark…?”

“What? No! Mr. Stark would never,” Peter hastily clarified. “I figured it out from the background of the phone call and the time zones, that’s all.”
There was silence for a moment as T’Challa appraised him. “You figured it out.”

“...Yes?”

A long-suffering smile that didn’t seem aimed at Peter crossed the king’s face, and he muttered something under his breath that Spider-Man’s enhanced hearing picked up clearly as, ‘now there are two of them.’

Spider-Man rocked back on his heels and waited for the king to say something he was meant to hear.

“Alright, then. I suppose you’re here now anyway, and, well…” T’Challa looked down the hallway. “There’s someone you should meet.”

“Shuri?”

The massive, streamlined room T’Challa lead Peter into almost brought the boy to his knees in the doorway. His eyes darted around the room like a fluttering songbird within a cage, trying to take in everything at once and miserably failing. Because the windows... they looked out into the heart of the vibranium mountain, and it shone like every star conglomerated on Earth.

“That was quick, brother! I assumed there would be hours more political hogwash before you returned,” came a muffled voice from an undiscerned place in the echoing room. Peter’s breath caught.

“A cat and a boy were infiltrating your palace,” T’Challa called, his kingly demeanor falling away like Tony’s press mask.

“Aaaah, and you’ve brought the cat for me to meet?”

“Shuri…”

A cackle filled the room, and out from under a table on the area beneath them emerged a girl. She wore dirty, crumpled clothes too intricately embroidered to be lab-wear with patterns and symbols Peter didn’t recognize, and had one leg clad in denim and the other in a black, shimmering armour that crawled up her torso when she wasn’t swatting it away. One braided curl of her hair was tight against the back of head, but the other had come loose and seemed to be shedding nanotech bobby pins as she moved. “Sorry. You’ve brought both of them.”

“Yes, so get up here, will you?”

Shuri slapped at the nanotech on her leg and limped up to them, unperturbed.

“This is Spider-Man,” T’Challa said. “I’m sure you’ve heard about him.”

Before Spider-Man could think too hard about the fact that the king of Wakanda was sure his genius, engineer sister had heard of him, Shuri looked him right in the eye and said, “Spider-Man, eh? Good to meet him on this fine Wednesday.” And then she lifted her head into the air and screeched like some sort of demented parrot.

Immediately after, she held out a hand to shake his as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. T’Challa discreetly rubbed his face with a sigh, saying, “It’s Monday...”

And Peter, because he was absolutely not discreet, and because he really wanted to know if she’d
just done what he thought she’d done, replied with, “I like your accent, where’re you from?”

Shuri, Princess and Engineer of Wakada, broke into the biggest grin Peter had ever seen. “I’m Liberian.”

He couldn’t have kept from quoting the final line of the vine even if he’d wanted to. “Oh, I’m sorry.” Then he whispered, “I like your accent, where’re you from?”

T’Challa raised his eyes to the heavens and groaned. “Alright, that settles it. You’re never allowed to leave.”

Peter turned to him, his neck heating vivaciously. “What?”

“We need someone to communicate with her. You seem to be the only one who can translate.”

Shuri nudged Peter with her shoulder as though she’d known him all her life. “I’ve tried to teach him,” she said conspiratorially, “but he refuses to appreciate.”

“I fail to understand the humor of the situations you’ve provided.”

“He refuses to appreciate.”

“Anyway,” T’Challa cut her off pointedly, “he’s here to help with the search.”

Shuri surveyed Peter again, and he fidgeted under her calculating gaze. “Why? What can he provide?” The question didn’t stem from judgement, just inquiry.

T’Challa answered for him. “Stark didn’t tell him where the Captain is. Neither did the Captain.”

“So?”

“So--”

Spider-Man cut in. “I know Mr. Stark. I know his background, and I know his resources. But it doesn’t matter if you need me…” he swallowed. “It’s me who needs you. I can’t not know, not when he’s in danger.”

The siblings had migrated closer, and shared a look that had the air of telepathic communications.

“I know you like him,” T’Challa said suddenly, and Peter jumped. Definitely telepathic.

“He’s not about to go back.” Shuri shrugged. “You were a dunce and confirmed Steve is here, and Steve was a dunce and told him we’ve made progress, and there’s nothing any of us can do about it.” She winked at Peter. “Besides, he seems like I could bounce ideas off him.”

T’Challa bristled, the movement unmistakably defensive. “You can do that off me.”

“Don’t worry,” Shuri patted her brother’s shoulder affectionately. “I can still be condescending to you anytime. He seems like he’d at least know what I’m talking about.”

“Um,” Spider-Man said, “I am still here, you know.”

“Oh hello!”

“Shuri…”

“Don’t you have something to be doing?” Shuri said pointedly. “Like, I don’t know, finding the
Captain and busting his ass?"

"Or important kingly things?"

"Oh, you’re a king now? When did that happen?"

T’Challa through his hands up into the air, though his smile was wide and affectionate. He mouthed sorry, at Spider-Man, then said, “I give up! You stay here and bond with the youth, and I’ll go and do productive things.”

“Good luck prying him away from the White Wolf,” Shuri chuckled, and T’Challa raised an eyebrow and huffed in agreement.

“Spider-Man will meet both Rogers and Barnes, I suppose.”

Spider-Man stiffened.

“See you, brother.”

A grunt, and then T’Challa was gone.

“Did he take my cat?” Peter said after a moment.

Shuri cackled. “Of course he did; he’s the Black Panther for a reason. No need to worry, he’ll take good care of her. Too good; that kitten will be spoiled like there’s no tomorrow.” The girl turned to him and clapped her hands together eagerly. “Now we can get down to business!”

Spider-Man grinned and bounced up onto his heels, pushing down the anger that had flared at the mention of Barnes. “And that is?”

“First things first; what’s your name? Don’t worry, I’m the queen of keeping secret identities hidden. Well, the queen of a lot of things, but that especially.”

“I--”

She means my name, idiot. Peter smiled and stuck out a hand. “I’m Peter Parker.”

“Really, I can keep a secret.”

“What--no.” Peter laughed. “That’s my actual name. I know,” he added when she raised an eyebrow.

“That is a very cool name,” was her reply in an atrocious German accent.

Peter smirked. “Hallo. I am Heinrich. I’m the one who set 26 wild dogs into your room.”

“Damn! He knows all the vines.” Shuri moved back down the staircase towards the wider area of her lab.

“I could say the same about you. And it’s only because my best friend loves them; he quotes them all the time when we’re tinkering for school.”

“He sounds like someone I would like to meet.”

“He would blow his shit if he heard you say that.”
“I want to do it even more now!”

Peter was beginning to feel quite a lot better. “I’m sure he does, too.”

“So, tell me about what you know.”

“Of your search?”

“Yeah.” Shuri lead him to the same table she’d been under earlier, and started re-opening pages on the holoscreens floating about atop it.

“Absolutely nothing. I just know you’re further along than we were, and that I needed to know what you guy’s did.”

“And your first reaction was just to Sherlock-out where the Captain was and crash Wakanda?” Shuri was looking at him with almost respect.

“My third reaction, actually.” His next words slipped out before he could stop them. “I honestly don’t want to be anywhere near the Captain.”

Shuri put a hand to her chest in mock offense.

“No, you and his majesty are… amazing,” Peter clarified. “I can’t promise I won’t punch Rogers in the face at some point.”

*Me first.* Spider-Man whined.

*Shut up.*

“Hm. What did he do to you?”

“Nothing. It’s what he did to--you know what, can we move on to the part where you tell me what you know about the people who’ve shot and kidnapped Mr. Stark?”

Shuri made a face and held up her hands in the universal ‘alright, alright’ gesture. “Sure, sure. It’s not much…”

“But it’s something.” *Please. You have to have something.*

Shuri moved straight in. “I started with the footage, of course. It’s all I could start with.” She tugged him towards the screens, gesturing with vague direction. “For a while, I was stumped. Whoever this woman was, she was *good*; she disabled most cameras, and avoided creating her portal where the ones she couldn’t see.”

“Right.” He recalled that from when he’d seen the footage, May and Rhodes and Pepper at his side.

“But she didn’t calculate the angle of the sun.”

Peter started. “What?”

“Look here.”

Shuri pulled up the footage, and he tensed, a bit. But thankfully, as though she’d done it dozens of times, Shuri swiped to the exact frame she needed, and paused the video.

Peter resolutely didn’t look at Tony’s still, blood-covered form.
But he still his stomach churn and the Knot sink deep within his gut.

“Can you see it?” Shuri looked at him, her voice slightly softer than it had been.

Peter knew what she was doing, turning this into a puzzle, pulling his mind away from the rut it was falling into. He was grateful, and wondered how she knew what he needed, in that moment. 

*She lost her father, too,* Spider-Man reminded him.

*We haven’t lost him.* We haven’t, Peter thought, and pushed the other consciousness away.

He searched the screen, thinking about what Shuri had said. The angle of the sun. “Hmm…” **What’s so special about the sun? There are a ton of windows in the courtroom, and light comes in from every angle--oh.** “That’s genius!”

“You found it?” She sounded excited, and slightly surprised. 

“The window. The portal is reflected on the side window, and you can into it a bit more.”

“Bingo!” Shuri dragged her finger across that area of the screen, selecting it and blowing it up with barely a twitch. “See?”

“I don’t recognize it,” Peter admitted, his hope deflating slightly.

“Neither do I. And the picture’s too blurry for a recognition scan. But it’s a start, and I’m trying to determine anything I can from the brickwork, and the wallpaper.”

“That’s wallpaper?”

“Yeah. Or something like it.”

“Hm…”

Shuri looked sideways at him. “There’s more.”

“Really?”

She smiled. “Yeah. About the women, and the magic. I had to do a *ton* of digging, but I did come across a few descriptions that matched what we saw.” She paused, then added (modesty), “*this* is what you came here for; only Wakanda has the infrastructure to discover it.”

“I can neither agree, nor disagree,” Peter said haughtily.

Disgruntled, Shuri said, “did you not see the--”

“I’m kidding! Just tell me what you found.”

“Right. Of course. Anyway, the woman is a sorcerer.”

“…Obviously?”

“No, that’s what they call themselves. Sorcerers. There’s a sort of team of them, as far as I can tell, spread out around the world. They perform miracles, at the very least. Healing permanent disfigurement or injuries, the like.”

“That’s all?”
Shuri shrugged. “Probably not. I think they were involved in the strange shit that went down in New York and London and Hong Kong, but I can’t know for sure.”

“Are they… will they…”

“I don’t know why they took Stark,” Shuri said, and the what-if’s returned to Peter in full force. Shuri turned to face him fully. “But I’m going to find out. You’re going to help me, yeah?”

Spider-Man swallowed, and met her gaze. “Yes. And then I’m going to help you get him back.”

Shuri grinned. “Damn straight. Now let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

SHURI!
Yes I am on the they-are-vine-royalty bandwagon. Don’t even try to change my mind. :)))) Yes I am also aware my vine library is very limited. I’ve been trying to change that.

BUT ANYWAY, I wanted to thank y’all for the explosion of advice I got last chapter! Seriously, it's AWESOME, and SO INCREDIBLELY HELPFUL so shout-out to all of you dorks. It'll take some time to get all of that integrated in here, y'know, because I take at least 7 chapters to do ANYTHING, but your essays were not written in vain!

Thanks for reading, thanks for being awesome, and I'll see you soon!
In Which Steve Causes a Few Problems

I post this chapter early, in loving memory of our Lord and Master, Stan Lee. I don't know if you heard, but he died today. A little more than an hour ago. I was taking a Calc test...
I have so many things to thank him for. So many thing I learned, so many ways I've grown. I made friends because of him. I fell in love because of him. And maybe this is all very dramatic, being devastated over a man I've never met, but I know his stories closer than I know most people. And I mourn that. I mourn him.

So I dedicate this chapter to Stan Lee. I dedicate 20000 hits (thank you all). Enjoy this installment because of Stan Lee, enjoy this whole story because of Stan Lee. Enjoy the incredible stories of the MCU because of him. Enjoy that part of yourself, that part of me that whispers 'create', that part that came from Stan Lee.

Thank you.

Rest in peace, Stan Lee.

“Alright.”

“What?” Aedoilagen rocked back away from Tony, surprise etching itself across her face. Tony flexed his hands and stared up at her, debating countries and cities and locations.

“You expected something different?” He raised an eyebrow, as crossing his arms was impossible without aggravating his shoulder.

“Honestly… yes. I expected somewhat more… resistance.”

“It’s your lucky day!” Tony grinned and arose carefully. “I’ll tell you where the Rogue Avengers are, no fuss, no mess, and you drop me back in New York to deal with the fallout of my own kidnapping. I’ve got experience with it.”

“We’re going to kill them,” Aedoilagen said, as though he’d missed it the first time.

“You’d be doing me a favor. When you take over, try not to make as much a mess as they do, m’kay?” Tony held out his right hand for her to shake, which was thankfully the one connected to his uninjured shoulder.

Aedoilagen took it with elegant, sharp fingers and a razor’s smile. “Thank you, Mr. Stark. You must understand that we cannot release you right away; we must verify the… accuracy of your information.”

“Would I lie?”

“I hope not.”
Tony nodded (he’d hoped otherwise, but expected so nonetheless) and reached behind him for the chair somewhat more carelessly than he should have. His left hand smacked into the armrest, sending shock into his wound, and he winced. “Fine.”

But Aedoilagen wasn’t done. “Besides, there’s use for you beyond their location, so you have little motivation to lie at all.”

Tony clenched his fingernails into his palm, trying to draw his focus away from his aching shoulder. “What sort of use?” he snarled.

“If we find the Rogues where you say, none at all,” the woman said. Then she moved behind him to the door, trailing her fingers along the back of the chair. Tony watched her, his muscles tense.

She stopped before the door, and then, usurping Tony’s expectations, knocked on it with a laugh. “You guys can stop listening at the door, now! Come on in, I’m done, and I know you want to hear where they are.”

Tony jumped back despite his complaining hip, fingers going to his smooth, simple watch on instinct.

The door opened somewhat sheepishly, and four more people filed into the living room. Tony surveyed each as they past, trying to assess threat. The first, a young woman with a face that was just… off, somehow, and eyes the color of rubies, stuck close to Aedoilagen when she entered with an air of excitement. Then two men, close enough in resemblance to be brothers, with dark hair and chestnut skin, who never tore their eyes from Tony. Finally, another woman, older and seeming to have some Asian roots, glaring at him in open disgust.

“Mr. Stark, these are my right hand men, and women, I suppose.” Aedoilagen smiled a tight-lipped smile. “Meet, respectively, Jade, Atticus and Jasper, and Kenja.”

None of them said a word, just staring at him with increasing hostility down the line. Tony’s smirk widened.

“So because he’s cooperating, I figure I’m not allowed to punch him,” said the elderly Asian, Kenja, after a lengthy awkward silence.

“No.”

“He deserves it!”

Yeah, this woman got the highest place on his threat-to-personal-well-being list. That was hate in her eyes, and instability. Perhaps Aedoilagen didn’t blame him for the deaths of her family, but others in her group obviously didn’t feel the same. Tony resolutely didn’t take a step back.

“We aren’t here for revenge, Kenja,” Aedoilagen said. “We’re here for salvation. He’s our map there, so have patience.”

“He’s one of them,” Kenja hissed. “And you’re going to let him go?”

“I’m going to let him go as soon as he gets us to the others; think of it as a trade. He helps us do what we really need to, and we return him to his predicament, which, admittedly, wasn’t that much better than this,” Aedoilagen set a hand on the Asian’s shoulder.

“I think you’re being blind and small minded and ignorant of the possibilities that stand before us already.”
“Noted,” Aedoilagen said with a sigh, and turned back to Tony. “Kenja is my apprentice of the mystic arts.”

Jade piped up, then, a grin flitting across her face. “Maura was stubborn about it for a while; she doesn’t teach people anymore. But Kenja’s even more stubborn, and here we are!”

The woman in question kept staring Tony down, fixing him with an unsettling icy gaze. He’d seen that before, from May when she thought he’d hurt Peter, and it was terrifying.

“Kenja is essential to my plan, Mr. Stark. And Kenja, so is Stark. So I suggest you try to be civil to each other.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Tony deadpanned to Kenja.

She didn’t even bristle, probably because any more of it would have had her bursting, and Tony decided not to push it.

“I second the punching of this man,” said one of the brothers. Tony thought it was Atticus.

“Aye,” replied the other.

Aedoilagen rolled her eyes. “The man we kidnapped and shot is being more tolerant than all of you! Could you at least be quiet for a few moments? I let you in here to know my plan, but I can still swat your asses out of here.”

The four people stared at her, then at Tony, and let out a collective sigh. “Fine.” Tony couldn’t help but think of them as petulant children, in that moment.

“Thank you. So, Mr. Stark,” Aedoilagen said, clasping her hands behind her back and leaning forward slightly. “Where must I plan to invade?”

Tony’s eyes flickered shut, just for a moment, as he prayed to every god he didn’t believe in that he wasn’t about to make a terrible mistake. His hand playing across his bandaged shoulder as if to remind him of the danger these people and this place hid, Tony braced himself.

“Lisbon,” he said, naming the location of Wakanda’s second International Outreach Center. “They’re in Lisbon.”

*I hope you’re paying attention, Steve, for once in your goddamn life.*

* * *

Steve Rogers had allowed himself a break. Just a short one, just for a few hours, to spend with Bucky and keep him caught up on what the Rogue Avengers had been doing, and on their new problem.

Problem. Catastrophe?

Honestly, he didn’t know what to think about Stark’s disappearance. Well, kidnapping. Kidnapping from a trial Steve had inadvertently caused, a trial that could have saved them or destroyed them. Each of the Rogues—Sam, Natasha, Wanda, and he, along with the council of Wakanda—had been watching the footage with baited breath (Shuri having hacked in to watch it real-time), and been struck frozen at the gunshots, at Stark’s actions, and at this new threat.
The first person Steve had turned to, his hands working at the denim of his worn jeans, was Wanda. But she had only shrugged, looking as shaken as he. The red haze that usually played perpetually around her fingers, danced along her hair, whispered at her ankles, had disappeared. “I don’t know,” she’d whispered. “I don’t know.”

Shuri, unsurprisingly, had flicked Steve in the head and bounded towards the screen, forcing the footage to rewind. How did she force hacked security video to rewind? “Stop whining and get to work!”

Steve fidgeted. “Doing what?”

“Making Christmas dinner.” She rolled her eyes. “Finding Stark, you douche!”

“Well, I get that,” Steve said, glad for her distraction, “but how?”

No one had an answer. No one had an answer yet.

And it just so happened that the moment Steve decided to stop hovering uselessly and leave the capital for a few hours, T’Challa made his entrance and quickly and efficiently hauled both him and Bucky back into Wakanda.

They were playing cards and betting on bits of cheese from Bucky’s goats (which he’d named in Russian and wouldn’t translate no matter how much Steve weeded), when the king let himself in to stand above them like a cloud before the moon.

“Who’s winning?”

Bucky smirked. “Me, of course.”

“Wrong,” said T’Challa, tossing a perfect hand of Shuri-brand canasta cards onto the table before them. “I am. Now come on, we have things to do.”

“Buck—” Steve began to protest.

“The White Wolf may accompany us, if he so chooses,” T’Challa said impatiently. “Come.”

Steve glanced towards Bucky, who nodded with a shrug, and then the two of them followed the king out of the hut. “What is going on?” Steve demanded as the three super soldiers trotted back through the valley.

“Don’t ask me,” was Bucky’s reasonable-toned response. He ran somewhat unevenly with only one arm; Steve had learned from experience not to comment on it.

“I wasn’t.” Steve chuckled. “Your Majesty, did you find something?”

T’Challa didn’t look at him, an unreadable expression crossing his face. “We did.”

“Bad news?” Steve inquired, his breath hitching ever-so-slightly.

“Not news.” T’Challa sped his pace as the palace came into view. “A boy.”

Steve, assuming he’d heard the man wrong, looked towards his friend. Bucky shrugged. “Didn’t you talk to a kid?” Bucky asked.

“I did, but I didn’t tell him where we were. I didn’t tell him anything.”
“Well,” T’Challa said, slipping around the back of the palace. None of them could enter through the front; Bucky and Steve because they happened to be worldwide wanted criminals, and T’Challa because he was, well, T’Challa, so Shuri had created a safe entrance for them straight into her lab. “That was enough.”

“What?”

The wall slid back, and Steve followed T’Challa into the building. It wasn’t long, especially for the hurrying superheroes, before the lab was opening up before them, its light stretching hungry tendrils down the passage. Bucky glanced at Steve, who met his eyes; Steve found both of them moving tensely, coiled like springs in case of a threat.

T’Challa ushered them through, not looking anything but resigned, and perhaps fond. Though that was the expression he always reserved for Shuri.

“I’ve brought them,” the king began, and the three of them stepped out onto the veranda above the main floor of the lab.

Beneath them, two children were crowded together before Shuri’s wall of screens, racing at lightspeed through footage and files, not speaking, but communicating all the same. At the king’s voice, the new one that Steve didn’t recognize paused, his head of curly brown hair turning towards the girl. She whispered something, mouth twisted into a smirk, and put a hand on his shoulder.

When the boy looked at him, Steve was struck paralyzed at the passion in his eyes. This petite, non threatening kid had disgust in his gaze as he surveyed Steve, almost hate, and not a hint of submission.

“Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes,” T’Challa began, stepping out of range of that toxic look, “meet Spider-Man.”
Peter felt the Captain step into view, rather than saw him. It only took the man’s presence to paralyze Peter, to slam an opposing force against him and tear him apart with the need and the fear to turn around. Shuri felt him tense and put a hand on his shoulder, whispering something sarcastic that he didn’t hear, too busy with the pounding of his furious pulse reaching down into his throat.

And then Peter felt another presence. A lurking one behind Steve, a calculating one. He knew who it was, and suddenly there was no choice but to turn.

Captain Steve Rogers looked like a wolf, staring down at him with pale blue eyes from beneath dirty blond hair. A neat beard dusted his cheeks and chin, and he held himself as if to pounce, enormous shoulders squared and lifted. Behind him was the coyote of James Barnes, lingering and evaluating and pretending.

It took all of Spider-Man’s self control to turn his grimace into a glare. And Peter’s itching hands were clenching at his sides, working the sensation of emerging talons from the digits. They remembered every video and photo and article about the Captain, and they remembered the ones that had changed everything. They remembered their mentor curling defensively away from him, they remembered his blood and pain and panic that was all that man’s fault--

“Peter!” Shuri grabbed his shoulder.

Spider-Man twisted, his hands flashing out, his fingers reaching towards the button that would deploy his webbing. Shuri leapt away, and Peter caught himself before he did something he’d regret.

“Shit, man,” Shuri said, her voice still low. “When you said you were gonna punch him in the face, I didn’t think you meant murder.”

“I can’t do this,” Spider-Man growled. I can’t, I can’t do this…

We have to. It’s our only option. Peter took a breath. He’d brought himself here, he’d put himself in this position; he’d thought he was prepared (he wasn’t) and he really had no other option.

But even the logic couldn’t dull the razorblade of wrath driving hard into Spider-Man’s heart, the overwhelming need to fight for what was right, to defend and to protect and to exact justice. His palms were bleeding from where the fingernails of his clenched fists had sliced through his skin. And he knew he only that his control was shredding, and he had seconds remaining.

If I turn around again, Spider-Man articulated, I don’t know what I’ll do.

Let me, then! was Peter’s panicked response.

I’m sorry.

No you’re not, but just let me. He’s our only chance.

No, he isn’t. You are.

Peter shook off the gaze of Shuri and looked back at the balcony. T’Challa was leading the two men
down to the lab, looking less like the king and more like the Black Panther. Peter suddenly felt woefully out of place; there were superheroes in this room, and right now, he was just a boy.

So he said the first words that came to mind. “I told you I’d find a way.”

“Apparently, you didn’t need me at all,” joked Rogers as fakely as Peter.

They stare at each other.

“Sokovia? Lagos?” said Shuri.

All five others turned to her in confusion.

“Just trying to find a reason for the awkwardness I’m sure I’m not alone in experiencing,” Shuri said.

Peter couldn’t decide if he wanted to disappear or begin webbing everyone in this room to various walls. He was leaning towards the latter.

“I’m reasonably sure he didn’t hate me six months ago, when we fought, and I don’t think I’ve generated any arch enemies lately,” Rogers said.

“No one hated you six months ago. Can’t say the same for now.”

“Why?”

Peter clasped his hands behind his back to keep them from folding into Spider-Man’s hand positions. “It’s because you don’t know what you did. How could you, both of you—” he glanced back at Barnes—“possibly not realize…?”

That must have tipped something within Rogers, shifting Peter from an annoyance to a threat, and the man advanced. Peter, already too close to jumping him, stayed put, staring him down.

“I don’t think you understand—”

“No, I don’t think you understand,” Peter growled. “Look, I’d rather not do this now.”

“Why? Having doubts?” The Captain was close enough that Peter’s spider-sense prickled at his breathing.

“I’m not scared of you, if that’s what you think.” He stood firmly half a foot below Rogers’ eye level and looked him straight in the eye.

“Aren’t you?”

Peter scoffed. “I was never scared of you. Maybe impressed. Awed, once.” He lowered his voice. “That’s long past, Cap. And now I’m here, and maybe I’m not here for you, but I’m finding it hard not to show you what you did six months ago. I was never scared of you, and it’s high time you start being scared of me.”

An angry, amused smile flickered over Rogers’ face. “I can’t remember the last time I was scared of anyone.”

Peter’s expression twisted to match. “Liar.”

“Enough!” T’Challa put a hand on either of their chests.

Shuri piped up from behind him, “the pissing contest is amusing, but not super productive.”
“Steve, do me a favor and stop trying to intimidate the kid?” Barnes said, pulling the man back. Peter’s muscles relaxed slightly.

“What are we here for?” Rogers demanded. T’Challa held his gaze. Eventually, the Captain looked away. “Sorry.”

The king nodded, then said, “we have another resource at our disposal for finding Stark, now. And the fact that you’re here--” he turned to Peter-- “changes a few things.”

“What things?”

“You reminded me the specifics of Stark’s kidnapping. And I started wondering; why at the trial? Why then? Of course, it could be a coincidence, but it seems that a group of sorcerers wouldn’t necessarily need to snatch Stark when he was removed from his center of power. So why, then?”

Peter crossed his arms, thinking. “He didn’t have his suit… maybe that had something to do with it?”

“It could have, but his suit is part of what my brother means by ‘center of power,’” Shuri said. “Portals and magic; even Iron Man could have been out of his depth.”

Peter shivered. “Maybe.”

“He’d been arrested,” Rogers said. “He was a scandal, a high spot in the news.”

“What if the kidnapping wasn’t about him?” Peter ventured, disgruntledly agreeing with the Captain. “What if it was simply to get noticed.”

“I don’t think so,” said T’Challa. “Although that could be part of it.”

“Oh I think I see it!” Shuri closed her eyes, drawing her fingers in front of her face. “The trial. He’d been arrested for being in contact with you, Steve.”

“Right,” said Barnes. “And that was public knowledge.”

“They think he knows where you are,” Peter breathed, his eyes widening.

“What?”

Shuri and Peter spoke as one: “they want you.”

Thrown off slightly, Peter looked to the girl. She gestured for him to continue, and he bounced on his toes to release anxious energy as he did so. “Think about the timing. Think about the reason. Those people had the might and the means to take, or try to take, Mr. Stark from the compound. They could have tried before the trial, but they waited. Until right when he was about to remove the Rogue Avengers from the limelight.”

“And--” Shuri took over-- “when he still hadn’t proven he didn’t know where you are. These people want attention. And not just anyone’s; they want yours’. The Rogue Avengers.”

This is your fault in so many ways. Peter tried and failed to push his bitterness aside for the sake of the mission.

“Well,” Rogers said, “they got it.”

But T’Challa wasn’t done. “That does put a significant dent in our advantage.”
“How?” Barnes wondered.

“It means you can’t go at this Captain America style,” Shuri said in another terrible accent. “They’re expecting it.”

“And if they’re as bold as they’ve shown and as powerful as we think, loss has a chance of transpiring,” added T’Challa.

“Which we can’t risk.” Peter said, trying to keep his voice even.

They lapsed into silence, unique thoughts dancing in each of their eyes. Peter was forcing the Knot down even as uncertainty overwhelmed his entire being, the utter hopelessness of not knowing that corroded at his control.

But I’m here, now, in Wakanda, with the best people I could possibly be with in this situation, he thought with as much conviction as he could muster.

Well, perhaps not the best. Some of the best.

I’m okay, Aunt May. Pepper, I’m okay, and I think Tony’s okay. Colonel Rhodes, it’s going to be okay. Peter’s fingers found the phone in his pocket.

They should be here.

Peter vowed to text them soon, and to communicate everything he’d learned. They deserved it, just as he did; he’d just had to steal his way to the other side of the world to find it out.

He would have had to travel anyway, even if he’d stayed with his remaining family. If walking continents, swimming oceans, was necessary to get information or to act on it, Peter would have done so. And Pepper, May, and Rhodes would have been there beside him, and Ned and MJ if he needed.

Tony would have done the same for him.

Peter would walk continents, swim oceans… and run away from home. And he didn’t have time to be sorry.

And with a jolt, Peter remembered exactly who had actually accompanied him on his journey.

“Hey,” he said, turning to T’Challa. “What have you done with my cat?”

Shuri burst out laughing as the king ducked his head like a scolded child. And then, sheepishly, he moved his elbow away from the tuck in his waist, his embroidered drape falling open like a bird’s wing uncurling.

And there, a parsel tucked under an arm, was a peacefully dozing kitten.

Rogers looked somehow more shocked than Peter, saying, “you ran all the way to the hut and back with an animal under your arm?”

Bucky snorted. “So he does like cats.”

T’Challa turned to him with exasperated eyes. “I wear a panther suit to battle, I grew up in a country where leopards are idolized and incorporated into everything, as a king I will become such a creature when I transition to the ancestral plane; of course I like cats.”
Grease looked up, mewed in sleepy agreement, and tucked herself back into T’Challa’s pocket.

The laughter that bubbled out of Peter’s chest was more than slightly hysterical.

* * *

“Alright, so the plan is pretty simple.”

Maura addressed her thirteen companions as she paced with impatient, anticipatory steps through the kitchen of their suburban hideout. Each stood stock-still, their breathing coming low and fast and ready. Pride, and hope, leaked into Maura’s words.

“You don’t have to find them, you just have to find a sign of them. A trace, a trail, something. Once we have three, Jade can find the Pattern, and lead us to them.”

The girl to her left bounced on her toes, though her nod was stoic. The product of a genome assembled like a house built from the ground up, Jade a sickly dwarf with a limited lifespan and one of the most amazing people Maura had ever met. The interactions of her chromosomes did more than ruin her enzyme reactions, however; when she’d been written, what she called her ‘authors’ had focused just a bit too much on her brain’s ability to synthesize information. As a result, if provided with three, sometimes two, or more pieces of evidence, Jade could see their ‘Pattern’ and use it to deduce all sorts of information.

It was how they’d found and defended this place, smack in the center of Ukraine’s Kiev, their Sanctum where none remained.

Her group grunted their agreement, slipping in their silent headphones to indicate understanding of how they would communicate that information. Maura did the same. “Once we know where the Rogues are, we can plan efficiently and take them out in one fell swoop. Kenja and I will work to channel our magic, but please try to remember who you kill?” A few grinned at her joke. “In all seriousness, though, I need to know everything that happens, down to the smallest drop of blood, if this is going to work. Understand?”

A chorus of affirmatives.

Maura looked behind her at the door to the kitchen, where through the living room she had no doubt Tony Stark was listening intently.

Maura also had no doubt she was being played for a sucker.

But she’d been patient for a long time, and she could be patient some more.

And she could listen to screams.

Maura Aedoilagen pictured a small alley in Portugal’s capital clearly in her mind, and brought her fingers through the air, clenched against a worn wooden sling ring and pressing against its carving.

*Happy Mother’s Day. Love Mercury.*

Maura was the first to step into Lisbon.
Be impressed--he didn't even punch him. Surprised even me. I was just letting Pete do whatever he wanted, and he was actually quite civil!

Hope you liked! Opinions and perceptions will get ever-more-muddled.
When Wilson, Maximoff, and Romanoff made their appearance, Peter was too tired to try to kill them.

He’d spent the rest of the afternoon in Shuri’s lab, checking and checking and rechecking for anything they’d missed. But there was nothing, and between responding to his aunt and friends and that, despite their possible breakthrough that morning, the simmerings of despair had begun to bubble beneath the Knot in Peter’s chest.

Shuri had noticed his hand turning white against his side and his eyes narrowed to slits, and put her wrist on his shoulder.

“Let’s find you a place to stay,” Shuri said. “My lab floor’s comfortable, but not that comfortable.”

So he was led with feeble protest from the room, not yet too exhausted not to be awed once again by the architecture. T’Challa had vanished with Grease long before, off to continue running his kingdom and remind Peter once again of the scale of the universe, and Rogers and Barnes had trickled away at some point. Peter had pointedly ignored them as soon as the conversation had ended, and as a result hadn’t noticed when they were gone. Not that he cared.

Shuri trotted through the halls, doors and stairwells seeming to sense her coming and move to her will. Supposing the entire palace was like her child, Peter wasn’t surprised. He didn’t have to feign being impressed, however, and Shuri told him of all sorts of magical things.

“So here’s the secret room (I know, it’s awesome) I engineered for the Rogues, when they showed up. Since I assume you’re wanting to go unnoticed, this is the best place.” She looked at his face, and clarified, “there’s space enough that you won’t have to look at them if you don’t want too. And if the Captain’s debriefed them on you, they likely won’t bother you.”

“Good to know my show earlier did some good, then,” Peter joked halfheartedly.

“Eesh.” Shuri waved her hand in front of his face. “I feel bad; we should have found you a place to at least sit down hours ago.”

“M’fine.”

“He says tiredly, in an tired tone of voice,” Shuri said, and shooed him into the room.

As it turned out, Rogers and Barnes had come to debrief the three others, and apparently hadn’t left. So when the door slid open, there were five enemy faces staring Peter down.

It wasn’t any more than he was used to.

So Peter grinned cynically at them, raised his eyebrow, and threw a few finger guns for good measure. And then he chose a random direction and walked. Shuri’s shoulders were shaking with silent laughter as she followed, quietly choking out, “this way.”

“What time is it?” Peter said.
“You’ve got jet lag.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s just get you set up, okay?”

“Mmm.”

Shuri guided him into a small, cozy, panther-themed (of course) room, which stood ready and waiting and undisturbed. She pulled him gently to the inside door frame, and gestured to a panel inlaid there.

“This is your keypad, if you can call it such a generic word. Press your hand or finger there; it’ll imprint you and then only obey you.”

“Like FRIDAY,” Peter realized groggily, doing as she instructed.

“Who?”

“Mr. Stark’s AI. She runs his compound, and she’s badass.”

Shuri raised an eyebrow in an expression Peter couldn’t read. “Huh. AI?”

“There’s one in my suit, too. Maybe I’ll introduce you tomorrow; you’d like Karen.”

“Yeah! Is she programmed with—” Shuri broke off, surveying Peter, and laughed. “Tomorrow. Even the princess of Wakanda must wait for Spinners to sleep.”

“Mmm.”

“Alright, leaving. Sleep well, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Shuri. Thanks for the help.” Peter smiled at her, and she returned the expression.

“Of course. ‘Night!”

Peter had made a beeline for the bed and was running his hands through the blankets in preparation for climbing within when the princess’s voice came again from the door.

“And Peter?” She lingered with a hand on the doorway, staring him down. “It’ll be okay.”

He didn’t answer. She didn’t press.

“I’m glad to meet you, Spinner kid,” Shuri said, and then disappeared.

Peter watched the door until it closed, sealing him into some much needed solitude, and some even more needed darkness.

He didn’t bother to even remove his shoes before nestling into the goatswool coverings that whispered like May’s stories and slipping into slumber.

It was only moments before the sun was shining directly into his eyes and he was swimming up from unconsciousness, and yet the Earth had turned halfway.

Spider-Man stretched himself out and rubbed at his chest where his spider-sense was tingling. Yawning, he unfolded from the bed and found that his luggage had somehow relocated itself from
the lab to his room, where he almost stepped on it.

And his cat.

Seeming far too pleased with herself, Grease rubbed up against him and swept her tail along the base of his knee. Spider-Man smiled and reached down to stroke her.

“Has the Black Panther been spoiling you?” he wondered rhetorically.

Grease mewed.

“I knew it. And yeah, I’ll bring you back to him, if you want. I’m sure he appreciates a random housecat distracting him at all the political councils.” Spider-Man stripped out of his civilian clothes and pulled a clean set, noting the fact that he should ask if there was a place to shower or bathe without having to interact with… anyone.

*I’ll get used to this. I will.*

*Hopefully, I won’t have too.*

Before he could remember exactly how wrong his situation was, how wrong the simple fact that Tony Stark wouldn’t be waiting for him a spider’s swing from his location, Spider-Man shoved himself towards the door. The sensor seemed to leap to scan his palm like a puppy eager to do its job, and the door opened with a familiar *shick* that sent a pang through Spider-Man’s form.

James Barnes was waiting for him.

He was still wearing his singular web-shooter, and it only took a moment to whirl and send the man flying to the other side of the hallway, pinned by his shoulder and ankle by sticky netting.

“Woah! Woah man!” Barnes yelped, a laugh beneath his words.

Confused, Spider-Man’s face fell out of its snarl. He kept his wrist extended, but Barnes’ posture and tone didn’t indicate threat. “What are you doing?”

“I wasn’t going to shank you as you turned the corner, if that’s what you meant.” Barnes poked tentatively at the webbing and made a face.

“That’s not what I meant, but thank you so much for clearing it up.” Spider-Man’s disgust couldn’t have been more obvious.

The amusement fell off the other man’s face. “I just want to talk.”

“I don’t.” Spider-Man turned to continue down the hall.

“When you told Steve you hated him because he didn’t know what he’d done to deserve it, you said ‘both of you.’”

Peter stopped. “I did.”

“I don’t know, either.”

“I know. Which is why I *don’t want to talk to you.* Ever.”

He began moving again, but what Barnes said next stopped him in his tracks.
“I want to know. Please.”

Peter’s lip lifted. “Why? So you can feebly try to defend yourself? So you can dismiss me as just another Accords activist?”

“No,” Barnes said quietly. “I’ve done a lot of terrible, terrible things. I’m one of the reasons people thought they needed the Accords. I don’t make a habit of ignoring the things I’ve done.”

Peter whirled. “Oh really?” he snarled. “Then tell me; why the hell did you run? Why the hell did you let these idiots fight for you, fight against the wishes of the entire world while you hid behind them? Why did you let their family break apart?”

“I--”

“And that’s another thing! If Rogers had just brought the problem—that’s you, by the way—to the entire group, do you honestly think the resident powerhouse, billionaire, businessman wouldn’t have been able to do something?”

Barnes’ mouth slid shut.

“Imagine, for a moment,” Peter hissed, “that there was a man that would do anything for his family. Imagine, for a moment, that someone introduced another member. Tony Stark’s ability for care has no set limit; you would have been welcome. And then, if you told him what you did to his family all those years ago, if you owned up and apologized and explained, do you really think, in the presence of a new brother, that Tony Stark wouldn’t have tried to understand?”

His chest was heaving and his eyes had narrowed like that of the suit. Barnes stayed silent, sensing he wasn’t done.

“Now imagine,” Peter said, his voice flat, “that that man’s brother instead ripped the family he’d worked so hard to create in two. Imagine the terrible conflict in his mind between supporting his friends and doing what was right, what was right according to one-hundred and seventeen countries and his own heart; a trait, may I say--” Peter took a step forward-- “he learned from that same brother.

“Imagine he prepares himself to explain this. Imagine he travels across the world to do so. Now imagine, after five sleepless nights and days of fighting to make the Accords better, of sitting in the backseat next to the boy he recruited as he flew and drove home, of hearing the gibbes of his family tearing at everything he hates about himself, he realizes that his brother had betrayed him again. He watches his f**king parents’ murder, and finds that no one bothered to tell him about it. No one bothered!” Peter’s fists itched.

“And then,” he said, his breath coming out in a long sigh as he took a step back and dropped his gaze from the unreadable one of Barnes, “imagine he finally snaps. Imagine he wants to hurt those who hurt him. Imagine they fight back, and imagine he relishes it. But he never shoots to kill. He never shoots to break, never to disable. Not even--” Peter turned away, trying to stop memories of the footage from playing behind his eyes and failing miserably-- “when they raise the shield for the killing blow. Not even when they crush his actual heart. Not even when they leave him there, freezing and bleeding and dying, with no way home in so many ways. Imagine that.”

“I didn’t… I never thought…”

Peter turned away. “I know. The webbing will dissolve in half and hour; I have the quickest corrosion loaded.” He moved off down the hallway, his shoulders slumped. He’d imagined that
conversation so many times, he’d imagined the triumph he’d feel, the justice. But he felt none of it, just utter exhaustion.

“Imagine, for a moment,” came Barnes’ quiet voice, and Peter stopped in his tracks. “Imagine a man who goes to sleep, and wakes up a Nazi murderer with his best friend beneath his fists, one-hundred years later. Imagine he finds a way to disappear, but it means nothing, because one day, they find him again. Imagine he kills a king, destroys a possibility for peace.

“Then imagine his best friend finding him. Imagine hundred-year-old loyalty awakening, the illogical, wonderful prioritizing of Steve Rogers to the past and its ideals that makes him Captain America. Imagine the doubts this friend had to the Accords already exploding with force, and imagine his fear that he’d lose his friend again. But this time, to the government he’d fought for, the world he’d fought for, that had betrayed him.”

Peter stood rigid, nothing in his face moving.

Barnes’ hadn’t looked at him once, just stared down at the far corner of the floor, his singular arm pressed to the wall. “Imagine that the king-killer doesn’t realize what’s really happening. Imagine he assumes things aren’t as sever between his friend and the inventor as they seem, because his friend tends to react in extreme ways. Imagine he doesn’t realize until a friend is lying what looks like dead in the arms of the inventor, and by then he doesn’t know how to stop it. By then his allies are in prison and he has no more doubt of what would happen to him if he was caught. From what you’ve said, he should have.”

Peter just watched the man, noting every inflection and trace of emotion, as strong as his own.

“Imagine it takes a boy spelling it out to him to remember how broken the inventor looked as he asked his friend if he knew.”

“I don’t have to,” Peter whispered.

“Imagine he didn’t bother to find out what happened to the inventor after they fought. And now imagine that makes him sick.” Barnes looked up towards him, and though his eyes focused on Peter’s face, he wasn’t truly looking at him, the shadow of something long past dancing in his irises. “Imagine he’s not looking for forgiveness. Imagine he just wants to do what’s right, for once in his life.”

And Peter did. He saw a drifting man, almost alone in a world that had moved on without him. He saw a man standing beside the only semblance of normalcy he had left, knowing both of their faults but having no where else to go. He imagined.

Peter didn’t say a single word.

There was nothing the man could say that would erase the things Peter’d seen. There was nothing any of them could say to go beyond what they had done. But Peter knew better than most that nothing was simple, and nothing could be understood completely, and all he wanted was to find Tony and go home.

Barnes flinched as Peter walked up to him, but Peter didn’t show any signs of having noticed. Pulling his sleeves down over his hands, he reached out slowly.

And pulled the webbing away from the other man’s shoulder.
Well this chapter was hard. REALLY hard. Still, at least it's DONE. Lolo!

More Tony in the next chapter.

I'll see y'all soon, and drop some feedback to tell me what you think!
In Which Information is Received and Sent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’ve got something!”

Peter heard the excited voice down the hall, and broke into a sprint exactly 0.4 seconds later. Barnes had followed him until the door of the secret room (which he should come up with a name for), before turning down another hallway, neither of them showing outward signs of dismissal. So, left only with his convoluted thoughts, Peter walked slowly until he heard the words echo down the lower palace halls.

Spider-Man was running at inhuman speeds, each second increasing his impatience, sending his muscles curling faster, his arches and achilles straining to move him faster. Three days of nothing, three days of panic and doubt and confusion, and they’d found something, something good. He didn’t care if the people he rocketed past stared, cried out, snarled—he had to get to the lab. Now.

The door sensed him coming and slid open, and Spider-Man threw himself to the railing of the lab’s top balcony, then over it without pausing to even slow.

If had been too long since he’d found himself in a controlled fall, far too long since he’d flown. Spider-Man folded himself to be upright as his momentum carried him towards the windows a story below, Wakanda’s engineers gaping at him from each tier of the workshop. He caught onto the window, his fingers catching the surface to slow, and slid, then leapt again. The bottom story of the lab rushed toward him, and Spider-Man narrowed his eyes. His head tucked at the practiced second, his legs coming to his chest as he rolled and distributed the shock of his fall throughout his body.

He came up running, and skidded to a halt moments before colliding with a screen.

The whole escapade took less than forty-five seconds.

“Holy shit,” came a now-familiar voice, and then a laugh. “And a wild Spider-Man appears!” Shuri trotted over toward him, applauding quietly. She turned to the rest of the people in the room, all staring towards Spider-Man. “See, I told you the American heros are at least somewhat competent.” She mouthed no offense at him and kept talking. “So, Zukita, you found something?”

The round-faced, curly-haired man next to her nodded. “Look.”

The contents of the room gathered around them seemingly by magnetic attraction, and Spider-Man found himself pressed against Shuri and Zukita as the rest of the engineers crammed in to look. Zukita’s fingers flickered commands across the screen, and data began to accumulate.

“I’ve been working with the needs of the Lisbon Outreach Center this morning, because K’Chima is sick,” the man said, “and while I was waiting for the Center’s latest update needs, I decided to poke around with the Center’s resources. It measures the energy usage and efficiency of the city,” he added, presumably for Spider-Man’s benefit.

Shuri nodded, her eyes racing over the numbers on the screen.

“So,” Zukita continued, his fingers moving like lighting across the keys, “I changed the scanning frequency for the wavelength signature we traced from the security footage of Stark’s abduction, and
had the Center scan for it. Guess what I found?”

“A match!” Shuri exclaimed, shoving forward so she could see the screen. “How long ago?”

“Just now.”

“Fantastic! Keep it running,” Peter ordered, information clicking in his mind and subsequently throwing Spider-Man from it. “As long as you’re picking up that signature, the sorcerer’s still there. When the residue starts to fade, she’s gone; the portal has closed and taken her magic with it.”

“What he said,” Shuri added with a grin, and punched Zukita lightly on the shoulder. “Awesome work.”

The man nodded, dawning a pleased smile, and moved away towards a different monitor to presumably continue the calculations.

Peter darted up next to Shuri. “So he’s in Lisbon?” he said, hope stirring in his chest.

“Maybe,” Shuri answered. “At least his captors are at this moment. And either way, Spinner, we’ve got a new clue.”

She looked at him and grinned. Peter returned it, and their hands went for the keyboard as one.

Peter found himself with an array of commands, seemingly all correlated to the Lisbon Outreach Center’s ability to scan for energy. Shuri pressed a quick key, and a box of flickering numbers appeared on Peter’s screen instantly. Peering at it, he recognized it as the energy signature that had them all so excited. He wondered if they could draw the source of the magical power from the signature, but now was not the time to experiment.

“You can trace locations in the city where this is coming from, right?” he asked.

“Already on it,” Shuri replied, flicking her fingers to extend their screens so they joined at one edge. She dragged a window into the corner of Peter’s screen, and it expanded to fill both of them. The road map of the city flickered with data; carbon emissions, radio waves, even traffic was mapped in different colors and symbols, specified elegantly in the legend in the map’s corner. Peter copied the magic’s signature into the small specifics bar near the bottom, and the map faded out of existence to be replaced by a different one in moments.

“Huh,” he said, leaning forward. The energy gathered in specific pockets, scattered about the city with no discernible pattern, making no distinction between roads and pipes and trains and roofs. “Are we dealing with more than one sorcerer?”

“Maybe,” Shuri said, frowning. She zoomed in on one of the spots of color, her nose crinkling.

Peter pulled the map away from one side of his screen for a moment, pulling up Google. He doubted he was utilizing this amazing software to its full ability and probably missing a lot of information he could glean by figuring out how to use it, but Google was what he knew, right now, and could perform what he needed. Shuri raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment, as Peter quickly searched the address of the area Shuri had selected.

“It’s a warehouse,” he said, surprised, and moved to another place of concentrated energy. Google told him a house for rent.

“Oh stop,” Shuri said, closing his google window and swiping against the map. Immediately, further description of each location emerged, and Peter grinned.
“Show-off.”

“Efficiency.”

Peter squinted at the map. The locations didn’t seem to have much correlation at all, not even in the way a daily routine did. Large, empty areas, abandoned buildings, classic places for a sneaking villain all emerged, but Peter didn’t understand why there would be so many. As he and Shuri studied the addresses and locations, more appeared, dotting the city seemingly just as randomly, as others disappeared.

“Oh!” Shuri said, slapping the table with both hands. “It’s just one sorcerer. See? She’s moving about the city, popping between these places and sealing the ones a few jumps behind her.”

Peter peered at it, and realized that, indeed, the areas of high energy appeared and disappeared in the same order. “Why would she leave them open at all?” Peter wondered, tapping on the most recent signature. Another warehouse.

“Not sure.”

“And why all these places? And moving so quickly?” Peter’s hope began to deflate. “I don’t think this is where they’re keeping Mr. Stark.” What do they want, what does she want, what’s going on, why, what, where--

“I agree,” Shuri said, “but don’t give up yet.”

Peter shook himself. “Of course not. We’ve got this.”

“Damn right we do. Alright, so abandoned buildings and subway tracks and parks: open spaces without many people. Is she looking for a place to relocate? Why Lisbon? Seems far too convenient that she’d decide to move to one of the only places in the entire world we could read her energy signature…”

Convenient…

Peter peered at the screen again, noting the increasing rate of appearing signatures, phrases of the deductions of last night flickering through his mind.

“Oh.”

Peter exhaled in a slow pant, his hand coming up to massage at where his heart was throbbing with unknown emotion.

“What?” Shuri demanded.

“They’re looking for the Captain,” Peter explained, a fond smile beginning to creep across his face. “Places where he and the Rogue Avengers could be camping. Why do you think they’re looking in Lisbon? The one place we can track them?”

“Why?”

Peter’s grin broke forth full force.

“Because Tony Stark is awake and alive, and he’s not about to sit and wait for us.”
Leaving Tony Stark to his own devices was not the smartest of ideas when one was his captor.

As Tony wandered the house, he decided maybe he should write a book. Or a pamphlet. Something that started with ‘even if you are a super badass wizard who can charm your house so he cannot leave, NEVER leave Tony Stark unsupervised.’

He supposed more than kidnappers could read it.

Leaning carefully on his good leg, Tony poked around at the lock of the windowless, but comfortable, bedroom he’d been halfheartedly confined to. He wasn’t particularly good at this sort of thing, but he was nothing if not tenacious, and the lock soon relinquished control.

Moment of truth…

But no one jumped him as he opened the door. He could hear movement from other parts of the house, but nothing changed upon his exit. No surveillance, no guards. Tony wondered if he should be insulted. These people were very, very confident; either Tony was grossly underestimating them, or they were just stupid.

As quietly as he could, Tony began to limp down the hallway, trying to get his bearings. He figured from the way the sound was echoing about the walls, he was on the bottom of three floors, underground. That meant no windows, and he’d have to ascend stairs to gain any semblance of his wider location. It was the first intelligent decision Aedoilagen had made so far.

Tony moved a few more steps, then chose the next door he came to at random. Unlocked, it swung open easily, and he peered inside. He was greeted with what looked like an old, empty wine cellar, containing three different beds, each made with a dash of personality. A home for some of the cavalry, perhaps? Scanning it again, Tony saw nothing of use to him, and continued in his slow inch through the basement.

Another door, and Tony was grinning. Under the door, he could see the lazy glow of a monitor on screensaver.

He pushed into the room, then found himself leaning hard against the wall. His breath released in a short gasp, and he closed his eyes. He could hear Pepper’s scolding-- what the hell are you doing standing after a gun wound?-- and his mouth quirked into a smile despite the aching in his hip.

Escaping, Pep. I’ll rest as soon as I’m home.

Tony shoved himself over to the glow, which turned out to be an abandoned smartphone. It lit up with a whirl like a chorus of angels when his fingers played across the home button. “Hey, beautiful,” he said, sliding into the hard wooden chair in front of the desk. His fingers began their manipulation of the device practiced ease.

The confidence of his captors was definitely stupidity. Tony Stark had internet access.

Apparently, the idea that he would come in contact with a phone or computer had fleetingly passed through Aedoilagen’s mind, and the WiFi was locked down quite completely. That idea, however, seemed not to have been as prevalent as the one that had the house keeping him from looking out or climbing through windows, and Tony scoffed.

“I am insulted,” he said to the monitor, and went to work.
It took exactly fifty-five seconds for Tony to hack into what he presumed was Aedoilagen’s account. But as soon as he moved to open a browser, the screen flashed up with a warning:

*Virus detected. Alerting similar devices; restarting in one minute.*

Shit. He’d triggered something likely implanted by Aedoilagen’s magic or even from the fact that’d he’d been coding in a language alternate to the phone’s natural blueprint. If he could just *figure out* where the *f*uck he was--

*Focus, Tony. Limited time.* There was time to curse himself for blowing his advantage later.

The first thing he did was calculate his timezone, based of the calendar, time, and weather feature he had access to. He figured he was in the Eastern European daylight savings time, due to the date and the difference between his own watch and that of the phone. Good. He knew his latitude, at least.

Tony’s hands flew across the tiny keyboard. He didn’t have time to get through Chrome’s firewalls, but there was another widely-used program on the homescreen; apparently, Aedoilagen liked her music.

Spotify wasn’t often hacker’s go-to program, Tony figured as he burrowed his way into the code. His countdown ticked in his mind, reminding him that someone upstairs was about to be alerted to his shenanigans, but Tony was in his element, now.

Pepper was a die-hard ITunes user, and Tony figured Happy would not be the one to pick up on what he was doing. So Peter it was.

Screwing with the boy’s Hamilton album would be the most noticeable, Tony figured, but set his inserted chunk of code to add the desired songs to every one of Peter’s playlists. The message wasn’t extraordinarily subtle, but he wasn’t trying to be subtle; just trying to do what he could with limited resources of a magic-tampered phone.

*Hello* - Adele

*Kid* - The Pretenders

*Don’t Worry* - Ace Wilder

*I’m OK* - Christina Aguilera

*I Might* - Tom Grennan

*N*eed *Y*ou *N*ow - Lady Antebellum

*Look* - GOT7

*Timezone* - Shadowboxers

*Eastside* - Halsey, Khalid

*Europe* - The Final Countdown

And then, after a moment of hesitation:

*I Love You* - Celine Dion

With that, the phone shut down in his hands, and the thump of feet on stairs echoed down towards
him. Tony let out a quiet curse and chucked the phone onto the desk, then hauled ass from the room. In his hurry, he felt the scab on his wound crack once again, warmth spreading across the fabric bandage. He let out a hiss, but kept moving, closing the door behind him and hobbling off down the hall, his hand on the wall to support him.

Someone came around the corner exactly when he’d calculated, finding him moving towards them.

“Why am I not surprised,” said the man Tony recognized as Atticus.

“Dunno! You definitely shouldn’t have left me here unsupervised,” Tony said with a grin, only the faintest trace of pain in his voice.

“If Maura happened to care as to your location within this basement, do you truly think she wouldn’t have taken more care with her charms?”

Tony shrugged. “Well, I don’t tend to analyze the psychological probabilities of people who kidnap me, so you can’t really blame me.”

“And Maura can’t blame me for you finding an item of technology if my orders were to watch the entirety of the house,” Atticus said, then shoved him backward.

Tony bit back a gasp as his hip and shoulder wrenched, sending a stab of throbbing pain through his form. The coppery taste of blood trickled down his throat; he’d bitten his tongue. None of it showed on his face, however, as he regained his balance and put his hands up. “Alright, alright, I’m going,” he said, turning to begin limping (which he couldn’t hide) back towards his original room.

Atticus entered the room Tony had just vacated, grumbling and stomping around until, presumably, he found the phone. The man spared one more glance at Tony before turning back around the corner and ascending the stairs.

Only when he’d disappeared completely did Tony fall onto his hands and choke up anxiety-induced bile.

Chapter End Notes

What is it with Tony and codes? Well, obscure messages at least. First Star Wars, now this... mwehehe. I have more planned. ANYWAY!

Thanks for reading! The chapter you're all waiting for is the one after next. You might not know you're waiting for it, but you are. :P Lol all the good ones are coming up! :))) Okay anyway, kudos, comments, y'all know the drill, thank you so much, byyyyyeeeee!!!
In Which Progress Goes Haywire

In the brief fifteen minutes he was eating lunch, it happened.

Shuri came barreling into his small room, a screen bobbing in her hand, and Spider-Man was on his feet in an instant, his wrist outstretched. It lowered after a moment, his reflex shifting to a sprint towards her.

“What is it?” he demanded, pivoting to stand behind her.

“We’ve got her.” The triumph in Shuri’s voice had hope rocketing through his chest, uncoiling the Knot and letting him breath, just slightly.


“Maura Aedoilagen,” Shuri said, and spun the screen to face him. A woman, her hair the color of rust and her fingers alight with magic, was frozen in photo, disappearing into an alley.

“How?”

“We contacted the Lisbon Center and had operatives sent out,” Shuri explained. “Not warriors, but they knew the importance of this, and one managed to locate the woman, if only for an instant. And it took me a while, but I eventually found her based off her face. She’s originally from London.”

“Do you think she’s still there?” Peter asked, trying to shove all the rest of his food into his mouth at the same time.

“Don’t choke,” Shuri advised.

“S’ry,” he slurred, chewing as fast as he could. By the time he’d finished, his jaw was sore, and Shuri was laughing silently. “That didn’t go as well as I’d hoped.”

“No really?”

Peter grinned and poked at her portable screen again. “Keep talking.”

Shuri plopped herself down on his bed, tapping on the holographic screen. It increased in size, and Peter slid down next to her to get a better view.

“That’s mostly it. Maura Aedoilagen, thirty-seven, lived in London before seemingly disappearing from the face of the Earth. And now, she’s popped up again wielding dimensional energy and kidnapping superheros.”

“Yeah…” Peter let his chin slump into his hand, his other rubbing against his chest, where the Knot was beginning to re-form.

“Hey, don’t be dreary,” Shuri said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We’re getting closer. We’ll find him.”

Peter swallowed, and dropped his hand so he could nod. “Who am I to argue with the princess of Wakanda?” he joked.
If Shuri noticed how forced his words were, she didn’t react. “That’s right, nobody. So finish your lunch and get--”

Peter stopped listening for a moment, his thoughts prickling.

“Spinner?”

“Huh?”

“Anyone in there?”

Peter shook himself. “Sorry. But… did this woman have a family, when she lived in London? Now that we have a name, we can try to figure out motive.”

Shuri leapt to her feet, grabbing Peter by the wrist and hauling him up as well. Spider-Man yelped, his hands flashing out to grab his bowl of fonio porridge before it spilled across the bed. He almost couldn’t shove his phone and Spider-Man’s mask into his pocket before he was yanked from the room, feet stumbling to find a rhythm, laughter bubbling in his chest. “Wait up, Shuri! I can walk, y’know!”

“Motive motive motive,” Shuri muttered, hauling them past the common room where only one of the Rogue Avengers was currently situated, sharpening a vast array of weapons.

“What’s going on?” Natasha Romanoff demanded, slipping off the sofa like a shadow incarnate and following them from the room.

“Research!” Shuri called behind her.

“Motive!” was Peter’s attempt to clarify. Romanoff sprinted to catch up with them, her hand fastening precisely around a spot in Shuri’s shoulder, and her hand unclenched from Peter’s wrist immediately.

“Hey!” Shuri protested, not breaking stride.

“The Spider-Boy can run by himself, probably faster than both of us,” Romanoff said, the ghost of smile dancing across her sharp face.

The idea of getting into another conversation like that of this morning was less than appealing, and Peter decided the best course of action was simply not to answer. Romanoff was eyeing him as they ran, her gaze calculating, appraising, studious, and Spider-Man bristled.

They burst into the lab, and, after pausing a moment for breath, began their decent. Romanoff looked towards the screen in Shuri’s hand. “Found something?”

“Not since ten minutes ago,” Shuri said. “But the Spinner here says we should focus less on where and more on who, at the moment.”

“Makes sense,” Romanoff grunted, jerking her chin at Peter in acknowledgement. He looked away before a tingle of pride could erupt in his gut.

“What were you doing in the front room?” asked Shuri. “I thought you guys were having a meeting or whatever. Trying to make what you could out of Maura, strategy, shit like that.”

“We were. And then I decided I could not contribute anything to the idiocy and the scent of testosterone, so I vacated the premises,” Romanoff said flatly, tucking her hands into the pockets of
Black Widow is wearing jeans.

I’m Spider-Man, and I wear jeans…

You don’t count.

Hey!

Peter grinned a bit to himself, then, realizing it would probably be misinterpreted, schooled his face back to neutrality. Shuri lead them with pattering steps to an open monitor, a different one then they’d been using previously, which was still open to the flickering map of energy signatures in Lisbon. Looking around, Peter saw the engineers seeming to shift and flow like the cytoplasm of a plant cell, dodging and picking up ideas from other areas and resources. He could almost see innovation in the air.

This place is amazing.

And Tony would love it.

“Maura Aedoilagen,” Peter murmured, mulling the name over in his mind, mulling the hatred over. What did she want? Why the Rogues? And why Tony, why did this happen, why--

The automated sound of keys flicked through the air, and Peter turned his head to watch Shuri typing on the holographic screen at the speed of light. She must like the satisfaction of the noise, as it was unnecessary on keys made of light, and he agreed. “From the London records, before she went off-grid… she did have a family.” Shuri sounded surprised.

Peter and Romanoff teleported behind her, each leaning over one of the girl’s shoulders.

Shuri gave them the side-eye, then continued. “A husband, for at least fifteen years. And a daughter, sixteen. Calvin and Mercury, respectively.”

“Any sign of them now?” Romanoff asked, reaching over Shuri to swipe at the screen.

Pulling it sharply out of the assassin’s reach with a dramatic frown, Shuri resumed her tapping. “Um… no,” she said after a moment. “There’s no one that resembles them in the footage, but that doesn’t necessarily mean… it makes sense not to take your family on a mission. Just a general rule.”

Peter fidgeted.

Spider-Man crossed his arms. I don’t like that rule.

“Or they could be dead,” Romanoff said, “which would make this a revenge plot. God, I’m over those.”

“We need to know where the family is,” Peter said, fingers coming up to rub his temples. So many possibilities… “We need to know where they all are!”

“We’ll find them.”

You keep saying that.

Peter tightened his fist. And it won’t be true, if we don’t believe it.
“Alright, I don’t think we’re getting anywhere with the family right now,” Shuri said, her hands ghosting along the hologram again. “There just isn’t enough data. No where to look, besides the footage and the energy signatures from Lisbon—” she gestured to the map, still changing as Maura continued her search—”and neither of those are telling us much.”

“What about the group?” Peter said. “There were a number of people in that footage. And there—” Peter bounded toward the data-covered screen, his hands tracing the ever-changing spots of color—“she’s just bouncing around, never staying in one location for long. That doesn’t make sense if it’s just her searching, but if she’s got a group with her, she’s dropping them off in promising areas.”

“Which means—”

“They’re still there,” Romanoff barked. “And our time window is closing; it’s been hours, and Aedoilagen will be returning for her team presently.”

Shuri vaulted across the desk, her hands tapping frantically at another hologram, and in milliseconds, she was connected to the Lisbon Center. Peter tried not to scream his impatience as Shuri conveyed their theory precisely, her words clipped. It took mere minutes, seconds, but it was too long.

When the girl sat back and the line disconnected, Peter let out a breath. But it wasn’t of relief, it was of confusion, for Spider-Man’s spider-sense was growling warningly low in his gut.

*What’s going on?*

*I don’t know; it’s not like my stomach talks to me.*

*Fine, fine. Fight? We should be ready for one.*

“There’s nothing we can do until Lisbon finds someone,” Shuri said. “So Spinner, you should finish your food and try not to spontaneously combust.”

It wasn’t a bad point; he was vibrating, his hands ratcheting up and down the outside of his thighs. Spider-Man took a breath and forced them to calm, but resorted to pacing instead, as stillness was out of the question. “I want to do something,” he breathed.

Shuri shrugged. “Eat. There’s nothing of use for any of us right now, and especially if we’re all malnourished.”

“I’m not—”

“You haven’t eaten in more than twenty-four hours,” Shuri said, and she sounded so much like Aunt May the Knot grew ten times heavier, pulling at his chest, thumping against his heart. Spider-Man ducked his head. “You’re no good to Stark if you destroy yourself.”

She was right, and he hated it. He hated that he needed to rest, needed to eat, needed to text his family. He hated that he needed to tell Karen what had happened, and Karen needed to tell FRIDAY, while Tony was still in unknown danger. And he hated that Romanoff was looking at him with understanding and sympathy.

Spider-Man tried not to snarl as he nodded.

Shuri’s eyes softened. “I’m hungry too; I’ll get you royalty benefits in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.”
“Hm. Let’s go.” The girl gestured unreadably at Romanoff. “You coming?”

The woman shook her head, the spark of mischief in her lethal eyes gleaming. “I think I’ll bully someone into sparring me. After all, my knives are in prime shape.”

Shuri grinned, and held up her hand. Even the sound of their high-five was intimidating, echoing about the lab like a thunderclap. Spider-Man smiled.

They parted ways, and Spider-Man found that he was disappointed to see the woman go. He ignored that feeling with as much definiteness as he could, and trotted off after Shuri through the shimmering halls of the palace. Wondering, vaguely, where Grease was, he fingered the mask and the phone in his pocket and forgot to memorize the path they were taking.

Shuri (probably leading him around in circles anyway) eventually slipped through a small door, which drifted softly against the hand he held out to keep it from slamming on him, like it had sensed him. The umami scent drifted against Spider-Man’s taste buds, enticing saliva from beneath his tongue, and his stomach churned in pleasant anticipation. The area was small, contrasting to his expectations of a palace kitchen, and mostly empty.

Shuri moved through the steaming room to the far end, where a grill was smoldering beneath the skillful hands of a man Spider-Man recognized as the engineer from earlier: Zukita. Remembering again what was happening as he lingered in this inviting room, Spider-Man began to fidget once more.

Somewhere in Portugal, operatives were getting close to a breakthrough to finding Tony. And he wasn’t one of them. He had to wait.

“Got anything extra for our resident Spinner?” Shuri said, glancing at him with a frown, though she spoke chipperly to Zukita.

“Sure.” The man flipped a fizzing slab of meat onto his strange tool, which resembled a pair of tongs made of spatulas, and held out a hand. Spider-Man cocked his head in confusion, but Shuri bounded over to one of the various cabinets, pulling out two small jars of grainy liquid. She handed them to Zukita, who decorated a plate with trails of the jelly contained within them, then tossed the meat atop it. With a final flourish and exaggerated bow, Spider-Man was handed the food and the smell of garlic and ginger that accompanied it.

“Thank you,” he breathed through the wetness of his mouth. Shuri laughed.

“Sit down, get comfy. We’ve got time.”

“I wish we didn’t.”

“Me too,” Shuri said, her voice sobering.

Peter did as he was bid anyway, slipping over to a stool at the counter breathe the jar-containing cabinets. He then proceeded to decimate his meal, pausing only to breath when he absolutely could not keep from fainting a moment longer. Shuri watched him with a combination of holy-shit and I-told-you-so dancing across her face, and Peter waved a hand in what could have been a vulgar gesture if he’d been concentrating harder.

“So,” Shuri said after a while. “What do you do with your life?”

“Mm?” Peter questioned, looking up from a mouthful of meat.
“Back in New York. What does normal look like?”

Peter swallowed, then shrugged. “Well, I wake up, I go to school, I make web-fluid in the bottom drawer of my desk on lab days, I talk with Ned and MJ, I get out of school, then comes Spider-Man’s time to shine. He’s not allowed out on Wednesdays, so that’s when I often visit Mr. Stark, though that’s becoming more common. Or—” he faltered—“at least it had been.”

“Right; stop with the dreary.” Shuri poked him. “That was very vague. I need more information.”

Peter shrugged. “There’s not much else to say! You must think New York is so boring compared to this place.”

“Are you kidding?” Shuri exclaimed, disbelief oozing across the table. “I’ve dreamed of New York-like holy shit—all that art and people and history, all in one place, all that I’ve never seen before? Sign me up!” She punched the air enthusiastically. “I’m going to get there someday, and I’m going to have New York pizza and go to MOMA and use nanotech bribery to get impossible tickets to Hamilton.”

“You like Hamilton?” Peter demanded, his fanboy emerging.

“Uh, yeah I do!”

He was almost falling off his chair fumbling for his phone, lyrics flying through his head at unreal speeds. “Favorite song?”

“Oh, don’t make me choooose…” Shuri whined as she shot out a hand to stabilize him. He slapped his phone on the table triumphantly to make up for the humiliation he’d just brought upon himself.

“Well, top three then.” Peter said, unlocking his phone with a grin.

“‘Non-Stop’, ‘My Shot’…” Shuri tapped her chin. “‘The Room Where it Happens’.”

“Good choices.” Peter nodded. Not wanting to forget to consider any of his favorites as he scrolled through his far-too-cluttered screens of apps, Peter found Spotify and then his Hamilton playlist. “I like ‘Non-Stop’ too (who doesn’t) and ‘Wait for It’ and—”

He broke off, eyes racing down the screen.

“Spinner?”

Peter’s hand went to his mouth of its own accord.

_Hello_

_Kid_

_Don’t Worry_

_I’m OK_

_I Might_

_Need You Now_

_Look_
Timezone

Eastside

Europe

I Love You

Peter knocked his chair over standing.

Tony.

Tony was alive. Tony was okay. Little late not to worry.

(He’s in Eastern Europe time. Why so vague? Is that all he knows? And why hack into Spotify, if you could hack into things?)

Alive.

(Why? What did this mean?)

He’d heard from him, for the first time in more than a week, a week that felt like eternity. He could hear his mentor’s voice reading kid, reading I’m OK. Reading I Love You. Peter’s phone clattered to the table, song titles lighting up the air before him. I Love You.

(He sent a message. He sent two messages, giving us all the information he can give us. Lisbon. The Rogues. Now this; his timezone.)

Wait.

(Wait.)

Peter snapped back to this world as the signs flipped into his understanding. And he realized they, here at Wakanda, had just made the worst mistake they could have made.

“We have to stop them,” Peter breathed. But he wasn’t talking about Aedoilagen, anymore.

Chapter End Notes

CLIIIIFFF HANGER, HANGING FROM A CLIIIIIIIIFFFF.... AND THAT’S WHY HE’S CALLED CLIFF HANGER!

Hello all! I hope you had a fantastic Thanksgiving, break, or week, depending on your own timezone. :) I certainly did--the leftover turkey makes the best sandwiches, too! Thanks for reading, and I'll see you soon. For the best chapter. Yessssssssssssssssssss. Anyway you know how I love feedback, and have a great rest of your break/week!
“Call Lisbon! CALL THEM NOW!” Spider-Man roared, his enhanced speed sending him skidding into the center of the lab. It had grown crowded, in the time he and Shuri had been gone, now full of five Rogue Avengers and a king.

“Spinner!” T’Challa said. “I was informed of contact with Lisbon, what is going on--”

“We have to stop them,” Spider-Man panted, beelining for the nearest screen.

Shuri burst into the room behind him, stopping against the door to catch her breath as she choked out, “what the hell--Spinner! What happened?”

Stop them stop them stop them--

It might already be too late.

“We have to call Lisbon, call off the agents,” he hastily explained, hands racing across the keyboard before him. He didn’t know how, but he had to try--

“What do you mean?” Rogers asked, stepping forward toward him. They all stepped toward him.

“They’re our best chance--”

“They may be, but they’re too much of a risk--if Aedoilagen or her minions find them--if they realize--”

“So what? The Lisbon Center has operatives out often,” Shuri said.

Peter tried not to snarl. “Not openly. Not attacking magical kidnappers. Not apprehending people themselves. Even if we do catch a member of Aedoilagen’s little club, we’d still lose.”

“No,” Rogers scoffed, “we’d have our way in, all the information within our grasp--especially with Wanda.”

No time no time no time. Stop them, Peter, stop them!

“And when the sorcerer tracks the action to Wakanda? When she realizes Lisbon was not a random lie on Mr. Stark’s part--” his voice faltered, just slightly-- “but a calculated warning? A warning to us?” He couldn’t look at Rogers, just at the keyboard refusing to do his bidding before him. He should look, he needed to make the man understand. “When they find out, when they notice their being pursued, it’s all over. Mr. Stark’s risk was for nothing; Aedoilagen will know where we are.”

Shuri made toward him, but Rogers held out a hand to block her path. She snarled at him, but he didn’t move, simply saying, “we can take them.”

“And if we can’t?” Peter hissed.

“We could take them,” Rogers insisted. “Use it to lure them out while we go in to take back Stark.”

Peter shook his head, his hands shaking before him in kin. “No. We can’t risk it.”
“Risk what?” The frustration was returning to Roger’s voice.

“Risk failure. Risk Mr. Stark.” Peter wanted to roar it, to scream it, but he spoke evenly.

“The risk he took in warning us—”

“Was just that,” Peter growled. “A warning. He knows what they’re capable of, he specifically didn’t tell them where you actually were—he gave us an edge.”

“Why shouldn’t we use it?”

“And sentence him to an unknown fate?” Peter’s voice had risen.

Someone else tried to speak, but the dueling superheroes drowned them out. Rogers said, “A calculated fate.”

“No. This—” Peter gestured to the room around them—“was his calculation, and the only calculation we should trust. He had every possibility to tell his captors where you actually were. But he didn’t; he sent them somewhere that would tip us off that they were looking for you. Do you know why he might have done that, Captain?” Peter snarled.

“Better than you.”

The retort to his rhetorical question that had been on Peter’s tongue dissolved. And he froze, the entire room going silent. “What did you just say.”

“I think,” Rogers said, advancing (Shuri ducked behind his back to one of the screens), “that it’s time you tell us what, exactly, you’re doing here. Why you’ve decided you know so much about Tony Stark.”

“Steve,” Bucky breathed. “You might want to shut up about now.”

“I want to know,” the Captain said. “Who are you? His last-ditch attempt to form a force against us?” Rogers indicated the team behind him. “A kid in a StarkTech suit who did a little research? Why do you care, little Spider?”

And one second, Peter was hearing the vague impression of those words through the pounding of his pulse, and the next the Captain was stumbling back. A CRACK resounded through the silent room as Peter threw his fist with all of his enhanced strength, pain splintering across his knuckles.

“I’M HIS FUCKING SON,” Peter snarled.

Spider-Man raised his fist once more. “So ask me that question again. Go on, I dare you.”

Silence. Silence from everyone—shocked, stunned silence, and Peter could hear his own breathing like the boom of thunder through the room. Peter met Roger’s eyes and saw the misunderstanding flooding through the man’s expression, but he didn’t give one singular fuck, because he wasn’t sure if there was anything to be misunderstood.

“You’re…” Roger’s breathed, and Peter watched every question flit across his face—how and who and how could we not know and maybe even I’m sorry— but none of them found words.

“Oh my God,” said Romanoff, looking at Shuri, looking at T’Challa.

And Spider-Man decided he liked people knowing his heritage. Because it was his heritage, his heritage of nine months and the biggest changes of his life.
Peter Parker, Peter Stark, rolled his shoulders back, the movement straightening the collar of his jacket. “Call off the operatives. Now,” he said evenly.

When he met Shuri’s eyes, she nodded. And unable to bare the atmosphere a moment longer, Spider-Man spun on his heel and stalked from the room.

As soon as he was out of view, he sunk down against the wall, clutching his phone to his chest.

* * *

Tony had resorted to tying the blanket of his provided bed into a tight, vaguely-rounded shape and throwing it repeatedly against the wall to the tune of “My Shot” by the time Aedoiligen returned.

He heard her descending the stairs, and his eyes flickered shut as the deep breath pulled itself from his chest. Apparently, this was all the peace he’d get. His ruse had run out, and he had very little time left.

Easing himself up against the wall, Tony unwrapped the blanket and spread it across him, hiding the dark patch of blood at his hip that had permeated his suit in the hours of his desperate search for stimulus. It had clotted, by now, but he couldn’t afford to look any weaker than he already did.

He’d been trying to come to terms with the fact it was very likely that as soon as Aedoilagen returned, he would die.

“My Shot” was likely not the best song he could have chosen, he thought off-handedly with the part of his mind that wasn’t hyper-analyzing the approaching footsteps. He really, honestly, didn’t want to die. Usually the thought didn’t bother him; it was often almost reassuring. But not now. Not here, not with so much to do and so much to learn and… well, he wanted to watch his kid grow up.

‘I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory…’

Tony shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, and the footsteps stopped. He saw the parallel slits of darkness cut through the light coming from the crack beneath the door.

‘When’s it gonna get me? In my sleep? Seven feet ahead of me?’

Tony Stark rolled his shoulders back, the movement straightening the collar of his jacket. The wound on his shoulder twinged.

The door swung open, and it failed to creak. Tony was slightly disappointed about that; he couldn’t make any puns about haunted houses without sounding cliche. Well, he would have sounded cliche anyway…

(The puns were not a distraction.)

‘If I see it coming, do I run, or do I let it be?’

Tony looked up, the slightest of smirks touching his lips, and met the furious eyes of Maura Aedoilagen. “How was Lisbon?”

“Largely uninformative,” Aedoilagen replied. “Except—” she knelt before him, bracing the tips of her fingers against the carpet—“for the confirmation that you are an exceptionally fine actor.”

“Thank you,” Tony said, inclining his head.
“They aren’t there, and you are a liar, Mr. Stark.”

Tony shrugged. “How do you know? Maybe you weren’t looking hard enough.”

“I don’t know if I told you about my team, Mr. Stark,” Aedoilagen said, her voice flat. “But Jade Pattern does not miss things.”

“And Natasha Romanoff is not found.”

The smile that crossed the sorcerer’s face was nothing less than terrifying. “You think so little of us. That given a city, we could not find the people we seek.”

“I know you can’t do it in a world,” Tony said.

A flicker of irritation, and Tony’s smirk widened. One point.

“Jade took in the way your hands moved when you were in the mirror dimension and the fingerprints on my phone and deduced you sent a message when we were gone.”

Tony blinked.

The only sign of his mind yawning wide he let show. The only hint of surprise and terror and the realization that he’d miscalculated.

“She would find Rogers. She found nothing.”

Nothing. That was good, Tony reminded himself. It meant they hadn’t clued in that he’d sent them where Wakanda was a powerhouse. Which meant, he supposed, that the country hadn’t noticed, or that they had and (thankfully) not revealed themselves. Pay attention and throw me a bone here.

He had to be careful. He had to be so careful, because there were things, like certain arachnid boys, that couldn’t be known.

“And a message?” Aedoilagen sighed. “Why would you waste your time on that? My phone is untraceable, and my magic wouldn’t let even your hacking skills onto Google. You know nothing.”

Her hands were clenching against her knees, nails ripping at the threads of thin fabric.

“And neither do you. I suppose we’re in the same boat as we before.” Except that my family knows my timezone, Wakanda hopefully knows you’re looking for them, and my hip hurts like all hell.

“If you’d like to think of it as such,” Aedoilagen said, “I will allow you another chance.”

Tony snorted. “I can’t decide if I’m offended you think so little of me.”

“Little?” Aedoilagen said, tension radiating along her body. There was a slight aura of orange around her hands, and Tony forcibly kept himself from watching where its light spread across his knees.

Any hint of sarcasm fell from Tony’s demeanor. “That I would ever, ever, sell out the Captain and his band of criminals to you.”

“They aren’t your friends. Not anymore.”

Tony didn’t flinch. “I will not sentence them to death. I will not allow you, frankly unstable, people to enter my world of protection. It doesn’t matter who the Rogue’s are to me.”

The snarl that crossed Aedoilagen’s face was almost inhuman. “Why. How are they different from
us? What have we done that makes us worse than them, that makes us deserve this?” She lifted her arms to the room around them, illuminating it in orange light.

Tony shook his head. “Nothing worse. I’m sitting here, bleeding, but at least you treated where you shot me.” A mirthless smile quirked one side of his mouth upward. “Which sounds bad. How pathetic is it that I actually count that a point in your favor? I don’t think you deserve this, Maura Aedoilagen. I think you deserve a life where you can help people. I think you deserve a life where your daughter and husband still live. But so does Wanda Maximoff. So does Natasha Romanoff. So does Sam Wilson. So does Steve Rogers and James Buchanan Barnes.” He stared her down. “Once, I tried to give them that. And maybe I can’t anymore, but I sure as hell won’t take it away from them!”

Aedoilagen rocke’d backward, her hands finding support against the floor once more.

“Fine,” she said.

And then her hand shot out, slamming hard against his sternum, and everything turned to light.

*Is it like a beat without a melody?*

Chapter End Notes

Ha!

Okay I hope that’s actually as good as I advertised it to be. I enjoyed writing it, so I hope you enjoyed reading it! :)))

We are two chapters from the end of part... what part even is this? Part four? Yeah, two chapters until part five!

Thanks for reading!
In Which Wanda Maximoff Speaks

Chapter Notes

Alternative Title: In Which Peter Loses his Shit.

The poor guy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Peter’s surprise, it wasn’t Shuri that found him outside, standing on the outer edge of the balcony’s railing. He’d found the highest one in the palace, then climbed over it easily, irritated by the obstruction in his path. Peter didn’t want another obstruction. Not even if it was for safety.

“I don’t think any damage was done,” Wanda Maximoff said from behind him, leaning against aforementioned balcony. “Lisbon reacted pretty quick.”

Peter grunted.

The city shimmered in the mid-afternoon light, one-thousand scales on the back of a sleeping dragon winking at him. Vaguely, he wondered what would happen if the dragon ever woke up. Shuri would probably convince it to heat vibranium for her, honestly.

“You gave everybody a pretty impressive surprise,” Maximoff said, hoisting herself up onto the railing. She swung her legs over and looked at him. He could feel her gaze analyzing the way he leaned out, fingers just brushing to hold him against the edge, just taunting gravity to pull him down to the streets far below.

He grunted again. Maximoff wasn’t necessarily the last person he wanted to talk to at the moment, but she wasn’t very high up on the list.

“Natasha, probably, the most,” she continued. Peter gave her the side eye, and wished she would take a hint. But Maximoff kept talking. “She’s always surprised when she doesn’t know something like that. And, well, we’re all surprised when someone deals blows to Steve that actually affect him.”

_How come you got to punch him and I didn’t?_ Spider-Man whined.

“Well, because he moved first,” Maximoff said with a laugh.

Peter started, almost falling off the wall.

What?

What?

“Shit, that was the other guy, wasn’t it,” Maximoff muttered. “This is why it was a good idea _not_ to talk to you.”

Peter grabbed the railing with his other hand, turning so he was facing the woman. He stared at her,
trying to read what the *hell* had just happened.

“You can hear him?” asked Peter.

*You can hear me?* wondered Spider-Man, simultaneously.

“I can. I think it has something to do with, well, this.” Maximoff lifted her hand, a flicker of red flame winding around her fingers. “Who is he? What happened to you?”

*I’m Spider-Man, said Spider-Man. What do you mean ‘what happened’ to me?*

“The last time I heard two voices from one body,” Maximoff murmured, “it was the scream of James Barnes from beneath the roar of the Winter Soldier.”

The two boys fell silent.

*Oh.*

“That doesn't just happen,” Maximoff said, smiling, a little sadly, at him. “What happened?”

Peter thought about that for a moment, and found he had no answer. He shrugged. “I… don’t know. He just isn’t me.”

*Of course I’m not. I’m* me, Spider-Man said.

Maximoff looked at him, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Hmm.”

Peter rubbed his eyes, swinging back out over the balcony. “What does that mean,” he sighed, suddenly exhausted once again.

“Nothing.”

He didn’t believe her, but shied away from prying. He knew something was strange about Spider-Man, knew… *something*, but wouldn’t think about it. He couldn’t. And neither did Spider-Man.

So he didn’t say anything, instead letting go of the balcony with his other hand.

Maximoff cried out, suddenly, and Peter whirled, still sideways against the pull of gravity. Spider-Man raised his wrists, already alert for the threat. “What, what is it?”

But she was looking at him, hand outstretched as if to grab his shoulder. Her mouth had fallen open.

“What?”

“You’re… sideways.”

He looked down at where his feet stuck to the edge of the balcony. “Um…”

“I thought you were going to fall,” Maximoff explained. “Sorry.”

“Oh. It’s fine.” Peter shrugged. “It’s not that normal of a thing to do, I suppose.” He was still standing horizontally.

“How do you do it?”

Disarmed by the question, Peter looked at her. “Why?”
Maximoff shrugged. “We’re working together. I’m simply curious.”

Peter sunk down, hugging his knees to his chest. His hair flopped down over his eyes, pulled by his strange position in relation to gravity. “I want to argue with you, about that. Working together. Argue with you all. Be angry. Hate you.”

Maximoff said nothing.

“But I don’t.” Peter pushed his head further into his knees, feeling the denim of his jeans pressing against his forehead. “I don’t like being angry. I don’t like wanting to hurt you all, and forcing myself not to. I don’t like hating you.”

Rhodey’s limp and Tony’s nightmares and blood on the shield.

“But I have too. Do you… understand?”

“I do.”

Peter huffed. “Really?”

“I was turned into a monster because of it.”

That had him looking up, looking toward her. She met his eyes.

“For a very long time, I hated Sta—your father, I suppose.”

Your father. A small smile flicked across Peter’s face.

“I hated him because of the weapons he created. Weapons that killed my family because of his dismissal, his ignorance. And I let that control me, define me. I lived for it. I lived for that hate.”

Maximoff shook her head. “And the things I did, the things I let others do to me…” The red magic danced around her again, creeping into the metal railing she sat upon. “I can never change them. And now, I’m not sure who I am anymore. Because… that hate is gone. It was gone a long time ago.

“Stark changed. He learned. He grew. And then he helped me, tried to help us all. He made mistakes. He fixed them. Maybe not good enough, but it was better than some.”

Maximoff sighed, dropping her chin into her hand. “Better than me. I just hitched a ride on the ‘good’ side and did my best to ignore what I did before.

“Then, I met Bucky. And I understood him, and how not to blame him, because I understood Stark. The weapons that killed my family? They weren’t your father. He made the knife—Bucky was the knife. Neither of them held it. Neither of them struck the killing blow.”

Maximoff looked at him, and Peter was struck paralyzed by the genuine tears in her eyes. “We’ve all fucked up. Bad. I want forgiveness, but I know I don’t deserve it. None of us do. And neither do you.”

Peter found himself nodding.

“But… do we deserve hate? For doing what we thought was right, for letting it control us, blind us to reason?”

“I wish…” Peter whispered, “I wish you hadn’t done it. Any of it. I wish we could forget this.”

“Me too. But we can’t.”
“I wish I didn’t hate you,” Peter almost moaned.

“And I wish the world didn’t look at me like a villain. I wish I wasn’t imprisoned by my freedom. I hate that I am.” Wanda looked toward the horizon, her eyes guarded. “But… maybe I won’t let that hate drive me, this time.” She glanced down at him. “And take it from me, if not as a friend than as someone who knows, don’t let hate define you.”

For a long moment, Peter was silent. Spider-Man let the words whir within his brain, trying so hard to understand them.

“I’m not here to hate you.” Peter breathed, her words clicking into place. “I’m here to love. I’m here for Mr. Stark. And you are just obstacles, trials, on my way there.”

Wanda smiled. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so flattered by someone calling me an obstacle before.”

“I hate you,” Peter snorted.

“Yeah, I know, you’ve said.”

Brokenly, Spider-Man laughed. “And I hate Steve Rogers, and I want to punch him, because it totally isn’t fair that Peter got to punch him and now he’s whining about how he enjoyed it.”

“I am not—”

“‘I don’t like wanting to hurt you’?” Spider-Man scoffed. “Whining. Although, I concede and agree.”

“Thank you.”

“And you!” Spider-Man whirled, still stuck by the bottoms of his feet to the wall, and pointed at Wanda. “You are a disloyal, ungrateful, blind, childish fucker, and I sort of want to punch you, too!”

The side of her mouth flickered into a grin.

“But! I must also thank you, for if you and the Captain and all the rest of you fuckers hadn’t fucked the fuck up, I never would have met Tony Stark.”

“Well, I suppose—wait.” Wanda stared at him. “He’s… your father.”

“That he is!” Peter grinned hysterically. “But he wasn’t. Until a few weeks ago when we finally figured out that the blood of the covenant is thicker than the blood of the womb! And other such fuckery!”

“I think I broke him,” Wanda said.

“Oh, you broke both of us,” replied Spider-Man.

“Mr. Stark isn’t my biological father. And that matters exactly none.”

“Oh.” Wanda nodded. “Well, that clears up a few things…”

Peter pointed at her again. “Do not tell Rogers. Or Romanoff. Or I will give in to the urge to punch you, and I will not feel bad about it. Those two secret-keeping, hypocritical fuckers can be the ones shocked by the hiding of an event for once. They can feel betrayed and confused and ignorant! They fucking deserve it.”
“Alright, alright,” Wanda held up her hands in surrender.

And with an almost audible crack, he really did break.

“I’M WASTING GODDAMN TIME!” Peter screamed. “I’M FIGURING OUT THESE STUPID EMOTIONAL TWISTS WHILE TONY COULD BE DYING AND I’M WASTING TIME I DON’T EVEN HAVE!”

He was choking on the wind that was blowing the wrong way and the hair that was still falling into his mouth. He was choking on the memories. Choking, choking on the Knot, choking on everything.

“Because you know what?” he coughed out to the open air, to the sky of Wakanda. “He lied to his captors. He lied, and now they know he lied, and who knows what’s being done to him right now!”

Spider-Man gripped his hair. “While I stand here. Talking to you--” once again, he gestured to Wanda-- “when you don’t even deserve to be looking for him! BUT I NEED YOU! I NEED ALL OF YOU FUCKERS BECAUSE I’M USELESS ON MY OWN!”

Chest heaving, Peter and Spider-Man stood frozen for a moment. And then they turned and threw their fists against the metal railings, over and over and over, not caring if Wanda yelped and gripped it hard to keep from falling off.

“I—” punch-- “miss--” smack-- “my—” strike-- “DAD!”

I miss you I miss you I miss you.

They collapsed back down to their knees, snarling at everything and nothing. Snarling as their anger turned to humiliation. Snarled as they acted like a child before Wanda, snarled at their hypocrisy, snarled at this entire gorgeous, crazy, impossible city. Snarled at the fact that they liked it here. Snarled as they understood Maximoff, understood Barnes, because it was a betrayal in itself. To their own views, to their own motivations, to everything.

Spider-Man was failing. Failing Tony, failing justice, failing failing failing.

‘Hello’ ‘Kid’, ‘Don’t Worry’, ‘I’m OK.’

Peter’d left May and Pepper and Rhodes, he’d left Ned and MJ, he’d left all of them. He was hurting them. He was failing them all.

‘I Might’ ‘Need you Now.’

Now. Now, they were supposed to be home with him. Supposed to be seeing the stars with him. Supposed to be hugging him, to be calling him dad, because they’d been too scared to before.

Now. Now he was standing sideways on a balcony in Wakanda, losing his shit in front of someone he somehow hated and understood at the same time. Now he had run, because he was a coward, from the room where the others were making a difference.

Now, when he needed to be strong, he was weak.

Now, when he needed trust, he’d isolated himself.

Now he was only fifteen when he was supposed to be old and knowledgeable and able to do something.

“Fuck you,” he choked out, to Wanda, to the world. “Fuck you, fuck you.”
‘I Love You.’

I love you too, Tony, Dad. I want to tell you. Please, please come back, please don’t be dead, please.

I need you.

No.

No, Tony needed him.

And he’d wasted enough time.

Peter looked up.

Then he swallowed, and the Knot in his chest grew to press against his heart. He’d get used to that. He’d get used to it all. Peter Parker, Peter Stark, had a job to do.

He looked at Wanda, at her concerned face, and ignored the fact that he hated it. Ignored her.

Save him.

Spider-Man launched himself over the edge of the railing and onto the balcony, gravity flipping right-side-up as he landed deftly upon his toes. He turned to Wanda. “I don’t know if I should thank you. And because we’re being weirdly honest all of a sudden, and because I am just really fucking exhausted, I’ll say I’m not sure if I want to.”

And with those words as his parting farewell, he strode back into the palace.

Chapter End Notes

:)  

I had faaaaaaaaaaar too much fun with this chapter. Way too much of it. Enough that it was gonna be in combination with another chapter but the scene was long enough on its own. Anyway! I hope you enjoyed the angst, and look forward to a new character perspective next chapter. Thank you all!
There was a ghoul in Stephen Vincent Strange’s library.

Well, it wasn’t really a ghoul. Wong called the creatures malphancorpi, but who the hell knew where that came from? It was a monster, it fed off of carrion, it tended to rob tombs in search of magical energy, it was ugly, it dribbled drool and venom all over the Sanctum’s clean floors (courtesy of the Cloak of Levitation); what other criteria were there for ‘ghoul’ not to apply?

Besides, calling it such annoyed Wong. Which was something Stephen leapt at the chance to do, whenever possible.

He’d slept rather well that night, from about midnight to five in the morning, and closed his eyes as he moved through the dark, empty building toward the Library. The quantum energies drifted against his perception, weaving about him, and Stephen smiled. He reached out to feel the dimensions duck and dance with the ripples of reality. They were silent, as always, but he could sense the movement, the texture of the unique fabrics of each universe, and sometimes even their color. That morning, energy danced like hummingbirds through the adjacent dimensions, and Stephen had half a mind to chase it.

He would have, had not the idiotic ghoul been tearing through the sacred tomes of the Sanctum Library.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Stephen demanded, crossing his arms before his wrinkled tunic.

The ghoul looked up at him and dribbled more, the glob of steaming liquid landing upon and beginning to corrode a nameless book.

“Out, out, out,” Stephen said, gripping the Cloak’s boom with his unsteady hands and waving it towards the hulking monster. “No pests in the Library. Get.”

The ghoul beheld the Sorcerer Supreme and his deadly broomhandle, and threw the book to the side, roaring. Stephen grimaced, squinting as saliva sprayed across his face, the roar reverberating through the halls. The ghoul extended its six legs, flaring the crests on its elbows. Or maybe they were knees.

“Yes, yes, you’re very scary, dark dimension demon and all that.” Stephen surveyed the crouching creature. “Honestly, there’s so many other things—”

The ghoul pounced, another roar splitting the quiet Sanctum air.

Stephen sidestepped, ducking out of the way of the waving talons. He tapped some of his sleepy dimension’s energy, shielding himself from the spray of venom flicking off the tips of those claws.

“Wong!” he yelled. “You’re mother’s in the Library!”

Nothing. The man slept like a rock, unlike Stephen, and wouldn’t respond to a warning like that anyway.

There was no one else to call, of course. Stephen hadn’t known very many, when he’d first arrived,
and even after the Dark Dimension, after Dormammu, he hadn’t known them well enough to mourn. Wong had. The dimension almost didn’t survive the first few weeks.

“Well fine,” Stephen said, dropping the shield and standing up straight. “I’ll just deal with you myself.” Orange light curled around his shoulders and fingertips, and the ghoul cringed away as Stephen gripped the broomhandle again.

He promptly tripped over the pothole the creature’s venom had created and sent said broomhandle spiraling back behind him with a flail of his arms and a yelp.

Stephen straightened and glared at the ghoul. “Not a word,” he said. “I meant to do that.”

It just snarled.

Stephen ignored it, rifling around for his sling-ring. He sidestepped again as the creature leapt for him, not looking up. “Give me two seconds, would you?”

Apparently he should have at least surveyed the creature’s trajectory, for he failed to avoid it completely, and was struck hard by one of the creature’s elbows. Knees. Whatever. Stephen grunted, stumbling backward against one of the bookshelves. His sling-ring skittered across the rough floor, and Stephen scowled.

The ghoul looked triumphant. Another roar curled from the side of its mandible and it lunged toward him, the sheen of iridescence on its claws glinting.

Stephen grabbed randomly for a weapon, unable to redirect the leap without his ring.

So he hit the ghoul with a metal-bound book.

It yelped, sprawling off to the side, and Stephen dived for his escaped jewelry. He wiped it off the floor in one pass, whirling to face the recovered creature as it leapt again. It took him two tries to slip the ring on over the perpetual movement of his fingers, but after nine months of practice portals were as easy as breathing. A single swipe of his hands through the air before him had the universe yawning wide, ribbons of alternate dimensional energies sneaking through to rally about him, and the ghoul plunged through. Stephen flicked a finger, and the portal closed, leaving him alone in the Library.

He frowned at the mess, the claw marks in the wood, the venom carving grooves in tables and bookcases, the fluttering bits of ancient paper. Stephen pulled off his sling-ring, securing it to the loop on his halfheartedly tied belt. He brushed the wood shards off his tunic, tucked a stray lock of hair out of his eyes, and sat down on the only remaining intact chair in the Library.

“Get up.”

Stephen looked up. “Wong, what the--”

“You should be in the training hall.”

Sometimes, I actually can’t believe him. “There was a ghoul in the Library two seconds ago! Surely that counts for some training and therefore time for me to read the damn books. Great timing, by the way, you just missed it.”

Wong’s deadpan gave away nothing. Stephen resigned himself to not knowing if the man had truly been asleep, or just ignoring him and the ghoul, and stood.
“Alright, alright, I’m coming,” he said.

“What did you do to the Library?” Wong answered.

“A ghoul. That I vanquished. With the Cloak’s broom. Weren’t you listening?”

“The less I listen to you, the more brain cells I retain,” Wong said. “And the more intact my pride.”

Stephen grinned his most innocent grin. It probably looked more like a grimace.

“Go and get the Eye.”

The grin fell away. “What?”

“You heard me. Go and get it.”

Stephen’s hands were already moving as he cocked an eyebrow at Wong. “What do you have planned. Seriously, what?”

Wong’s answering expression gave Stephen no little anxiousness.

His ring of orange energy opened onto the tiny safe where Eye was stowed, and Stephen learned through it to grab the thing. Wong had once tried to close a portal on him (he’d probably meant it as a joke, and would have stopped a heartbeat before slicing Stephen in half), but Stephen hadn’t even noticed. And neither had the portal--he’d pushed himself back into the original room to find Wong panting and his portal unchanged.

He chucked the eye through the doorway and curled his long body back through behind it, hand flashing out to catch the thing before it clattered to the ground and he got a lecture about respecting artifacts and shit. The portal closed with him, half a thought keeping the energy from splicing his form between two parts of the dimension.

“Show off.” Stephen thought he heard Wong mutter the words, but as he wasn’t sure, he simply grinned and tossed the amulet from hand to hand.

They moved from the Library together, descending the arcing staircase toward the training hall. Sunlight streamed in through the wide window and made the dusty Sanctum air foggy. Stephen breathed in deeply, his twisted fingers stretching as far towards straight as they could, letting the whispering energies brush against him.

Footsteps echoing on the mahogany wood of the training hall, Stephen spun and dropped the Eye around his neck.

“Alright, what do you want from me today?” he asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

He was Wong’s singular student. Or maybe Wong was his. You may have a gift for the Mystic Arts, but you still have much to learn. They should have tried to find more beginners, should have tried to teach and bring the Mystic Arts back to life like they rebuilt Kamar-Taj. But they hadn’t. Stephen didn’t think about that, often. Ignoring it was easier than trying to deny it wasn’t because of the pang in his chest when imagining sending students into the astral dimension, imagining standing afront a group with orange magic billowing about him. Imagining him trying to take the Ancient One’s place.

Wong said, “today, I want to teach you how to siphon the Stone’s power without using it.”

Stephen peered at the other sorcerer. “You want me to use it… without using it?”
“I want you,” Wong said, “to draw from its dimensional energy without falling completely into it. Siphon it. Use it to manipulate dimension and form, and not simply time.”

“That’s possible?”

“Isn’t everything, with enough time?”

Stephen spend far too long trying to think of something that was objectively impossible. He figured the fact that he couldn’t find one off the top of his head indicated his being far too optimistic, but, well, what could he say? “That may or may not be true, but I get your point.” He looked down at the Eye, then slipped it on.

Looking up at Wong, he spread his arms.

The man said nothing—just raised an eyebrow.

Stephen waited, and the Cloak drifted over, moving between them as they stood in silence. After what must have been minutes, it waved one of its collars before Stephen’s face in what seemed like concern.

“Don’t worry, we aren’t under some curse,” he told it. “I’m just waiting for Wong. What are you waiting for?” That to the older sorcerer.

Wong cocked his head. “I’m waiting for you. Go.”

“Go… where?”

“What do you mean—use the goddamn Eye, Strange.”

“What, ‘just do it’ is all the instruction I get?”

“Some things cannot be explained, Stephen,” Wong said. He only ever used Stephen’s first name when he was extraordinarily disappointed.

“You’re Mr. Read-the-Warnings-Before-Experimenting guy, so excuse me for getting confused,” Stephen drawled. “Fine. Here goes.”

The Cloak settled on his shoulders as Stephen contorted his fingers before the Eye, drawing the wires of the containing cage apart. Power sparked in the air around them like static on a wool blanket.

“Now take it,” Wong said, his eyes glowing green in the reflection of the Stone’s light.

Stephen reached out into the new wavelength around him, so much stronger and more concentrated than the dimensional energies. He gathered it, wrangled it, his awareness shaping it into the form he desired…

Stephen reached out into their own realm once more, and whipped at the power, sending it spiraling to the edges of his fingers—

The only physical indication that he’d accomplished anything was the ring of green light around his elbow.

“Well that was ineffective,” Wong said as Stephen sighed and dropped the spell. “What were you trying to do?”
“Manipulate form. Of air. Which shouldn’t be *that* difficult.” He glared at the Eye.

Wong nodded. “You tapped time energy, and aged the air. Or maybe youthed it. Which is why we couldn’t see.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “‘Youthed?’”

“What?”

“Nevermind,” Stephen shook his head.

“Go again.”

With a nod, Stephen released the Eyes energy once more, carefully letting it trickle into the area around him. *Form. FORM.*

But again, nothing happened.

“You can’t just do the same thing as you did before,” Wong said. “Repeating the same action--”

“And hoping for a different result is the definition of insanity,” Stephen sighed, and dove back into the well of power sitting at his heart.

He let only a trickle rise up, a thin ribbon of power that he echoed with one of his own. Separate, the two strands wove through his awareness until he cleaved open the doorway to the physical.

A single butterfly flitted lazily before him.

“Is that the Stone’s energy? Or yours?” Wong asked.

The butterfly was orange. Stephen sighed. “Mine. But you can bet the air next to it is significantly youthed.”

His joke went over Wong’s head. “Again.”

So Stephen threw himself into his practice, and slowly, everything else began to disappear. The headache in his temple, the aching of his hands, the endless plodding of time. He remembered the work, remembered purpose, and became it. He forgot the pang of hunger in his chest, the ever-growing list of things to accomplish.

He forgot the gripping, eviscerating twist of loneliness that pulsed in him like a second heartbeat.

Power and strength and protection; skill and resourcefulness and safety. The Eye of Agamotto fit in the hollow beneath his ribs like he’d been missing it his whole life, only now complete. There was time energy seeping around him, seeping through him, Time winding about his mind and soul, bringing his heartbeat into his ears like the ticking of a clock.

But it was Time, always Time, as Stephen harnessed it. Like trying to suture with a hammer, Stephen couldn’t seem to control it.

Wong pushed, moving him around, growling at him to focus. Reminding him what he’d already done.

And finally, exhausted, Stephen waited. He let the Stone’s immense, ancient, all-encompassing energy flit around his own, let his dilute it, break it apart and herd it. Closing his eyes, Stephen breathed out slowly. Within him, the heartbeat of Time roared. Orange and green became one, and
Stephen drew the energy up, into his throat, into his mouth.

When he opened his eyes, a blue-green butterfly hovered before him.

Stephen grinned through the cinnamon taste of power on his tongue.

Wong didn’t speak. Instead, the idiot man hurled a disk of sparking energy towards Stephen.

He yelped, and hurled power fourth instinctually, pushing it into a shield about him. But there was so much more, so concentrated and potent--

ROAR

Moments later, Stephen was flat on his back with his face and hands stinging from the paths of the glass shards around him, remnants of the destruction his shockwave had caused. He groaned, sitting up and brushing himself off.

“Shit, Wong, are you alright?”

Wong, rolling off the ground himself, turned to look at Stephen, very slowly.

And punched the air. “So it is possible!”

“What--”

“You did it! Ha, who knows what you can do now!” The man was grinning, his face bleeding from a dozen knicks.

“I thought you knew this was going to work!” Stephen said, gesturing at the Eye. “What if it hadn’t? And I’d just wasted the entire day?”

Wong shrugged. “But it did work, did it not? And it would have exhausted you, and maybe you’d have slept in tomorrow.”

“Fuck you.”

“Language.”

Stephen laughed, then looked around. “Eesh. Better clean this mess up…”

“You aren’t going to disrupt the laws of nature.”

Stephen smiled sweetly. “Of course not.”

He then proceeded to wrap aforementioned laws of nature around his forearm and wrist, and manipulate them shamelessly.

Four seconds of flying glass shards and retreating shockwave later, the Sanctum was sparkling once more. Stephen resisted the urge to bow. He probably would have fallen over anyway, as exhaustion was ripping at every cell.

“You--”

“Don’t start,” Stephen said. “We have exactly zero money to spend on repairs. Besides, the Cloak was pinned to the wall by glass, and I can’t have my artifact angry with me.”
The Cloak bobbed, and Stephen nodded at it in return.

Wong rolled his eyes while Stephen took a step back to lean against the wall. Where had he gotten so tired…

He didn’t realize the Eye was still open until it happened.

A sound. A sound through the dimensions, accompanied by a pang he hadn’t felt for nine months.

The pang of an astral form changing realms.

“Wong…” Stephen breathed. “Wong, I can hear something.”

“So can I—it’s your stubbornness.” But the sarcasm fell from the other man’s face as he met Stephen’s eyes. “What?”

“The dimensions. I can hear them.”

“Impossible.”

“I can hear them.” Whispers. Voices. No—just one. A single voice, projecting out through the dimensions.

“Who?” Wong demanded, coming closer.

“I felt them enter their astral form.”

“Impossible!”

“Just minutes ago, you thought using Time to manipulate Form was impossible, too,” Stephen said. “Apparently it works with Dimension as well.”

“But… who could be entering their form? Mordo gave up the arts, and the other Sanctums…” Wong trailed off.


“Where?” Wong demanded, his desperation yanking Stephen back to the situation.

Stephen closed his eyes, concentrating. But as he tried to follow the voice, locate it…

“I can’t tell,” he said. “It’s like they’re blocking me. It has to be a pocket dimension—I might as well be the ruler of the others.”

It was a measure of the gravity of the moment that Wong didn’t point out his immodesty. “Shit.”

“Why would they be using a pocket dimension?” He peered at the other man. “Have you never felt—”

“No, I cannot sense others entering their astral forms,” Wong explained hurriedly. “It must be a function of the Stone.”

Stephen closed his eyes again, concentrating. But the pocket dimension stayed out of his reach, and the whispers continued, taunting him. “They’re speaking,” he muttered, still not comprehending—there was never sound from realms. Never.
“What… what are they saying?”

Stephen was about to say he couldn’t tell, once again, but…

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“You were thinking. It's too loud.” Stephen’s fingers clenched in focus. He narrowed in on the sound, trying to sort it from the interference, trying to understand its message; the message that only he would ever hear.
And he heard it.

Stephen opened his eyes.

“Holy burning hell.”

END OF PART FOUR

Chapter End Notes

Me: I don't need to bring Stephen into this besides a little cameo at the climax.
My Brain: But... it's Stephen! He's the best! You love him as much as you love Pete and Tony!!!
Me: This is complicated enough as is! There's so many characters, I don't need another one to deal with.
My Brain: But. Stephen. C'mon, he fits into this so well! Think of all the angst you could make Peter and Tony go through with his magic as a last resort!
Me: But then I'll have to bring in Stephen's problems.
My Brain: You like Stephen's problems. They're fun to deal with. And think of the cool dynamic between him and Peter!
Me: ....
Me: No.
My brain: :( 
Me: No.
Also me: *writes this chapter, rewrites later events to make more sense involving Stephen, watches Doctor Strange and theorizes on the magical abilities,*
...
Oops.

Anyway, hope you liked this… we've got Stephen now! Fair warning: I ADORE him. I also adore writing him, apparently. So he'll probably be in this way more than some of the other characters... I have a good excuse though! I have to develop him for the climax!!

Alright. Bye! Thanks for reading, leave me some feedback, I'll see you soon!
PART FIVE: AND DRIED UP ALL THE RAIN

The Lab was still full when Peter re-entered it, every muscle still engaged within his form. He was coiled like a spring, but had nowhere to jump, no one to fly at besides the vague idea of a Maura Aedoilagen.

People stopped their movements to look up at him, to wait, taking him with their eyes, as he advanced through the lab. Well, everyone but T’Challa--Grease seemed to have made an appearance, and the king was kneeling next to her. It looked, to all the world, like they were plotting; an involuntarily smile spread across Peter’s face, chasing away some of the exhaustion that lay across his form.

No one spoke, and Peter kept walking, kept putting one foot in front of the other to propel him into the awkward, dangerous atmosphere he had created. Only Shuri’s expression was readable: a slight grimace as she glanced between him and the group of Rogues.

But Peter had eyes only for the slice of red on Roger’s lips, and the ugly purple bruise already forming on the man’s cheek. He resisted the urge to shake out his hand--he’d nearly, if not truly, broken Captain America’s jaw.

*And it felt good*, Spider-Man teased.

*Of course it did.*

*My turn?*

*We can’t just keep punching him until we’ve both had our fill--pretty sure it’d take a few days and not end well for us, either.*

Spider-Man fell silent, and Peter reached the group. He eventually did work his hand against his jeans, just barely catching himself from apologizing on muscle memory. “I shouldn’t have walked off on you,” he said, eventually, turning to Shuri.

“It’s understandable. Sometimes, if you drop a bomb like that, it ruins the mood if you stick around.” She grinned. “You should have *seen* their faces…”
“Well, I am sorry I missed that.”

Another silence, and Peter tried not to feel small under the pressure of all those eyes, nearly physical to his spider-sense.

And then Natasha Romanoff began clapping.

“Not gonna lie,” she said, the echo of her palms slapping together still ringing through the room, “I thought I knew everything about you. And about Tony.”

“About time someone gave her deduction skills a challenge!” Wilson added.

“And this one--” Barnes stood forward and gestured with his arm towards Rogers--- “has gone one-hundred years without some kid socking him good. It was almost nostalgic!”

The Captain glared at his friend, but his smile was fond, and Peter found himself relaxing ever-so-slightly. Perhaps he wouldn’t have to battle, here.

“Okay I’ve been waiting for this,” Shuri butted in, “and I think now’s the time for this vine.” She twisted her voice into the accent Peter was all too familiar with. “How did you defeat Captain America?”

Peter grinned, and stared the Rogues down. “We shot him in ze legs, because his shield is the size of a dinner plate, and he’s an idiot.”

The room went silent.

And then exploded with laughter, even from Romanoff, as everyone took in the burning on Rogers’ face and the comedic timing of the whole moment. T’Challa must have joined the conversation as well, for his booming cackle was almost louder then Shuri’s. Even Grease joined in, mewing her caterwaul towards the ceiling.

“You know what?” T’Challa said, when the room quieted. “I think I do find the humor in the situations you’ve provided.”

“And there it is!” Shuri grinned. “He decides to appreciate.”

“What in the world were you referencing?” Rogers demanded.

“The credit goes to one Patrick William Charlton, our vine lord and master,” Shuri said. She and Peter bowed simultaneously.

“He’s got one about you, too,” Peter said to Barnes.

“Really?” Barnes looked intrigued.

Shuri raised an eyebrow at Peter, and he nodded. “You wanna be ‘im, or the other guy?”

“You be the other guy.”

“Alright.” Peter cleared his throat, found his imitation voice, and began. “Sergeant Barnes, we’re going to take your arm off.”

“I think I just need help,” Shuri said.

“’N give you a cool robot arm.” Peter barely made it through the line without dissolving into
exhausted, slap-happy giggles. Shuri did the same, and after a moment they realized Bucky just looked confused.

“It’s one of those ones you have to see for it to be funny,” Peter explained, straightening himself up again. “But yeah.”

“I’m on the internet?” Barnes whispered to Rogers.

“Are you kidding? We all are. All over it,” said Sam.

“Basically, one third of the population wants to kill you, one third wants to kill Mr. Stark, and the last don’t care,” Peter elaborated.

“That’s dreadfully inaccurate,” Shuri said from behind him.

“But you get my point.”

“I do.”

He paused, turning to the princess. “Out of curiosity, can you get me exact percentages?”

Shuri chuckled, glancing at T’Challa. He met her eyes and that subtext something passed between them again. The man stood, and Grease mewed at him. He ignored her, to Peter’s surprise and slight flattery.

“Nope,” Shuri said. “I don’t have the tech. Yet.”

“And even if we could,” T’Challa finished, “we wouldn’t, because you’d want to hunt down everyone who wants to kill Stark and give them a piece of your mind. Or your fist, as the Captain has so kindly demonstrated.”

Grease butted her head against his ankle, and the king gave in, bending down to pick the kitten up. But his head was still tilted slightly towards the group; the entirety of his feline perception was focused on their conversation, Peter knew.

Spider-Man shrugged. “I try not to go around punching random people, even if they do happen to be wrong. Because then they try to tell me that I’m wrong, and it just gets so tiring.”

“Well, unless they’re criminals,” Peter clarified.

“Right! And you fit all the criteria,” Spider-Man said in the direction of Rogers’ swollen face.

To his amusement, the rest of the Rogues edged a couple of inches away from him, as though they were worried he would fly off on a few more strikes. Or vine references. He’d be edging away from the vine references, too.

God, what was wrong with him?

He took a deep breath. “Look, I shouldn’t have run off earlier. Not when so many things had changed. I… I’m sorry, for that.”

Romanoff quirked a small smile. “I notice you don’t apologize for that.” She pointed towards Rogers.

Peter met the Captain’s eyes. “I’d be lying, if I did.”
Rogers shifted, and turned his gaze away. Not far, just slightly to the left of Peter’s own. As though he couldn’t quite stand to look him in the eye. “I didn’t know,” the man began. “I didn’t realize…”

“What,” Peter finished when the man didn’t continue, “that I’m his son?”

Silence echoed through the area once again, until Peter broke it.

“It shouldn’t have mattered,” he said. “I shouldn’t have had to explain, not like that. Not when Mr. Stark was in danger.” Peter slipped back, then, his words flitting onto autopilot as thoughts bubbled inside his subconscious.

He’s protecting them. Protecting all of the world from whatever sick plan those bastards have.

“But I suppose I’m glad you all know, if only to see your faces.”

Looking back at the screen that had once shown pockets of energy from the Lisbon readings, Peter saw it had been replaced. The window was no longer useful; Aedoilagen and her crew had long since relocated. Back into the mystery of the enormous universe.

He lied. And they realized he lied, and now they’re back, back with him…

Reels of a security video passed through his memory.

Did they take the bullets out? Did they help him? Why would they, why wouldn’t they let them fester, let him bleed, let him weaken and cripple and die--

“He sent me a message,” Peter said abruptly, mostly for his own benefit. Tony wasn’t dead, not if he could still feel him in his spider-sense, not if he’d received word from the man. A message of song lyrics, hacked through via Spotify accounts, of all things.

Tony was still planning. Still trying. Still resourceful and clever and utterly flippant.

But the dark voice still pulled memories of the man curled, helpless under the claws of his own mind, assaulted by memory of when this had happened before, from Peter’s mind. He couldn’t help but imagine what it would take for Tony’s curbless strength to be destroyed, how many attacks from both within and without.

Because even Iron Man would be scared.

I’m OK - Christina Aguilera.

OK

“It was through song titles--he hacked into a Spotify account and added them to my playlist.” Peter took a breath. “He didn’t know where he was, but he said ‘look timezone eastside Europe.’”

OK

“Eastern European time,” Shuri said. “Well that narrows down a latitude, at least.”

OK

“What countries are in that time zone, at the moment?” Romanoff asked.

Shuri’s eyes flicked up and to the left in thought. Peter wracked his own memory, trying to distract himself from the fangs of the what-ifs that bubbled from his subconscious and pounced at his
awareness.

OK

The word became a mantra, a quiet force Peter formed against the onslaught of panic. He would not break. He would not fail. He would save him.

“Countries in EET… let’s see.” Shuri waved her hands as she spoke. “The Åland Islands, Cairo, Greece (though not the cat, obviously), Estonia, Jordan, and I think Finland…”

“Finland’s in there,” Peter assured. “Also those four L ones: Latvia, Lebanon, Libya, and Lithuania.”

“How many’s that? Ten? There are eighteen…” Shuri’s hands moved faster. “Bulgaria, Palestine, Romania, Ukraine, Syria…”

“Cyprus, Egypt, Moldova.”

“And that one part of Russia.”

“That eighteen?” Peter asked.

“I think so.”

Peter nodded. “That’s a whole lot less than 195, but still a ton. Where in that region do you think--”

“Hold up,” said Barnes.

“Yeah pause a moment,” echoed Wilson. “Did you two just name every country in an obscure timezone?”

“It isn’t obscure,” Peter said, a bit defensively. “It’s a large slice of Europe and Africa.”

“Why the hell do you know this?” Wilson demanded.

“Does it really matter?” Shuri said at the same moment Peter objected, “it’s important to know the spatial orientation of things!”

“You must be some sort of trivia master,” Wilson grumbled. “But I suppose it doesn’t really matter.”

You all could do with a bit of geographical knowledge, Peter only just kept himself from saying.

I wonder if they even know what percentage of 195 117 is, Spider-Man grumbled. How much of the world’s population they were undermining, ignoring.

It’s exactly 60 percent, Peter thought with a small grin, because he knew how Spider-Man would respond.

Fuck you.

Fuck you!

Peter tuned back into the conversation around them, rubbing at his sternum unconsciously. Shuri was looking at him, calculating him, and he mouthed, what?

She shook her head.
“Is that all he knew?” Romanoff was saying. “A timezone is immensely helpful, but we still don’t know a small enough coordinate area to begin searching.”

“It was,” Peter said.

Or it was all he had time to tell us, whispered his treacherous brain.

OK

“We can extrapolate from that,” T’Challa said. No one elaborated.

“Did you find anything while I was…” Outside on the balcony having my mind accidently read by Scarlet Witch and losing my proverbial shit? “Out?”

Shuri shook her head. “I tried tracing the energy signature from Lisbon after it began to disappear, but…”

“Nothing.” T’Challa finished. A meow from Grease confirmed.

Peter let a growl build in his chest, audible only to the enhanced ears of the king. The look of understanding, of empathy, on T’Challa’s face was infuriating. Peter wanted to punch him.

Stop. He’s on your side, all of them are on your side. At least for this, Peter told himself harshly. You’re being irrational and counterproductive.

His emotions didn’t listen to him, of course, and Peter took a breath.

“What do we do now?”

* * *

When Steve and Bucky left the lab to fetch food, nearly half an hour later, shock was still throbbing, along with pain, along Steve’s cheek. Utter and complete shock.

His son.

Tony Stark had a son.

What the actual, literal, genuine fuck.

A son—a sixteen-year-old son. How could he not know of this? How could the world not know of this? Nothing made sense. Disbelief spiraled through Steve with every step as he replayed conversation after conversation.

Disbelief, and maybe a pang of shame.

He would have liked to have known.

“Tony never said,” Steve murmured to Bucky as they passed through the halls. The other man knew what he meant.

His friend looked at him, a sad smile pulling at the sides of his mouth. “Can you blame him, Steve?”

No. He didn’t suppose that he could.
Hey hey hey!

I'm almost done with the next chapter--it's a Tony one--so that might be posted a bit earlier. It's finals week, though, so you never know.

Anyway! Hope you liked the bit of team bonding. I thought I'd give you something that at least resembled fluff in some aspects before what I'm about to do to you next chapter. ;P
In Which Dimensions Glow

Chapter Notes

A chapter! Two days early! What??? Yes I know! Anyway, what are you doing reading this when you should be watching THE F***ING TRAILER?? I don't care if you've watched it already; go watch it again. Then you can come back. Please come back. But WATCH IT! I cried, and it was ONLY THE TRAILER.

Alternative Title: In Which the Author Finally Takes Maura from Creepy-but-Slightly-Understandable-Nutcase to UNFORGIVABLE, IRREDEEMABLE VILLAIN. Have fun.

The sky was silver.

Silver and red, and so, so close. So close to him, just like the edges of the world; every part of this stained, glowing universe pressing in in in...

Tony could feel it. It wasn’t like being trapped in a room, wasn’t like being confined within walls--he knew, he perceived that this tiny globe was all there was. He was used to the reaches of an immense and unquantifiable universe, the movement of time and space around his infinitesimal existence, and he never thought he would see it as comforting.

But the world only extended a few paces in either direction. The entire fucking universe--Tony could walk and touch the borders of the universe in less than a minute. There was no physical stopping point, but beyond a certain place... the world just stopped. Nothingness. Not a vacuum, not like space--just nothingness.

He couldn’t think. He couldn’t breath. The ground beneath him was uniform, the only texture being softness, and it was flat. Bare. The macrocosm was mere cubic yards, and covered in nothingness. Ground. Soft, crumbling ground, ground that didn’t stick under his fingernails, ground that moved like a liquid but held him like a solid, ground that was nothingness. Grey, silver, and sometimes red.

Tony thought this might be hell.

He might have been here for days. He might have been here for minutes. Millenia might have passed, alone in the box of a universe. Time might have existed. He would never know.

Tony knelt.

He’d been kneeling for days, minutes, millenia. And he thought he might be losing his mind. He thought maybe he already had.

He couldn’t even remember how space had felt, how the awareness of the astronomical had felt. He knew only the walls of nothingness, and he knew he hated it.

Tony thought this might be hell.

He’d tried to scream, some time ago. Or maybe he still was. Time might exist. He was beginning to doubt it.
It hadn’t echoed.

There was nothing around him, nothing anywhere, and he hadn’t heard his own scream. The nothingness at the edge of the universe had eaten it, and Tony thought it might be coming to eat him. Slowly eroding this tiny world, the silver sky pulsed down towards Tony.

Maybe he imagined it being silver.

Maybe he imagined the redness.

He appreciated the redness. It was… familiar. Comforting. A sensation of sight.

Sight was all he had, in this timeless, miniature existence. He’d tried to scream, to create sound, once, and it had only made the sky advance faster. He’d tried to eat (to choke himself on) the liquid of the ground, but it had dissolved long before he’d had time to taste it.

Time didn’t exist.

Tony thought this might be hell.

He wanted it to be. Because that meant what he remembered might be possible. That maybe past existed, and with it, time.

If this was hell, another universe existed, somewhere. A universe of thousands of untold threats, because there was space for them. A universe where when you looked up, there was darkness, darkness pierced by starlight, because there were other worlds out there. A universe where there was always more to see. A universe where there was something.

A universe where there was a woman of wit and spice and fiery intelligence, a woman he’d been chasing his whole life, a woman he loved.

A universe where there was a boy of energy and optimism and future, a boy who saved him, a boy, a son, he loved.

He thought he could remember, and he thought—hoped—wished—despaired—that they existed too. Or they would. They had.

Tony thought this was hell.

He wished The One Who Had Put Him Here would appear. To confirm that he had been somewhere else, once, because she would have to appear from somewhere.

Tony clung to that.

He’d run out of periodic table elements, which he’d once foolishly thought was an indicator of the existence of time. But there were no elements here, and maybe nowhere. As soon as he’d thought that, he’d forgotten them. Forgotten what they were made of, forgotten what they dictated, forgotten their order and their rules.

So he didn’t think about the other universe. He didn’t think about the woman, or the boy, because maybe he’d forget them, too.

And that would be worse than hell.
Maura emerged from the basement with blood on her hands.

“What happened?” Kenja asked when Maura made her way into the kitchen, looking at the streak of red with an expression Maura could only describe as hungry.

“Exactly what you said would happen,” Maura admitted. She slid down next to her apprentice at the table, reaching for a paper towel. Kenja watched her clean the flakes of blood off her fingers somewhat instantly, one hand resting on the handle of her mug of undefined beverage. Maura found herself almost craving tea.

Kenja said, “So we wasted two days.”

“We wasted two days,” Maura sighed.

“And now?” Kenja asked, slurping from her cup in that way she did.

“Now, I’ve forced him from his physical form and sent his astral form into my pocket dimension.” That was where the blood came from--she’d reopened his shoulder wound with the blow.

She really did want some tea.

“Great,” Kenja said, the hatred in her eyes burning ever brighter. Maura had never asked what Stark had done to Kenja, and Kenja had never said, but Maura had her theories. They involved Afghanistan, and the way Kenja glanced towards doors instinctually every few moments. She went to stand. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Maura said, putting a hand on the older woman’s arm. “Not yet.”

“What do you mean?” Kenja almost snarled. “We need information. We’ve already wasted too much time; the Rogues will be on our tail, and you know it.”

It was what she didn’t say that almost made Maura release her. Please. Please, I’ve waited for years. Years, Maura. I waited while he was here. I did what you asked. You had your push for peace of mind, now let me have mine.

“Not yet,” Maura forced herself to say.

Kenja just looked at her, her face unreadable.

“Think for a moment, with your mind and not your heart. I put him in the pocket dimension.”

“So,” Kenja said flatly.

“You know what it’s like there. You helped me create it.”

They’d created it for Kenja, in fact. It was an exercise, but Kenja had hoped it would also be a sanctuary.

It wasn’t. It was insanity inducing and the only place Maura truly owned in this entire multiverse. And it was perfect for keeping the prisoner that her team was done pretending for.

She would find the Rogues.

They would find them.
The determination that simmered in Maura’s chest, the determination that kept her heart beating and her lungs expanding, kept the gun barrel out of her mouth, had kindled to fire. Months ago, it had become an inferno.

And Maura no longer tried to keep people from being burnt. She only pointed the fire at who.

“I don’t care what it’s like there,” Kenja murmured. “It’s too good for him. Give me ten minutes, Maura, and I could get us the Rogues.”

“Don’t underestimate Tony Stark,” Maura said. “People have tried to get him to talk before, and it resulted in the very first Iron Man suit, and the demolishings of our entire lives. We don’t want to pay that forward.”

“He can’t if he’s dead.”

“And we won’t find the Rogues, that way. The pocket dimension is safer, less risky.” There was nowhere to go, nothing to use, no ‘box of scraps’ for Stark to assemble into something to spell their demise.

And those who were looking for him? Maura was going to make sure they were exactly where she wanted them.

“You want me… to just wait. To just leave him,” Kenja said, her voice flat. Empty. Dead.

“Not for forever,” Maura explained. She guided the woman back onto her chair, letting magic burst in the air around them. Runes had always been her promises to Kenja, and she didn’t intend to break this one. Kenja would have her time to break, and Maura would indulge herself on every moment. “Just until the dimension has done its work.”

“Done its work…”

“A mind like his? Imagine what would happen.”

Kenja nodded somewhat reluctantly. “It’ll definitely make him more pliable.”

Maura laughed. “You could say that.”

The tired grin on Kenja’s face had Maura releasing a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Fine, I’ll wait. But remember I was right this last time.”

Maura punched her friend on the shoulder. “You’re always right; I’ve learned this by now.”

“In anything besides the Mystic Arts.”

“And even that, not for long.” Maura slid her chair back, the legs screeching against the cheap vinyl. “You’re going to do so much, Ken.”

“We’re going to do so much,” the woman corrected. “I’m about three decades older than you—if anyone’s going to be imparting wisdom on padawans, it’s me.”

Maura laughed again. “Fine, fine. Now let’s have some tea, shall we?”

* * *
Even death wouldn’t release him from this place.

There was no way to die, here.

Hell.
In Which Wakanda is Invaded

Chapter Notes

Don't hate me until you get to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At this point, Peter had grown so desperate that Bulgarian news articles were interesting.

He’d thought that looking through the keyword searches for the national news would be simple. How many articles could there be about magical woman and their missing families?

A lot, apparently.

But he read them obsessively, hours passing in a blur. Shuri worked next to him, letting him sneak pieces of her food occasionally. Others cycled in and out of the Lab, engineers when the Rogues had left, and Rogues when the engineers had vacated. T’Challa wandered in with Grease in hand and spoke quickly with Shuri over politics occasionally, and most nothing happened.

He’d worked through Bulgaria, and Syria, and found everything and nothing, gone nowhere and everywhere, and he felt completely useless.

But he kept reading, kept swallowing, kept trying.

He would never stop trying.

Nothing happened, and then one of the Wakandan engineers let out a low breath and rocked away from their screen.

Shuri looked over at the woman. “What is it, Arimirin?”

The engineer’s face had gone ashen. “The signature. The one we found in Lisbon.”

Peter’s head jerked up so fast it gave him whiplash. “What? Did you find it?” The screen dropped from his hands, clattering onto the desk before him.

Arimirin nodded, throat bobbing. “Yes. You could say that.”

“Where?” Peter demanded, jumping up.

Arimirin looked at him, and then at Shuri. Her hands moved across the keyboard, and her screen rotated so they could see. “That’s the thing,” she said. “It’s… well, it’s accumulating here.”

Peter peered at the map, and recognized Wakanda. He recognized the orange pooling of energy and code. And then he recognized it’s pulsing position exactly atop the palace.

Peter closed his eyes and tried to breathe.

“They’ve found us,” Shuri breathed. Just once, just a single indication of fear and meaning. Peter opened his eyes as she threw herself from her own screen, spinning into determined action. Grabbing her wrist, she spoke into the metal band pressing against her dark skin. “Brother? Brother!”
“What is it, Shuri?” came the voice of T’Challa in astonishingly high quality. Not that anyone could have expected anything different.

“They’re coming,” Shuri replied grimly. “We found the signature, and it’s pooling here. The sorceress is coming.”

T’Challa whispered something Peter didn’t understand, then said, “Sound the alarm. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Shuri cut the call, then turned back to address the lab.

“You heard him! Sound the alarm,” she ordered. “Find as many as you can and evacuate the area, now.” She whirled, typing once again, alternating between screens as she pulled up data and algorithms in symbols that passed so quickly Peter couldn’t decode them. “They’re going to be here. In the lab. Somehow, they’re going to be here. We have five minutes, at most. GO!”

People cleared like fish from the jaws of a dolphin, scattering for the exits of the lab.

And Peter stood frozen.

His spider-sense was screaming, roaring, and every part of him, inside and out, itched with warning. Danger, danger, danger.

They’re coming.

They were coming, because they knew. Knew the secret Tony had been hiding. And there was only one way that could be possible, a way that wasn’t a ‘somehow’ or a mystery. Aedoilagen knew the Rogue’s location. and she hadn’t the day before--she hadn’t mere hours before.

Peter couldn’t breathe.

What had they done?

What could they have done, to break Tony Stark in hours?

What had they done?

The man had lasted three months, in Afghanistan. It had been hours, only hours, hours.

What had they done?

Tony.

TONY.

He would fight for the Rogues with everything he had. He would fight for Wakanda. He already had, Peter and Spider-Man knew. They’d seen Tony Stark fight, and it was as unstoppable as the wind, as indestructible as the sky, as relentless as the sea.

It had been mere hours.

What.

Had.

They.
Maybe it was already too late. Maybe they had broken him, broken him and then killed him. Maybe he’d died alone, thinking he’d failed, knowing he’d never see them again, maybe he was dead—

“PETER!”

Peter jerked backward, his breathing ragged, his hand at his throat. Spider-Man was roaring in his head, his fingers clawing into his own flesh, as though that could tear away the what-ifs and the maybe’s and those terrible, paralyzing possibilities. Blood and screams and orange magic—

“Look at me, Peter,” Shuri said, and he felt her hands on his shoulders.

He forced himself to swallow, to do as she said.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she growled. “Trust me, I’m thinking it too. But we can’t freeze, Spinner. We can’t. And we can’t give up just yet.”

Peter choked out a sound that might have been an affirmative.

“There’s still hope. There’s always hope, always, even after the fat lady sings.” Shuri smiled with a razor-sharp edge. “But first we have to beat their asses. First, we have to win.”

Peter took a breath.

Spider-Man took another.

And then he squared his shoulders and nodded grimly. “Alright,” he said, his voice hoarse. “What do I do.”

“Get the Rogues,” Shuri said. “I’ll prepare the lab, down here, start on our strategy. You have four minutes.”

Spider-Man was already running, already throwing himself through the door. He cursed himself for not wearing his suit, cursed himself for risking the half-a-minute it would take to slip it on. Cursed the length of the hallway, his brain already doing calculations for time.

(What had they done?)

He skidded before the door to the camouflaged quarters, and his hand flashed out against the keypad in the corner. The doors shicked their way open, and Spider-Man barely slowed down as he vaulted around the corner, using the doorframe as an anchor.

He almost screamed Avengers assemble! but decided this was likely not the time. “GET READY TO FIGHT!” he yelled instead, his voice echoing down the corridor. “THEY’VE FOUND US! ARM YOURSELVES AND GET TO THE LAB! NOW!”

Heads emerged from their rooms, questioning calls following Spider-Man through the hall. He didn’t respond, and didn’t count them; if some were missing, they would be alerted by the clamor in the palace. Hopefully, they’d be alerted in time.

He ducked into his own room, his mouth twisted into a grim line, and lunged for his suit. It lay draped over the edge of the bed, and snagged on one of the curls of the frame as he tried to pull it towards him.
He roared and ripped it from its position with far too much force. Stumbling backward, he tried to find his balance, and realized he was still roaring.

He cut the sound off, and stripped, throwing his clothes anywhere and everywhere and nearly levitating to get the suit on faster.

*Go!* screamed Peter. *GO!*

He was going as fast as he could, as fast as physics let him, and he still snarled and pushed himself faster. *Three minutes.*

The mask went on, and Karen recognized the speed of his pulse and the grimace of his expression. “What is it, Spider-Man?”

“They’re coming,” he snarled. “They found us, they--”

*They broke him.*

He cut himself off. Swallowed. “We have to be ready to fight. We don’t know what they can do, what they’re capable of. We don’t even know how many there are.”

“How do you know what’s coming?”

“The energy signature. It’s pooling, right here in Wakanda. In Shuri’s lab. We have a little less than three minutes until it reaches the highest potency we measured in Lisbon.” He made for the door, tapping his chest to suck the suit to his form as he went.

“Are you okay?” Karen asked, and Spider-Man knew what she meant.

“No,” he said quietly, racing down the hallway. “I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again.”

Karen didn’t answer, but he sensed her understanding.

He ran into no one in the hall, and as soon as he was back into the innards of the palace, he was flying again. He pushed past Romanoff, running with her knives unsheathed, and Wilson, his wings assembling even as he ran. Spider-Man nodded to each of them.

He’d be glad to have them, in the coming battle.

The lab was bright against the darkness of the hallways, and Spider-Man didn’t slow until he was next to Shuri, next to the only information he had. The Black Panther already stood beside her.

Shuri took one look at him and said, “One minute. She’s coming right there.” She pointed to a spot on the floor; a perfectly average, non-descript spot that Spider-Man suddenly hated with every fiber of his being. He squared itself towards it.

“What’s our plan?” came the voice of Captain America from a higher tier. He was alone, and there was no sign of Barnes--the other man had likely returned to the edge of the city. Spider-Man wondered if he was already running back.

T’Challa and Shuri looked at each other, deep brown eyes meeting the glittering black of the Panther’s.

The princess reached to the table beside her, and gripped the handle of a wicked looking gun. Then she turned her gaze to the screen beside her, staring at the ever-growing patch of orange light.
“There’s a sorcerer with unknown powers coming to our city,” Shuri said. “A sorcerer who’s already done the impossible.”

(What did they do to him, what did they do, what did they do--)

“We have forty-five seconds,” Shuri whispered. “There is no plan.”

“Wrong,” Spider-Man found himself saying.

The forces of Wakanda turned to him, and he didn’t balk from their gaze.

“We fight,” Spider-Man said. “We fight for this city--your city. Our city. We fight for our families. We fight for you--” he looked at the Rogues-- “despite everything. And we fight for Tony Stark.”

Who is family, for me. “And we win.”

Captain America looked at him and nodded. No shield pressed against his palm, but the blades in his fists glinted, and the smallest snarl split his face.

Natasha Romanoff unsheathed her fighting knives, standing relaxed, but not for one instant unprepared. She met Spider-Man’s eyes and her mouth twitched into a lethal grin.

Sam Wilson spread his wings, and red light danced around Wanda Maximoff’s hands and neck.

Spider-Man’s enhanced ears picked up the pounding of steps in the stories above them, the sounds of the Wakandan soldiers flooding to join the battle. Flooding to die, to win.

And next to him, Shuri and T’Challa, children of T’Chaka, stood curled for battle with power and grace that made every doubt swim from Spider-Man’s mind.

He was glad to stand next to them. Glad to fight with them.

Orange light began to spark before them, and Spider-Man’s fingers brushed against the button of his web-shooters. Tense silence spread throughout the Lab, and Peter could hear the breaths and heartbeats of his allies.

But Tony didn’t stand beside him. There was no whir of nanotech, no hum of a charging repulsor, no glow of an arc reactor.

He swore, in that moment, that Maura Aedoilagen would not walk away from the coming conflict. Not if his father was dead.

They broke him.

The light completed its circle, opening a portal in the center of Wakanda.

And a sharp-featured man sporting a familiar goatee, clad in a collared, red cloak stepped through.

“‘Well,’” the man said, his chin tilted up and to the left, his smile sarcastic, “this is a turnout, isn’t it?”

Chapter End Notes
HE'S HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!

Welcome, Doctor Stephen Strange, to the group of idiots brought together by the circumstances of my fic. WOOO! I wanted to end part four right there for drama reasons, but it fit better earlier. Or maybe it didn't. I don't know, whatever, I'm doing it this way.

Hope you liked this anticlimactic thing. There's a little bit left to go before the final battle; I wasn't gonna give it to you THAT easily. Anyway, thanks for reading, and I'll see you soon!
In Which a Sassy Sorcerer Speechifies

Chapter Notes

Listen... you hear that? That's the sound of an early chapter, because AS OF THIS MORNING, I AM ON BREAK BITCHES!!!! Wooo!!! I have TIME now! Hallelujah!

So anyway, you'll probably get a lot of these, at a faster frequency. Who knows, I might even get close to finishing!!! *Pauses* *Looks at Google Doc* *Looks at notebook* *Considers plans* Don't take my word for that. I'm unreliable.

Cools! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A long, long silence hung in the air, broken only by Shuri’s gun clattering back to the table.

And then Spider-Man pulled off his mask, trying to assure himself that he was actually seeing what was happening in front of him.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded, raising his wrist. “And what are you doing here?”

The man’s grin grew wider, seeping arrogance like a tangible aura. “My name is Doctor Stephen Strange, and I’m here because the first word the Multiverse has ever spoken was ‘Wakanda.’”

“The Multiverse?” Shuri demanded.

With a sigh, the doctor said, “this is going to take a while, isn’t it.”

He took a step forward, and the weapons of seven superheros bristled toward him. He stopped, and held up his hands. “Look, I come in peace.”

“You’re a sorcerer,” Peter snarled. “Excuse me if I don’t take your word for it.”

The doctor’s smirk fell away, confusion flickering in his eyes. “Okay, I take it I’m missing something.”

“I doubt it,” Spider-Man said. “What is your connection to Maura Aedoilagen?”

The sorcerer peered at him. “Who?”


The doctor dropped his hands, his face dropping all expression. “Sorcerer,” he said. “And beyond that title, I have no connection to Maura Aedoilagen. None.”

“Why should I believe you,” Peter growled.

They broke him.

The doctor met Peter’s gaze with eyes that swirled with color. “Because sorcerers, proper ones, fight for the safety of this world, too. Because if I wanted to kidnap someone, I’d never do it so sloppily.
And because I would never take a man from his family.”

“Prove it,” Maximoff snarled.

Strange rolled his eyes. “Of for the love of--”

He broke off, touching thumb to pinkie of his trembling hands and spreading his fingers wide. Spider-Man lunged, but orange lights were already leaping through the lab like tigers breaking through rusted chains, upon him before he could even fire a web.

Muttering irritatedly under his breath, Strange crossed his arms before his chest and then drew them apart. A startling green light appeared between them, emanating from beneath his tunic, as his cloak seemed to flutter of its own accord.

And color *devoured* the lab, wrapping around each screen, each terris, securing itself to ankles and necks and wrists. Peter tried to move, but the magic froze him, paralyzed him, ropes of sparks and vines of green light clamping about him. Manacles secured him to the ground, secured him to this universe--Peter felt that it would take only another wave of that man’s hands for his heart to stop beating.

“That enough proof for you?” Strange said, lowering his hands. The green light faded, and Peter found himself collapsing to the ground of the lab along with the other inhabitants in the room. “I could kill you all in moments. But I’m not going to--that would be counterproductive, though somewhat satisfying, I admit. I think by the end of this, I will end up killing someone else, alongside you. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m here to help, damn it.”

Peter fought to his feet, staring at the man before him with no little awe.

“All right then,” he breathed.

Strange nodded, and took a step forward. No one threatened him, this time; there would be little point. He surveyed them with a raised eyebrow, not speaking for a long moment.

“Didn’t you sign the Sokovia Accords?” he finally asked, to T’Challa.

The king lifted his chin.

“That’s what I thought.” The smirk returned. “All right then, the Rogue Avengers are chilling in Wakanda. The Winter Soldier here, too? It’s almost a party!”

Rogers growled.

Strange ignored the Captain, and Spider-Man thought he might like him. “Nice to finally meet you, Princess Shuri,” the doctor said, inclining his head. “I’ve dreamed of speaking intelligent English with you. Well, for as long as I’ve known you existed.”

Shuri raised an eyebrow, obviously not sure if that was an insult or a complement, and Peter didn’t blame her.

Strange turned his nebulous eyes on Peter. “And you… very small spider… I thought you based in Queens?”

Peter ducked his head.

“He’s here to help search for Stark,” Shuri said, stepping forward. “Just like you.”
“Ah.” Strange nodded. “Search for Stark, who is apparently in the clutches of another sorcerer?”

“Yes,” Peter breathed. Such power, this man had such power--

As though he’d read the thoughts from Peter’s mind, Strange said, “she’s powerful, but no Sorcerer Supreme.” His smirk widened. “That’s me, by the way. Hello.”

Fresh hope surged in Peter’s chest. Aedoilagen hadn’t walked through that portal, hadn’t found them, hadn’t broken Tony. He was still out there. Still out there, still fighting, and Peter and Spider-Man and their allies had just found the advantage the hadn’t known they’d needed.

Then something else caught up with him.

_Magic._

_I was just--this man--Sorcerer Supreme? Yes. YES!_

He must have grinned, for Strange grinned back, a bit of the sarcasm leaching from his expression.

“What have you found, so far?” Strange said, taking off his cloak and draping it over the back of one of the lab’s chairs. He then folded himself into the same chair, looking for all the world as though he owned the place.

Peter and Shuri looked at each other. “We found who took him. Maura Aedoilagen. We found her energy signature, and her motive,” Shuri said.

“That motive being find these idiots.” Peter gestured to the Rogues behind him. “Possibly also kill them.”

“Stark knows where they are?” Strange asked. “The idiots, I mean?”

“Yeah. But he hasn’t told them.”

Because it had been Strange that stepped through that portal, not Aedoligen. Tony was not broken.

“And we know Stark’s somewhere in the Eastern European time zone.”

Strange waited.

They watched him, a rustling behind them, along with a clanking, as a few of the others put down their weapons.

“That’s it?” the man finally said.

Peter bristled. “We have no idea what we’re dealing with.”

Strange leaned forward, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. “Seems I came along just at the right time, then.”

“Yes,” Peter said, and Shuri pulled up a chair and sat before the sorcerer. Peter followed suit, and T’Challa came to stand over his shoulder. He sensed more motion from the Rogues, but didn’t care to look, leaning forward towards Strange as if compelled.

“What do you know?” Shuri asked.

The smirk returned, full force. “I know what you’re dealing with.”
“What did you mean when you said ‘the first word the Multiverse has ever spoken’ or whatever?” Peter wondered.

“I meant exactly that. I can sense dimensions—feel them, and their energy. Most sorcerers can, but, well, I have an affinity for it. Most of the time it’s color, strength, health—the basic makeup of those dimensions. But never sound. Never. There is never a strong enough call to pierce through fabrics of the larger dimensions, and no smaller ones have voices to speak with.” Strange’s hands stayed clasped as he spoke, very little gesticulation involved in his conversation. “But when I was tapping the Eye’s power, I heard a voice. And it said *Wakanda.*”

“The Eye?” T’Challa asked.

Strange glanced at him. “A powerful relic.”

Peter sensed there was something the man wasn’t saying on that subject, but didn’t push it. “Okay. And the voice? What did it sound like?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Annoyance flashed through Peter. “Why?”

“I mean,” Strange said, “I actually can’t tell you. There’s no words to describe it. You’d have to feel it. It’s like trying to describe the way we can all sense this universe without ever having traveled to another.”

Peter let out a huff. “Alright.”

“But the voice wasn’t all.”

“What?” That from Romanoff, who had joined them near Strange.

Strange’s eyes flicked to her, then back to Shuri and Peter. He shifted his hands to lie in his lap, and Peter saw they were still shaking.

Cocking his head, Peter opened his mouth to inquire, but thought better of it.

“In addition to the voice, I sensed someone shifting into their astral form, which I haven’t felt in—” he broke off. “I haven’t felt in a long time.”

“You’re astral form? That’s a thing?” Wilson asked with a tinge of incredulity.

“Of course,” T’Challa answered for him. “Another body your spirit can reside in that gives you passage through different planes of reality.”

Strange looked at him, both eyebrows raising this time. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Do you think it was Aedoilagen?” Peter asked. “The person shifting forms, I mean?”

Strange’s eyes got faraway in that way memories always looked when they played on the front of your mind. “Sorcerers have the ability to force others from their physical forms and direct them through dimensions, as well,” he said. “And after what you’ve said, and the whisper of *Wakanda* , which is where the idiots are… I don’t think it was Aedoilagen entering her form. I think it was Tony
Stark.”

Peter sat back, taking in a breath.

“Before you ask,” Strange added, “I can’t find him, or contact him. I already tried—the call came from a pocket dimension, likely created by his captor, that opens only for the wishes of its creator.”

“But you can hear him?” Peter demanded, not caring if desperate hope ran through every word.

“I haven’t heard anything since that initial call,” Strange said. “It would have taken energy, and he likely didn’t know he was doing it—I doubt he has any training in the Mystic Arts.” Strange looked to Peter, as if waiting for agreement.

Peter shook his head, somewhat flattered that Strange had realized he was the most connected to Tony.

“I’m keeping a figurative ear out, though,” the man said.

Peter brought his legs up and wrapped his arms about them, bracing his heels on the lip of the chair as he listened. From above them, someone slammed open the lab doors, which had Peter looking up. The forces of Wakanda stared down at them, brandishing spears and sizzling, futuristic projectile weapons.


The soldiers stopped their advance when T’Challa called a few words in the language Peter didn’t understand. Along with a signal with his hands, the forces were relaxing and backtracking through the lab doors, again. Calling of the alert, Peter thought, and leaned his head onto his knees.

“Go back to ‘pocket dimension’,“ said Rogers, after a moment. “And what advantages does trapping Stark in… astral form give Aedoilagen?”

“The pocket dimension is her advantage,” Strange said with what could have been a sigh. “She’s separated him from his physical form, leaving him within a very universe designed as she sees fit. His body will be wherever she happens to reside, but his soul has been removed from it, relocated, almost.”

“What…” Peter swallowed hard. “What happens to his physical body?”

The sorcerer looked at him, eyes softening almost imperceptibly. “The longer the astral form is separated, the more damage to the physical form. Time moves differently on the astral plane, as our forms vibrate to a different frequency—but being trapped from a physical form is like leaving a body without a soul; effectively without life. It’s… not healthy.”

“How much time?” Peter forced himself to ask.

“The soonest the damage would become irreversible is about a week,” Strange said.

A week.

Peter sat back.

That’s time. That is time, Spider-Man assured. We can do this, especially now that this weird-ass doctor has shown up.

“Right,” Peter breathed, only half to the doctor.
Strange stood, straightening his navy blue tunic. “Which means we should likely get back to work.” His simper grew ever-wider. “Now that I have provided something to work on.”

Shuri gestured vaguely at the air in front of the man, saying, “you’re right, but you haven’t gotten yourself out of one-thousand-years of questions—I have magic to understand.”

“Of course,” Strange said, bowing elegantly. “Who am I to stand in the way of scientific discovery?”

“Magical discovery,” muttered Rogers from somewhere behind them. Peter grinned; Strange had been here for no more than ten minutes and was already rubbing the Captain the wrong way.

“The Mystic Arts are often better understood by younger minds,” Strange said. “They tend to be less obstreperous. And by younger, I of course mean ten, twenty…” The man brought up a hand, wavering it in the universal so-so gesture. “Eighty years old.”

Rogers opened his mouth, but T’Challa stepped in front of him. “I feel we may be drifting from our priorities, here.”

“Aw, let them at it!” Romanoff laughed.

Honestly, Peter agreed; he would have enjoyed watching Strange untie his tongue and had little doubt the poised, controlled man could verbally eviscerate most anyone in this room. But they did have other things, utterly essential things, to be doing. “I second T’Challa,” Peter said.

Strange grinned and saluted to the Captain with one (specific) finger, then turned back to Shuri. “I assume you’re the boss?”

The girl grinned, cracking her knuckles. “Astonishing deduction. That’s my second.” She pointed to Peter. “And you and T’Challa can fight for third. There’s a ranking in this court, after all.”

T’Challa rolled his eyes, and Strange pivoted towards Peter, nodding towards him in acknowledgement. Peter nodded back, rubbing a hand through his curls.

The Sorcerer Supreme looked back at his chair and said, “are you just going to wait there?”

“Huh?” Peter blurted. “Why would I--”

But the red cloak, still sitting over the back of the chair fluttered, one side of its collar lifting at the sorcerer’s words.

Peter’s jaw dropped open.

“Get over here,” Strange said. “I don’t look nearly as majestic without you.”

The cloak lifted from the chair of its own accord, zipping over to unfold across Strange’s shoulders. It’s high collars folded along the man’s neck as the red fabric draped down against his ankles. Stroking it, Strange turned back to them. “Sorry for the late introductions--this is the Cloak of Levitation.”

A long, long silence.

And then Shuri burst out laughing, only just managing to choke out, “sorry, Spinner; you’ve been replaced. The Cloak’s my second, now.”
Chapter End Notes

I actually cannot.
Stephen is the best.
I'm making that a tag now.

Alright anyway, hope you liked the good Doctor's intro into Wakanda! Sorry for the truly atrocious number of Sherlock references...
You know how I feel about feedback, and I'll see you all soon!
In Which the Sorcerer and the Spider have Words

Chapter Notes

Bonding.

Also!!! With this chapter, I reach 1.5k words, and get to do a little dance. *Shimmies*
Okay there's my dance. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three hours later, when Peter looked up from his latest set of Aedoilagen-themed news articles, he
found Shuri with her head dropped between her shoulders and her hands against her forehead. And
he started wracking his brain for the last time he remembered her leaving the lab, let alone sleeping.

“Shuri,” he said softly, getting up and moving over to her. Strange--the only other current occupant
of the room--looked up at his words.

She yelped, throwing herself back against the chair. “Whatisitwhat’sgoingon?”

Peter laughed. “Nothing, it’s fine. You should get outta here, get some sleep. It’s been… I’m not
sure, but a long time since you’ve probably done that.”

Shuri glared at him. “Did you just suggest I leave the lab?”

“... Yes?”

“Come off it; never going to happen. I have to find your father.”

Strange looked up again, and Peter decided to pretend he hadn’t notice.

For a moment, he hesitated. Part of him screamed they couldn’t waste a single hour, a single
moment--but Shuri was suffering. And it wasn’t like they were accomplishing much at the moment,
anyway.

So he said, “Remember when you said ‘we’re no use to Stark if we’re dying?’”

Shuri snorted. “Yes. But you’re misquoting me, I said: ‘There’s nothing of use for any of us right
now, and especially if we’re all malnourished.’”

“Same thing.”

“No. I am not malnourished, and there are things of use right now! Things I have to figure out!” The
girl stuck a hand out and cricked her wrist toward Strange.

“You’re falling asleep at your screen, Shuri.”

“No I’m not.”

Peter sighed, pulling on the back of her chair and wheeling her away from the keyboard. “Look,
you’re the most useful of all of us right now; we can’t have you dumbed down to our level by
fatigue.”
She grinned, and it was definitely sleepy. “You aren’t dumb, Peter.”

“Compared to you?” Peter laughed. “Whatever. But thanks. And if you believe in me so much, why don’t you go and sleep for a bit while I run the algorithms for a bit? I’ll wake you if anything happens.”

She didn’t answer, and Peter realized she was asleep again.

He laughed, keeping his hand over his mouth as not to disturb her, and kept pulling at the wheely chair. A twinge of memory tickled at him, of doing the same to another engineer, in another lab. He swallowed hard.

Carefully propping the chair and the girl it contained up against the far stairway of the lab, Peter stood and sighed. “I told you so.” He turned, snagging another chair as he went, and sat before the screen Shuri had been occupying a few moments before.

He watched the code, for a while, in silence. But eventually, he wasn’t watching the numbers so much as he was staring at the empty space in front of it. He listened to the silence of the room, broken occasionally by the quiet rustling of the sorcerer’s apparently sentient cloak, and thought about nothing. For a while, he just… stopped.

Nothing interrupted him, and Peter drifted back into reality some time later, feeling better. Not more rested, not more determined, not more hopeful… just better. He stretched, and looked about the room.

Shuri was still asleep, and Strange hadn’t moved as far as Peter could see. He was, however, holding an old, leather-bound book that Peter didn’t recognize, and Peter wondered where it had come from.

“I portaled to get it earlier, while you were meditating,” Strange said, and Peter realized he must have said it out loud. “It’s about pocket dimension formation—informative, but so far not super helpful.” The man didn’t look up, but Peter took the liberty of wheeling the chair over to the table on which he sat anyway.

“How come I’d never heard of sorcerers before this whole… situation?” Peter asked, his hands fidgeting atop the table before him.

Strange looked at him over the yellowing pages. “Why do you think?”

“Because it would likely destabilize the entire social and mental order of the entire public,” Peter admitted.

Strange looked down again. “You can ask me questions, but try not to bother me if you already know the answers.”

“Not worth your time?” Peter said with a grin.

Strange’s eyes flickered, his jaw tightening slightly. “You could say that,” he said flatly. Guardedly.

Peter winced, not knowing what nerve he’d hit but guilty all the same. Who was this man? He kept talking anyway, of course. “Is your magic an innate thing? How do you do it? Is it like alchemy, or like Harry Potter, or something else? Elemental specific?”

Strange lowered his book, raising an eyebrow. “If you’re speaking in references, it’s more like the Force.”
Peter almost squealed. Okay, he definitely squealed.

One side of Strange’s mouth flickered up in a genuine smile, though it was gone as soon as it had emerged, as though the man had hidden it. “I use the energy of other dimensions of the multiverse, learning the specific realms I must tap for specific spells, as the source of my power.”

“What can you do?” Peter said, his eyes shining with excitement.

“Most everything, as long as I have felt, or have a way to quantify, the energy I need to do so.”

“So… can you levitate things?”

Strange raised both eyebrows. “Is that a question?” Peter, and the chair he was situated in, rose a few inches, sparks of orange light flickering in the space beneath.

“Woah!” Peter craned over the edge of the chair to survey the spell as he was floated back down. Excitement had all but completely replaced his caution, distracting him even from the Knot. “Can you…” he thought fast—“summon things?”

“Like create things, or call specific objects?”

“Both?”

Strange closed the book, his hands clasping a top it quickly as he explained, “I can create things quite easily, especially if I am projecting within another dimension. Often, it's easier to manipulate energies that aren’t your home. And I can only summon objects with strong, specific auras, like treasured heirlooms or magical relics.” He looked to the cloak at his shoulders, lifting a still-trembling hand to stroke its patchwork surface. “But I can get around that by portling.” He jerked his chin to the wall next to them. “Empty mug?”

Peter fixed his gaze on the thing across the room.

An sparking orange ring appeared beside it, and through it emerged Strange’s hand. Peter whipped his gaze over to the man, and saw him reaching through an identical portal near him. Long fingers curled about the mug on the other side of the room and drew it through the circle of power.

“Catch.”

Spider-Man’s hands flashed out to snatch the mug, and Peter goggled at it. “No way.” More questions leapt from his tongue. “What happens when you close the portal if your still in it? Can you even do that? Can you portal anywhere? How do you know where to direct it?”

Another quick grin from Strange, and Peter felt strangely pleased with himself. “One at a time! I can close the portal when something is still passing through it—exactly what you expect happens. Whatever it is is spliced between the two locations.”

Peter shuddered. “Gross.”

“It often is,” Strange agreed. “And I can’t portal anywhere, only to places I know, or can quantify, the energies of.”

“So… you have to have been there?”

“Not necessarily. I’ve never been to Wakanda, but there are plenty of internet pictures of it.”

Peter tapped his chin, intrigued. “You can know energies via images?”
“I can quantify them that way. It took practice, of course, but it’s pretty much second nature, now,” Strange explained.

“Is it only through sight? Or if I provided the specific sounds or tastes or smells, would it work too?”

Strange paused at that, his nebulous eyes almost vibrating with thought. “Those are less common, but, with practice, I don’t see why not.”

“Can you… can you only portal to places? Or can you portal to objects?” People? Tony?

“Oh. Peter nodded, trying to keep the disappointment from his face.

“I tend to use Google Maps,” Strange admitted. “Street-view is entertally helpful.”

“Where are you based?” Peter inquired.


Peter couldn’t keep his shock from showing as he realized there’d been magic in his city, true sorcery, his entire life. He finally managed, “why Queens?”

“Well, it has the best deli in the city,” Strange said. “Delmar’s Deli-and-Grocery.”

Peter burst out laughing.

“What?”

“Small world, Doctor Strange, sir,” Peter said. “I go to school right by there, and I always buy something for Spider-Man.”

The doctor’s unreadable gaze turned on him again. “Best sandwiches in Queens.”

“Apparently in all the world, if you choose there, out of everywhere in the universe!”

“Not everywhere--remember, I have to know the energies?”

Peter nodded, still grinning. “Right. What does Delmar’s feel like?” He didn’t really expect the doctor to be able to answer that--no one could just explain the Force, after all.

Strange rocked back, one finger of his still-clasped hands tapping against the cover of the book. “Sand,” he finally said. “Tiny pricklings of sand, clinging to you, pooling in the wrinkles of your skin and clothes.”

It made sense. An unnerving amount of sense. So Peter just nodded. “What does… here feel like? Wakanda?” he questioned, leaning forward.

Strange closed his eyes, and Peter almost yelped as an orange haze touched the air around them. It undulated like smoke, licking at the air, or at the other energies drifting through the room. Peter watched the stain of color with wide eyes, his hands itching to reach out, to touch it.

It disappeared abruptly as Strange opened his eyes and shook himself. “Bone,” he finally said. “Bone and fire. Smooth, strong, clean, supportive, but there are areas of roiling power, scorching areas. I think it’s the nanotech.”
“That makes an unnerving amount of sense,” Peter said out loud this time.

“It should. You can feel it, even if you are not conscious of it.”

“The Force runs through us all?”

That flickering, blink-and-you-miss-it half smile again. “It does indeed.”

* * *

Stephen didn’t think of himself as a dog person.

But this teenager was decidedly reminding him of a very excited labrador, or maybe a golden retriever, and Stephen was beginning to change that opinion.

Or maybe he was just very, very tired. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Here he was, sitting in a nanotech chair, somehow still able to conjure dimensional energies in response to the kid’s questions despite the exhaustion hovering in every cell of his body. Here he was, unable to stop grinning at the excited comments of the boy.

Peter. Peter… Stark, he supposed. He should ask what the kid’s name was, instead of just assuming. Spider-Man.

The Eye of Agamotto was nestled safely beneath his tunic, still open and warm. The stubborn superheroes had bought his performance and he thankfully hadn’t had to actually tap any power; as a result, he continued to be conscious. But God--his head was screaming and his hands were shaking so hard he almost couldn’t hide the movements by securing them together.

But apparently tonight--today?--was one of his bad nights.

So, he’d gotten a book and dealt with it, because the Mystic Arts had never failed him on these nights. They’d never failed him, in general.

And now there was a puppy asking him questions.

Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, was a Jedi Master now, and he somewhat liked it.

“So, do you have acolytes? Padawans?” Peter asked after another moment.

“His name is Wong,” Stephen said, and prided himself on his straight face.

“So you teach the arts?”

A pang of grief shattered through Stephen, but his face didn’t change. “No, I mostly learn from Wong; he just doesn’t get a title.”

“Wait so why are you the Supreme one, then?”

*The Supreme one.*

He was grinning again, and stanching it just as quickly. “I have an affinity for understanding all forms the energies take. I possess a lot of raw power,” Stephen explained.
“The Force is strong with you?”

“I am blown away by your ability to reference space operas. But yes,” he sighed, “the Force is strong with this one.”

Peter turned bright red, giggling. Stephen thought the boy might be just as tired as he, and just as unable to quell it, as he watched him dissolve into slap-happy laughter.

“So,” the kid eventually said. “Only one padawan?”

“Yes,” Stephen said. He did not elaborate, and he did not take his hands from their clasped position atop the book.

“Hm,” was Peter’s reply.

There was something off about the boy, Stephen decided. Something that tickled at his doctor’s instinct, that told him to examine. To think neuroscientifically about word choice or posture or pronouns, to make a diagnosis.

But it wasn’t his place, not anymore. And he would much rather listen to the boy instead of calculate him, anyway.

Or maybe he was just very, very tired.

“Why do you really want to help us?” Peter said suddenly.

Stephen peered at him. “Meaning?”

“Why do you want to find Mr. Stark? Why did you follow the call to Wakanda?”

Stephen stayed silent for a long moment. Flitting through answers, through reasons, through his instinct to lie. “I followed the call because it was new,” he said. “Because it was a challenge. And now I stay because I want to help you. There’s no ‘why’ to it.”

Peter smiled. “You remind me of him.”

Stephen just raised an eyebrow.

“Mr. Stark. You remind me of him.”

“I’m flattered,” Stephen said. The sarcasm in the tone was instinctual, but he found he meant his words. Stark was this boy’s father—he cared for him. Immensely. He looked up to him, understood him.

Stephen wondered what traits he possibly exhibited to make that connection within Peter.

Peter heard his sarcasm and just smiled, knowingly.

And Stephen had the distinct impression he was now being the one diagnosed.

They fell silent, and Peter brought a hand up to rub at his chest. Stephen watched him, expression yielding nothing.

“You didn’t know Aedoilagen,” Peter said, “which says there’s a lot of sorcerers. But you only have one padawan, which says maybe not.”
Stephen didn’t answer.

“Or maybe… you said you hadn’t felt someone entering their astral form in a long time.”

“I did.”

“There aren’t any sorcerers left, are there?” the boy said quietly. “You didn’t know Aedoilagen even existed.”

Stephen stood up abruptly, looking anywhere at the boy as the memory of an old, wise woman’s smile broke through his mask. Just for a moment, as he braced his hands against the tabletop before him.

Then the control was back, though the grief lingered. Stephen had long ago stopped caring if that was natural, not being able to ignore it often--nine months hadn’t changed anything, after all.

Stephen sighed inwardly, straightening. He let his hands fall freely, let their trembling go unhidden. He wasn’t sure why. “You’re right,” he admitted with a sardonic smirk.

Peter just smiled sadly at him. “You do remind me of Mr. Stark.” He kept smiling, looking back at the sleeping princess, and then at Stephen’s hands. “I think I’ll go back to work, now. Thanks.”

“Of course,” replied Stephen.

The boy wheeled away, his intense focus turning back onto the locating of his father.

Stephen sat down.

He really was tired.

Chapter End Notes

Stephen is unsettled by Peter-the-human-lie-detector.

Hope you liked this!!! I certainly had fun introducing Peter into the world of the Mystic Arts. :) Next chapter is Tony. And some plot. And some angst. Awww yesssss.
In Which Screams are Heard

Chapter Notes

Once again, I must attempt comfort: Don’t hate me until the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The standing turned to kneeling. The kneeling, to convulsing. And the convulsing, to curling, trembling, around his knees and head, trying to breathe through the pressure shattering across him.

Tony was chanting his name when his Captor arrived. His voice was absorbed by the nothingness around him, but he felt, he wished, he thought that perhaps he was absorbing it too.

Anthony Edward Stark

I am Anthony Edward Stark.

It had begun to mean nothing, become part of this hateful universe. When the syllables rolling off his tongue, he no longer recognized them. But at least he remembered.

He felt the change in energy when another being arrived in this claustrophobic universe. It was a quiet trace, like a breath of cool air, of something he knew, something he remembered. A trace of home.

Tony’s neck straightened of its own accord, his hand reaching towards the flicker as a snake would emerge from its burrow.

Another trace—a second person arriving.

The two whispers of Earth seared through Tony, giving him the strength to look up.

He focused on the shapes before him, shapes approaching him. It took a long, long while for him to recognize them, and even longer for him to name them.

Aedoilagen and Kenja had knelt next to him by the time Tony realized who they were, and he pulled his hand back in towards his body. It felt like he was moving from beneath endless feet of water, the pressure of the wrongness of this world weighing on him, chaining him. But Tony gritted his teeth and forced his muscles to work, to adapt to this new environment.

And curled his hand to display his middle finger.

Aedoilagen’s chuckle sounded like it came from underwater. “So some fire remains.”

“Not for long,” came the voice of the other woman, ragged with impatience. “Not long now.”

Tony hardly processed her words, and when he did, he didn’t care. He couldn’t, couldn’t remember how. This universe was ripping him apart, taking his consciousness and ripping him apart, piece by piece, neuron by neuron, memory by memory, and he had to protect them, protect them at any cost—Anthony Stark...
“I didn’t realize the dimension would have such a strong effect on him.”

“It’s got to be that inventor’s mind. All those rules of our world, the ones that don’t apply here.” A pause. “Win-win.”

Anthony…

“We can take you out of here. But not until we know what we’re looking for. Where we’re looking for them.”

Wrong. This was wrong, wrong size, wrong world, wrong consciousness. Wrong energy—did it follow the laws some vague memory told him it should? Entropy, enthalpy, transfer and change, creation and destruction—he couldn’t feel it, he didn’t know he had felt it until it was gone. Electrons and protons and neutrons in arrangements that defied everything, quarks taking impossible forms, particles that were wrong wrong wrong.

Tony…

“Where are the Rogues?”

Not here, not here, nothing was here. He shouldn’t be here, maybe he wasn’t here, maybe there was no here, no time, no sound no touch no taste no sight no--

He didn’t speak. He couldn’t speak—he didn’t remember how.

“This is your last chance,” said that voice again. “You won’t like what happens after. Where. Are. The. Rogues.”

Terror burst through him as he realized he had to work to comprehend the words. He couldn’t understand them, he was forgetting how to understand them.

This world was disassembling him. He was being taken apart, and he could feel it happening, each tiny brick taken from his soul. His name...

“Take it, Kenja. Take him.”

“Thank…”

It was only sounds, from that point on. Sounds he couldn’t put together. Sounds that he didn’t comprehend. A beast. That’s all he was now, an animal--

Pain.

Orange perception, orange energy, and pain.

Starting at the tips of his fingers, creeping up his arms, through each of his ribs, along the curls of his esophagus. Pain. Indescribably excruciating agony.

He knew pain.

He knew it.

Pain came from the world he knew, pain was part of home. He remembered pain.

His perception narrowed, curling down to shield his core as the malevolent magic crept ever further through him. Sparks flew against his insides, embers of ice in his mouth and heart.
The pain traveled slowly.

Slowly.

He knew that, too. Slow meant time. There was time, time that it took for him to draw in a breath, to scream.

It was an agonized cry, a triumphant one.

He could only feel one section of his form, one small area of utter torture that commanded his whole perception. If there is enough pain at one time, the brain cannot quantify it all at once, can only feel one part of the body at a time. A rule he knew. A rule of his world.

He screamed again, screamed of agonized delight.

That rule applied here.

Somewhere, someone was speaking, laughing, roaring for more. He gripped at the sound, aware of its movement, aware of the waves as they reflected off the curves of his ear, directed toward the delicate bones within. He roared silently with them-- more, more. Bring me back.

Lanthanum before cerium, praseodymium, neodymium, promethium, samarium, europium... Lanthanide metals, electrons filling the f-orbitals. Often highly reactive, forming oxide coating when exposed to oxygen. Corrode when combined with other metals. Become brittle when added to nonmetals. Most stable ionic form has a 3-plus charge.

Lanthanides were not rare, in his universe, and played a part in everything from lighters to TV screens to colored glass.

His universe existed. He existed.

The point of agonizing perception shifted, moving along his ribs, giving the sensation of warping them as it went. It was fire and ice and loneliness and heartbreak and betrayal, and it centered on his sternum.

He’d felt it before. He’d had weight there before, weight and pain in all its forms.

A machine.

A machine he made, a machine he made through pain, of pain.

Mechanic.

Tony…

Anthony Edward Stark.

I am Anthony Edward Stark, and I am not broken.

The pressure didn’t lift, the pain didn’t ease, but Tony stopped bowing to it. Stopped guarding against it. This universe was just another prison, just another cave, just another obstacle for him to face. And Tony wasn’t afraid.

The energy didn’t resist him when he moved, this time.

Tony threw himself upward, onto his feet; he would not face this in the fetal position. He would not.
Kenja and Aedoilagen rocked backwards, the latter cursing as she stumbled. Kenja was silent, silent and still, aside for the orange light weaving through her extended fingers, glowing in her eyes and between the exposed teeth of her smile.

Tony snarled—snarled and snarled and snarled to the frequency of the energy ripping him apart, tearing him into atoms. He’d felt it before.

“You should…” he panted, “have left… me here alone.”

Kenja’s smile disappeared.

He could have sworn he heard the words ‘you will wish’ dance through the air of the pocket dimension, but the older woman’s mouth did not move. Instead, her lip lifted in a canine growl and the light began to burn brighter—brighter and brighter, until it was searing through the universe, searing through Tony.

His world dissolved into screams.

But it was his world, once again.

And Tony relished it.

* * *

“Hey, Doctor Strange, sir?”

Shuri was awake again, which was the only indication Peter had of the passage of time. His circadian rhythm was likely irrevocably destroyed, and he wondered how long it had been since he’d looked at a clock. There wasn’t much passion behind the thought—he was just curious.

The sorcerer looked up from his book, eyes slightly dull. Part of Peter wanted to ask him what was wrong, ask him what had happened to give him that air of lofty separation, aloof protection. But now was not the time.

“Yes?”

“You don’t know Aedoilagen.”

“We already established this.” That eyebrow had cocked upward again.

“Do you know anyone?” Peter winced. “That’s not—I mean, are you the only person from before whatever happened? The only one who survived?”

“Wong’s been studying the Arts much longer than I have,” Strange said. “What’s your point?”

“Might he know Aedoilagen?”

Strange opened his mouth, then closed it again. “You know, he might. My arrival somewhat coincided with ‘whatever happened’, but Wong knew a lot of people.”

Peter vibrated.

“I’ll go ask him.”
“Would you please?” Peter laughed.

Shuri looked up from her screen, trotting over. “Do you need a plane to get back to New York?”

Strange just looked at her.

Shuri squinted, then flooded with embarrassment. “Oh,” she said. “Right.”

“I appreciate the offer, however,” Strange said. He stood, stretching his spine long. It cracked with three audible pops and Spider-Man followed suit, having been far too stationary the past… while?

Shuri had been quite irritated to know he’d questioned the sorcerer while she was asleep, and had forced him to convey what he’d learned, lab-report style, despite the work they needed to complete. Strange had just watched him, not once interrupting to correct even though Peter was sure he’d been wrong many a time, somehow seeming amused as he was discussed like some sort of science experiment. Shuri now had an electronic document open to perpetually scribble down questions and information she learned about the sorcerer. So, when Strange got up to portal, neither Shuri nor Peter needed to ask his method.

Peter couldn’t help but notice that it only took one circle of the man’s trembling hands to cleave open time and space, when he’d seen multiple from Aedoilagen. A bubble of hope lifted the Knot slightly from its sunken spot in his chest.

But Strange didn’t step through the portal, simply leaned through it and screamed, “WONG!”

Peter jumped as a crash emanated from the hole in reality.

A heavily accented voice drifted out immediately following the sound of catastrophe. “Strange! It’s about time you decided to update me.”

“No, I just came to return the book I stole when you weren’t paying attention,” the sorcerer replied, peering around the edge of the portal. Peter watched the front half of Strange seemingly cease to exist, and couldn’t help a chuckle.

“Strange.”

“I came to ask you if you’d provide some insight.”

“You, Stephen Strange, are asking for my help?” came the voice in a perfect deadpan.

“Call the media,” was Strange’s reply. “You might actually be able to provide something valuable to a mission.”

“What do you want?”

“Come over here, will you? I’ve got an audience who are giggling at me.”

Peter immediately stopped giggling as a squat, Asian man appeared in the portal, squinting at the comparatively blinding light of the lab. His robes were different from Strange’s—red—and Peter wondered what they signified. Maybe it didn’t matter.

Wong surveyed them, his expression shifting from seriousness to slightly-more-amused seriousness. “You’ve attracted strays.”

“No, we attracted him, from what he’s said so far,” Shuri said. “I’m Shuri.”
“Peter,” said Peter, waving awkwardly. He wasn’t sure what else to do.

The older sorcerer ignored them, looking back to Strange. He opened his mouth, then paused. “Are you wearing the Eye, open?”

Strange put a hand up to his chest, covering the green light shining through his tunic. “Yes. And I know it’s dangerous, concentrated alien energies, blah blah blah. Don’t start; we need its power.”

_For what?_ Peter didn’t interrupt.

Wong rolled his eyes. “Fine. So?”

“So, do you know anything about a Maura Aedoligen?”

Peter didn’t expect the expressive shift in the otherwise-serious man as Strange spoke. Shock, grief, and hope spread across the face that had been flat moments before. Wong almost looked like Ned, in that second.

“She’s dead,” the sorcerer said. “You told me they were all dead.”

Peter looked at Strange, waiting for the reaction to Wong’s accusatory tone, but the doctor didn’t so much as twitch. “We were all told they were dead.”

“She worked at the London Sanctum,” Wong said, and Peter glanced at Shuri. The girl nodded, and both of them pulled their screens to their chests, ready to record any and all information Wong bestowed on them.

“She specialized in mind manipulation,” Wong continued. “She was _brilliant_. Heroic. She somehow balanced her family with the Arts, and was one of the best soldiers I ever met. But the London Sanctum was completely decimated by—”

Wong broke off, glancing at Peter and Shuri.

“It’s alright,” Strange said, and Wong nodded.

“After Dormammu, there was nothing left of that Sanctum. You saw. You and your _doctor’s instincts_ said no one could have survived!”

“No one in the rubble could have. And we didn’t sense anyone using the Arts after, Mordo included—I was even wearing the Eye—but someone escaped. She did.”

“Maura’s alive?” There was such hope in Wong’s gaze.

Peter stepped forward. “She’s alive. She survived whatever weirdly-named catastrophe you were just talking about, built a team of freaky minions, and kidnapped Tony Stark.”

A pause.

“What?” Wong said, shaking his head. “You’re mistaken. Maura wouldn’t—”

“See for yourself,” Shuri interrupted, turning the screen in her hand towards Wong. Peter glimpsed it as she turned and recognized the blurry image from Portugal they’d used for facial recognition. “We think she’s looking for the Rogue Avengers, and she kidnapped Stark to lure them into the open and/or use him for his knowledge of where they are.”

“Why wouldn’t she contact us? Why wouldn’t she try…” Wong wondered.
“Um.” Peter raised his hand. “You thought she was dead. Maybe she thought the same.”

Strange and Wong looked at each other.

“I should have started apprenticing,” Strange murmured. “Fuck…”

“No one could have expected you to,” Wong said. It was the tone Pepper or Rhodey often used when Tony was being self-deprecating, like they were justifying something. Peter grew even more curious, and couldn’t help the dart of his eyes towards Strange’s shaking hands.

“Do you know anything that could help us find her? Anything about her family?” Peter asked.

“Nothing.” Wong shook his head. “I thought she was dead. But I do know that she wants to help people. If she’s done what you say, she thinks it is for a good reason.”

Spider-Man forcefully swallowed his growl.

Wong continued, “We’ve had to be more secretive about our magic since the Scarlet Witch’s exploits in Lagos. It’s partially why we haven’t been apprenticing to build up the sorcerer’s ranks, and probably why she never realized anyone else had survived.”

Peter almost cracked and yelled, *survived WHAT?*, but caught himself at the last minute. He hated this not knowing. Hated everything about it.

“But she likely can’t use her magic to help much, anymore,” Wong added. “Perhaps that is why she seeks the Rogue Avengers.”

“What, just to *talk* to them?” Shuri said, incredulous. Peter was inclined to agree.

Wong shrugged. “Perhaps. When I knew—”

He was cut off by the portal abruptly slamming shut, and the clatter of chairs as Strange collapsed, a gargled cry ripping itself from his throat.

Spider-Man was moving in an instant, spinning to seek threat. Peter fought at him, demanding, *is he okay?*

Peter won out, and sprinted towards the fallen sorcerer as he tried to rise against the lab table, Shuri at his heels. The red, sentient cloak beat them both, wrapping about Strange’s shoulders to somehow help him from the ground.

“Doctor Strange!” Peter said, hands hovering awkwardly above the sorcerer as he braced his hands against the tabletop, breathing hard. “What is it?”

“I’m fine,” the man growled through gritted teeth, his hair listing into his eyes. “It’s just—”

The light in his chest flared with suddenly blinding energy, and Strange broke off with something far too close to a scream. Peter couldn’t contain his whine of concern and confusion as the sorcerer forced his hands from the table. They were shaking like saplings in a gale as he pressed them, seemingly involuntarily, to his ears, his grimace growing ever-stronger.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Peter turned to Shuri, but she only shook her head.

“I don’t know. Doctor? Doctor!”

“I’m fine,” the man choked out again. But he didn’t look fine, not in the slightest, and Spider-Man
was slipping through again. Was it that light in his chest? The ‘Eye’ that Wong had said was dangerous?

But before Peter could do anything, Strange suddenly straightened. He was still breathing hard, but the pain had disappeared from his eyes as soon as it had come. Slowly, as though he couldn’t quite believe something, Strange lowered his hands.

“What happened?” Shuri asked quietly.

“The pocket dimension,” Strange answered. “It’s not so strong, now, but I can hear a call. From Stark”

Peter stopped breathing as Strange turned to him, empathy in those multicolored eyes.

“I can hear him screaming.”

Chapter End Notes

Soooo... you can take that as a good thing? Or a bad thing? Or just sort of stare at it like I did and quietly whisper "wtf..."

Anyway, I loved writing this, and I hope you enjoyed! Thanks for reading, and drop me some feedback and I'll try to dodge the pitch forks... See you soon!
Peter had his hands pressed against the lab’s broad windows as he watched the magnetic suspension trains carry their loads of shining metal through the cavernous mountains when he felt Shuri approach. He didn’t look away from the view, instead letting his forehead slump into the reinforced glass.

“Hey,” she said, leaning against the window next to him.

He answered with a lift of his fingers, not bothering to hide his exhaustion. Or his resignation. She would have already told him if there’d been any progress.

“You’re being dreary again.”

He humored her with a half-smile, but didn’t turn away from the window. If he looked up and out of the mountain from here, it was like looking down a tunnel, with the light glimmering at the end.

“We’ll find him, you know. We’ve got so many advantages now. Strange. You. And I don’t fail, especially not with… things like this.” Shuri put a hand on his shoulder.

“You keep saying that. I keep saying that. I just--what if--” Peter closed his eyes.

“What? You can’t keep on like this, Spinner.”

It had been two days. Two days of nothing, of trivial searches, of calculations that lead nowhere and investigations that ended fruitlessly. Two days of obsessively checking his Spotify playlists, of sending shorter and shorter texts to his family. (They’d stopped responding.) Two days of the presence of the Rogues that kept Spider-Man on the front of his mind. T’Challa had returned Grease. The king thought he needed her.

Two days of Strange refusing to tell them when the screams stopped or started.

But Peter knew. He knew from the catnaps the sorcerer took, never falling asleep for longer than forty-five minutes. He knew from the way the light beneath Strange’s tunic would fade when he thought no one was looking, when he’d stanch whatever extra power that light was giving him for a few moments of silence.

The screaming hardly ever stopped.

Spider-Man shook his head, inching his fingers together into fists. Shuri didn’t say anything, waiting, calculating, like she always did.

Screams. Tony’s screams. Two days of it. Peter could almost hear them himself.
“What if we’re too late?” Peter finally breathed. “What if he’s…”

“Alright, look at me.” Shuri wrenched him away from the window, her warrior’s determination overcoming his spider-strength for a moment.

He didn’t meet her gaze, instead looking anywhere but it. The lab behind her. The slumped form of their resident sorcerer as he managed to quell his exhaustion. The rhythmic clicking of Natasha Romanoff’s fingers across a keyboard as she continued their useless search.

Shuri sighed and released Peter’s wrists. “I want to tell you,” she said, her accented voice hard, “that that won’t happen. That we will find Stark before he can be wrung dry and killed.”

Peter flinched a bit, but was grateful for her harsh wording. One of them had to be forward about this.

“But I can’t. I can only promise that we will do everything in our considerable power to keep it from happening.” She grinned her half-smile.

“We keep saying that,” Spider-Man growled.

“What else is there to say?”

Nothing. There was nothing else for them to say, nothing else for them to do. They could only hope. And Peter had precious little of that left.

“There’s never been a call through the multiverse,” he said by way of explanation. “Strange told me. Nothing has enough energy in proportion to dimension size. And he can still hear him. He can still hear him screaming.”

But he couldn’t wish for those screams to stop. Because once they did, he would no longer know if Tony was even alive. The sounds tore him apart, but they were the only thing keeping him together. If they stopped, it really would be over. The last, fragile spark of hope would die with those screams.

“I…”

There were no words within the rift, the endless, yawning chasm in his core. It shattered through him, shattered him into shards of glittering darkness that told him it was too late, told him he would never see Tony again, told him he’d live with this empty feeling inside for the rest of his existence, told him to accept that he was going to lose another father, told him truths and lies he couldn’t distinguish from each other.

He just wanted the light to come back.

Peter raked his hands through his curls, unable to stop the what-ifs swirling within his mind. What-ifs that made his heart clench and his stomach churn.

Shuri pulled his hands away, keeping ahold of them this time, though her grip softened. She pulled him away from the window and sat down on the steps to the upper tiers of the workshop, hauling him down beside her. He resisted at first, but eventually surrendered to her will.

They sat there in silence, for a while. Spider-Man focused his enhanced senses on the regular, if troubled, breathing of Strange, on the sound of Romanoff’s jeans rustling as she moved.

“When my father died, I thought I would too,” Shuri finally said, her voice quiet as to not attract the attention of the spy or the sorcerer. Peter turned his eyes on to his shoes as she continued. “I couldn’t
imagine a world without his steady hand on my back, his solid leadership bringing my people forward. But eventually… I realized that that hadn’t gone away.”

Peter looked up at her, confused.

“You love Stark. He’s your father.” Shuri smiled, the enormous curls of hair on the back of her head shining in the lab’s bleached light. “And every father, someday, leaves. Every parent will someday travel to the ancestral plane. Someday, we have to grow beyond those before us, allow time to continue its flow through the world.”

Peter’s words crawled out on his next breath, barely audible. “Not a third time… another father…”

Shuri leaned over and slid an arm over his shoulder, hugging him to her side. She was silent for a moment, then spoke hesitantly. “Three?”

Peter just nodded.

Shuri didn’t press the point, looking back towards the window with a bob of her chin. But she hugged him a little tighter.

He is in pain, suffering, dying, right now. Peter’s treacherous brain whispered. He felt something sinking, fast and heavy and so, so painful down through his chest and pulling him after it. He was drowning, he was suffocating in thoughts and questions and those damned whispers.

Those words he said over the phone when he was arrested will be the last you hear his voice. No more missions, no more building suits together, anticipating the donning of them. No more stories over the phone, no more proud smile, no more grinning in response to praise. Spider-Man couldn’t imagine it. It made him sick to try, drove the shards of darkness deeper.

Those words he said over the phone will be the last you hear from him. The last he speaks to you. No more days reaching into nights in the workshop, no more chemistry advice the day before a test, no Uno in the living room of the compound-- Peter almost roared as he clapped his hands over his ears.

Shuri pressed the side of her head into his. “Please, Spinner. You’re strong,” she said. “If we’re too late…” She searched for words. “You will get through it. You did it before, you’d do it again. And you will flourish from it, this passing of the old, like the sprout that finally gets enough sunlight on the jungle floor when the old redwood falls. The redwood’s passing is terrible, tragic, but in the light of it…” Shuri tapped his chest. “You’ll continue on.”

Peter could only shake his head. She was wrong. Tony was not the blockage keeping the sun from him, not the one keeping him from growing. He was teaching him, encouraging him, protecting him.

“My father left behind a nation and a people for me and my brother. A kingdom, a future. He left me the world, one I finally found my place in. One my brother saved.” Shuri gestured around them. “Stark left you a world, too. Maybe you can’t see it right now, but there’s a world out there and a world inside you that he built to be ready for him to leave.”

Peter looked at her, looked at himself. He was seeing everything in third person, feeling everything the same way. He pulled his knees up to his chest.

“It’s up to you to decide what to do with it.”

It’s up to you.
Up to you, kid.

You.

Why? Why was it up to him, why did it have to be up to him? Why did he have to be left alone to carry out a vision of a future he didn’t want? Why couldn’t there be someone else, anyone else, to take the weight of the world away?

And leave justice to the fates? something whispered within him. Why wouldn’t it be up to you?

Did he really want that weight gone? Did he truly desire his responsibilities to be lifted, his hardships solved by another’s hand? Spider-Man was a result of a call to fix. A call to grow up, to face the world with the skills he now possessed. And as much as he shied away from admitting it, as much as it terrified every part of him, Peter was a result of that call, as well.

Why wouldn’t it be up to me?

Shuri was right.

She was so right, and he hated it, hated that he could think beyond the possibility of Tony’s death. Hated that there was a future he could conceive that Tony wasn’t in. Hated that he himself would have a place in it. It felt like a dishonor, a betrayal, to even consider going on through life without the man that meant so much to him.

But then, that’s what Tony would want.

The Knot splintered within Peter.

For a single moment, he was overwhelmed as the Knot leached its noxious contents into his soul. Pain and fear and uncertainty and rage and betrayal and confusion and so, so much desolation swept through him as though an earthquake had cleaved him open. It washed against the splinters of darkness, consumed the what-ifs, doused all hope and possibility; he went blind and deaf and mute from the power of it all. For a single moment.

And Peter’s body shuddered as his head dropped onto his knees and he finally, finally, let the sobs slip form his throat.

Chapter End Notes

*Anxious finger guns*

Okay bye.
In Which Tony Makes a List

Chapter Notes

What?? Another chapter?? So soon?? YES INDEED! I'm really liking this break stuff that's happening. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony hated waiting.

He wasn’t much of a fan of what he was waiting for, either, but the anticipation might just be worse.

Simultaneously yearning for and terrified of the return of Kenja and Aedoilagen, Tony lay on his back and stared up at the roof of a sky. Silver and red wove around each other like lightning through storm clouds, and he wondered why. He thought it looked like Ultron, and resisted the urge to cringe in on himself.

He was trying to move as little as possible; shifting made his insides writhe with the residual sparks of Kenja’s magic. It was not a pleasant sensation, but it was the only one that he could rely on to keep him sane, keep him Tony. So he horded the possibility for pain like the most valuable of treasures, and stared at the sky.

He thought that deserved a high spot of his ‘reasons my life is fucked up’ list. Being actually grateful for excruciating torture was something he couldn’t say he’d ever experienced before, but at least it reminded him who he was.

Time must move differently here, Tony had realized. (It existed, at least.) Everything was so drawn-out--when his captors left, they left for what felt like eternity. He figured he was moving quicker, faster, and he hated that he didn’t know the rate of change so he could calculate the true time.

Everytime they left, the energy of this despicable place tried to suffocate him again. But the pain had brought Tony back into himself, brought memory back into himself, and he fought off the dimension ferociously. He would not be devoured again. And every time he got close, every time his mind began to slip away, Kenja would return to remind him of it.

The ground enveloped him somewhat stickily, seeping between the strands of his hair as he lay atop it. Tony glared at it, glared at everything, and breathed. He was getting better at that--breathing. And no screams followed, which was always good, at least when he was still Tony.

Breathing. He couldn’t do much else.

Basically, Tony was very, very bored.

So incredibly bored that he’d almost prefer the agony, at this point. Bored and still; not something that Tony Stark had ever dealt with well. He wanted something in his hands, wanted something to focus his mind on.

So he lay there for eternity, slowly going insane. But not in the way he had--he was not losing his mind. At least there was that. He would not fall back into this dimension. He wouldn’t.
But the relentless march of time kept moving, too slowly and not slowly enough. Tony recited the periodic table, played chess game after chess game with himself. He forced himself to square and cube random numbers. Small things, like the exercises of a weightlifter, to keep the synaptic connections within him from going dark again.

Time kept passing.

Tony moved his arm, tracing it through the strange texture of the ground beside him. The earth clung to his skin, relinquishing him with a soft squelching noise. Pain skittered up through his shoulder, and Tony grimaced. He lifted his head, letting the residue of energy assault his spine and lungs.

It wasn’t enough.

Tony snarled and sat up, engaging every muscle he could, focusing his whole consciousness on the way his heart and stomach shivered under the extreme pins-and-needles sensation. His mind cleared, chasing away the claustrophobic dimension as it probed at his brain.

“Fuck,” he said, massaging his upper arms. The feeling dissipated, leaving him feeling clean. Safe. “This is fucked up.”

Nothing responded, and the dimension swallowed his words before they even reached his own ears.

Tony sat there for another long while, naming the bones and muscles in the human body and the corresponding sections of his Iron Man suit. He missed the damn thing--how long had it been since he’d worn it? He was forgetting the inner design, the locations of even the most important wires, and it wasn’t because of this creepy-ass dimension’s influence.

He brought his hands up to his hair, running them through it slowly. Though he no longer expected it, Tony was still caught off-guard by the lack of grime within it. He was confined to a world of non-newtonian fluid, and it was exceedingly unnatural.

*Non-newtonian fluids. Have I ever made oobleck with Peter?* Doing so would probably not be a good idea--they’d make a mess, and likely get the ratio wrong, and then Pepper would punish him by making him clean up instead of paying someone to do it.

He liked oobleck. Things that didn’t follow the laws of nature were interesting.

Except if they were pocket dimensions and psychotic sorcerers. Then they were just terrifying.

But Peter would like oobleck. Hopefully. If he did, maybe Tony could then admit his strange obsession with kinetic sand, and they could enjoy those strange substances together.

If he ever got out of here.

He’d been avoiding thinking about that. Wondering how anyone could possibly find him. Wondering how he could get out of here. Wondering what his family was doing right now, feeling right now, wondering what his future looked like. Wondering how long his future would be.

*I am Anthony Edward Stark, and I am not broken.*

He knew what broken felt like. And he knew he wasn’t there, knew this place could no longer cut him that deep, bring him that low.

Tony stood, wobbling on unsteady legs as the ground shifted beneath him. He frowned at it.
He took a hesitant step across the uneven floor, tracking the way it moved. It was a solid, he knew that, but still. It had viscosity. Measurable viscosity.

Tony took another step.

And then another.

It was sort of like walking on ice--the same control, the same conscientious use of friction. Tony slid across the dimension like some sort of deranged water-strider, turing before he got too close to the edge of the universe. The pressure of the dimensional energy increased the closer he got; it was really quite easy to tell.

Eventually, he stopped his strange skating and surveyed the dome of the sky as it extended into nothingness. He wondered how thick it was, how much border was between this small bubble of a dimension and the ones around him. He wondered how far he was from his own.

And he wondered what would happen if he just… kept walking. Walked right into that nothingness.

He didn’t plan to find out.

Tony sighed, looking back behind him. He wanted out of here. He wanted out, and he wanted out now. Even sleep escaped him--something about this form did not require it. He supposed the nightmares would keep him from that protection anyway, but being conscious for every tick of this mind-numbing dance of time.

“You know,” he said to the dimension, “I’m sure you’re really a great place. When someone can leave. D’ya think it would be cozy? Were you part of another universe before being engineered into this one? Or did Aedoilagen and Kenja create you?”

The dimension didn’t answer. Which made sense, seeing as it was a dimension.

“I’m going insane,” Tony sighed, “and I can’t really blame me.”

He sat down as close to the edge of the universe as he could manage without feeling like his soul was going to be pressed flat and shattered, and started off at the not-so-distant horizon. The end of the line.

Dimensional energy prickled at him, harsh and unforgiving, so different from that of his own universe. Tony hadn’t realized he could feel it until it had disappeared, and now he missed it more than he could describe.

So he turned his gaze toward the energy of this dimension, investigating, weighing. He read it like he’d read a blueprint, analyzed it like he would a circuit. He didn’t have words for it, didn’t even know if there were words at all, but the dimension reacted to him. Just slightly, like the wind might notice a bird leaping into its midst.

But as soon as he tried to quantify it, dividing his concentration in an attempt to understand, the energy writhed away from him, writhed against him, and Tony grunted as the pressure on his mind increased threefold. He slid backwards through the top layer of the ground, which rippled away from him like water atop a lake, and flopped backward again.

“What the hell is going on with my life?” he wondered. “I suppose I did ask for it. All the death attempts that never worked out. Too stubborn for that, apparently. I just can’t seem to die.”

And because he was bored, his mind leapt at the opportunity to connect that to something--mainly,
‘Hurricane.’

Tony groaned, closing his eyes. “I really don’t need Hamilton stuck in my head right now…”

In the eye of a hurricane, there is quiet. For just a moment. A yellow sky.

“The sky’s silver. And red.”

When I seventeen a hurricane destroyed my town. I didn’t drown. I couldn’t seem to die.

Tony tried to redirect the songbug to something else, anything else: the primary structure of sickle-cell hemoglobin, soldering safety, circuitry rules and exceptions to those rules. Something that wouldn’t remind him of Peter and home. But once a lyric had passed through his brain, he couldn’t help the following of the rest of the tune.

Tony resigned himself and opened his eyes.

And found the sky pulsing.

Tony sat up, staring at it. The red and silver were changing, shifting, glowing brighter and darker in oscillating times.

He looked frantically around for Kenja or Aedoilagen, his body already preparing itself for pain. But nothing appeared, and as he stopped focusing, the change ceased.

Tony sat, breathing hard, terrified, as this universe suddenly presented even more danger in the form of things unknown.

But nothing changed. It was like the shift in the sky had never occurred, like he really was going insane.

Tony cursed, long and drawn out.

He stared at the sky for a long while, not daring to take his eyes off it, not daring to concentrate on anything else. Hours must have passed as his fingernails dug into his palms, every instinct screaming at him to run.

Nothing.

And slowly, Tony relaxed, and turned almost gratefully back to the song.

Pulsing, once again.

Before he freaked, this time, Tony recognized the pattern. The sky was… giving him a beat? The specific rhythm behind the lyrics of ‘Hurricane’ were reflected by the dimension, red and silver eating at each other as certain notes danced through Tony’s mind.

He freaked even harder.

“Shit, shit, shitshitshit!” Tony yelped, bounding to his feet and curling his arms over his head. “Get out of my head!”

The pulsing stopped.

Tony slowly peeked out from beneath his arms, and still found no sorcerers entering the realm. Nothing sentient playing with his mind.
What the hell?

A little bit of curiosity trickled out through Tony’s terror. He concentrated on the sky again, and slowly let a few words float through his mind.

_I think there’s something you should know…_

Alright, so it was George Michael, but the important--and terrifying--part was that the dimension sung, too. The background rhythm of ‘Freedom 90’ played across the very universe.

Tony threw his hands into the air. “That’s it!” he yelled. “I’m out! That’s quite enough, thank you very much!”

But the song kept spinning through his mind, and the energy kept lapping the lyrics up hungrily.

The universe pulsed to the words ‘I think it's time I told you so.’

_Oh, fuck it._

“‘There’s something deep inside of me...’” Tony watched the sky.

A drumbeat echoed across it.

Tony hunched a bit, trying to get as far away from whatever strange shit was going on up there as possible.

Or maybe…

How did sorcerers feel? How did they manipulate the energy? The first step had to be feeling said energy. Crossing dimensions to become awakened to its presence...

“Let’s just assume I’m the one doing that,” Tony said. “Not some creepy aspect of this stupid dimension. ‘There's someone else I've got to be.’”

No pulse, this time, and Tony cocked his head, his theory growing ever-more complex.

“What, you tired all of a sudden?”

No reaction. He really needed to stop personifying things. The energy of this universe was doing something to him, or he was doing something to it; but it wasn’t alive. No matter how he wished it.

Tony narrowed his eyes, and concentrated all his perception on the pressure on his soul. He knew what this energy felt like. He understood it. It was trapped her, just as much as he. _'There's someone else I've got to be.'_

The sky flashed.

Tony straightened.

And a slow smile spread across his face.

“Okay,” he said. “Maybe I’m not so bored, after all.”
SOME HOPE FOR ALL OF YOU!!! SOME LONG-AWAITED, WELL-DESERVED HOPE.

You'll never guess what songs I was listening to before I wrote this. I did try to have them actually relate to stuff though, so there's that.

Anyway! Thanks for reading! Next chapter is... well, you'll see next chapter. It's good though, I promise. :)}
Stephen felt like shit.

Five hours of sleep over the last three days was unusual, even for him. Combined with the constant sucking void of the Stone at his chest and the intermittent cries ringing out through the dimension, he felt like someone was scraping out the inside of his skull and ribcage with a blunt gardening spade.

He was standing on the second tier of the lab, leaning out slightly over the balcony and trying to keep the black spots out of his eyes. The Cloak drifted against his back, resting like an ordinary piece of fabric, and Stephen stroked its quilted patterns rhythmically. On the floor below, a group of superheroes clustered around each other, strategizing uselessly. Stephen had participated the first few times, but, well, he honestly didn’t know how to contribute to this sort of problem.

And he made the boy skittish.

Stephen crossed his legs, leaning atop the railing and letting his head drop between his shoulders. The screaming had ceased for now, leaving his mind silent, but he couldn’t sleep, not while the rest of them were actually trying to do something.

That was another thing.

He felt like shit, and he felt useless.

He hadn’t felt useless in a long time, and he really, really didn’t like it.

But he wasn’t the only one feeling as such, and he didn’t intend to whine about it. So Stephen stood above the group and listened.

“Have we found anything on the family?” Romanoff was asking.

Stephen shook his head, and Shuri answered, “nope,” from beneath him.

“And nothing on her home, and nothing on her minions,” Rogers added, a hand coming up to rub his face. Stephen sent a small ribbon of imperceptible magic to shift Roger’s finger so it ended up poking him in the eye. Petty and childish, of course, and it made the darkness in his peripheral vision advance, but the confused look Roger’s gave his hand made Stephen feel a bit better.

“What’s our next move? Our next step?” Maximoff wondered. Stephen’s eyes were drawn to the way Peter’s glower became seventy percent darker. How many times had he asked himself that?

The conversation continued, going in circles, driving even Stephen utterly up the wall. This was pointless, it always was—but what else were they to do?

What else...

... 

“Doctor Strange, sir?”

Stephen bolted upright, his hands wiping up to bring his mandala shields into existence. The Cloak
flared upward, collars rising to brush Stephen’s cheeks. But it was only Peter, of course, and Stephen dropped his spells quickly. He must have lost a few moments, there. And of course the boy had noticed.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Always mean to startle someone, Spider-Boy,” Stephen said, tapping his collarbone in an attempt to clear his mind. “Take credit whenever you can.”

The boy rolled his eyes, residual irritation and frustration from the meeting leaching into the air around him. “I’ll keep that in mind. What are you doing up here?”

“Listening to you without having to tolerate your frankly tiresome presence.”

Peter nodded, then slapped the railing triumphantly. “I knew it!”

Stephen raised an eyebrow.

“You’re lonely.”

Stephen raised his other eyebrow.

“Don’t even try to deny it, sorcerer-guy,” Peter said, staring Stephen down from his very short position. “I’m an expert in seeing through bullshit.”

“And spewing it, apparently.”

“That right there? Bullshit.”

Stephen raised his shaking hand, displaying his sling-ring towards the boy. “I will portal you into a different dimension.”

“Lonely.”


“That doesn’t make a difference. You can still be lonely without being alone.”

“Maybe you can, but I’m not,” Stephen said flatly, hiding any emotion but irritation. Apparently this golden retriever could read minds. Unlikely as it was, Stephen threw up his mental shields just in case.

“Buuuuullllsh!” Peter lilted.

Stephen threw up his hands. “You are displaying the very reason I was not involved in your little squabble down there in the first place!”

“Lonely.”

“You should not be worrying about me,” Stephen said. He’d had enough of that for a lifetime. “You’re the one we’re all failing.”

Peter’s expression darkened almost comically. “We aren’t failing me, either.”

All of them were trying, and it still didn’t seem to be enough.
Stephen’s lip lifted slightly, and he looked away from the boy. How could he still not find her? He was the Sorcerer Supreme, wielder of the Time Stone—he should be done with this job by now.

Done, and returning to the empty Sanctum.

Stephen shut that thought down quickly, eyes flickering to the potential psychic beside him. He half-hoped the boy really was being influenced by a corporeal dimension, meaning Stephen wasn’t just extraordinarily obvious.

But Peter didn’t say anything, just moving to rest against the railing beside him.

Stephen’s hands twitched as a shriek drifted across his perception.

“Do you… how do you feel about the Accords?” the boy wondered.

Stephen forced himself back to reality as sound built up in his brain, hammering against him. “I don’t care about them.”

Peter gave him a questioning look.

Focus.

Stephen concentrated on this reality, consciously demanding his vision to focus. “I’m undecided. I think they’re important. But I can’t say I support them without being hypocritical, seeing as I should probably be sanctioned by them, but am not. Although, at the rate you humans attract dimensional attacks…” Stephen shook his head, once, then immediately stopped as blackness swam in his vision. “Just be thankful I can react quickly.”

Peter nodded. “It really is complicated, isn’t it?”

“Mmm,” Stephen grunted, trying to sound like he was still paying attention.

It took all his concentration not to bring his hands up to his ears again. But the boy was trying so hard not to think about it, to accept what was happening, and Stephen didn’t want to cut that down. Not after what he’d done before.

“Why don’t you like Rogers?”

Stephen formed words slowly, precisely. He would not flinch. He would not.

“It’s not personal. I dislike everybody.”

“Oh-huh.”

“Alright, maybe it’s personal for him,” Stephen admitted and turned the conversation back on the boy. “Why don’t you like him? Him being an American icon and all that shit.”

Peter snorted. “Do you really need to ask that?”

Stephen grimaced, nodding. “Point.” God, his head was so slow, his thoughts moving as though through treacle, clouded as they were by fatigue and the deafening interdimensional cries.

Stephen called out after them, again. He’d been doing it for days, in tandem with the loudest of the screams. It was unlikely he’d be heard; he’d only picked up on the sounds in the first place because of the Stone around his neck. But if the connection had already be formed, maybe, just maybe, his own message could get through.

Fight.
And keep doing it. They’re coming to find you. But you can’t leave them with all the work.

Fight.

He took a step back from the rail, and stumbled, the sparkling darkness reaching almost completely across his vision this time. Peter put a hand out, but Stephen caught himself in the Cloak’s buoyancy, the garment pushing him back against the railing again.

When he looked at the boy, there was a conflict raging across his face. Two conflicts. The nameless one Stephen couldn’t identify, and another: a war between concern and determination. Stephen ended that before it could continue tearing the boy apart.

“I’m not going to close the Eye,” he said. “Or take it off. Or sleep; you need me, and you know it.”

Peter nodded once, almost thankfully. “It’s power lets you--”

Stephen stopped listening.

I can’t locate the pocket dimension. I can’t locate the source of the screams. But I can sense use of magic and the entrance of astral forms, when not directly into a masked universe.

I can find her.

“I have an idea,” Stephen breathed, interrupting whatever Peter had been saying.

“What?”

Stephen allowed a slight grin to crawl across his face, the tiniest glimmer of true satisfaction. “I can find them.”

* * *

The words ripped through him.

Spider-Man took a step back, and then a step forward. His mouth opened, but no words came out—he thought he must have misheard.

Strange stepped tentatively away from the railing, and Peter could see the weakness inherent in every movement. He didn’t understand the magic, he didn’t understand why the man wouldn’t—couldn’t—rest, and he didn’t understand how the man could possibly still be standing. Iron will.

God, he missed Tony.

“What?” Spider-Man choked out.

Strange’s cloak repositioned itself on his shoulders, lifting slightly to help the man support himself. Spider-Man moved to offer a hand on instinct, but was swatted away. “I have an idea. And I think—I know—we can find her. We just need the cooperation of a certain Captain.”

The hollow in his chest that had emerged upon the dissolving of the Knot was filling again. But not with corrosive, rotting emotion, not with tears or pain or confusion. It was filling with hope.

Peter hadn’t realized how close he was to giving up. He’d grieved already, passed through the stages, and Shuri had brought him to acceptance. But… hope.
The sorcerer could find Tony.

“Shuri!” Peter almost screamed. He didn’t notice the way Strange flinched, one ear tipping towards the shoulder of the Cloak.

“What?” The girl’s head slammed upward from the screen she was analyzing. “What is it?”

“Strange has an idea.” The words tripped over each other coming out, trying to emerge over each other. “We need the Rogues.”

She nodded. “I’ll call my brother,” she said, simply accepting without question. “You go get them.”

Spider-Man was racing from the room moments later, but he still heard Shuri say, “and you, wizard-dude, will be staying right there and not blacking out. I swear, all the strays we’ve accumulated are actually insane.”

The Rogues came with him without question, each racing at their own top speed down the hallway. Peter topped them all.

T’Challa was waiting for them in the lab, once again having hands full of fuzzy (now quite chubby) kitten. Peter had seen the king eyeing his room, and had simply handed the cat back to him, ignoring any protest and trying not to look to desolate. It wasn’t because of relinquishing Grease, anyway. Beside the king, Strange had been forced into a chair, and Shuri was beckoning them down to the first level of the lab.

“Tell us,” Peter demanded, not checking to see if everyone had arrived.

Strange blinked once, slowly, and some part of Peter shriveled. The sorcerer was distracted. He was hearing Tony, again.

We’re coming.

“I can sense people entering and exiting their astral forms,” Strange said. “With a few exceptions: mostly, if the astral form is moving willingly directly into a shielded dimension, the energy is drawn from or released to that shielded dimension, and I can’t sense it. Meaning I can’t sense Aedoilagen entering her form when she’s traveling to where Stark is, or returning to her own dimension. I could sense her forcing Stark’s form into her pocket dimension—which must be on a tier of the astral frequency—because it was involuntary; it tore a large gap, relatively, in the fabric of this universe.”

“Someone entering their astral form tears a hole in the fabric of the universe?” It was Wanda who asked, and Strange shook his head.

“No, I was simply comparing it to something you might be able to quantify. Tearing a hole in the fabric of the universe looks much different,” Strange drawled. “A simple dimension change does involve forcing yourself through dimensional borders, and that involves gaining or losing energy at a certain rate. You have to absorb less energy if you’re not fighting the transformation.”

“The third law of thermodynamics,” Peter blurted before he could stop himself.

“I wish,” Strange muttered. “Unfortunately, it is not that simple. But anyway, the astral dimension is a higher frequency than our dimension, which is why, transposed upon it, one can occasionally drop spontaneously in energy level. That leaves you closer to our own dimensional frequency, allowing you to interact with objects. Entering your astral form absorbs energy, returning releases it.”

“Alright, so what’s your idea?” Peter demanded.
“I can sense that change in energy when it is being absorbed or released from our dimension,” Strange said. “I can sense its location, as well. So, all we have to do is get Aedoilagen to portal somewhere—which will absorb energy from the location she intends on going to—and then return to her original place, which will release that energy where she was before.”

“And you can sense that change,” Peter and Shuri said as one. He grinned at her, excited, interested, hopeful.

“Yes. And we have the perfect tool to get Aedoilagen to portal.” Strange’s sharp gaze leveled on the group on superheroes standing next to the two children. “Time for you to serve your purpose. As bait, of course.”

Spider-Man leapt atop the nearest table, scrambling to his feet so he could survey the entire group at once. The plan was laying out across his mind, and it was going to work.

He barked an excited, breathless laugh and flailed his arms. “So we portal them somewhere, location not mattering, and have them make a scene. Aedoilagen shows up, but they’re long gone by that point. We should leave a note, though. So she doesn’t stay to search for them before returning and letting us know where Mr. Stark is.”

“Exactly. And the city of choice… Bharuch,” Shuri said. “India hasn’t signed the Sokovia Accords, so it shouldn’t hurt them politically if these idiots show up in a small city.”

“As good as any,” T’Challa agreed.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Rogers said, stepping forward. “What do you even want us to do there?”

“What you do best,” Spider-Man couldn’t help but say. “Make a mess.”

Strange snorted, but Shuri waved a hand toward him. “Don’t be provocative,” she said.

Me? What about him?

But Spider-Man nodded anyway.

“Basically, that is what you need to do, though,” Shuri said. “Be seen. Get into the news. Show yourselves.”

“They stay here,” Rogers said, gesturing to the group of Rogues behind him.

Romanoff glowered. “It’s not going to be dangerous, Steve.”

“Exactly,” said the Captain. “You don’t need to expose yourselves.”

“But--” Wilson protested.

“The Captain may have a point,” T’Challa said. “The less disruption the better. But most assume where he goes, you go—it will be efficient.”

The group of superheroes looked prone to continue objecting, but Strange cut in before they could.

“Alright, fine, perfect. Anyone have a picture of Bharuch?”

While the Rogues huddled to discuss further, Peter pulled his phone from his pocket and made his way over to Strange, quickly opening Google Maps and finding Street View. “Here.”

But Strange didn’t take it, instead peering at the Indian city over Peter’s shoulder.
Peter cocked his head up at Strange, but the man was simply squinting at the screen from his slightly awkward angle. “You can use the phone,” Peter said. “I’m not sure what you need exactly.”

Strange’s intense gaze shifted onto him, and Peter thought he read surprise there. And then… shame?

“I’m not good with screens,” the sorcerer said, his voice still far too flippant for the way he clenched his jaw and looked away. “They involve too much precision.”

Peter suddenly remembered each moment when he’d noticed Strange’s shaking hands, and realized perhaps it wasn’t simply from exhaustion. He winced, feeling awful at having brought up something obviously painful. And that Strange felt he needed to skirt the subject to avoid feeling weak.

Peter wanted to hug him.

No, he wanted to hug someone, and Strange just happened to be closest.

“Move along the street a bit,” the man ordered. “I need a wider view to form the signature.”

Peter jerked back into himself and nodded, taking the program through Bharuch.

“That’s good,” Strange said, then rocked backward. He fumbled at his waist for a moment before extracting a pair of conjoined rings, slipping them carefully—clumsily—onto his two longest fingers. Peter forced himself not to watch the trembling of those otherwise powerful hands. “Are you idiots done whining? Because your carriage awaits.”

A single circle of Strange’s fingers later, Rogers was stepping out into India to begin the end of their quest.

It took too long.

In reality, it was only a few hours. Not long, relatively. Not long at all.

But Peter felt like ripping every strand of hair from his head, one at a time, as they waited and waited and waited for a sign from Strange. Not one of them, not even T’Challa, left the room in those hours.

Rogers had moved simply and effectively; walking through the portal, exiting the alley, and standing in a crowded square, yelling the words ‘we know you seek us,’ for about five minutes until there were significantly enough sirens, before returning. He stood next to Shuri, now, watching the news clippings filter through regional, national, and then global news.

And still, hours passed.

Flipping one of his nanotech web-shooter off and back on to his wrist, Spider-Man stood next to Strange’s wheeling chair as the sorcerer stared unseeingly, green magic curling around him. Shuri was examining the other web-shooter, poking at it with a needle-nosed pair of fairly wicked looking pliers.

_On_.

_Off_.

_On_.

_Off_.

On.
What was wrong? Why was it *taking so long*--

An intake of breath from Strange, the green light sucking back into his body. The web-shooter shattered onto Spider-Man’s wrist one more time, and then they are all facing the sorcerer, breath catching in their chests.

Strange’s blue-grey-brown eyes cleared, and he looked up, as though surprised to see them.

“Where?” Peter demanded, stepping forward.

The sorcerer swallowed. “I need a map. Quick.”

Six milliseconds later, Strange was provided with five. He sighed, surveying them all flatly, then choosing a screen at random and beginning to navigate through it with shaking hands. Peter vibrated with impatience as the man laboriously forced his fingers to pull the map through the world, moving towards a place he knew, but couldn’t explain. But none of them could help him--none of them would know where to go.

And finally, Strange froze over a single suburb in Kyiv. The Ukraine.

Peter stopped breathing.

“Here,” Strange said. “They’re here.”

Chapter End Notes

DUn. DUN. DUUUUUUUN.

ALERT! EVERYONE! THE TONY HAS BEEN FOUND! THE TONY! HAS BEEN! FOUND!

Yes anyway, I hope my description of the energy transfer involved in Mystic Arts made at least a small amount of sense... it's a bit wordy, looking back. Basically it means; Strange can do cool things because of disturbance in the force.

Awesome. Thank you all for reading, and I hope you enjoyed the latest installment of This Thing. See you soon!
The dust was the texture of kinetic sand, roiling and sticking to itself in precise, clean-edged shapes. It was almost lifelike, that sand, and Peter watched it with wide, entranced eyes, taking in every glitter of the nanotech.

Houses and trees rose up, the sand building on itself, supporting itself, to match the sights they’d found on Google. The screens of the lab had been pushed aside to make room for the large, spiraling table that now housed the smart sand. Its perimeter was large enough for all of them, and the luster of power in the room was almost tangible.

“Alright,” began Shuri, and Spider-Man slipped into his body. Time to plan. “Despite the strange location—some suburban landscape, we still need an infiltration plan.”

Spider-Man’s fingers drummed against the table, sending slight ripples through the sand. “They’ll be expecting us, after what the Captain said in Bharuch,” Spider-Man said. “Well, not expecting us, exactly, but they’ll be prepared. They want us to come for them.”

“But we still have the advantage here,” replied Romanoff. “We’re in control. They’re still wary; otherwise, they would have simply broadcasted their location to lure us to them.”

“Either way, we must be careful.” T’Challa was watching the shifting sands absently, his hand ghosting against his short beard. “These people pose a threat, even to us. How many are there?”

“At least eight,” Shuri answered. “That’s what we saw from the footage. And we’re a significant threat, ourselves!” She gestured around the table, arm brushing the sand, which clung to her momentarily before letting go. “You all to combat whatever forces could be compiled, whether enhanced or not. Me and Spinner to be badass. The Doctor here to overcome Aedoilagen. This isn’t hopeless.”

“By no means is it hopeless,” Rogers agreed.

“But they do have one thing up on us,” Strange butted in. “They have Stark. And though I doubt he will be a burden, but it’ll take some effort to turn him into an advantage, again. We don’t know what state he’s in.”

_After what they’ve done to him._ Sand curled up between Peter’s fingers.

“He’s our priority,” said Maximoff, and the rest of them nodded. “Get Stark, and then get Aedoilagen’s crew.”

A lapse spread over the table as each of them considered what could and couldn’t be done, considering the leverage against them in that way. Spider-Man flicked his hands across the surface of the table before him, his eyes focused on the house Strange had identified as Tony’s prison. Ideas
flitted across his mind, dismissed before he even quantified them. Too risky. Too vulnerable. Wouldn’t guarantee Tony’s safety.

“Could we… no,” Wilson muttered. “We need him out before the fight.”

“Can you portal there?” Spider-Man asked, looking towards Strange. “Right to him? We can get him out immediately.”

Strange shook his head. “That would solve every problem, if I could. But I don’t know what the energies feel like inside the house. The closest I can get is here.” He pointed towards the street around the house, the furthest place they could reach on Google Maps.

“Damn,” Barnes muttered. “So we will have to fight.”

“If someone gets in,” Shuri asked, “to find Stark, I mean, will he still be unconscious? Or whatever you call someone in their astral form?”

“He will be,” said Strange.

“Can we wake him up?”

“I can,” was the sorcerer’s reply. “But it would take days to teach any of you that skill. Which we don’t have.”

“So Strange has to be the one to get into the house,” Maximoff said.

Spider-Man agreed, but he couldn’t imagine how Strange would ever get past the threshold without a fight, let alone to Tony. He reeked of power, and Aedoilagen would likely know him. Or at least recognize the signature of another sorcerer.

“I don’t think… that’d be possible without beginning the fight we want to avoid.” Strange spoke the words moments before Spider-Man did.

“But we have to get Stark back to this dimension,” T’Challa mused. “There’s no alternative to that--he’d be vulnerable if we didn’t, leaving us vulnerable.”

“Can we get him out? Bring him to Strange?” Natasha grimaced at the idea even as she said it.

“That could work, in theory,” Rogers said.

“But it’s too risky,” Spider-Man finished. “Getting in, through the hostiles to where Mr. Stark is, and then trying to get him out the way we came? There’s too much risk.” He’d thought about that.

“What can we do?” Wilson said it, but they were all thinking it.

Another silence. The sand had finished forming its elaborate diorama of the Kyiv street, silver and black but utterly detailed. Spider-Man watched each of his allies as they stared at nothing, thinking. Trying, truly trying.

They were so, so close.

They needed more information. They needed something inside, something to tell them what they were up against. Spider-Man’s drone… but no. The thing would never get through the magic of the perimeter--Strange had described the wards around the building, the ones he could identify from simply examining the house.
But maybe…

“It’d be significantly easier to get someone in, right?” Spider-Man wondered.

“Yeah,” chorused most of the crowd.

“What if we got someone in with a camera?” He was getting excited. “Doctor Strange can portal from a photo. If we could get a picture to him, he could get us out.”

The eight of them turned towards the sorcerer, awaiting his word.

Strange shrugged. “That could work.”

The room released a collective breath.

“So that’s it,” Shuri said. “I think I might have just the thing for that, seeing as we won’t be able to get a cellphone into that building.”

She moved away from the table, scanning the cabinets and drawers on the edges of the room. Humming, she beelined for one side, ignoring the eyes on her as she rifled through the neatly organized inventions. It took a few drawers, but she eventually lifted something triumphantly into the air, grinning.

Peter peered, but he couldn’t make out the shape from this distance. “Camera?”

“Small one, satellite connected.” She trotted back toward the table, rolling the thing out along the table between them. The sand parted to make way for the silver square as it skittered across the surface. “Not undetectable, but pretty damn close--and it can send images instantly.”

“Perfect,” T’Challa said.

“Of course, brother.” Shuri ginned.

“So we’ve got the means, technologically,” Maximoff said. “Who’s going to go in?”

“It can’t be any of us,” Barnes admitted reluctantly, gesturing to the six Rogues. “We’re exactly who they want, and they’d never let us close to Stark. They’d likely just kill us as soon as we knocked on the door.”

Silence trickled through the room again, and Spider-Man tapped his chin. He wasn’t associated with the Rogues—but he was well known in New York, and could possibly be identified. ‘Possibly’ was too high a probability, however. And Strange couldn’t go in; they’d realized that, already. T’Challa was far too recognizable, and so was Shuri. No one in their right mind would let either of them near a hostage.

“I will.”

Everyone’s gazes whipped to Peter as he drew himself up.

“I’ll go--not in the suit, not as a hero. As me. As his son.”

What?

It’s the only reasonable option, Peter explained.

No, no! Spider-Man tried not to sound scared, but the emotion seeped through his thoughts anyway.
It’s too dangerous. The other boy could so easily die…

It didn’t occur to Spider-Man that he would die, too.

I can do this, Peter said.

You—you could get hurt. You’d be at their mercy! And Spider-Man wouldn’t be able to help him. Taking control could jeopardize everything, jeopardize Tony, but Peter could be hurt—

“I think Peter should go,” Maximoff said, looking straight at Spider-Man.

“But—”

Peter stopped Spider-Man’s protest. There’s no other way.

When Spider-Man looked at the group again, Strange was watching him with a doctor’s eye, and Maximoff was expressionless.

“As his son? Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Rogers asked.

“Nope,” said Peter. “But it’s the only one we have. I tell them the truth, but avoid speaking of you guys. I ask to see him. I show I’m not a threat— I won’t fight back.”

No. Please.

Let me do this, Spider-Man.

Peter continued, “I’ll get to Mr. Stark, get the pictures, and Doctor Strange can come in with a portal before anything gets too far. As soon as Mr. Stark and I are out of the house, you guys can come in, all guns blazing.”

A long pause, Peter’s scenario playing out on the smart sand before them. He wondered how it knew the shapes of the nine of them—how it knew how they moved. He blamed Shuri.

“She may be able to follow,” Strange said, after a moment. “Aedoilagen. If we portal right under her nose… the portal allows dimensional energy through. Which she needs to be able to portal to our location—and she could.”

“We move fast, then,” Romanoff said. “How worried are we about property?”

“Not theirs.” Rogers shook his head. “But we should avoid harming other parts of the street.”

“Get the people out,” Maximoff said, her voice quiet.

“Right,” said Peter.

Something in his mind was whispering, demanding he face the hypocrisy of his actions here. Demanding he remember he was about to work without UN approval, to ignore the laws he’d aspired to. About to possibly cause damage—death—internationally, as a vigilante. The revocations of that…

But this was Tony.

It shouldn’t matter, should it? His father was no more a sacrifice than anyone else’s, killed by a heroes exploits.
Peter didn’t know what to think, anymore.

But he wouldn’t stop now.

This was the line. Maybe not the line of the laws, but the it was the line Tony looked for, the line of truth. The truth even enemies would band together to fight for. The truth of Tony himself.

“Destroy the building,” Peter heard himself saying.

Everyone paused. “What?”

“It’s the only way to make sure everyone’s on the field,” Peter explained. “It subverts their strategy, their bunker. Once the Doctor and I get Tony out, collapse the house.”

“Once we get the civilians out of the way,” Rogers agreed. “Destroying the building might even kill a few before we even start the fight.”

“And Peter’s right.” Romanoff was watching the smart sand disintegrate its model of a house into rubble, shifting back and forth between the two states. “We don’t want them to have a place to store their forces. We’re on their turf--we need it leveled.”

To say Spider-Man was panicking was an understatement.

A building. Primed for explosion, he tried to explain, tried to stop it.

Peter aurred,

It will be me in there. You don’t have to worry.

Spider-Man didn’t exist in the rubble of buildings. They stripped him from Peter’s consciousness.

You could die.

So could you! Peter was starting to get angry now; he was done with Spider-Man’s instance he was incompetent, insistence that Peter wasn’t as good as him.

That’s not--I don’t want you to die. I don’t want you to be scared. He said the last quietly, almost a whimper within their mind.

Oh. Peter swallowed hard. I didn’t know you…

Maximoff spoke through his internal dialogue again, and he blushed, remembering she could hear both of them. “Are you sure your up to this?”

Peter thought of Tony. He thought of his fear of stars, his fear of so much, even as he slipped into the suit. Even as he offered those fears to the universe, saying, ‘I’m more than these.’ He pushed down his nervousness, and nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Then that’s what we will do,” Strange said. He offered Peter the smallest of encouraging smiles, but it was genuine. Peter puffed up as though under the highest praise, smiling in return.

“One problem,” Rogers admitted. “We all know what it is.”

“Stark is not going to sit still and let us fight without him, once Strange wakes him up,” Romanoff replied, her own razor-sharp smile spreading across her face. “It’ll be hell, wherever you take him.”

Peter laughed. That was the truest thing anyone had said yet that day. “We get a suit, then.” He looked towards Strange. “If our resident instant-transporter could get me into the compound, I could sneak through and find another one of his watches. I can even do that now, if we want to start the
“We could use one of the extra Panther suits,” Shuri offered.

Peter laughed. “No offense, but he’d never wear one of those.”

Shuri glowered. “I thought he had good taste.” But there was a grin behind her words.

Peter didn’t tell them that Ross had taken the watch when Tony was arrested, and that he wasn’t sure the man would have another functional suit that could activate long distances from the compound. He would make it work, if not.

“And Strange?” Shuri turned to the sorcerer.

“Yes?”

“We have a plan. We have something to work through. We’re starting the infiltration tomorrow.”

“I was here for this lastling conversation, in fact,” Strange said flatly.

“You, sir, will be taking that blasted thing off and sleeping,” Peter said, jumping in with Shuri. “We don’t need you to be able to sense dimensions perpetually right now, we need you to be able to fight. Sleep.”

“Alright.”

A pause.

“Alright?” Shuri looked at Peter, then back to the sorcerer.

“I may be an arrogant bastard, but I do know when something would be help my physical and mental state. Whether or not I ignore that is a different question--it is not necessary to ignore it currently, as you have so kindly pointed out.” The man somehow still managed to sound disinterested.

“Fine, then,” Shuri said. “Everyone should get some sleep. Spinner, you can grab the suit after this idiot has replenished his energy--we don’t want him falling unconscious when you’re halfway around the world.

Strange’s lips twisted in offense, and Peter chuckled. “Yes ma’am,” he said, feeling light.

The dust had the texture of kinetic sand before him, and it showed them succeeding. Over and over again, it showed them winning.

Peter fell asleep that night believing the next day would have him with his father again.

Chapter End Notes

ONE DAY MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOORE

*Cough cough*
The plan has been constructed. The ideas have been accumulated. The reunion is coming. AW YEAH!!!
Okay I'm about to make a really amateur mistake. I know I'm doing it, and I tried really hard to NOT do it, but without a lot of rewrite of the previous chapters there's no way to skip this chapter.

In all honesty, I should get rid of this and go straight to the next chapter, because I built up to it in Chap 69. But the information in this one is important, and so I have to make you read it.

To make up for that, I spent the last three days writing THE NEXT ONE too, so you can have two chapters at the same time, because otherwise I'd lose the suspense and that would be SAD and my little writer brain would be VERY DISAPPOINTED in me. Forgive the bad flow of this chapter and hopefully enjoy?

“Karen?”

Peter waited a moment while his AI booted up, shaking herself awake for the first time in days. He should have updated her, he knew. But now there was true news. Hopeful news. Changing news.

“He smiled, chest filling with the comforting familiarity of her voice and the promise of safety. “We found him, Karen. We really did.”

Every light in the mask flashed. Every single one. Peter squinted, but could only laugh.

“Is he safe?”

“Not yet,” Peter admitted, slipping onto the mattress of his honorary bed. He’d wanted to speak to the AI in peace, before returning to the lab, where Strange was waiting. “We’re about to go in to save him. I can’t wear the suit for a while after the operation starts--I’ve got to go in as Peter--but you’ve gotta be ready.”

“Alright,” she said. “What do you need now?”

“I need you to call FRIDAY,” he said.

“To update her?”

Peter started. “Oh shit. Shit-- I forgot to tell May. And MJ and Ned--shit. I’ll do that later. But yeah, I’ll update her, and I also need her to know I’m about to show up at the compound, and she needs to not sound the alarm.”

“... My sensors are still reading Wakanda…”

“Right, sorry. We found a helpful sorcerer. His name is Doctor Strange. He’s cool, and he’s gonna portal me to the compound so I can grab a suit for Tony,” Peter explained hastily.
Karen, thankfully, just accepted that frankly ridiculous statement and moved on to her next question. “Didn’t Ross…”

“I’m sure he has another,” Peter assured. “He’s Tony Stark.”

“He doesn’t half-ass things,” Karen finished, flashing the lights.

Peter laughed. “Right.”

“Alright, I’m calling the compound now,” Karen said. “But you’ve still got things to explain.”

“Soon,” Peter said. “I promise.”

They fell silent as the thrums of the call rang out through the mask. Peter trailed his hand through the goats wool blanket, feeling like he was simply trying to swallow a vast quantity of light. It didn’t take long for the silence to end, however, FRIDAY’s automated voice filling the mask.

“Mr. Parker,” she said, even her voice flooding with emotion. Excitement and relief and concern and confusion. “What is it?”

“FRIDAY, we found him.” And this time, his heart cracked open and poured its contents into his voice, and Peter found tears pressing between his skin and the waterproof fabric of his suit. “We’re going to save him. We really are.”

“The boss,” FRIDAY said, her voice quiet. As though she hadn’t truly meant to speak aloud.


“What do you need from me?” The AI demanded. Peter heard the true question behind her words, akin to Karen’s; how can I help him?

Peter quickly explained, to both AI, the events of the last days. He spoke of Strange, and Shuri, and the Rogues; of his admission of who Tony was to him, and his knuckle-warping blow to the Captain’s jaw. He spoke of Grease and T’Challa, wondered about his conversations with Barnes and Maximoff, and laughed about the stubbornness of their sorcerer. He choked out admissions of what they’d learned had been done to Tony while they were stumped. The AI’s listened without interruption, the lights occasionally flashing on Peter’s end.

“Anyway,” he finally said, “I’m going to end up portaling to the compound to get a suit for Mr. Stark, when we wake him. I just wanted to let you know so you didn’t blow my cover to Ms. Potts.”

“Ah,” FRIDAY hummed. “Well, I may have a few updates of myself, in that regard.”

“Yes?” Peter asked, getting comfortable on the bed.

“Your aunt, Ms. Potts, Ms. Jones, and Mr. Leeds are on their way to Wakanda now.”

“WHAT?” Peter leapt up off the bed, ending up on the ceiling before he could think.

“Even I couldn’t hide your tracks from a worried May and a determined Mrs. Potts,” FRIDAY said. “As soon as they found the transaction I made to get you a ticket, they booked their own. They left for the airport only two hours ago.”

Peter groaned. “So I’ve got seventeen hours, about, left to live?”

“Pretty much.”
“Shit.” He rubbed his face with his hand, and dropped back onto the bed. The springs groaned, and his sighed. “I’ll tell T’Challa they’re coming, and to let them into the palace.”

“That might be prudent.”

Peter sighed again, already imagining the look on May’s face. It honestly terrified him more than Aedoilagen ever could.

But he’d brought that on himself. And he would face her, and Mrs. Potts, with Tony by his side.

“Wait, you said Ned and MJ were with them?” Peter suddenly remembered.

“Yes,” FRIDAY said. “They can be just as stubborn as you.”

Peter thought of Ned’s utter elation upon seeing…everything, and grinned. Dear God, the other boy would go out of his mind.

And then he thought of MJ standing before Shuri, and his terror amped up six more notches. The world would either end in the fire started by the sparks that would fly between them, or end by their combined forces, and Peter had no idea which.

“Well, I have nothing to say except I’d better enjoy my continued existence while it lasts.”

“Indeed,” said FRIDAY.

Peter fidgeted. “Alright, then… If that’s all, I’ll go on back to the lab to get myself a portal. See you soon?”

“Unbelievably, I think I will,” FRIDAY replied.

“Cool. Bye, FRIDAY.”

Karen terminated the call, and Peter sat back, pillowing his hands against the back of his head. He let himself rest there, for a moment, sorting out these newest developments.

But he had a job to do; Peter leapt to his feet soon after, and made his way to the lab. Strange was waiting, his shaking fingers drumming against the tabletop before him impatiently. The sorcerer’s eyes were clear; he’d slept far less than any of them had expected considering the power he’d been using constantly, but he claimed the time was considerable, for him.

“All set,” Peter said.

Strange nodded, and stood. “Picture?”

Peter was already prepared, flashing an image of him and Tony in the workshop onto the screen of his phone. He held it out to the sorcerer, who thankfully didn’t comment on the slightly awkward capture of the two of them laughing.

A moment later, Strange stepped away from the screen and raised his hand. The worn brass ring glinted once in the lab’s light before the man dove into portal making, and Peter was almost knocked over by the whir and the scent of home.

He stood frozen, for a moment, watching the robots whir aimlessly within the room, watching the nanotech lie undisturbed within its trays. He truly expected to see Tony look up from an obscured position behind a screen or beneath a table, a grin on his lips and grease on his face.
But there was nothing, of course. Just the sounds and scents of home.

Peter took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold.

He didn’t feel anything physically upon moving through the hole in spacetime, just the understandable awe of having moved through a hole in spacetime. He turned, looking back through it to where Strange was watching, expression as unreadable as ever.

“Well, get to it,” the sorcerer said, and Peter nodded.

He moved away from the portal, which would be left open until he was finished, and began to hunt through the workshop for what he needed. Each drawer he opened gave him a fresh burst of nostalgia, and Peter shook himself, focusing as best he could. There were pieces and parts, blueprints and sketches, tools and tech, in every hollow and nook of this room he knew so, so well.

“Mr. Parker? Is that you?”

Peter broke into a grin and looked up, the disembodied voice filtering through the room. “FRIDAY!”

“It is good to see you again, Mr. Parker.”

“Likewise, FRIDAY. Well,” he paused, “sort of.”

She laughed, then fell silent for a moment. “What is the strange energy in my compound?”

“Doctor Strange’s portal.” Peter turned back to the fiery hole in space and waved to the sorcerer now peering through it. “He’s gotta leave it open so I can go back when I find the suit.”

“Hello, Doctor,” FRIDAY said.

“Hello, disembodied voice I assume, from Peter’s greeting, is FRIDAY,” responded Strange.

“She’s the AI who helps Mr. Stark, both in the compound and in his suit.”

“Ah. Nice to meet you.”

“You as well.”

The three of them lapsed into silence as Peter began to rifle around again, though it didn’t last.

“How’s the mission?” wondered FRIDAY.

“Mr. Stark has a lot of shit.”

“He does indeed. I have a suggestion.”

Peter looked toward the camera in the corner, as close as he could get to glancing in confusion at FRIDAY. “Yeah?”

“There is a package addressed to Ms. Potts in the quarters building’s foyer,” FRIDAY said. “She did not open it; it is from Ross, who she is understandably quite pissed at.”

“Understandably.” Anger, and more than a little blame smoldered in his gut, and Spider-Man clenched his fist. Some of this, part of this, was because of that man. “But you think I should open it?”

“I have a theory as to the contents. If you can’t spare the minutes, though, it is only a theory.”
Peter was already moving towards the door, however. “Your theories are sounder than most people’s certainties,” he said. “I’ve got the time. Direct me to this addressed-from-an-asshole package. And how sneaky do I have to be?”

“There isn’t anyone here who would be overly confused by your presence,” FRIDAY responded.

“Alright. Doctor Strange, sir? I’ll be back in a sec.”

The sorcerer waved a shaking hand. “Have fun.”

Peter rolled his eyes and moved off into the hallway. Even the opening of the door made him want to hug something, the lightness of home doubling. The compound winked at him, its clean, precise angles and towering windows calling out welcome. Time passed quickly as he traveled, and luckily, he encountered no one on his way through the press building, across the courtyard, and into the quarters section.

“The package should be by the door to Ms. Pott’s room, Mr. Parker,” said FRIDAY.

“Alright.”

It was; the thing was slumped, abandoned, in the corner of the hallway. It was quite small, and Peter picked it up with a bit of hesitation. What the hell was Ross playing at?

He moved back to the foyer and sat down, his enhanced strength easily popping the tabs across the tabs of the cardboard. He unfolded it, probably far too carefully, and was met with a small, precisely folded piece of paper.

Grabbing that first, Peter sat back against the stuffed back of the chair and unfolded it, not sure what to expect.

It wasn’t this.

Written on the paper were four words.

‘He saved my life.’

Peter’s hand slipped into the box, and closed around a familiar, smooth surface.

And when he withdrew it, the potential for Tony Stark’s unprecedented, multimillion-dollar, long sought Iron Man suit lay concealed in the silver and red segments of the watch in Peter’s hand.
“Are you sure you’re ready?”

Peter stared at the lab’s wall, the place where Kyiv would appear as soon as he gave the word to Strange. He was dressed casually, normally, apart from the tiny camera in his shirt sleeve, and every hole in their plan was becoming increasingly glaring. If they tried to kill him immediately. If he couldn’t get to Tony. If the image wouldn’t get through to Strange. If a million other unforeseeable things went wrong.

He nodded.

“While you’re in there, we’ll be setting up the detonation field,” Shuri explained. “I’m not sure how it’ll interact with the magic, so try not to make any unorthodox changes in energy signature while you’re in there.”

He nodded again.

“And don’t panic.”

Peter looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

“She’s right!” called Romanoff.

“Anxiousness is normal, though,” assured Wilson. “Keeps your adrenaline going.”

“I know, I know,” Peter said. “I’ve just never waltzed into a Ukrainian suburb and tried to get into a house full of psychopaths to rescue my father before.”

“Can’t say I have, either,” Shuri laughed. “But this’ll work.”

“I know it will. It has to.”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” Strange added, the smallest of inflections in his voice. “Portals take less than a second. I only need an image.”

“Right.”

“I warded you from any hostile aura magic,” Strange said. “You’re safe from the exterior defenses of the house.”

He was safe. Not he ‘should be’ safe, he was. Peter found himself thankful for Strange’s unfailing—though founded—arrogance.

“You know how to use the camera?” Shuri fiddled with the screen beside her, clicking in and out of the software his image would send too. The watch was on the table beside it—they couldn’t risk the thing being confiscated by AedoiJagen—and next to that was the Spider-Man suit. All waiting for the moment they would enter the battle.

Peter took a deep breath. “Yes,” he answered, and fingered both his sleeve and the lump in his pocket where he had tucked his phone, on the off chance it wasn’t taken.
Eight superheroes nodded at him, standing tall across the tiers of the lab. The Black Panther, the Scarlet Witch, Captain America—even the Winter Soldier were here, prepared to fight with him.

But the first push started with Peter Parker.

Romanoff had given him a quick and terrifying lesson about playing weak, and taking advantage of enemy perception. You’re a boy, she’d said. You’re not a threat. Make them believe that. Make them think they control you, own you, and they won’t even notice it’s the other way around. Swallow your pride. Grovel. Plead. Whine. Crawl, if you have to. It will make it even more unexpected when you start kicking ass. Then she’d grinned with lethal grace and shoved him into the lab.

He glanced up at her, and she winked. Peter shook out his trembling hands and swallowed, lifting his chin.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

Strange nodded, taking one last look at their map of Kyiv, and cutting a circle out of their dimension.

Peter’s chest grew three times heavier as the portal opened, as he suddenly stood closer to Aedoilagen, closer to Tony, and closer to success, than he’d been in weeks. The street looked peaceful, normal; there were lights in windows and he could hear the whispers of music on the wind, as though someone was cleaning with their windows open.

He stepped through, feet scuffing on the asphalt. The portal closed as he turned to look at his group of allies one more time—they couldn’t risk drawing attention by keeping it open, even in this hidden location.

The last thing he saw was true encouragement on Strange’s face, before the lab disappeared.

Peter took a breath, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Let’s do this.

Spider-Man didn’t respond; this had to be Peter, and they couldn’t risk exposing him.

Peter blew the breath out through his lips, pivoted on his heel, and began to move.

The quiet of the neighborhood pressed in on him, his entire perception narrowing to focus on the large house across the street. A villain’s lair, a family’s home; Peter’s heart conflicted with his eyes, and he found himself shaking his head, as though he could clear his perception.

He was on its threshold too quickly.

And suddenly, as soon as his foot had brushed the first blade of the lawn, he couldn’t wait another second. He flew, flew across the yard and the deck, his heart in his throat and his form flooding with adrenaline. He could feel it, like fire in his blood, like the power in Spider-Man’s movements. In moments, he was before the door, the ordinary door, the barred prison door.

Be weak. Be scared. Fool them; be in control.

And Peter Parker reached out a hand and rang Maura Aedoilagen’s doorbell.

* * *
“Maura!”

Maura jerked herself out of her concentration, looking up from the laptop before her. She was behind, she was failing, and she felt it all-too-potently. The Rogues knew her team looked for them. They were a step up on them, now surfing locations. Or baiting her to others. And Kenja, despite all of her skills, had gotten nowhere with Stark.

“What?” she demanded, probably too sharply. “I’m working to save our asses!”

“There’s someone at the door… ?” was the confused reply. It was Marcus; the confusion wasn’t all that unusual.

Although having someone at the door was.

She stood, closing the top of her laptop halfway, and peered towards the living room hallway.

“What?”

“A kid.”

“Have you opened it yet?” Maura sighed.

“No… you know how people react to me!”

Alright, she did have to give him that. Marcus’s senses were abnormally strong, but his biology had been shifted to match; his nose and ears drooped in enormous size, and his eyes protruded from a misshapen head and spine. Maura wondered where the hell Atticus and Jasper were when she needed them; the two beings were supposed to be the welcoming party. Or the discouraging party.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Maura sighed, pulling her loose socks over her heels and making her way to the door. Marcus stepped aside for her, and Maura nodded in acknowledgement. She hunched to peer through their poorly-made peephole.

There was, indeed, a kid on their doorstep. A handsome boy, no older than seventeen, with sandy brown curls tamed flat against his head and a bold, if terrified, stance as he faced their entrance. Maura wondered why the house wards hadn’t turned him away, and she scanned for weapons almost instinctively. But apart for the sign of a cell phone, he was unarmed.

“What the hell…”

Maura sighed, and opened the door.

“No soliciting,” she said in Ukrainian, pointing to the sign to the side of the door.

The boy met her eyes.

And so many emotions flashed there, so many and so much, and Maura took a step back, suddenly trapped by the sharp brown gaze.

“I don’t speak Ukrainian,” he said. “And I’m not here to sell you something, Maura Aedoilagen.”

Maura slammed the door.

“What the fuck?” she demanded in Marcus’ direction. “What’s he doing here? How does he know me? Us?”

Marcus surveyed her, unbothered. “You cut him off before he could explain.”
Maura brought an eye to the peephole again. The kid was staring at the door, his throat working hard. He glanced behind him as she watched, as if he was contemplating running, and Maura grew more confused.

“Go on, figure out what’s going on,” Marcus urged, that smirk of his flitting across his face.

“I’m going to regret this, aren’t I,” Maura muttered. “I’m opening my door to a demon or something.”

But she put her hand against the doorknob and turned it, stopping the boy before he reached out for the doorbell again.

“Alright,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

The boy was shaking subtly; his shoulders drawn down like an animal preparing to fight or flight. He looked up at her again, and this time, Maura was prepared for what she’d see in his gaze.

“I know who you are,” he said, every word a swamp of hate and fear and pain and determination. “I know what you’ve done.”

The energies of her pocket dimension flickered in Maura’s mind. Kenja was still there, with Stark.

“Who are you,” she said flatly, her agitation allowing the smallest flicker of dimensional energy to break through. A haze of orange silhouetted her hand against the dark wooden door.

“My name is Peter Parker,” said the boy, squaring his shoulders with obvious difficulty. “And I would like--” his voice broke-- “I would like to see my my father now.”

There was no question as to who the boy spoke of. No question in the way he watched the orange magic like he recognized it, in the exhausted grief written across his face. She hadn’t known--

_Doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter—all that matters is the future. The work. The purpose._

“I suppose there’s no point in denying it,” Maura sighed. The boy, Parker, shook his head mutely.

“I’m not going to let you in,” she said as though they weren’t discussing a life.

“A-and I will not go--” the boy’s voice was wavering, with fear or anger she couldn’t tell-- ”until you do.”

She wouldn’t; even if Parker couldn’t make a difference, she wouldn’t risk it. There was always another secret, always another threat, and this boy was the first of many.

“If you do not leave now,” Maura said, the magic flickering ever more vibrant, “I will kill you.”

Parker shrunk back, his eyes widening towards the orange light. But he didn’t step away. There was courage in his eyes as he looked at her again, desperate, reckless courage, the kind that would prevail no matter the threat, the kind that blinded all logic.

“Please,” was all he said, the barest of whispers. “Please.”

Maura’s magic crackled into the door, flooding the veins of the wood with fire. The boy didn’t look at it, didn’t even flinch, just kept staring her down with an expression that didn’t match his body language or his words.

“Go.”
He shook his head, hands shaking at his sides. Such determination in that gaze. He couldn’t have been older than Mercury.

“Why are you here alone?” she demanded.

More panic, of a different strain, passed across his gaze. But he seemed to gather himself quickly, saying, “no one would believe me. To--Stark is the only one I have, please. I’m alone, I can’t leave; there’s no way back.”

Alone. What would harm could come from this broken child?

“Leave now,” she said again. “Or I will kill you.”

His hand rose slightly, gesturing before him, pleading. “You’ll have to kill me, I know that. You can’t let me leave, I know you now. Kill me now, or kill me later, kill me after I see him. One last time. Please.”

What harm could it do?

She’d have to kill him eventually. There wasn’t a choice, anymore.

No older than seventeen. Still a child, still with a future, a purpose.

What harm could it do?

“Just let me see him,” Parker breathed, taking a step forward.

Maura’s magic flickered, light curling back into her. There was no call for her threat, anymore; she didn’t need it here.

Kill him now, or kill him later… she didn’t want to do it now. (She didn’t want to do it ever.)

Maura sighed through her nose, already cursing herself, and flicked her hand forward. A rope of orange energy whipped into existence around one of the boy’s wrists, yanking it back behind him. Parker yelped as the rope extended to engulf his other hand, pulling and pulsing like a living creature until his hands were secured behind his back.

He raised his eyes to hers again, his expression betraying hope, and Maura crossed her arms and stepped back. She let the door fall open again, and Marcus, surprised, skittered out of the way.

“Dead man’s last wish,” Maura said.

* * *

Aedoilagen stepped aside, and the doorway yawned like the maw of a great beast.

Peter kept his shoulders hunched, kept the wobble in his movements, even as triumph and conviction wound around his bones like the vine of power around his wrists.

In one step, he was inside.

And in another, the door had slammed behind him.
AAAAAAAAND A CLIFFHANGER!!!! Because I love you and I want to torture you!!!! It's somewhat like my relationship with the Marvel characters, actually.

Anyways! Hope you liked this, and hope you're excited, because EVERYTHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW. No more slinking around it. ACTION WILL OCCUR.

See you soon!
Okay so apparently Google Docs screwed up my versions of the last chapter so some of my edits got deleted?? Basically the only change is with Maura's comrades: Atticus and Jasper are not telepaths, and Marcus has a different power: "Marcus’s senses were abnormally strong, but his biology had been shifted to match; his nose and ears drooped in enormous size, and his eyes protruded from a misshapen head and spine. Maura wondered where the hell Atticus and Jasper were when she needed them; the two beings were supposed to be the welcoming party. Or the discouraging party."

Sorry about that.

Also, fnf stands for FriendlyNeighborhoodFangirls? Nope! It stands for FUCK’N FINALLY. Enjoy!

The house was cold.

It was the only adjective Peter had to describe the place. He wished his hands were free to wrap about him, to provide some protection against the pernicious air, but the slimy texture of his bindings was unforgiving.

He walked behind Aedoilagen as she advanced through the house, each room procuring a new threat. People looked up as he passed, met his eyes with confusion and hostility.

The first, a man with features sagging under their own weight, peered open-mouthed at Aedoilagen as she lead Peter into the house. Peter saw his tongue was swollen to fill almost his entire mouth.

“You’re letting--”

“Yes. Kill him now, or later--why not later?” Aedoilagen’s piercing gaze settled on Peter again, and he swallowed.

“Because you’ll regret it.”

“Marcus.” There was warning in her tone, now, and the dude backed off, shaking his head. The lobes of his ears swung exaggeratedly with the movement, and Peter tried not to be too intrigued. The enemy, he reminded himself sternly. No matter how interesting, how new, this man was advocating for killing him now.

Peter forced himself to shrink away. Romanoff’s advice was working wonders, even if he was unpracticed; despite the conflicting signals he couldn’t help but give off, Aedoilagen was letting him in.

Letting him see Tony.

Keep walking. Hurry, hurry, hurry!

Peter imagined he could feel the man’s presence, so close. He was so close, he was past enemy
walls, he was in the thick of things.

He tried to seem hesitant as Aedoilagen continued moving and not leap before her, settling for curling his hands into fists within their bindings. He could still reach the camera; it was a stretch, but he could do so. Strange would have to get by with a picture of the floor, but at least there would be quantifiable energies.

As they passed from the foyer into the next room, a lounge if ever he saw one, two more faces snapped up to survey them. They were similar, two men of dark mien that must have been brothers. Their eyes followed Peter unnervingly as he dogged after Aedoilagen, gazes so piercingly black Peter thought there must be something unnatural about them. Something ancient. He shivered, breaking the eye contact, but felt something had already been stolen from him.

The two men didn’t fall behind as Maura moved into the next hallway, however. They rose as one, trotting after them with silent steps.

Peter turned his gaze back to Aedoilagen, wondering how much bigger this creepy-ass house could get. Every tick of time felt like a physical thump against his mind and heart, roaring at him that he was so close.

She never looked back at him, not once. Peter didn’t know what that meant, and it both scared and reassured him. He itched to square his shoulders, to take the lead, to run like all hell to his father, but he could not break his character, not now.

He was an actor, a performer. Standing on a stage, he had to be someone else, had to take the things that didn’t make sense and conquer them.

He ignored the voice that reminded him how bad an actor he was.

Karen, activate Interrogation Mode.

Peter tried to avoid remembering that little incident as much as possible; it always made him cringe, and this time was no different. The two men behind him may have noticed, but they were at the wrong angle to see the heat rushing to his face.

Now was no time to shrink away from the challenge, though. The stakes were high, and he had no second chance this time.

Aedoilagen paused before another hardwood door, the dark hall illuminated by the quiet undulation of her magic. Peter thought it looked unhinged: powerful and agile, but aggressive. Not precise like Doctor Strange’s had been when it lifted Peter’s chair or sensed energies or portaled him around the world, Aedoilagen’s magic was closer to Maximoff’s in look and feel.

He wondered if that had to do with her search for purpose. If people associated her magic with Maximoff’s and therefore with danger on a subconscious level, it could have played a part in driving the sorcerer to this after whatever ‘catastrophe’ had befallen the group. The catastrophe Strange still hadn’t divulged the details of.

Peter was yanked back into his current predicament quite literally; the bindings around his wrists jerked, and the door before them swung silently open onto a brightly lit stairwell. A basement; a cave.

It was an effort to keep from sprinting down those steps, but Peter followed Aedoilagen without a word. She kept glancing at him, now, as though she expected him to speak, but he kept his eyes downcast, pretending to be concentrating on balancing on the narrow stairway without his hands for
stability. As though he would ever have a problem with balance.

The stairwell stretched on forever, and the hallway after it was no different. Every time they approached a door, Peter’s heart-rate sped up, but Aedoilagen never turned, never stopped. Time stretched like a rubber band, and Peter kept waiting for it to snap, for the whiplash to slice across his face.

And then she did stop.

She stopped, and she turned, and she reached for a door.

And Peter self-control shattered, plunging him into the lagoon of frigid fear and anticipation and love beneath, and suddenly he was running. He was pushing past Aedoilagen, he was hurling himself against that door, he was tumbling into the room, a force of nature, an explosion of power.

The room was dark, and it smelled faintly of copper to Peter’s heightened, on-edge senses. It was bare, except for an air mattress in the corner where Peter had entered, and a single light in the center of the ceiling that looked as though it was made of broken glass and blown fuses.

And there…

A figure slumped against the far wall.

A figure, a familiar one, so still against that wall.

Tony.

Tony, his face drawn and still, his clothes ripped and bloody, his head hanging between his shoulders.

Peter took a step forward.

One singular step.

He loosed a shuddering breath, followed by a small, whimpering noise—a sob.

And then he was running, sprinting across the small room as though the winds themselves pushed at his heels. He fell to his knees before the man’s body, his fingers working desperately at his bindings as he frantically pulled his wrists away from each other. Shoulder’s screaming, chest heaving, he ripped at the magic with everything he had; he couldn’t feel Tony’s pulse without his hands. And it was suddenly all he could think about, the fact that he couldn’t hear a heartbeat, didn’t know if this was a corpse.

The ropes around his hands only tightened.

Peter’s breathing was ragged, animalistic—he was trapped, trapped inches away from what he needed. There was nothing rational in his mind anymore, nothing logical to remind him that Tony couldn’t be dead because they’d heard him, because they knew. Peter could remember only a promise that it was going to be okay, a promise that had never felt more false.

“Dad…” Peter choked out, his struggles slowly ceasing.

There was blood on Tony’s sternum, smeared there from the larger patch of it near the shoulder of his suit. The gun wound. His face hung away from Peter, his eyelids half-closed, but unresponsive all the same.
And Peter was back in the dark alley of Queens, young and helpless and far too late, as another family bled out on his hands. He was cold and dead himself, utterly annihilated as the world ended at his feet.

Tears darkened the fabric of his jeans, and he could taste their salty wetness on his lips.

A hand landed on his back.

And suddenly, it all came rushing back. Aedoilagen, the pocket dimension, his bonds, and most importantly, the camera in his sleeve. His fingers stretched for it as he was lifted to his feet and turned to face Aedoilagen, her hands wreathed in orange magic. They brushed against the cool metal, reached to send the final image--

Aedoilagen’s hand slammed into Peter’s sternum with more force than just the physical, and Peter’s body was no longer his own.

* * *

When Peter Parker appeared in the dimension, Tony was almost offended.

The boy shimmered into existence, his form slightly translucent, and Tony was shocked out of his focused practice at making the sky turn colors.

He took a step back, the dimension’s pressure suddenly all the more noticeable. The kid turned to him, slowly, stumbling as he materialized fully onto the fluid ground of the dimension.

“M-Mr. Stark?” came the disbelieving voice.

And Tony spun, looking up at the sky of the dimension and snarling inhumanly. “No. NO, you do not get to do this to me. I thought we were getting along, you and I!”

The sky did not respond, and Tony’s irrational fury grew like thunder within his mind.

“Get out of my head,” he spat, unable to look at the form that couldn’t be Peter. That he wanted to be Peter. “I’ve had fucking enough; you do not get to make me see him.”

He couldn’t look at the boy.

“Get out of my head!”

Silver and red, this hateful place. Peter couldn’t be here. And it was all the more terrifying that he wasn’t, that he was some apparition of this twisted place, of Maura Aedoilagen. She couldn’t take his son, couldn’t twist him too.

“It’s me,” said Peter. Not Peter. There were tears in voice, tears of joy and desperation.

Not him. He couldn’t trust this, he couldn’t trust any of this.

He still couldn’t look at the kid.

“It’s me, I’ve been looking for you for forever, Mr. Stark, I…” The apparition took a step forward, and the ground shifted beneath him, causing him to overbalance onto his knees.

Tony flinched forward before he could stop himself, every neuron of his subconscious roaring to
give the boy a hand back to his feet, to teach him how to surf the strange ground.

“It’s me.”

And hell if that didn’t sound like his boy, the trust and the excitement and the determination, despite the waver of hurt and fear in his undertone. Tony’s instincts had his hands twitching; *comfort him, protect him, hold him* until that waver had gone.

He hadn’t seen the kid in so, so long.

“Prove it,” Tony growled. God, he couldn’t *look at him*.

He already knew what Peter was going to say, already knew the way he’d do so. Which didn’t really prove anything, if there was someone, some *thing*, within his mind. A new form of pain. He already knew--

“Steve Rogers said he knew you better than I did, so I punched him in the face and announced somewhat loudly that you are my father.”

Alright, so he didn’t know what the kid was going to say.

Wait…

“Peter?”

“It’s me, Mr. Stark, it’s me.” And Peter was crying now, unhindered, and Tony turned his head.

His kid was standing again, having fought to his feet upon the molten earth, with his arms half-spread and his feet slightly turned-out, the way he always stood. His hair had obviously been combed not long before, but was already beginning to push its way into unkemptness, curls wandering about his forehead. Clouded eyes met Tony’s, clouded with exhaustion and delight, and Peter’s expression mirrored it, his smile pulling Tony’s lips upward in turn.

“*Peter.*”

And suddenly Tony couldn’t move fast enough, couldn’t skate across this goddamn ground fast enough. Peter was here--he could deal with the implications of that later--but he was *here*.

Tony had missed him so *fucking much*.

He slammed into the boy with enough force to send them both stumbling, the earth sloshing beneath them. Arms wrapping tight around Peter’s shoulders, Tony felt the kid’s head bury itself in the hollow of his shoulder, felt his form shake with sobs and laughter. Here, here *here*. The kid’s arms curled around him in turn, the crushing strength of his enhanced limbs pulling a slight wheeze from Tony. Running a hand through the boy’s curls, Tony couldn’t stop himself laughing, couldn’t stop himself hearing Peter say ‘*announced rather loudly that you are my father*’ over and over and grinning from the pure euphoria that admission filled him with.

*You are my father.*

The dimensional energies meant nothing, the claustrophobia of the pocket universe meant nothing as Tony held his son.
I hope that measured up to all the hype...
Eventually, when Tony’s mind began to work back to the problem at hand and Peter had begun to lift his head and look around, Tony uncurled his arms and stepped away.

“What in all hell are you doing here, kid?” Tony demanded, still grinning despite every danger they were now facing.

“Um, yeah, where exactly is ‘here’?” Peter put a hand on Tony’s shoulder to steady himself as he tried to move along the ground.

“Maura Aedoilagen’s pocket dimension,” Tony replied.

“It’s… horrible.”

“Tell me about it. When I was first here…” He broke off. “Well, it wasn’t a good time, let’s just stay that.”

Peter’s eyes darted to him, and Tony suddenly remembered a certain superhero that was now separate from his kid. That deserved a place in his little brain box of ‘problem at hand.’ But something told him it was Peter looking at him now, not Spider-Man, and Tony was inclined to believe that instinct.

“I… I’m so sorry, Mr. Stark,” the boy breathed. “I tried to find you but Aedoilagen was just so subtle and we didn’t know what we were dealing with and it took me so long and I’m so--”

“Hey, hey.” Tony brushed his thumb against Peter’s cheek, wiping away a newly gathered tear. “Enough of that. This was not your fault, and look!” Tony gestured to himself, and then at the pocket dimension behind them. “I’m fine. And you’re here; you did find me.”

“But they still hurt you.” The boy was looking anywhere but at Tony and it made the man’s heart feel like it was being excavated out of his chest cavity.

“Pete, I’m okay,” Tony said, drawing the kid close to him again. “It wasn’t fun, but all things considered, I got pretty lucky.”

“What do you mean?” Peter’s voice was muffled from where his face was buried in Tony’s shoulder again.

“I mean, this tiny-ass dimension drove me somewhat insane, but Aedoilagen and her sidekick actually brought me back.”
“How? Why?”

Tony sighed. “How much do you know about Aedoilagen?”

“I know she’s a sorcerer with some creepy goal of trying to help people again. I know she kidnapped you because she wants to find the Rogue Avengers. I know you sent them to Portugal as a warning to Wa--”

“Stop.”

Peter immediately shut up, raising his face to look at Tony in confusion.

“Sorry,” Tony said. “But you can’t say it. I never know who’s listening.”

“Right…”

Tony took a breath. “She wants to kill the Rogue Avengers and take their place. With magic, she can change perception and memory of them until she and her team have quite literally become Steve and his group of idiots.” He paused, his eyebrows lowering as he regarded Peter. “You said…”

“I met him.”

Tony rubbed a hand across his forehead. “Fuck… how the hell did you do that?”

“FRIDAY sent Karen the activation code for the Molten Iron protocol,” Peter said, and Tony winced.

“Damn it, AI.”

“You should be thanking her.”

Tony looked at him, and couldn’t help but smile. “I suppose I should be.”

“But I called the Captain and he went off on me about closed investigations and shit, then hung up. But I heard voices in the back of his call, and he said a couple of things that I could…” Peter chose his words carefully. “Derive his location from.”

“So you Sherlocked your way to the Rogue Avengers,” Tony sighed.

“That’s what the princess said,” Peter laughed.

“Oh dear God, you met her? It’s a wonder any of us are still alive!”

Peter nodded, a smug smile gracing his face. “I’m her second in command. Well…”

“Well?”

“The Cloak of Levitation outranks me now, I suppose.”

“The what?”

Peter laughed again, this time somewhat hysterically. “A lot of things happened while you were stuck here, Mr. Stark. Did Aedoilagen say she was the only sorcerer?”

“She said something about the Sanctums being destroyed and leaving her alone, yeah.”

“Well, that’s not true.”
Tony threw his hands into the air. “Why am I not surprised? So there are more psychopathic magicians running around?”

“Two. And they aren’t psychopathic, they’re actually quite nice. Or the one I met is.”

“Of--fucking--course.”

“Doctor Strange. He’s apparently the Sorcerer Supreme, and he’s the only reason I’m here, now.”

“Explain.”

Peter took a breath. “Well, apparently, when you were first sent into this dimension, you sent out some sort of call that said… where the Rogues are. And the Doctor heard it, and followed, and really freaked us out when he showed up because we thought he was gonna be Aedoilagen.” Peter’s eyes shuttered. “I thought… the only way it could have been Aedoilagen was if you’d…”

“I’m okay, Peter,” Tony said softly, his chest suddenly aching. “Really.”

“Anyway,” the boy cleared his throat. “He showed up and he started sensing magic and stuff, so we set a trap for Aedoilagen that would get her to reveal, in terms of energy, where she was. It worked, and Doctor Strange pinpointed it to this one house in Kyiv.”

“I’m in the Ukraine?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

Peter fidgeted. “I… I was supposed to get you out.”

“What?”

“The Doctor can portal to places he knows the energy signature of, and he can figure out that energy signature via images. The princess gave me this tiny cuff camera, and I was supposed to get to you and take a picture of the room, so the Doctor could get us out and then get you out of your astral form. That’s where we are, right now.”

“But…”

“But Aedoilagen struck me and now I’m stuck here too!” Peter growled. “And I can’t get the image to the Doctor and so he can’t get here and they’re all waiting and I don’t know what to do and I screwed this up and--”

“Stop, stop, you’re doing it again.” Tony put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Not your fault.”

Peter didn’t answer for a long moment. They stood in silence in the silver and red light of the pocket dimension, thoughts dancing almost tangibly in the air around them, and waited. And wondered.

“What… what are we going to do?” Peter finally whispered.

Tony was hugging him again before he’d realized. “I don’t know, kid. But something. Because I haven’t been idle here, while you all were panicking over me.”

He stepped back, and led Peter somewhat awkwardly to the center of the tiny dimension. The kid got the hang of walking across the liquid ground quite quickly, which did not surprise Tony in the slightest. “Okay, watch this.”
Tony closed his eyes, and forced his churning whirlwind of thoughts down into something manageable and calm, a disk of focus through which lyrics danced. He lowered his defenses and let the pressure of this dimension force him down, dampen his form in this universe until he was part of it, until he was one with it.

And then he thought of *Hamilton*.

“You will come of age with our young nation…” he said quietly.

A yelp from next to him broke his concentration, and Tony found himself in his body again. Or, as close to it as he could be. Peter was staring at the sky, eyes wide with awe and a touch of fear.

“That was me,” Tony said. “Don’t worry. I freaked out the first time, too.”

“Holy shit,” Peter breathed. “Are you a sorcerer now?”

Tony shook his head, very firmly. “No.”

“But--”

“I’m not a sorcerer, Pete.” He couldn’t be. He wouldn’t be able to…

“Alright, if you say so. But that’s still really cool.”

Tony smiled. “Thanks. It’s probably the only reason I haven’t dissolved into insanity again. And I’m getting stronger; I’ve got more control. Soon, I might be able to use it as a weapon.”

Peter didn’t answer for a moment. Silence pressed in on them, and Tony realized the boy had stopped breathing.

He was standing before him in an instant. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“You’ve been here four days, already,” Peter said. “And it’s not healthy to leave your body without your soul for long. It gets irreversible in three more days.”

Tony opened his mouth. Then he closed it again.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that certainly gives me a bit more of a time limit.”

“Yeah.”

Tony rubbed a hand through his hair. He needed to cut it, and likely to shave, though it didn’t reflect in his ‘astral form’ or whatever this was. That was one thing that suffered from kidnapping; personal hygiene. And apparently physical health.

*Shit.*

He had to fix this, he had to do something. Not just for himself, anymore; Peter was stuck in this same situation, and Tony, as much as he hated to even consider it, didn’t know what to do.

Something. Something, he had to do something. Anything.
Something flickered within the dimension, and Tony went rigid. *Not yet. We need more time, give us more time.* But the time he had had was more than he ever should have expected, and this universe didn’t have any more miracles for him.

Aedoilagen was coming.

“Peter.” Tony whirled, gripping both of the boy’s shoulders to force Peter to look him in the eye. “Listen to me. Whatever happens next, you are *not* to say anything.”

“What do you mean--”

“Promise me,” Tony snarled, then winced at the harshness of his voice. “Promise me you’ll let me handle this.”

Peter watched him with wide, suspicious eyes. “Why.”

“Because I know how to deal with this sort of shit,” Tony growled. *Promise me!*

Peter was shocked into a nod, and Tony released him.

“Good. Don’t be an idiot--”

“Tony…”

“-- *Don’t be an idiot.* And Peter?”

The boy looked at him, not so much suspicious as terrified.

Tony smiled, softly. “It’s going to be okay.”

And then he spun to face the center of the dimension as two figures fuzzed into existence before them, two figures he would regrettably recognize anywhere. Tony stepped in front of Peter almost unconsciously as Kenja and Aedoilagen advanced towards them, no magic curling visibly around them, but buzzing threateningly in the air all the same. His form already prepared for agony, Tony’s hands clenched at his sides, though he raised his chin high with all of the arrogance he could muster.

*“Why, hello!”* he said, his grin sharp and blinding. *“Last time I checked, no one invited you two to the family reunion.”*

Kenja glanced toward her companion. “I told you sending the kid was a bad idea. It’s already destroyed, or I suppose rebuilt, the vast majority of our hard work.”

Peter tensed behind him, and Tony had no doubt the kid understood every connotation of those words. One of Tony’s hands sought the boy’s wrist, and he gripped it tightly, reassuringly.

“Yes, yes,” Aedoilagen sighed. “Although he was getting less and less broken every time we came.”

“You should let me spend more time here,” was Kenja’s reply, her eyes snapping to Tony’s with an air of sadistic, sickening anticipation.

“I might just.”

Peter was trembling behind him now, but not with any semblance of fear; no, there was fury in every thump of the boy’s pulse, fury in every harsh breath. Tony gripped his hand tighter, no longer there to calm him, but to restrain him.
“I’m afraid we already decimated the refreshments,” Tony said, “so there’s really no point in staying.”

The sorcerers kept walking.

“That’s code for ‘get the fuck out of here,’” Tony said. “Or, even better, tell me what you’re planning to do with my son.”

That brought an intake of breath from the boy behind him, and Tony realized he’d never called Peter that infront of him. He hadn’t thought it would happen in this scenario, with his hand trapping the kid’s wrist to keep him from jumping their captors and viciousness written across the approaching womens’ faces.

“That’s a good question,” Kenja said, raising her eyebrows at Aedoilagen. “What are we going to do with the boy?”

“Oh, I’m sure we can find a use. And if not…”

Tony’s blood froze.

*Do something do something do something.*

But there was nothing to do, nothing he could do--the dimension’s energies were out of his reach, out of his focus with the two sorcerer’s before him. Tony had never felt more helpless.

Kenja glanced toward Aedoilagen, and Tony took a deep, preparing breath as the other sorcerer nodded subtly.

When orange magic crackled across Kenja’s hands and the familiar roar of electric agony began to build within his chest, Tony clenched his jaw shut and stared the bitch down.

He would not scream. Not this time, not with Peter’s hand in his.

He would not scream.

He would not…
Peter knew the moment something changed. He felt it in the way Tony stiffened, felt it in the silence
of Aedoilagen and her companion, Kenja. Shifting, he tried to get a clearer view of the scene before
him, but Tony’s hand was still clamped around his wrist with an imobile pressure.

He could feel the same pressure around him, clenching down upon his mind and soul in an
indescribably wrong way. It was the pocket dimension, he figured, and it felt like his thoughts were
being flattened and squeezed into nothingness.

It made him nauseous to think of Tony confined to this place, alone, for even a single moment.
Nauseous, and utterly furious.

The uncomfortable atmosphere of the pocket universe was all the more obvious now that they had
lapsed into silence. Peter felt tremors of multiple origins in his spine, and he thought he might be
growling. Low in his throat, the sound vibrated: a channel of his anger and his need to protect, and a
ward against the suffocating dimension.

He rose onto the balls of his feet to try and peer over Tony’s shoulder at the scene obscured from
him. Aedoilagen had a single eyebrow raised, a razor of a gesture on her sharp face, and her
companion had orange energy flickering between her hands like ribbons of caged flames. Kenja’s
face was twisted into wrathful, desperate determination as the magic lashed at her fingers with
increasing intensity.

Tony’s hand suddenly tightened around Peter’s wrist, grinding his bones against each other, and
Peter let out a quiet gasp.

“Such idiotic courage in front of your son.” Aedoilagen’s voice dripped sarcasm. “It’s no use.”

Peter tugged at the grip against his wrist. “Mr. Stark…”

A long, harsh breath ratcheted into Tony, as though it took every semblance of his strength to do so.

“Mr. Stark!” Peter’s fury was quickly corroding to fear.

“Why don’t you show him what use you’ve truly been these last days,” Kenja said, her own voice
tight with concentration. “Give up.”

Tony’s next exhale caught in his throat, coming out as a coughing whine.

Peter’s eyes snapped to the orange magic in Kenja’s fingers.

No. No no no.

He yanked his wrist out of Tony’s, and was met with almost no resistance; that strength was needed
elsewhere.
Peter stepped out from behind his father, and suddenly, he could see the man’s face.

Eyes closed, brows furrowed, Tony wheezed out through clenched teeth. But it wasn’t the sound, or the stance, or even the pain written in every tensed muscle that made Peter freeze, it was the aura of orange light shining out from his throat, as though his very core was aflame with hostile magic.

They were ripping him apart.

Was this what had caused the screams that echoed through universes? This psychotic drive Aedoilagen had for information for purpose that had Doctor Strange feeling residual pain? Was this what had been done to Tony for days, while Peter was confined to ignorance?

They were ripping him apart.

Tony began trembling.

“Stop it,” Peter whispered.

Kenja’s eyes drifted to him, dark with concentration and exertion. But there was nothing merciful on her beautiful face, no glimmer of feeling for the pain she was eliciting. Aedoilagen just watched, indifference in her stance, looking for all the world as though she was waiting not for a tortured man to break, but for the teakettle to whistle.

“Stop it!” Peter said, but he did not dare drag his gaze from Tony, from the shudders that had the man hunched over. There was blood on Tony’s lips; he’d bitten his cheek in an effort to stay silent. To stay silent for Peter.

Tony took it as though he knew—as though he knew how to pace himself, how much pain to expect. How many times had he been forced to experience this? How many times?

“Stop. STOP! Leave him alone!” His fear cultured fury once again, and Peter dared to take a step toward the sorcerers.

And Tony’s eyes snapped open. He lifted his head, teeth bared, face savage with pain and determination, the very look stopping Peter in his tracks. Peter could read the order in his expression, but Tony still snarled, “don’t.”

“This could all end with a word.” Aedoilagen’s voice filtered through the haze in Peter’s mind. “Just one; a city, a country. It’s nothing at all, really.”

“Fuck… off,” Tony choked out.

Aedoilagen’s expression hardened. “I’m beginning to get quite tired of this,” she hissed. Turning to Kenja, the woman added, “we’re running out of time. Give it more.”

It took a moment for Kenja to respond. “I’m using everything I have, Maura.”

Aedoilagen looked back at them, her gaze lingering on Peter for a moment before passing to the shaking form of Tony Stark. For a moment, there was hesitance in her eyes, the smallest flicker of regret.

Then they snapped to Peter, and new conviction blazed within them. That fire brought Peter’s heart to a speeding thump of fear.

“I’ll help, then,” Aedoilagen said, and clasped her hand around Kenja’s wrist.
And the magic between Kenja’s fingers turned crimson with power.

It was like the dimension around them had suddenly been charged with static, the combined energy of the enemy sorcerers burning in tandem with that of the pocket universe. The crackle of electric force burned against Peter’s perception, glowing in the eyes of Aedoilagen and Kenja, wrapping around their wrists and fingers and chests.

And Tony began screaming and screaming and screaming.

Peter’s world blurred with tears, and he was frozen, as good as caged by that sound, that sound that he knew meant unfathomable agony. He might have been roaring, but he could hear only those terrible cries, the broken bellows of a man with more strength than he’d ever known.

_Do something._

He couldn’t bear it.

He couldn’t bear that sound, bear the hopelessness of it, the resignation.

_DO SOMETHING._

“THE OTHER’S ARE COMING!” Peter roared, unable to stay silent a moment longer, unable to let this continue, unable to keep this small semblance of comfort away from the suffering man.

And like a light being flicked off, the energy disappeared.

Tony collapsed onto his knees, drawing in a long, shuddering breath.

“Others?”

Peter turned, very slowly, towards Aedoilagen’s voice.

She didn’t look phased, not in the slightest, by what she had just done. She looked as she had moments before, as though she hadn’t just inflicted incomprehensible torment onto his father, while he’d been watching.

Peter hadn’t thought he was capable of hate—true, murderous hate—until that moment.

He would kill this woman.

“Others?” she asked again, taking a step towards him. Peter could hardly see through the sheen of red around his vision, let alone answer.

“What others?” That from Kenja, her voice breathy from exertion. Exertion of channeling energy into pain.

Peter just snarled.

Aedoilagen flicked her hands, and suddenly Peter truly was caged; orange energy bound his limbs together, burning slightly at his exposed skin. He couldn’t care less.

“What others?”

A strained, hoarse voice answered for Peter. “No others,” Tony said, struggling back to his feet. His eyes were still dull with pain, but there was a spark of fear within them as he looked toward where Peter had been restrained. “Pathetic; you’ve been played by a sixteen-year-old. Some villains you
are.”

But even Tony’s blustering snark sounded weak.

“No, I think there are quite a few ‘others’,” Maura said, taking another step toward Peter. “I think your son knows the same thing you do, Mr. Stark.”

Peter stared her down, ignoring the pounding of his pulse in his throat and the trembling of his hands.

“I think, perhaps, we’ve been focusing our efforts on the wrong Stark. Where are these others, junior?”

And the dimension was flickering with orange light again, orange light coiling and striking out towards Peter.

“Don’t you touch him, don’t you fucking touch him.” Tony was on his feet, but there were more chains of energy warping the ground of the dimension, coiling around the man as he tried to move, binding him down. “DON’T YOU TOUCH HIM!”

Peter could feel the pressure of magic trailing against him, as though it was measuring him, calculating him. The force was almost a caress as it probed him for weakness, for entrance.

“Dad…” Peter said, hating the wobble in his voice, hating the fact that he was suddenly very, very scared.

“It’s okay, Pete, it’s going to be okay--”

And with resounding shatter, the magic forced its way into Peter’s core.

* * *

“It’s going to be okay--”

Not Peter, never the kid, let him go, let him go NOW.

Tony hands lacerated themselves against the binding on his wrists.

Let him go, let him go.

He was weak and trembling and useless, his core and his soul still twisted and tattered from pain like he had never known, and he needed to get to his son.

Tony saw the moment Aedoilagen’s magic found purchase in his boy. Saw the way it shuddered to a frozen, pulsing matrix of power in her hands, saw the way she smiled.

Saw the way Peter stiffened, his eyes going wide.

Heard him cry out.

Saw the shocked tears escape down his cheeks.

“NO!”

Tony was on his knees; he’d fallen from the force of trying to run still bound at the ankles. There
was blood on his cheek and on his cuffs and in his heart.

“How long this lasts depends entirely on you,” Kenja said, that sadistic grin widening at the sound of his son’s screams.

“LET HIM GO!” Tony bellowed, fighting against the ropes, a feral animal pulling at his bindings. He needed to get to Peter, he needed to stop this.

The magic felt like the end of the world, he knew. It felt like the disappointed looks of people you cared about, it felt like fire of your own making, it felt like failure. It felt like you’d been crying so long you couldn’t breath, it felt like starlight was ripping open your throat and your soul. And it hurt, it hurt more than anything.

They were hurting him.

Save him. Stop this.

He was bound, he was helpless, he could do nothing but watch as Peter lost the strength to stand, falling onto his knees.

He could do something.

One word, one city. One country.

Save him. Stop this.

Another scream echoed in Tony’s ears, and it hurt more than anything the magic could have done to him, anything this world could have thrown at him.

Save him. Stop this.

Tony roared.

Desperate and truly broken, shattered from the first cry wrung from Peter’s throat, Tony threw his perception out to the universe around him. The energy tried to run, tried to slip away from his distracted awareness, but Tony’s furious mind lashed at it, claws and fangs ripping through the fabric of this reality. The talons of his consciousness commanded the energy, utter anguish his channel for focus.

SAVE HIM. STOP THIS!

Tony was still roaring as his order echoed through the dimension.

And the energy obeyed.

There was a ripple through the pocket dimension, the only sign of what Tony had done, what he had accomplished. It shattered through Aedoilagen’s ropes, warping through the claustrophobic atmosphere of this universe, and wrapped about the form of Peter Parker.

A boom of perception rang out through Tony’s mind.

And he and Peter disappeared.
A clumsy surge of energy rippled out from a house under siege.

And six small blasting caps, placed mere minutes before, shuddered under the uncontrolled assault.
“Where the hell did they go?”

Maura’s magic was left writhing against the ground of the pocket dimension as it's targets abruptly vanished, the force of it sending her and Kenja stumbling back. Maura attempted to reign in the energy, and for a moment, it was almost as if it had stopped listening to her. The universe felt sticky and tired, as though it had been imprecisely wielded, wounded, and left for dead, and it separated Maura from her magic. She spent that moment in a state of abject terror, and then the energy allowed her, begrudgingly, to contain it.

Breathing hard, Maura searched for an answer to Kenja’s question, the only explanation glaringly obvious but still completely impossible.

“They re-entered their physical bodies,” Maura finally admitted. She took a step forward, watching the fluid ground of the pocket dimension smooth over the tiny divots where Stark and Parker had been restrained.

“Why would you send them back?” Kenja demanded, the fury of thwarted revenge dripping from her tone. “I was—we were getting close. Finally.”

Maura shook her head. “I didn’t send them back. Stark did.”

A long, long pause left only silence in the dimension.

“What.”

Maura could only shrug.

“How?” Kenja snarled, stomping towards the center of the dimension, her hands flickering with frustrated magic.

Maura didn’t have an answer to that, either. She was the last sorcerer, the soul vestige of the Mystic Arts. Stark couldn’t have trained; she would have felt it, she would have known. But as impossible as it was, he’d harnessed dimensional energy, and not just any dimensional energy. Her dimension. Her pocket dimension, designed to obey only its master.

It’s master…

Shit.

“I made a mistake,” Maura finally murmured. She’d left Stark alone in this dimension, left him as its sole occupant. This universe had never been used, not since its creation; it had never had a purpose. And Maura, through Stark, had given it the purpose it had yearned for.

Stark was the master of her pocket dimension.

Which was why the energy wouldn’t respond to her. It wasn’t hers to command, anymore.

Shit.
“I don’t know where you actually are in the physical realm,” Maura said, “but get out of here, and get to the basement as soon as you do.”

“Of course.”

Kenja flickered once, then disappeared, and Maura felt the echoes of her energy ripple through the dimension. She savored it for a moment, then closed her eyes and let the vibrations of her soul slow in frequency. She grew untethered from this planar dimension, floating out into the multiverse in slow, controlled motions. Frozen, for a moment, in the place between dimensions, physical and astral, Maura reached out a hand to brush the fabric of reality. And then she snapped back into the physical plane, her body stumbling at the force of her return.

She threw out a hand to steady herself, ending up slapping the phone she’d confiscated from Parker against the desk. She dropped it, grabbing her wrist to shake out the tingling in her hand.

It had never been so difficult to return from her astral form, before. A few more minutes and she could have been trapped in the dimension that used to be hers.

She’d made a terrible, terrible mistake.

The perpetual shuddering feeling, however, didn’t cease upon her re-entrance to physical form. Maura tore her eyes up and met the gazes of the two men across the room.

“You’re dead,” Tony Stark said simply, and Maura took a step back involuntarily. She had never seen such utter, resolute, murderous calm before, and it was nothing less than paralyzing.

Parker stood on shaky legs—or maybe it was the house shaking around them. “One way or another,” he said.

Her bindings had disappeared from his wrists, and the boy reached into one sleeve, the other hand wrapped tightly in Starks—

And froze.

Maura and Stark turned to him, simultaneously, as a deafening *boom* roared through the atmosphere.

Parker withdrew his hand, his face pale, and stared in disbelief at the shards of what looked like metal in his palm.

And then the world collapsed around them.

* * *

It was broken.

The camera; Aedoilagen’s bindings had shattered it. And had trapped Peter more effectively than a rope ever could.

Everything was falling apart; not just the plan, but the world, too, as the detonation charges Shuri and the others had placed exploded too soon. Not *yet*, he wanted to roar, wanted to pray. This wasn’t supposed to happen, he *wasn’t supposed to be here*, not when the sky was falling, not when the rubble was pressing down on them with ageless weight, not when—

Wood and stone began to crumble from the ceiling in what felt like slow motion, as Aedoilagen
locked eyes with him, then turned her gaze up at the imminent destruction. Peter saw conflict flit across her expression for a moment, part of her roaring to lunge for them.

But Aedoilagen ducked a falling piece of wood and circled her hand through the air instead, and Peter could barely take a step towards the quantifiable escape her portal offered before she, and it, had disappeared.

Leaving them alone.

And doomed.

* * *

“Pete--” Tony began.

And then there was nothing but sound and darkness and dust, and every one of Peter’s nightmares pressing down on him, as one.

Tony felt the small form next to him freeze, and he knew why a moment later.

The house folded in upon them, tearing him away from his son, and Tony roared.

He’d commanded magic, he’d broken them from interdimensional bindings, he’d survived days, months, with sadistic psychopaths. He would not die here. He would not let Peter die here, die within his own personal hell.

Tony threw himself upward, threw himself towards the body he could just barely see through the dust and the smoke as the supports of the basement finally lost their strength and brought the roof down on top of them. He threw his body, which had been soulless for four days, into motion.

Weakened bones cracked, atrophied muscles screamed, and Tony shielded the unconscious body of his son with his own form, hands bracing against the rubble-covered floor on either side of the boy’s head--

The world came crashing down against Tony’s shoulders.

* * *

“Kid.”

He knew that voice. He’d traveled across continents in the hopes of hearing that voice again. That voice, that word spoken in it, meant home, meant hope, meant safety.

But when Peter cracked his eyes open, he couldn’t see its origin through the dust and the darkness and the taste of blood in his mouth. There was a familiar, terrible weight against his hand, against his legs, pinning him down, grinding his bones to powder against the hardened floor below. Pain splintered through him, and he groaned, trying to pull his hand out from beneath whatever was crushing it.

Dull agony shot up his arm, and Peter’s eyes flew open as he tried to draw in a breath of thick, sooty air. He coughed, curling in around himself, torso convulsing and stirring up yet more dust.
He was dying, he was drowning, drowning in wood and rock and dust.

Buried alive.

“Kid.”

That voice again, tight with pain and exertion. Peter fought open his eyes, fought to try and distinguish the man who wielded it like a lantern against the foggy darkness.

Dust coated everything—he felt it in his hair, the creases in his skin, between his teeth, along his tongue.

His nightmares, coming true.

“Peter, look at me.”

Peter whimpered, shaking his head. He couldn’t look, he couldn’t open his eyes on this hell, he couldn’t try and see through razor-sharp blackness. He could smell blood, blood and stone and wood, and he could smell fire.

He felt rock and woodshards digging into his back, into his arms. Blood slid down between his shoulder-blades, coating his skin and the rock beneath him. He couldn’t remember what air felt like, he couldn’t remember what it meant to even breath.

“Peter.”

The pain in that voice had only increased, and he tried to remember why it scared him. The man had been in enough pain, had suffered too much already, why was he still hurting, still trying to save Peter when the boy was already gone drowning dying.

“Spider-Man?”

Spider-Man.

They needed Spider-Man, they needed someone strong, someone to do something, someone to succeed. Spider-Man. Peter roared the name through his mind, trying to find the other consciousness, trying to call him to save them.

“I’m sorry, Peter, or Spider-Man,” the man’s voice cracked, breathy with strain, “but I need you to wake up.”

Spider-Man wasn’t here. He never had been; the superhero didn’t exist beneath the seas of rock, beneath the oceans of rubble. Peter couldn’t even sense his presence within his mind, couldn’t hear his voice.

How do you kill a spider?

“I can’t do this on my own, kid. I need… grh… you to help me, I need you to do something.”

What could he do? He was nobody, he was just Peter Parker, Peter Parker who liked science and nanotech, Peter Parker who couldn’t even open his eyes. Peter Parker was useless, Peter Parker was nothing, and Peter Parker was going to die here, suffocate in rubble.

“Please, Peter, Spider-Man.”

Please, Peter begged the emptiness of his mind, please help us, please come back.
How do you kill a spider?
You crush it.

Spider-Man didn’t exist, here.

Tooms was getting away. Ned was gone. No one knew where he was, no one was coming to find him.

Tony had gone off after the lizard-guy. Tony had trusted him with this. He’d failed. And he was dying, and no one was coming to find him.

“I can’t hold this up forever, kid… I think my legs are broken.”

Tony.

Tony was saving him again. Tony had come.

But he needed help. And there was no one here to help him, no one capable of anything. Peter curled further in on himself, another cry shuddering through his throat and teeth, vibrating the dust around them. Pain curled through him, pain and fear and desolation. Darkness flickered in Peter’s vision.

“I love you, kid…”

And suddenly, the weight was gone.

The darkness was gone, the rubble and rock and dust…gone.

Tony was gone.

Peter raised his head, and found himself alone. Black void stretched around him, a vacuum of uncharitable space reaching forever in all directions.

Slowly, confused and terrified, Peter swung his feet underneath him and stood on the clinging shadows beneath him. “Mr. Stark?” he said, looking around him wildly. The sound echoed through the darkness, shrill and scared and young.

There was no answer.

“Where am I?” Peter wondered quietly.

“I’ve been asking myself the same question,” came a voice from behind him. “Though perhaps the question is not where, but who.”

Peter turned, and found himself staring at an astral figure. A figure in a suit of infinite capabilities, his hands fingering web-shooters at his wrists, his mask gleaming brilliant red and white. Sleek and powerful, the figure approached Peter, looking somehow taller despite the identical body. It was the confidence, the snark, the way he held himself even in this void of nothingness.

Peter knew the figure’s name.

Spider-Man.
AW YES

All those who asked/theorized about what happens when Maura pushes a dual-personality into their astral form? HERE'S YOUR ANSWER, combined with a traumatizing nightmare scenario. Well, next chapter shall be your answer.

SPIIIIIIIIDER BOY
In Which Spider-Man Understands

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone!!! Sorry I didn't get to answering comments on the last chapter; apparently it only takes 2.5 weeks for me to forget how to school. But I wanted to focus all available time on figuring out this chapter, so here we are! Just know: thanks to everyone who gave feedback, and y'all always make my day.

Anyway, without further ado, enjoy the culmination of my Spider-Man plot point, the climax of the DID, and the thing I've been leading up to for 75 chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spider-Man watched the startled boy before him take a step back with a yelp of alarm, and he let out a quiet chuckle. “I know, it’s sort of weird here. What did you do?”

The boy, Peter, coughed out a cloud of dust. “What did I do?”

“You must’ve done something,” Spider-Man said. He didn’t like this place; it was too open. No buildings or skies for him to run to, no purpose. He’d hadn’t been trapped here long, though, just since a strike to Peter’s sternum--likely with Aedoilagen to blame--had him spiraling away to… wherever this was.

“Unless I died, I can’t think of anything that could have prompted this… somewhat surreal experience,” Peter murmured, eyes narrowing as he peered at Spider-Man.

Spider-Man’s narrowed right back, and the eyes of the mask mirrored it. “You didn’t die. At least I hope.”

Peter shiverred. “I think I might’ve… I was being crushed. Or I still am. Ooooo…” The boy pressed his hands to either side of his head. “This can’t be happening. Asphyxiation due to building collapse would be the worst way to go.”

“Couldn’t agree more.”

Peter jerked his gaze back up to Spider-Man’s. “You just left me there.”

“What?” Spider-Man took a step back, irritated and more than a little offended. “Didn’t we have this conversation? I warned you! I told you I couldn’t help you if you wanted to go in there and blow up a building and get yourself killed!”

Peter deflated a little. “I know, I know… I just don’t want to be dead.”

“I’m not too keen on you being dead either,” Spider-Man said, flicking at the bottom of his web-shooter. “Just try not to blame me for it.”

Peter nodded mutely, sliding back down onto his knees and staring towards the infinite ceiling of their black void. “This is weird.”

“Again, couldn’t agree more.”
"How do I get out of here?" Peter asked, curling in on himself a bit. He looked so weak, like a deer in car headlights: far, far out of his depth.

"Hell if I know," Spider-Man responded. "I’d already be gone."

"So… am I dead?"

_No._ "I won’t let you be," Spider-Man said, offering a covered hand to the boy.

Peter studied it for an insultingly long moment before accepting, and Spider-Man pulled him easily to his feet. The two stood side by side for a moment, looking around and at each other and trying to quantify what they were looking at.

"Okay," Spider-Man finally said, "what the actual, literal, genuine fuck is happening?"

* * *

Peter could only shrug. Meshing his fingers together and resting his palms atop his curly hair, he tried not to fidget as he stared into the blackness around them.

"A weird-ass, magic-induced astral dimension?" he wondered. "A trauma-induced vision?"

"I think we’re in our astral forms," Spider-Man replied. "Or at least, I am. Aedoilagen sent the consciousnesses out of our body, right? It makes sense that I got kicked out, too."

"But I’m not in my astral form anymore--I got out," Peter objected.

"Well, then pick one of the other explanations."

Peter bristled. "You know, you can be unbelievably irritating sometimes."

"And you can be cowardly and ineffectual," Spider-Man retorted, the mask expressionless.

"Fine."

"Fine."

Peter huffed and took a few steps in a random direction. He couldn’t even sense the movement; this strange place seemed to shift with him. The light didn’t change, and neither did the sound, and if Peter couldn’t see his feet moving, he’d think he was stuck stationary.

If this was his mind, he didn’t like it. He was pretty sure that might mean something not-so-good for his health, but he couldn’t bring himself to care; he wanted out.

Though not back into his body. His body was stuck underneath two stories of rubble, his body was useless, his body was dying.

But if someone else could get into it, could save him and Tony, like his job dictated…

"So if you’re here now, could you wake up and get me out of the rubble?" Peter asked.

Spider-Man shook his head. "I can’t."

"Why not?"
“Reasons,” was the vague reply.

Peter rolled his eyes. “What, you still can’t exist in a collapsed building after the shit that went down with Tooms?"

“Can you?”

Peter huffed.

Spider-Man’s mask’s eyes twisted into a smirk, and Peter punched him--admittedly not very effectively--in the shoulder. “I hate you.”

“I know.” Spider-Man’s voice was soft. Sad.

A sudden, unwanted surge of guilt trickled through Peter. What had the hero done to deserve his hate? He only existed, just as Peter did. Peter sighed, rubbing a hand through his hair.

“We need you, Spider-Man,” Peter finally admitted. It hurt to say the words aloud, hurt to admit to his own uselessness, but he ground the statement out through clenched teeth.

“I know,” was the infuriatingly pleased answer. “But I can’t--wait. We?”

“Yeah. Mr. Stark is probably the only reason I’m alive right now, and he’s not…” Peter swallowed hard. “He’s not doing too well.”

The mask’s wide, white eyes bored into Peter as Spider-Man turned slowly, his hands almost vibrating before him.

“You… you found Tony?” he breathed.

* * *

You found him you found him you found him.

Spider-Man was grinning like an idiot under his mask as Peter nodded, looking a bit miffed. He couldn’t care less; Tony was with him.

“Is he okay? Is he…” God, what did he even ask? How did he ask it?

Peter shivered slightly, and a bit of Spider-Man’s excitement drained away. “He’s… they’ve been torturing him.”

Spider-Man had known that. But it still felt like a bullet shattering into his heart to hear Peter say it out loud, to hear it confirmed within the universe. Spider-Man took a stumbling step backward, his right hand strangling his left as he forced himself to control his breathing.

Peter looked at him, and, to Spider-Man’s surprise, reached out. The boy’s hand fell lightly, comfortingly, onto Spider-Man’s shoulder, and Spider-Man found himself leaning into it.

“When I found him, he looked dead. But he wasn’t… just stuck in Aedoilagen’s pocket dimension, like Strange said,” Peter explained. “Aedoilagen shoved me into the dimension too, before I could photograph the place to send to the Jedi.”

Spider-Man listened in increasing awe as Peter described what had happened within the pocket
dimension, his expression shadowed with memory and his hair falling afront his face to obscure his 
eyes from Spider-Man’s view. Spider-Man couldn’t help but shiver at his description of the place, 
and the claustrophobia of it. Hearing of Tony’s, and then Peter’s own, torture at the hands of the 
sorcerers had Spider-Man frozen, heart pounding with equal parts horror and fury.

“It hurt,” Peter said, his voice breaking for the first time. “Fuck, it hurt like all hell. It was like… it 
was like I was being burned and frozen from the inside out, one sensation paving the way for the 
next until they were indistinguishable from each other. It felt like watching Tony get shot and taken 
all over again. It felt like Liz leaving. It felt like May giving up on me. It was in my heart and my 
mind and my soul and it hurt…”

Spider-Man couldn’t help himself.

He turned under Peter’s hand on his shoulder and folded his arms around the boy, the metallic fabric 
of the suit rubbing against Peter’s bare neck. Surprised, Peter inhaled sharply, and Spider-Man could 
feel the gasp as he hugged him close. Peter’s arms wrapped hesitantly about him in turn, and Spider-
Man began to prepare himself for what he knew was coming.

“You were very brave,” he said quietly.

* * *

Peter scoffed lightly, but couldn’t quite bring himself to push Spider-Man away.

“Me? Brave?”

Spider-Man moved back, studying Peter’s face. “You’re brave.”

Peter shook his head. “No. You were always the brave one. You were always the helpful one, the 
good one. I’m just… me. Peter Benjamin Parker.”

Spider-Man just stared.

Peter looked away, his expression twisting bitterly. “You saved the world. You fight crime. You 
save lives, my life. And I… I wake up everyday, and I go to school. I mix chemicals. I code 
computers. I do homework and I study and I buy sandwiches, and I’m nobody.”

Spider-Man’s hands squeezed his shoulders, and Peter looked at him involuntarily, even as he kept 
speaking, unable to stop, even if he wanted to.

“Ned looks up to you. He’s my friend, but he wants to be yours. May can only see you when she 
looks at me. You and your suit and your potential; everything you can do and will do. All the good. 
And Peter Parker stays scared, stays on the streetside, is left with the life you leave behind.” And the 
words tumbled out, the words that made him hate the hero before him, the words that made him 
separate. The words that destroyed him. “You’re the only reason I met Mr. Stark, the only reason I 
still know him, the only reason he’s… he’s my father. He’s really yours.”

He couldn’t look into those black-rimmed eyes as they widened; if he did, he would surrender to the 
envy that ate at him, and he would fight this consciousness for the rest of his life. Which might not be 
long at all.

“You really believe that, don’t you?” came the hero’s disbelieving voice.
Spider-Man was not used to guilt.

He was not used to uncertainty, and he was not use to the shame he felt as Peter spat his heart at Spider-Man’s feet.

He was the cause of that.

He had told Peter he was useless. He had told him to surrender to Spider-Man himself, had sewn the seeds of every one of those insecurities.

And he’d believed it.

Now…

When Peter had chosen to go after Aedoilagen without him, when he’d been shoved from their mind, he’d realized something. Something that should have been obvious, that he should have seen every time he flickered into existence, every time Peter spoke to him. A title, a term for whatever this was.

“Of course I believe it,” Peter said, throwing himself out of Spider-Man’s grip. “It’s true.”

Spider-Man could only shake his head, shake it and shake it and shake it. “No.”

Peter didn’t look back at him, only staring towards the darkness beneath his feet, fists clenched.

“Well, I don’t believe that,” Spider-Man snarled. “I know I might have said those things, but I’m a liar.”

A broken scoff.

“Listen here, Peter Parker.” Spider-Man spun the boy to face him, meeting his eyes. “It wasn’t me that helped build a life with May after her husband died. It wasn’t me that befriended Ned Leeds with a screwdriver in seventh grade. It wasn’t me that concocted a web-fluid formula. It wasn’t me that fell in love with Michelle Jones. It wasn’t me that kissed her.”

Peter didn’t answer.

“And it wasn’t me that saw Tony Stark for anything other than Iron Man, at first,” Spider-Man said. “It wasn’t me that brought him back from panic attacks. It wasn’t me that pulled him from his shell. It wasn’t me that gained his trust. And it isn’t me who deserves it.” He gripped the boy’s shoulders, smiling and hoping the mask would convey it.

“But…”

“But nothing. I might have super-strength, but you’re the one with the drive to use it,” Spider-Man said. “You’re Peter Benjamin Parker, a Stark, an Avenger.”

Peter watched him, face unreadable, for a long, long moment.

And then he nodded, once, quick and precise.

Spider-Man let go of the boy, stepping back in satisfaction. “Alright then.”
“But Peter Parker isn’t going to get us out of the rubble,” Peter said. “I can’t. We need you, Spider-Man.”

With sudden certainty, Spider-Man found himself accepting it. What he would have to do, what he would have to sacrifice, for the continuation of the mission. For Tony.

For Peter.

And for himself.

He refused to say goodbye. He wouldn’t be leaving this world; he would simply see it in a new way. Perhaps a better one. Change wasn’t always bad, no matter how fearful it made him, made everyone, and Spider-Man was ready.

It was time to tell the truth.

“You know why I can’t come back? Why I can’t help you beneath the rubble?” Spider-Man said, stepping backward.

“Because you don’t exist there,” Peter ground out, parroting what they’d already discussed.

It’s time. Spider-Man took a breath. “No.”

“What?”

“It isn’t that I can’t come back,” he said. He brought his hands up to his head and, breathing deep, fastened his fingers around the material there.

“It’s because I won’t.”

And, quickly and cleanly, Spider-Man pulled off his mask.

* * *

“It isn’t that I can’t come back,” Spider-Man said, and Peter could hear resolution in his voice, resolution and acceptance. “It’s because I won’t.”

When Spider-Man removed his mask, Peter was not expecting what faced him beneath it.

A boy shook out his brown, curly hair as the mask slid off, throwing the scrap of priceless material to the side as though it meant nothing. He was pale and round-faced, with a sharp jawline and a friendly, if somewhat sad, smile. Soft brown eyes met Peter’s own, young and inexperienced but full of incredible potential, and they seemed to look into a future beyond the horizon even as they focused on Peter.

The face beneath the mask… was Peter.

“The truth is, Peter Parker,” said the boy, raising a hand clad in skin-tight suit, “I’m scared too.”
Hehehe...

Spidey is great. Pete is great. We love them both. Because THEY ARE THE SAME. And it's about time more than just Spidey understands this, because The Battle Is Beginning, and there's no time for uncertainty.

HERE IT COMES, PEOPLE.
In Which Escapes are Made

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I'm scared too.

Peter Parker opened his eyes.

The dust had settled somewhat, and Peter could see Tony's strained face above him, blood sliding in a half-congealed crust down the side of his face. He didn't know how much time had past, but it couldn't have been much; Tony was still holding the building, after all.

But his legs were broken.

His form was shattered, and he was holding the building anyway, holding it for Peter.

It was time to stop taking advantage of that. It was time to provide some goddamn help.

Peter Parker moaned, and it turned into a roar, a roar of frustration and determination, a roar of promise. He was going to do something, he was going to get out of here, he was ready.

He was Spider-Man.

Tony opened eyes dull with pain at Peter's cry, beginning to speak again.

But Peter couldn't hear; his mind was full of conflicting emotions, screaming at him to curl up and die, screaming at him to get up, to save them, that he wasn't enough, that they needed Spider-Man, that Spider-Man was him.

Peter moved.

It was jerky and weak, but he raised his head, turning onto his side, and then onto his hands, pushing up as far as he could in Tony's bubble of safety. He shook the fear from his mind, or tried to; he bound it up and clutched it between clenched teeth, and moved.

It was dark, but as Peter, as Spider-Man's, enhanced vision adjusted to the dusty light, he found he could see parts of the rubble, distinguish the specifics of the wall of destruction that held their death within its precariously balanced structure.

Peter felt his breathing speed up again.

"You can do it, kid." Tony's voice filtered through to his conscious mind. "Don't panic now, not when your so close."

So close? So close to what?

Peter shook his head again, dust curling out in clouds as his curly hair smacked against his scalp. He had to focus, he had to see. Tony saw something--Peter should ask him, but he couldn't seem to form words.

See see see.

Eyelids strained wide, Peter could blurrily distinguish soot and dirt and shavings on his eyelashes. He
curled his fingers into the wooden floor beneath them and felt splinters pricking against the undersides of his nails, a much-needed physical sensation.

*See see see.*

Broken wooden planks and bent metal supports. Sparking, severed wires and shattered glass. Rocks and wood and metal--

“Breathe, Pete.”

Spider-Man. Peter Parker, Spider-Man, could *do* this. He had to do this.

What was he looking for?
A way out. He needed a way out; he needed a gap.

Peter began to turn his head, and could almost hear his tendons creaking. Stiff, determined, he could do this. He wasn’t scared--

No. No, he was scared. He was living his deepest nightmare. He was terrified.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t save them. That didn’t mean he wasn’t brave. Even heroes got scared.

Truely, what made Spider-Man so different from Peter Parker? What made him *more*? What made him more than Peter, more than Ned, more than MJ, more than anyone who looked towards the future with hope and determination? What made him more than the man in the deli who gave free sandwiches to kids on Tuesdays? What made him more than the student who forgoes homework to console a grieving friend? What made him more than the child who held their head up high and plastered on their smile like armour through the throws of a divorce?

What made him a hero, when Peter Parker was not?

Peter looked to the future with confusion, with terror, with the nervousness of a teenager trying to understand the unquantifiable soaring of that mystery that was life. And Spider-Man, who was supposed to know, who was supposed to understand… he did too.

*Spider-Man is me.*

Someday, he might believe that.

But for today, it was a start.

Peter scanned the area around them, looking for a crack in the wall of rubble in front of him. He tried to judge how deep they were, tried to glimpse a flicker of light that might pose the exit Tony had seen, but there was nothing.

And then, beneath a shard of ivory wood, Peter saw something smooth and black as it reflected the sparking electric wires in a single blinding flash. Just for a moment, he glimpsed its surface in the fire, miraculously intact, before darkness swallowed it up again.

His phone.

Peter sucked in a breath, hope and dust mingling in his chest in a strange concoction of physical and emotional. A way out, a glimmer of possibility, lay half-buried in the rubble, the reflection of outdated technology something sent from heaven.
Peter smiled, and forced his knees to move, his fingers to grasp. He braced himself on the friction of the hardwood floor, pressing elbows and shins into the ground and pulling. He could reach it.

“C’mon, Pete, c’mon.” Tony haltingly managed to lift one of his arms up and out of Peter’s path as the boy scraped and slithered his way out of the small dome of safety provided by the man.

It was almost tangible, the transition into danger, into uncertainty. Peter paused, only for a moment, on the threshold as his fear began to fester again, forcing his senses into overdrive.

That was a superpower, in itself.

It wasn’t the suit that made Tony Stark a hero; Peter had learned that long ago. And it was only logical that neither did the spider bite make Peter Parker one.

Peter squeezed himself into the gap, hands scrabbling towards the phone just out of his reach. He shoved his form further, shifting the wooden beam slightly--

A groan echoed through the precariously stacked area, and Peter froze, breathing speeding.

“Don’t move,” Tony said, his voice slightly stronger by some inexplicable means. “Wait until I secure the edge--I think I can reach.”

Peter wanted to protest, wanted to stop the man from possibly injuring himself further. But it was no use, and he would get that look, even if he couldn’t see it, the look of ‘over my dead body,’ and it would simply waste time.

So he obeyed, trying not to shudder as the ruins around them creaked and moaned like a wounded animal, trying not to imagine them trapped in its innards. Tony’s presence was warm and reassuring at his back, and though he couldn’t keep the shudder from skittering up his spine as Tony shifted the area currently pressing in on him, he trusted the man to keep him safe.

Which wasn’t as surprising as it probably should have been.

“Okay go,” Tony said.

Peter breathed a quiet, “yes, okay,” his voice hoarse from screams and dust.

“That’s it. You’ve got it, kid.”

“I know.” Peter smiled and pulled himself forward again, fingers straining forward, brushing like the barest of winds against the casing of his phone. But it was enough; he stuck to it, and pulled the thing back toward him, a snake striking quick and precise.

He wriggled backward, back into Tony’s aura of safety, already clicking the home button with bated breath.

And the phone burst alive with white-blue light, the blinding image of his screensaver etching itself into Peter’s squinting eyes. “Fuck,” he yelped, quickly dimming it as his eyes re-adjusted to the shimmering afterimage.

“Language,” Tony laughed, the sound still rough and strained. “Now get us out of here, would you?”

Peter grinned. “It’d be my pleasure.”
It had been too long.

Stephen knew it even before he felt the wrenching tingle of another form unwillingly entering the astral dimension. But it was then that he panicked, pulling the eye open, fearing what he would hear ringing out through the dimensions.

Not a flicker of it showed on his face, however. He stood in silence, the Cloak idling beside him as he researched neuroscientific disorders on the screen in his hand on which would appear Peter’s photo. The lab was empty but for T’Challa and Shuri—he’d already portaled the others to the area around the house, to prepare for the battle they all knew was coming.

One way or another.

Stephen forced himself to listen, to prepare for the sounds, the signs, that would be given. He couldn’t give up on the kid, not yet, not when any interference might tip the fragile chance they had, but it was torture to wait. It was torture to abandon the boy he’d grown so unwillingly fond of to the fate Stephen knew was coming.

Not ten seconds later, the screams started up again. And though Stephen was prepared, though he knew what to expect from days and days of hearing the sounds, he still crumpled in on himself when the sounds exploded into his mind.

It wasn’t like those days and days, wasn’t like anything he’d heard before; it flayed him from the inside out, spiked his consciousness with deafening noise. No one should have the ability to make such a sound, no one should have the ability to force someone else to make it.

Stephen couldn’t hear the voices around him; the screams ate up his every perception. But he could feel the Cloak as it wrapped about him anxiously, its soft seams brushing against his face and wrists. His hand clutched at it involuntarily, strangling the fabric in the strongest grip his damaged tendons could muster as he forced breaths in and out around the sound in his mind.

And then, all of a sudden, they stopped.

No, they strangled to a halt, petering off, abandoned through the multiverse.

“Strange?” Shuri’s concerned voice filtered through into his consciousness.

“This is not good,” Stephen managed to say, his head still ringing. “This is a bit not good.”

“What?”

Before Stephen could answer, something else wrapped his perception with serrated claws and flung him to the side. Oh for fuck’s sake--

Power boomed through the multiverse, screaming an cal, screaming an order. And the dimensional energy responded, utterly inefficiently, but with such number and concentration even the Eye could feel it. Magic roared outward, and Stephen could sense it, could pinpoint it to that one house in the Ukraine.

Stephen would have thought the power stemmed from Maura Aedoilagen, would have truly feared her and the thread she could pose to these people and this world, if it hadn’t been for the words of that order.
STOP THIS. SAVE HIM.

“That’s… that’s impossible,” Stephen murmured, drifting back into himself. He hadn’t realized the metaphysical blow had slammed him into the astral dimension until he was back in his physical form, but he found himself lifting a pounding head and blinking the confusion from his eyes.

He expected to see Shuri, expected to be bombarded with far too many questions and then seventy more, but all he saw was her retreating form. It was his turn to ask after events as she threw herself toward a screen, T’Challa at her heels.

“I thought I told him to avoid magical outbursts!” Shuri said, but Stephen could hear the genuine terror behind her flippant comment. “I told him I didn’t know how it would affect the detonators—”

Oh.

Oh, shit.

“This is too early—” Shuri was sprinting to another screen, her eyes wide, her fingers moving at inhuman speeds. “Brother, Brother the charges are detoning; fuck, fuck, I have to stop this—”

“Shuri!” The king gripped his sister’s wrist as she moved towards yet another screen, and Stephen could see the strain of even his enhanced muscles as he tried to keep the girl in one place. “Shuri, stop.”

“Let me go, Brother.”

Stephen could hear the fury, the desperation in her voice as clearly as he had heard Tony Stark’s cries, and he couldn’t help but shiver at the danger in it.

But T’Challa didn’t move. He simply met his sister’s eyes, calm and powerful and protective, though not in the least apologetic. “There is nothing you can do.”

And Shuri didn’t deny it, which said everything.

The screens flashed red, then filled with code--power readings and success rates and results.

The house had been destroyed.

Shuri stared at the data, hardly blinking. “I… I’ve killed him,” she whispered, her voice shaking, just slightly. As though she still couldn’t quite believe it.

Stephen bowed his head, but forced the cool, heavy sensation he was far too familiar with away, for the moment. He would not grieve. He would not give up, not yet. He’d seen men brought back after diagnosed brain death; he’d brought them back. He’d seen crippled men play basketball, and watched an old woman weave magic from nothing and bring belief from skepticism.

Stephen Strange had seen miracles.

And he’d believe in them, this time.

Stephen slumped slightly, his shaking hands drifting against the cloak at his back, as Shuri reached hesitantly for the objects waiting on the table next to her: a lump of fabric that was the Spider-Man suit and a sleek, expensive watch that would call Stark’s suit. Her hand paused before coming in contact, just hovering millimeters from the surface.

Stephen found himself on his feet when the first of the girl’s quiet sobs echoed through the lab.
But her brother was wrapping her in his arms before Stephen had to think of anything he could possibly do, looking not like a hero, but like family. T’Challa didn’t say anything, didn’t try to reassure her; he just stood and let her seep up his endless strength.

Stephen didn’t think he’d ever seen the man look more kingly than he did in that moment.

And then, Stephen’s holoscreen beeped.

It was loud, far too loud for the horror-struck silence of the lab, and it had all three of them jerking in surprise. Stephen lifted the thing, double tapping on its surface with clumsy fingers.

He was met with a hazy image of a pile of rubble--no, from inside said pile of rubble. It was dark, but Stephen could make out the unique shapes of the ruins in the image and the dust in front of the camera.

Another ping, and, above the image, a single line of text appeared.

*Hey, Doctor, do you think you might be able to get us out of here? Like, right now?*

Stephen grinned.

Yes, he thought he could make that work.

“Now’s not the time for survivors guilt, Shuri,” he said, already drawing his sling-ring through the air. “Because it just so happens that your dead men survived, too.”

His portal opened onto wood and stone and rubble, dropping chunks of stone and bits of metal onto the spotless lab floor.

And through it fell the bruised, battered, and bloody bodies of Peter Parker and Tony Stark.

Chapter End Notes

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Guess what?

Tony's in the same room as Shuri. And as Stephen.

Yeeepppp... hold onto your horses, the action is upcoming!

(Crap, I've written 180k of political intrigue and angst, how the heck does one write action again???? Welp, we'll figure it out.)

Thanks for reading! :) See you soon.
Maura’s portal opened onto chaos.

She’d been prepared for chaos, but not to this degree. She’d been prepared for rock and metal and wood, prepared the decimation of yet another home. She’d been prepared for bodies.

But when she stumbled, coughing, out of her portal onto what should have been the top floor of her hideout and almost tripped over the bloody corpse of Marcus, she was struck frozen atop the rubble.

His mouth was slightly open, his swollen tongue filling it and spilling over to rest against his cheek. A stone sat atop the side of his head--no, buried in it, covered in rusty gore and stuck to shards of the man’s skull. Bulging eyes stared unseeingly at her, and Maura could focus on nothing but that dead gaze, the gaze of the friend she had failed.

“Marcus?” She whispered the question to the dusty air, the beams of sunlight clearly visible in the particles of atmosphere. The dusty air didn’t reply.

She looked up, and the sounds began to filter into her mind. The sounds of the chaos she’d been expecting, and so, so much more. She forced herself to her feet (she hadn’t realized she’d fallen from them) and tried to see through the blinding sunlight all around her. Unable to clear her vision, Maura snarled and called the Arts around her, sending them exploding outward in a gust of power that sent the dust spiraling away.

And then she could see the chaos, too.

The chaos of battle.

In the ruins of her home, the remaining members of her team were fighting. Maura’s heart lightened when she saw the telltale red-orange flashes of Kenja’s magic--her apprentice was alive--and the roaring thunderclaps of Jade’s ironically large gun. Red-edged throwing stars sang through the air, Samantha’s speed and accuracy cutting through the wind itself. Bantail’s rapier reflected the sunlight like the dust had, whipping through the air with unnatural force, pushed by the personal magnetic field the man emitted perpetually. Bullets swerved around him, shoved away by his personal shield as that sword swung wickedly and unconventionally.

But it was the object of Kenja’s magic, of Jade’s bullets, of Bantail’s rapier and Samantha’s stars, of the powers and skills of all of Maura’s friends and followers that shocked her back a step, that drew her mind away from the corpse of Marcus.

Standing against Bantail’s rapier were wings of metal, ducking and pulling to avoid the ensnarement of his magnetic field.

Against Jade’s bullets, twin shields defended and advanced with practiced efficiency--a soldier’s efficiency.
And against the scarlet light of Kenja’s Mystic Arts, another magic flickered: red and sleek, like blood diffusing through a viscous liquid.

The Rogue Avengers had come at last.

Maura stared.

And saw a battle on the ruins of the London Sanctum. Maura stared, and saw Mercury falling from the road, hand outstretched as magic-fearing townsfolk held Maura’s wrists. Maura stared and saw her chance.

In the back of her mind, she was already beginning the spell that would wrap this world around her team, that would give them back everything that they’d lost, that had been taken from them.

And in the front of her mind, she was roaring.

She had a witch to kill.

The dimensional energies whipped around her like fabric in a gale, slapping against her ankles and wrists, screaming along with her wrath. She flew on wings of orange, light shattering against the heroes and enemies below. It reflected dark against Sam Wilson’s mechanical wings, against Steve Rogers’ paw-patterned shields, against James Barnes’ black metal arm. It would do more than reflect.

Maura landed hard next to Kenja, her connection sending more dust into the magically cleared air. She didn’t speak, simply locked eyes with the woman across from them, the woman glowing red with power and evil and everything that had destroyed Maura and her future, and let out a low, vicious snarl.

Magic clashed like steel atop the ruins of a home, like it had done all that time ago. To Maura, it sounded like music, like a symphony of payoff, like catharsis, like utter fury and hate. To everyone else, it sounded like the call of the true beginning of the battle.

And each and every one of them was ready.

* * *

Tony stood up.

And then he decided, upon the pain of his fractured shins, that perhaps just sitting might be better. Peter (at least, Tony thought it was Peter—he really needed to start sorting that out) stood, but refused to take his hand out of Tony’s.

For a long moment, Tony could just look around, as everyone stood in silence. And he took in technology—brimming with potential and ability at the level of his own, screaming talent and future and use. Technology that could only mean Wakanda, even if he hadn’t already gathered that from the form of King T’Challa and Princess Shuri, children of T’Chaka.

Then the latter yelped a somewhat distraught laugh and threw herself against his son, wrapping her arms around his surprised shoulders. Tony pulled his hand out of Peter’s with a chuckle, as the boy hugged Shuri back somewhat awkwardly.

The girl stepped back and promptly socked his son in the face.
“I thought,” she said over Tony’s ‘what the hell?’ and Peter’s ‘hey!’, “you were dead. But you’re not!”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Peter grumbled, rubbing his nose irritably. T’Challa choked on a laugh behind him, and Tony turned his attention to the man for a moment. The king jerked his chin in greeting, but his hands were busy with… was that Grease?

“Did you bring the fucking cat with you?”

Peter looked back at him, his nose and cheek bright red. “I did a lot of very irresponsible things…” he stuttered, shame and embarrassment making the rest of his face color, too.

“For which I am grateful,” T’Challa said. Tony raised an eyebrow, then sighed—he had to be grateful for those irresponsible decisions as well, seeing as they were the reason he was safe in this room. It was May’s job to bust the teen’s ass, anyway.

“Okay so if I’m not dead,” Peter whirled back onto Shuri. “What was this—” he gestured to his face—“for?”

“For ignoring my instructions and sending out a magical surge that screwed up my instruments and set them exploding against my will,” Shuri responded.

“Actually,” Tony said, coughing once to try and get the dust from his esophagus, “that was me. Good to meet you by the way, and I can see we should all be running for the hills.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you met my fucking brilliant son and now there’s no stopping the end of the world.” Tony sat up a little straighter and held out a hand. “Tony Stark.”

She grinned. “I know. Princess Shuri.”

Tony grinned. "I know.”

“If you are all quite finished,” interrupted a deep voice Tony didn’t recognize, “we do have things to be doing.”

Tony scooched—quite gracefully, thank you very much—along the floor until he could see the source of said voice. He was faced with a tall, slim man with shaking hands in the most bizarre clothes he’d ever seen, with pointed features and facial hair that far too resembled Tony’s for his liking. But it was the cloak that had Tony’s eyebrow creeping up; the thing seemed to flutter of its own accord, deep red collar reaching high up against the man’s face.

“Doctor Strange, sir!” Peter exclaimed, and Tony’s eyebrow lowered. A sorcerer; no wonder the clothing was… strange.

Tony grinned maliciously. It was a shame the man had probably already heard all of the truly atrocious jokes blooming in Tony’s mind, but that had never stopped Tony before.

Strange watched the expression with understanding, and then subsequently complete indifference. “Yes, I’ve heard them all,” he sighed, looking back at Peter. “You okay, Peter?”

Tony couldn’t hide the flicker of surprise at the question, and glanced at Peter as the boy nodded. “Thank you for getting us out.”
“It was my job, after all,” Strange said with a slight inflex, and Tony realized the man had spoken with very little emotion thus far. “But seeing as that’s done, might we move on?”

“Yes, what’s the next phase?” Tony grinned, clapping his hands together in mock excitement.

Peter smiled slowly, meeting eyes with Shuri. The girl winked and reached behind her, tossing two objects into Tony’s son’s hands.

Tony’s mouth dropped open at the sight of one of those objects, and he didn’t even try to hide it. Because--

“Next step,” Peter grinned, holding up Tony’s watch triumphantly, “is kick ass.”

Tony lifted a finger, not quite ready to abandon all reason. “It’ll take hours for the rest of my suit to get here, even with that.”

And then there was a flurry of sparking light and a slice of the lab fell away to expose… his lab. Half of the world just dropped out of existence to make room for another part.

Strange crossed his arms, cloak wavering out behind him, and Tony thought the damn thing looked self-satisfied all on its own. Which was impossib--

The cloak lifted itself from Strange’s shoulders and floated off toward Peter, before crinkling itself in half to fucking survey the Spider-Man suit as if it was confronting a rival.

“Okay, what.”

A tiny smile ghosted across Strange’s face before disappearing almost immediately. “Yes, the Cloak of Levitation is sentient. No, you cannot touch it, it will flay you alive. Your suit will get instant transportation through the portal--you’re welcome--so there’s really no need to be lingering here, anymore. Wong will be waiting for us with the rest of the idiots, currently having all the fun.”

Tony’s excited curiosity leached away at those words, and he looked to Peter, who was grinning at the Cloak. The boy felt Tony’s eyes on him and looked up. “The ‘rest of the idiots?’” Tony asked quietly.

Peter’s smile dropped off his face.

The silence that fell across the lab was bitter and putrescent and as thick as treacle.

“Wakanda has been… housing them,” T’Challa finally said.

“I know,” Tony replied flatly. He’d come to terms with that fact long ago.

The festering silence pressed in on them again.

“We’ve been working with them,” Peter said, clearing his throat. “To find you.”

“The ‘finding’ was mostly me,” Shuri interrupted. Tony had never been more thankful for a sarcastic comment in his life, which was saying something. Shuri’s light sass sliced through the memories pressing down on Tony as they screamed at him to face them, drawing the engineer back to the present.

“I beg to differ,” Strange added with mock offense.

“I side with Doctor Strange!” Peter said, raising a hand.
Shuri put a hand to her chest and glared daggers at the boy. Tony barked a sharp, still not completely genuine laugh.

“Brother, I’ve been betrayed.” Shuri whirled on the king.

“Does this mean I’m your second again?” T’Challa asked hopefully.

“The Cloak’s still my second.”

“Alright, alright, everybody shut up,” Tony said, waving his arms to silence bickering geniuses. “So Rogers and his group of scavengers is already fighting?”

The other inhabitants of the room nodded--well, three of them did. Strange just looked at him expressionlessly.

Tony closed his eyes for a moment.

Then he looked back at the portal, and swallowed hard.

Taking the watch from Peter’s outstretched hand, Tony wrapped it around his wrist and clicked the small dial along the side unceremoniously.

“Alright then,” Tony said, and Peter--Spider-Man?--lifted his suit. “Let’s kick some ass.”

* * *

It all happened quite suddenly.

FRIDAY was helping Happy in the compound and checking in on the state of the Ms. Potts and crew overseas, and missed the signs as they burst into existence, one after the other, within her workshop. Busy, she filed the data flowing into her hard drive away to examine later and kept working.

So when she was suddenly pulled to life in another location as parts assembled into a complete suit, FRIDAY was unprepared.

And the voice that echoed through the helmet sent her reeling.

“Hell, it’s been a long time.”

“Boss?”

“Hey, FRIDAY.”

“Boss!” Lights in the helmet burned bright as every elevator in the compound dinged, over and over and over again. She was in the suit again, he was in the suit again, and she’d never felt such elation in her coded heart.

“Glad to see you too, FRI.” The suit picked up the boss’s smile and more elevators ignored express instructions.

And then more data collected from the suit--weight and pressure and strength. FRIDAY sent a spark through the shin guards of the suit. “You’re hurt.”
“I sort of had an out-of-body experience.”

“For four days!” Another voice picked up in FRIDAY’s sensors; a certain Peter Parker, halfway into his Spider-Man suit.

“Boss.”

“Apparently sitting around as a body without a soul is unhealthy,” the boss explained, looking fondly toward the boy. “And then Shuri dropped a building on us--”

“I DID NOT!” FRIDAY heard the somewhat disgruntled voice of the young genius and brightened the visor lights.

“Yes, I seem to recall that being you,” King T’Challa added.

“Okay, so I inadvertently dropped a building on us and had to avoid getting me or my kid crushed, and here I am with some fractured tibias and a really irrational yearning for donuts.”

FRIDAY sensed the momentary surge of strange energy moments before a frosted donut appeared out of nothing directly before the helmet. The boss’s hand flashed out to catch it, gauntleted hand grasping the pastry delicately. He whirled, repulsors firing to lift him slightly off the ground.

FRIDAY didn’t recognize the man he looked at, but she assumed he was the doctor Peter had told her about. The smirk on the doctor’s face was reminiscent of the boss’s, and orange light was fading from existence around his shaking hands.

Tony looked down at the donut, then back at the man, and his silence was so awestruck that FRIDAY couldn’t help but laugh. “Magic?” she asked.

“Apparently! Where the hell did this come from?” The boss gesticulated, a few sprinkles flying off the edge of the donut.

“I hate to fight on an empty stomach,” the sorcerer replied, a slight smile flickering across his face.

“So you just--” Tony waved metal-clad hands helplessly. “Made a fucking donut?”

“It’s perfectly safe.”

“But--conservation of matter--where did you--”

The doctor raised a trembling hand--FRIDAY zoomed her scanner to detect scars on each knuckle and tendon, and wondered what had happened--and flicked his fingers. Tony’s left arm was suddenly covered in donuts of increasing size and fading colors, strung along the metal like beads on a necklace.

Two hysterical young voices burst out laughing, and Tony pointed the eyes of the visor at his arm. “FRIDAY?”

“I’ve scanned the objects, and found nothing abnormal about them aside from their origin and location,” she said.

“Fantastic.” The boss dissolved his helmet, brought his arm up to his face, fixed his eyes on the smug-looking sorcerer, and took a bite out of three donuts at once.

“Now, you gonna magic us to Kiev? Or do I have to fly us there?”
The sorcerer bent into an elaborate bow. “Though I am flattered by your offer, efficiency is our best course of action, here.”

Not two seconds later, more alien energy flooded FRIDAY’s sensors, and the world folded away to reveal the sounds of war. She steeled herself, charging and syphoning power, reading the boss for battle.

His hesitated before passing through the portal, his breathing speeding up. FRIDAY sensed it and pushed the power of the repulsors, sending the suit through the gateway, listening to the speed of Tony’s pulse. His breaths were harsh beneath the visor, but as soon as Peter joined him, the boss’s focus was turned back onto the scene before him, and his eyes narrowed.

“Ready FRIDAY?”

“Always.”

The boss took another bite of his donut arm, and charged.

* * *

Stephen didn’t follow, immediately.

He kept the portal open until the inhabitants of the lab had passed through it, then flashed his hands through the air to change the location of his spacetime gateway. Instead of opening out onto the battlefield, Stephen stepped into Kyiv behind the still-intact house a block or so down from the explosion.

Wet cobbles from a leaking gutter splashed beneath his booted feet, and the Cloak lifted its hem to keep out of the spray. Whispering an apology to the sentient garment, Stephen strode toward the figure at the edge of the street as it watched the battle from afar.

“ Took you long enough,” came the perpetually disapproving voice of Wong.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” Stephen sighed, peering around the edge of the building toward where the sounds of gunshots and repulsor-blasts were echoing. “Things didn’t go according to plan…”

“When do they ever, with you?”

“I’ll have you know,” Stephen said, trying and failing not to let the man irk him, “it was not my fault.”

“I doubt that.”

Stephen rolled his eyes, and the Cloak’s collars ruffled. “Alright so, why did you want me here, and not in the heat of battle right away?” He flexed his wrists, surveying the shaking of his scarred hands. The Eye of Agamotto was warm against his chest, and he could feel constant manipulation of this universe’s dimensional energies.

“Because of Maura Aedoilagen.”

“So I assumed,” Stephen sighed.

Wong began, “She’s the last remaining member of our order--”
“No.”

“Strange—”

“I can’t promise that, Wong. She kidnapped, she *tortured*, one of us.”

“Not us.”

“*Yes us.*” Images of a bright smile on the face of an even brighter boy, fading away to fear and pain at the sound of screams flickered across Stephen’s mind. He thought of the effervescent curiosity of Antony Stark and the relief of Shuri when Peter came back alive. He could still feel the signature of the energy he’d transformed into donuts. “She deserves everything coming to her.”

“You can’t know that,” Wong said.

Stephen shook his head. “You didn’t hear the screams.”

“But—”

“Her fate is not ours to choose.” Stephen cut his friend off. “There’s only one man the choice of mercy falls down to.”

A smidge of desperation leaked into Wong’s voice, and Stephen felt his heart twinge. “She’s the last of our order,” he repeated. “An order we thought dead. The last of our *family.*”

“She’s no family of ours,” Stephen said softly. “Not anymore, Wong. We have to…” he swallowed. “We have to let go of that past, now. We can’t think about what… about what *she* would do, we can’t try and preserve that. We have to look up and do what is right, not what we wish was right.”

Wong didn’t answer for a moment, his judging gaze dancing across Stephen’s intense one. Then he smiled, and Stephen saw the brokeness they both held within them shine through in the expression, just for a moment. “Since when did *you* give the inspiring speeches?”

“Does this mean I get unlimited Library rights?”

Wong chuckled, and Stephen congratulated himself silently.

“Depending on if we die, absolutely.”

“Dying’s fine, I’ve done it before. Can vouch for that.” Stephen lifted two fingers and peered around the corner of the building.

“Yeah, and now you hardly sleep at night and you flinch everytime someone says the word *bargain.*”

Stephen flinched.

“Shit,” he growled, as Wong raised an eyebrow. “Alright fine, but that’s all because of the coming back from the dead part.”

“I take back everything I said about inspiring speeches. You are actually the worst.”

Stephen sighed. “Yes yes, thank you very much. Now can we please go and help our allies?”

“I figured some of them are a bit more than allies, now, Doctor ‘one of us.’”
Stephen snorted. “You ever talked to a human incarnation of a puppy?”

“... no?”

“You will,” Stephen said, a true smile flickering across his face for a moment. “And then you’ll agree with me.”

“Shut up and portal.”

Stephen chuckled sardonically. “As you command.”

* * *

Steve Rogers had to grudgingly admit that Maura Aedoilagen assembled a good team.

As he was dodging getting his head blown off by various far-too-powerful weapons, he wondered vaguely where they had all come from. What was the story of this girl who seemed to be able to read his movements? What turned that man into a magnet, shoving objects away while still wielding a blade? How about the woman with blood red eyes and the throwing stars that never missed?

How had Aedoilagen found them all? And how had she brought them all together?

How did she make them hate us?

Questions for another time, as he threw himself at opponents, Shuri’s shields an alien weight in his hands. He heard the sound of his harsh breathing beneath the cries of bullets splitting the air. He heard the yells of his teammates, his allies, and his enemies as steel and vibranium clashed and sent a hum into his bones. He heard the bells of battle within his mind, heard the roar of war, and hated it. Loved it.

Needed it.

There was blood on the edges of his shields and blood along his face and blood in his eyes, and Captain America fought.

The girl before him moved like his own shadow, exactly as he did. Her eyes darted through the air as though across words, and she dodged each thrust and lunge of Steve’s weapons. His perception was divided, part driving his next attack, part extended behind him towards his team, towards Bucky.

When the sound of repulsors roared out over the rubble of the home, every single one of them stopped in their tracks.

When the blue glow of power he hadn’t seen for nine months bathed the dusty ruins, allies and enemies alike turned their gaze upward.

Tony Stark hovered above them, suit shining, left arm ringed in--yes, those were donuts, with reinforcements peering out of the gap in reality behind him. His flippant voice crackled into the secure line of the Rogue’s communications--secure to anyone but him--and none of them found the breath to respond.

“I’m back, bitches.”
END OF PART FIVE

Chapter End Notes

OH

YEAH

BABY!

The next few chapters are gonna be looooot long. Anywhere from 1.5 to 4 times as long as the normal chapters? Cuz action! Woo!!! Anyway, it might take me a bit longer to get them figured out, but I'll see you as soon as I can. :)
God, Tony had missed the suit.

He’d missed a lot, but he hadn’t realized how long it had been since he’d felt the warmth and the power of his marvel of technology. How long it had been since he’d flown.

Or since he’d been shot at by various weapons and magic. He didn’t miss that part so much, but the roar of adrenaline that resulted from it was truly something.

Thankfully, none of… them had tried to speak to him yet. He couldn’t focus on two sets of enemies at the same time—well, he probably could. It would significantly reduce his effectiveness, though.

Shut up and fight.

“How the hell are you not dead!?” The irate voice of Maura Aedoilagen filtered through the visor, and Tony jerked his chin. Wanda’s magic flashed at her as she looked up at Tony, but a flick of the sorcerer’s hand had the red splintering away before a shield of orange.

“Broadway and George Michael,” Tony replied. “So here I am.” His tech-warped voice was met only with a surge of orange energy, and Tony ducked, spiraling sideways in a whirl of flashing metal and shining bluish light. “Also, you underestimate the skills of my son.”

And you will die, for every moment you made that boy hurt.

“That’s me, by the way!” Peter called, the last of their allies to crawl through the portal before it closed in a shimmer of sparks. Tony realized he must obscure the relatively small gateway from Aedoilagen’s eyes, and likely those of Kenja as well.

Peter—despite the suit, Tony found himself thinking of the boy definitively as Peter—shot a strand of webbing against Tony’s non-donut-ed arm, and Tony flared a repulser to counterbalance as the boy arced down into the midst of battle.

Aedoilagen might have responded, but Tony stopped listening, his focus narrowing on the men and women beneath him. Vaguely, he noted T’Challa moving to assist Maximoff with the wizards and Shuri diving towards where Barnes dodged scarily accurate throwing stars. Steve Rogers was looking at him, standing stock-still against the rubble.

Not the time. It was not the time.

Tony flicked his hands, swooping with a roar of his suit toward the battle.

He could see forms buried in the wreckage, the gleam of blood-covered flesh inkling a different fate he and Peter could of met, if they’d been an instant slower. People armed with tech that decidedly should not be possible on Earth stepped over the various exposed corpses with the hesitation of
friends, and Tony forced his mind to see them as enemies, and enemies only.

He cemented it with the first repulsor blast, sending dust and rock back into the air.

Three soldiers returned in kind, colorful lasers eating up the air between them and Tony. He weaved, aiming his next shot for the weapon in one of their hands. The blast shattered the gun from the man’s grip, though it didn’t seem to damage what must have been alien tech.

Tony growled. “FRIDAY, what am I working with, here?”

“I think--”

“The guy with the blue laser has a repurposed Chitauri blaster from the battle of New York,” interrupted Peter’s voice through his visor. Tony ducked a blast from the mentioned gun and slammed into the man holding it, trying to listen to the kid through the sound of cracking wood and explosions from an unknown part of the ruin.

“The red one you just shot--oh shit--” Tony whirled, releasing the man in his grasp, in time to see the kid shaking out a wrist. Moments later, Peter was using it to shot webbing at rapid-fire time, and Tony loosed a breath.

And received a blast of powerful laser to his suit’s chest for the trouble. The reactor fizzled, but otherwise, nothing was affected; Tony had long since invented defense against Chitauri energy.

Peter continued, voice full of adrenaline and exertion, “I dunno about the red. But the purple is definitely an Ultron Blaster, probably from your own tech, Mr. Stark.”

“Wonderful,” Tony sighed, backhanding the man who had shot him and sending both human and alien weapon sprawling across the rocks. “And how do you know all this? Do they offer some sort of evil villain weapons course at Midtown Science and Tech?”

“Well--” Peter rolled out of the way of a blast of red energy from some idiot who had grabbed the discarded gun. Tony lifted a nonchalant gauntlet and blasted him to the stones. “The vulture dude was trading stuff like this.”

“Yet another reason I should have taken you seriously… You’ve got that, FRIDAY?”

“Cataloging information as we speak, boss.”

“You’re the best.”

“Enemy behind you, sir.”

Tony whirled, barely missing a shot some part of him identified as blue. He raised his donut-covered arm to fire off another blast, but it was knocked aside as a blow sent his arm jerking, a spark of broken circuitry sending a flicker of pain along his wrist as bits of pastry exploded into the air around him.

“I’ve got ‘im, Mr. Stark,” Peter said, and the assault ceased with the tender application of web-fluid.

Tony couldn’t help but grin, somewhat hysterically, beneath his helmet. A surge of pride and love had him fighting even faster, and he added that to his ‘reasons my life is screwed up’ list; that a potentially life-threatening rescue could elicit the same reaction in him as a well-played game of Uno.

“You know I love you, kid.”
A laugh of surprise and distraction and realization echoed through Tony’s visor, and Peter responded, “I love you too, Dad.”

They each demonstrated those affections by returning to the guns and enemies before them, red suits flashing in the orange light.

* * *

“Hey Spinner!”

Spider-Man—no, Peter, he forced himself to think—paused his webbing assault on the group of four alien-armed men and women at the crackle of Shuri’s voice through his helmet. He looked up, eyes dancing across the battleground before him and taking in the changes in the chaos.

Rogers had joined Wilson in offense against the magnet-sword-dude, who’s personal electromagnetic aura seemed to be giving them quite a bit of trouble. Romanoff was deep in combat against the lady with the throwing stars (seriously, was she a ninja or something? Because that aim was wicked) and seemed to be doing far better than Rogers and Wilson. The wizards were conducting a frankly terrifying magical dance while Rogers and Barnes tried to round up the humans with the alien weaponry. And Shuri was waving at him in between gunshots toward the dwarfish girl with the very large gun.

“Yes hello?” Spide--Peter said, ducking a blast from yet another Chitauri blaster and flashing back to the days surrounding Homecoming.

“Do you think you could--” she broke off with a grunt, and Peter used the opportunity to ask Karen to shift to rapid-fire webs again-- “help me out with this?”

“T’Challa?” Peter yelped out as he dove forward to avoid one of Tony’s repulsor blasts. Tony.

“Can’t he--”

“I am already here!” the king’s voice crackled.

_The Black Panther’s calling me for backup._

Boy if he didn’t like the sound of that.

Peter grinned, lifting a wrist to pin the man shooting at him. The guy dodged his first web, but Peter sent another one flying faster than he could blink, and knocked him back against a nearby stone.

“Karen?”

“Connecting you to Mr. Stark now.”

“Kid?” Tony sounded understandably distracted as he fought off to Peter’s left.

“You good here?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, if you’re needed elsewhere.”

“Don’t die.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Peter grinned, then disconnected the call and barked, “Octopus!” His webs shifted to their standard
setting, and he shot one towards Tony. Using the Iron Man suit as a fulcrum, he swung over the heads of allies and enemies alike as he made his way towards Shuri and her brother.

He arrived on the trailing end of a front flip, and promptly slipped on the uneven ground of the destroyed house and narrowly missed falling on his face.

“Graceful,” Shuri said over the com, firing off another shot.

Peter glowered at her, and hoped the mask conveyed the motion. “Shut up.”

“If you’re quite done?” T’Challa ground out between various contortions to avoid the unnervingly quick, accurate shots of their enemy.

“Right, yes,” Peter said, falling back into his offensive stance. “What am I looking at?”

“Her name’s Jade,” Shuri answered.

“I mean--wait, how do you know?”

“I heard Aedoilagen scream at her when Barnes was battling over here.”

“Okay, sure. But what are we looking at?” Peter asked again.

“I think we’re fighting an attempted ‘perfect human’,” Shuri answered. She knocked the dual barrels of her energy-charged weapons on the rocks before her, the designs on her temples and cheeks flashing.

“Meaning…” Peter said and pounced up and over the young woman before them with the intent to help them cover her from all angles. She seemed to sense the movement--

And shot him out of the air.

Peter yelped, crashing to the rubble next to her. Whirling to him with weapon smoking, a flicker of a grin passed over the woman--Jade’s--face, and Peter fought to lift a wrist over the ringing in his head and the sudden pain in his hip.

“Peter!” Karen’s fearful voice sharpened the visor of the mask.

Before Peter could defend himself, Jade raised her gun. And before she could fire, the Black Panther bowled into her, throwing her sideways.

“Meaning that!” Shuri said, waiting T’Challa rolled out of the line of fire before resuming her barrage of energy blasts. “Pretty sure this lady has an artificially assembled genome.”

“But that’s like trillions of individual pieces of code!” Peter protested, climbing to his feet and letting his hand ghost over his hip. It throbbed, and the suit was fraying, but he didn’t feel any debilitating damage. “How can she be a functional organism?”

“Someone was very careful. But not careful enough. I think somehow she got genes to develop pattern recognition to a higher degree, and so we’re fighting someone who can--” Shuri broke of with a yelp, rolling away from a return shot that anticipated the movement and caught the center of her energy-absorbing armor even as she dodged. “Someone who can read what we’re going to do,” she finished.

“Well shit.”
“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” Shuri said.

“Is there a disadvantage we can exploit?” T’Challa said, somehow appearing directly behind them. Peter jumped.

“She focuses on offense,” he said after a moment of observing the slinking movements of their enemy as she stalked toward them, weapon buzzing in her hand. “Aside from finding some way to force her into defense, I’ve got nothing.”

“Sound analysis,” the king said, and Peter couldn’t help but preen a bit.

“Karen? Anything?”

Part of his visor lit up with code as Karen scanned and calculated. Thankful for the moment of reprieve, the three of them scattered to either side as Jade started up her attacks again, even Spider-Man breathing hard.

“I identify no weaknesses aside from those of a normal human,” Karen said.

“That’s okay,” Peter said, squinting slightly at Jade before ducking into a roll. Her attention was focused on T’Challa, his suit flickering with purple energy, as he tried to get close, forcing him onto the defensive yet again.

Another voice crackled into his visor; Tony’s. “Pete, I thought I might let you know that the red blasts slice through your webbing like it’s not even there.”

“I’ll keep that in mind!” Peter yelped, vaulting another shot.

“Which means webbing guys up is temporary. The ones you stopped earlier have gotten out and are currently being slightly--shit--irritating.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Peter demanded. An answer was flickering in him mind, one he refused to acknowledge.

“I don’t know; I just want you to be prepared so you aren’t caught off guard.”

Peter fired off two shots, each dodged expertly by the enemy before him. Karen hummed, code skittering in the corners of his mask. “Peter--” she began.

“Nope, Karen, don’t even start.”

“It would solve the problem…”

Peter ducked Jade’s answering shot. Scattered thoughts danced through his head as logic warred with emotion, warred with an irrational decision he’d already made. “It’s not the only way to solve the problem. I’m not killing anyone, not outright like that. I don’t care if it’s pointless and doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to,” Tony answered, and Peter realized he was still connected to the man’s com. “Just don’t let anyone outnumber you. Stay safe.”

A click as Tony disconnected, and Peter was able to focus on the battle before him again. With Instant Kill successfully out of the picture, Spider--he needed a plan.

“I think I might have an idea. Shuri!”
“Yeah?”

“Keep her attention off me. I need to try something.”

“That’s--” a grunt as she climbed a particularly large piece of rubble to try and angle herself to complement T’Challa-- “easier said than done!”

But she would manage it, he knew, and allowed himself to scuttle around Jade in a wide circle. He needed a good vantage point. “Karen, splitter web.”

A click emanated from his web shooters, and Peter bit his bottom lip, lifting his wrist to aim carefully.

There was so much movement; each moment, he saw a different face. T’Challa lunged every time Jade tried to turn her attention toward Peter, and Shuri drove aside shots as she tried to fight her way closer. But Jade’s eyes danced over each of them, recognizing where they’d go, what they’d do, what their next move was going to be.

“Now!” Karen suddenly said.

Peter didn’t even hesitate, pressing the activation of the shooter and sending twin strands of webbing arcing across the ruin.

They struck, just as Jade turned her head toward a swipe of T’Challa’s vibranium claws, and splattered across both of her eyes.

“Yes!” Peter said, instantly leaping toward the battle. “How did you do that?”

“She isn’t the only one who can read patterns,” Karen whirred, and Peter grinned.

“You’re the best, Karen.”

“Don’t you forget it.”

Eyes obscured, Jade stumbled, her arms flailing wildly. Peter swooped forward, webbing and releasing higher parts of the wreckage to try and gain speed, as Shuri and T’Challa went offensive.

Even blind, Jade fought surprisingly well; her other senses still computed pattern information, though not as effectively.

But it was one against three, now, one against two engineers and a king. And they had a job to do.

* * *

Stephen was quite glad he and Wong made their appearance when they did. All things considered, Maximoff was fighting impressively. But there was only so long one could last against two-- apparently, two--sorcerers, with magic specializing in the area of one’s own. Stephen could tell, just by the shape and flourish of Aedoilagen’s magic, that she was strongest when working with minds. And due to the nearly identical edge on the magic of the woman beside her, Stephen figured Aedoilagen, unlike him, had no qualms about apprenticing.

When he and Wong stepped out of identical portals onto the uneven ground of the destroyed house, one of the magics before them flickered and went out.

Aedoilagen took a step toward them--one step. Shock skittered across her face, mixing with fury and
what could have been grief. Behind her, the older woman’s magic slammed into Maximoff, driving the less skilled witch backward.

Stephen, not in the mood to wait around for Aedoilagen’s worldview to shift, cut right to the case. “Looks like you miscalculated.”

“Maura. Maura Aedoilagen,” Wong said, his deadpan returning.

“Wong…” Aedoilagen’s voice was soft, disbelieving. Her eyes raced across both of them, across the green light at Stephen’s diaphragm, as though she was watching something mythical, something impossible. “You were dead. You were all dead.”

“So were you,” Stephen replied, stepping forward. He could sense the static of the ongoing attacks behind her, and knew Maximoff needed help. Now.

“The Ancient One--before Dormammu, I heard of her death. How do you wear the Eye?”

Stephen took another step, slightly to the side, to bring Aedoilagen’s ally into his view. The woman’s eyes met his, and she fell back next to Aedoilagen, staring.

“The Ancient One indeed died,” Wong said so Stephen didn’t have to. “But before the world fell to the fury of Dormammu, Doctor Strange--” Wong gestured to Stephen, who waved sarcastically--“defeated him. Reversed his plan, saving the city and the dimension.”

“I don’t just wear the Eye,” Stephen said, sliding his trembling hands behind his back uncaringly, “I wield it. So I suggest, Maura Aedoilagen, you consider what the hell you think you’re doing.”

Another surge of red light whipped toward the enemy sorcerers, stopped by a wave of the acolyte’s scarlet Mystic Arts. Stephen thought they felt pungent: rotting, a gift forged out of hate and pain.

“You died,” Aedoilagen snarled. “You died, and I should have died too. But I didn’t. The world died around me, and I was left standing, unwanted, unneeded. I was left behind--Kenja, all of us, we were abandoned.”

Stephen saw it, then. The defensive wrath stirring behind the sorcerer’s eyes, the desperate thrust of the blame toward something, anything else. She was drowning, this sorcerer, in grief and hate and homelessness, unrooted in a world that had ripped everything away from her. Stephen was familiar with the expression.

So he was ready, when the wrath bled into magic and pounced for him, swallowing up the sound around them. Stephen reached into an adjacent dimension and sent energy roving out to parry. The clashing of the Mystic Arts boomed out across the battle, power rippling after the shockwave.

Wong dived sideways, his sling-ring flashing as he joined Maximoff against the assault of Kenja’s magic. Together, the witch and the sorcerer gained back the ground lost and stood against Aedoilagen’s apprentice.

“What’s your plan, then?” Stephen yelled, his voice raised to carry over the crackle of spells.

More power roared, and Stephen allowed it to wash over him, only a small, rippling shield up to protect him from its force. The energy of the mirror dimension whipped at his own, hastily drawn from their own universe. He tapped into a similar source, mirrored spells leaping up to wind around his fingers as he moved ever closer to Aedoilagen.

“I will live again!” It was a scream, ripped out along with another flare of magic from Aedoilagen’s
Stephen snatched power from the mirror dimension and let it fold into his mandala shields. He followed up the defense with hurled blades, drawn from an adjacent universe of glass and transparency. “You look like you’re living fine, to me.”

“I will live anew. I’m not going to spend the rest of this existence fading into nothing, purposeless and alone and untethered.”

“Ain’t gonna spend the rest of your liife quietly fading away,” Stephen sung, whipping more mirrored energy to spin in the air before them as Aedoilagen sent whips of orange light against him.

“Do not mock me,” she roared, and Stephen couldn’t help but grin.

“Yeah, yeah, so you want purpose. I get that. I even get why you’d go homicidal maniac over it.” Life, without my work…

“What I don’t understand is why you kidnap and torture Tony Stark over it; what the hell does he have to do with anything?”

“It wasn’t about him!” Aedoilagen said, suddenly behind him. Stephen whirled, his sling-ring circling, as he shut her portal for her. The cuff of her shirt and the flare of her pant leg were severed by the preternatural closing and Aedoilagen lunged with another roar. “It was always about purpose. I could never have what Tony Stark does, but the purpose the Rogue Avengers were granted, even despite what they’ve done-- I want that. We deserve that!”

Sudden fists were swinging toward him from multiple bodies, Aedoilagen’s form splitting, and splitting again. Stephen reeled, a temple throbbing, and reached out through six, then seven dimensions for the signature he needed. He shoved it through the dimensional barriers, supporting the edges of his own with it, and leapt sideways. Feet connecting with and pushing off what should have been air, Stephen flipped over the mirrored forms of Maura Aedoilagen, letting the energy deplete instantly.

“You think killing these scavengers will bring you purpose?” Stephen demanded, hands flashing out to block blow after blow. “Sorry, but that’s fucked up.”

“When I looked towards the future, I saw the same thing I saw then. When I thought about death, it stopped scaring me, because I knew it wouldn’t matter. I hurt myself--I almost killed myself, because pain was something different, something special, something worth it. I’ll do anything never to return to that state. But how can you understand?”

Stephen caught her wrist, fire sparking between them as he pushed each of her duplicated bodies back into the one he secured. “I do understand that,” he said and raised his other hand. Its tremble was exaggerated from use and adrenaline and Stephen watched it intently. “It’s not that doing anything to gain purpose is fucked up, it’s that you think killing these people will change anything!”

Aedoilagen twisted in his grip, and when Stephen shifted to try and keep her trapped, more magic erupted against his palm. Stephen hissed, pain splintering through his skin, and he pulled his arm back on instinct.

“I will take their place,” Aedoilagen said, both hands flashing out before her. Stephen turned just in time to parry the folding of the ground beneath him, the rubble around them shifting into something geometric.

“How in hell do you think you’re going to do that?” Stephen demanded as he thrust the energy of the mirror dimension beneath him, mandalas of orange light giving him something to stand upon as the
ground devoured the ruin atop it.

Seeing she was getting nowhere with such untalented dimensional manipulations, Aedoilagen shifted back into her strengths, and Stephen found himself stumbling backward. “I will become them. In the minds of those who matter, my team will replace the Rogues.”

Stephen stared at her.

Then he was moving again, sling-ring flashing as he transported to the area behind her. He rewrote the energy of the portal into that of his weapon of choice—crawling vines of orange light—and whipped them forward, wrapping around Aedoilagen’s neck.

“That’s impossible,” he said. “Even for you—even for me.”

“It’s not. I found the spell, and I’m already working it.”

Stephen closed his eyes against her struggles, letting his own magic rub up against hers. There was indeed the hum of continual magic roiling through the offensive energy around her, and Stephen released his hold before it could pernicate his own aura.

“I know that spell,” Stephen said. “It’ll never work.”

“It has worked.” Shards of a blade once again reached out toward Stephen, and he leaped backward, portaling to the other side of his enemy again.

“No it hasn’t.” He shook his head. “You need to know every energy signature, to the most intimate degree. You need to know the inner workings of the specific minds you want to change, unless you have a tremendous amount of power to rewrite them completely.”

“I can do it.”

“No, you can’t!” Stephen thrust more dimensional energy forward, and the rocks of the ruin around them began to roll forward. “This plan of yours is madness.”

“ ‘It isn’t! I will have purpose!’ ”

Her movements were frantic now, angry. Stephen caught each clumsy attack with his own precise power, trying to shift to the offensive, but Aedoilagen simply threw power at him and it took most of his concentration to parry.

“This isn’t about purpose,” Stephen said. “You’re lying to yourself.”

“I will live again!”

Shifting orange shields erupted around them, some sparking with angry power, and some calm and precise.

“This was never about purpose.” Stephen advanced a step. “This is about revenge. This was always about revenge, about the blame you pushed from yourself onto someone else.”

Aedoilagen screamed.

“THEY’re DEAD! SHE’S DEAD. And it’s Maximoff’s fault, it’s Rogers’ fault, it’s not my fault.”

Stephen smiled grimly, his shields spinning to deflect each strike of her hysteric power.
“That emptiness you felt? When you looked toward the future? It wasn’t purposelessness, Maura Aedolagen, it was grief. That’s all this is. Petty revenge. And you lied to these people, who thought they were building a new future with you. You built a team off of falsehood.” Stephen’s eyes flickered to the battles around him, to Steve Rogers and James Barnes and Natasha Romanoff. To Tony Stark. “You are becoming the Rogues, Maura,” he said. “But not in the way you promised.”

“NO!”

The world dissolved into magic and color and the ringing truth that festered like a virus between them.

* * *

The idiots with the guns didn’t last much longer.

Vaguely, Tony thought he might recognize a few, just slightly, from when he was more familiar with SHIELD. Even more vaguely, he wondered what their stories were as he fell back into the familiar motions of the suit and its capabilities.

Soon, Tony was hovering high above the ruin. He pivoted so the sun didn’t shine directly into his eyes—it was still annoying, despite the eyes of the helmet—and surveyed the ongoing conflict and the area around. The Rogues must have at least tried to use a bit of common sense; he didn’t seen any civilians in the intact houses around them.

* Hypocritical fuckers.*

Not the time. He couldn’t focus on that now, not when so much was still hinging on this battle.

Something whispered about that ‘so much’, deep within him. What was really at risk?

*Even the lives of the Rogues are still lives.*

He couldn’t join the list of hypocritical fuckers, any more than he already was. Plus, these people had hurt his son.

“FRI, statuses?”

“Peter’s vitals are strong--somewhat elated, actually.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Of course. He’s fighting side-by-side with T’Challa and Shuri, I don’t blame him. Do they need help?”

“They seem to have it handled. Peter is very inventive.”

“That he is.”

“There seems to be trouble around the man with magnetic tendencies,” FRIDAY said. “Rogers was fighting with Wilson, earlier, but left him to assist Barnes.”

“Boy, does that sound familiar,” Tony sighed, and sent his suit spiraling over the debris towards where Sam Wilson flew, shedding bits of scorched donut as he went. “Hack into Wilson’s com, would you?” Tony said. “But only his. I don’t want anyone else to be listening in as I try not to kill him.”
“Already on it, boss.”

Tony smiled, shoving the repulsors with increasing power. Six seconds later, he was swerving into an aerial roll above where the metal-man stood, nonchalantly twirling his sword.

“More useless, magnetic idiots for me to play with!” he said, grinning and waving, as Tony halted next to Wilson.

The Falcon spared him one look, clouded with memory and guilt and slight disbelief. But then his eyes were focused on the problem before him once again, and Tony was grateful.

Not the time.

“Figured I’d try my hand with you!” Tony said, shrugging. The suit emulated.

“Iron Man,” the metal-dude hummed, as though he was rolling the name over on his tongue. Tasting it. Honestly, it was creepy as fuck.

“Yes, I thought that was obvious,” Tony said, spreading his donut-covered arm to indicate the suit. “And honestly, I’m way more magnetic than the winged dipshit, here.”

Wilson choked on a laugh, and Tony wasn’t sure what to think of that.

Not the time.

The man gestured with his rapier, the blade warping within his two-sided magnetic field--one side deflecting, one attracting. But the razor-sharp tip still pointed precisely where Tony and Wilson hovered, and Tony had no doubt the man could wield the weapon with deadly precision, utilizing his field. “I, Bantail Nahiri, have power, Iron Man. Once upon a time, I thought my aura a curse, until Maura Aedoilagen opened my eyes--”

“To purpose, yeah I know,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. Speeches. Ugh. “I heard it every time she ripped me apart with her magic. Was that part of what she opened your eyes to?”

The man’s flippant grin faded slightly, a hardness growing in his eyes.

“Your armour cannot get close to me,” he snarled. “Your technology cannot hurt me. Your bullets cannot touch me.”

“Yeah.” Tony shrugged. “But our lasers can.”

Three quick blasts of repulser energy broke toward Bantail, only just avoided by the man’s quick duck and swing of his blade. Tony’s blast rippled against the thin metal of the rapier… and was absorbed.

“What the fuck?” Tony demanded, circling a bit closer as Bentail spun the sword through his hands.

“It seems the sword has magical qualities,” FRIDAY responded. “No doubt due to Aedoilagen’s influence.”

“Damn. Connect me to Wilson.”

“Connected.”

“Hey, Bird Boy,” Tony said, forcing everything but his chosen persona from his voice. Long time no see. Oh, fuck it. “The sword’s got some shit going on magically. And the magnetic field is strong
enough to do significant damage to your--” *my--* suit within 1.78 meters. It extends far enough to warp aims for 2.9 meters, having both a magnetically adverse and a magnetically attractive section."

“Um… I’ll keep that in mind?”

*Not the time.*

“You do that.” He severed the connection, not wanting to have the option to speak a moment longer.

Wilson looked at him again, probably thinking Tony couldn’t see him, before banking sideways, the pinions of his metal wings flashing. Tony pushed his repulsors and coasted around the perimeter of Bantail’s aura, testing the strength of the pull and push against his suit.

“Can’t come closer?” the man taunted, rapier twirling yet again. In his… left hand. Tony didn’t see any ranged weaponry on the man.

“FRIDAY, take readings,” Tony ordered, and began his barrage.

Wilson circled with him, flicking razored pinions toward Bantail. They missed, without fail, penetrating and warping within the man’s magnetic field, metal glinting like his smirk. Wings straining, Wilson fought to stay out of the interference of the repelling and attracting magnet.

Bantail’s rapier flashed with expert precision, catching every repulsor blast that came close to striking him. But Tony didn’t let up—he had to drive the man back, maneuver him into an area that wasn’t so open. Shards of metal broke from the house’s rubble as Bantail moved across them, some zipping toward him, and some flying away.

When he lunged, Tony couldn’t do anything about it. When Wilson yelped, one metal wing snagging in the magnetic forces and the *crack* echoed in Tony’s mind, he couldn’t get any closer.

Bantail turned, and Wilson’s wing was suddenly thrown from the field, sending him slamming against the rock and metal of the wreckage.

“Wing man! You alright?” Tony demanded, FRIDAY connecting him to the other man’s helmet before he asked.

“I--” Wilson fought to his feet, lifting his arm. A distorted hunk of metal hung from it, no longer even resembling a wing, and the man cursed. “I’m fine, but the suit’s compromised.”

“Grab a gun and help me out, then,” Tony said, whirling back toward Bantail, who shook out his wrist and gripped his sword tighter.

“Come and get me,” he hissed, and Tony responded in kind.

There was no ranged weaponry...

“The attracting and deflecting fields of his aura meet in the center,” FRIDAY suddenly said. “Attracting on his left. He can’t shoot a gun with his dominant hand because the bullet will curve back and strike him.”

“No, that doesn't make sense, the way his sword is warping,” Tony said, increasing his speed and banking into a circle. Bantail kept smirking, green eyes fixed on the mask.

“My readings conclude as such,” FRIDAY said, but she sounded confused.

“It must be fluid,” Tony concluded. “The fields shift--like a larger projection of individual electrons.
Try your readings again.”

FRIDAY hummed. “You’re right--the conclusions have changed.”

“Nice. Keep calculating, and overlay them over my visor, would you?”

“Got it, boss.”

Tony was soon seeing in shades of red and blue, the colors morphing over his view of Bantail as he circled. He grinned. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

* * *

Peter had only paused for a second.

One moment, after finishing the battle with Jade.

Breathing hard, he’d put his hands against a crumbling section of drywall and scorched wallpaper, and cracked part of his mask up over his mouth to allow clearer air into his lungs.

It seemed that as soon as his fingers touched the dusty surface of the rubble, the roar broke out across the battle.

* * *

The sound sent Stephen’s spell wide, a slice of debris near him shattering as orange magic fell temporarily from his control.

Before he turned toward it, he threw his shields up, shifting patterns inlaying in the air around him. He needn’t have; everyone turned to look, with him.

The creatures that rose from the ruin, ruined pieces of the house falling off of them like water sliding off of a fowl’s feathers, looked as though they belonged in Dormammu’s hell dimension.

A grotesque mix of man and beast, the towering animals resembled deep brown grizzly bears, with relative size and enormous fangs and lumbering forms. But they bore the anatomy of a feline and opposable thumbs, and their eyes…

Human.

* * *

Maura should have known they’d survive.

Her closest allies beside Kenja, she should have believed.

The tides were turning, now.

“Atticus and Jasper,” Maura breathed, her smile lethal and brilliant.
Chapter End Notes

I couldn't just not cliff-hang you. But anyway, yeah, the twins are bear-demons now. Fight me.

Also, the song Stephen referenced is Games People Play by the Alan Parsons Project. I have weird taste in music, I know.

Next chapter, more of this! But with a lot of... stranger Stark-snark. Hehehe.

See you soon!
In summary: bad language words, web ineffectuality, rocks, and sass.

“Sorcerers, soldiers, freaks, and now ugly monsters,” Bucky said with a sigh as he wiped the moisture from his forehead. “Someone’s covered all their bases.”

Steve nodded, watching the lumbering creatures emerge like breaking waves from beneath the rubble. Challenge burned on the face of the one that swung it’s head toward him, and Steve saw human eyes within its monstrous skull, boring into him with hate and the thirst for revenge.

“Well shit,” Bucky said.

Steve could only nod.

“We going that way--” Bucky pointed toward the woman with the throwing stars currently fighting Natasha at the speed of light-- “or that way?” He pivoted his finger toward the bear creature currently bearing down on them.

Steve jerked his chin toward said bear creature. “Unfortunately, I have to say that way.”

Bucky sighed again. “Why am I not surprised.”

The two of them began running as one, their feet slapping against the uneven ruin with increasing, and then inhuman, speed. Steve expanded his shields and the bladed regions flashed, deadly accurate, as Bucky cocked his gun, Wakandan arm working smoothly.

Steve heard repulsors in the background, and forced his eyes to stay on the creature before them.

They crashed against the roaring animal like the falling rubble crashed against the earth, already slicing into coarse fur. Steve felt it come away in clumps, jamming the mechanisms within his shield, and the beast let out another thunderous roar, pivoting with far too much speed and throwing him and Bucky from its form. Steve slammed into the wreckage with a grunt, but was up again a moment later, meeting gazes with Bucky before concentrating again on the creature.

It didn’t lunge, despite the power behind its flanks and the murder in its gaze--strategizing. They weren’t up against mindless aliens, or animals; this enemy had the heart and the soul and the mind of a human.

He couldn’t forget that.

Steve darted forward, swerving leftward as Bucky went right. The bear-thing reared, it’s height reaching double that of the super soldiers, and crashed sideways as Steve lunged. Sending out a paw to swipe Steve’s legs out from under him, the creature rolled back to four feet and bore down on him with a snarl. Snarling back at those gleaming, wicked fangs, Steve raised his shields. Three precise lacerations bloomed on the beast’s snout, and it pulled back, roaring, just as Bucky opened the magazine of his gun.
The thing cringed away, its roar turning to one of pain as the bullets buried themselves in its form, but didn’t fall.

“What is this thing?” Steve growled, rolling to his feet.

“All I’ve got it ‘fucking bear demon’,” Bucky replied.

Again, Steve could only agree.

The beast turned to them, eyes alight, and fixed its gaze on Bucky’s weapon as he pointed it back at the thing. Moving unnaturally quick, the creature attacked again. Bucky fired off a few shots, but the enormous paw was twisting the gun from his grip and crushing it into a twisted heap before he could do more than anger it further. Bucky rolled away, metal fist snagging and pulling away fur and skin as the beast tried to follow.

It roared, lunging away from Bucky and shaking away the welling of blood and shredded flesh. Bucky moved backward, eyes wary and calculating, but the bear pounced for Steve with little warning, spraying saliva soiled red. Steve yelped, trying to step away but finding himself on his back beneath the creature as it bore its fangs.

“Steve!” Bucky threw himself against the creature’s skull, driving its lunge against rock instead of his friend’s flesh.

“Thanks,” Steve breathed, grunting as as he climbed to his feet and retreated slightly.

“Sure, idiot,” Bucky said. “Hand me one of those shields.”

His friend kept the attention of the animal, but it’s eyes twitched toward his shields--it understood them.

Steve lept backward, heels catching on a bit of destroyed ceiling support, and quickly transferred a weapon to his unarmed comrade.

“I’ll get the grating screech through the already-cacophonous battleground. He struck as the paw retreated, earning a roar for his trouble.

When he rose, he found he’d been the distracted one--the beast already had it’s fangs clamped around Bucky’s metal arm, enclosing but failing to pierce the vibranium exoskeleton.

“Get off,” Bucky snarled, striking at it with his single shield. But the creature didn’t let go, instead thrashing its neck to the side to simultaneously bring its head out of the range of Bucky’s next blow and to throw both itself and the super soldier to the rubble.

Steve dove towards its now-exposed stomach, shield sliding through smooth belly-fur and meeting the resistance of flesh. The creature convulsed, blood flowing freely in the wake of Steve’s blade, and the sound of snapping circuitry accompanied its roar of pain and fury.
Steve snapped his gaze toward Bucky, who looked nothing less than irate as he rolled out of the animal’s hold, now armless. “That’s astonishingly inconvenient,” he snarled, staring at the twitching prosthetic and the shield it contained.

“Shit,” Steve said.

* * *

Peter didn’t mean to get separated from T’Challa and Shuri, or leave them alone to finish dealing with Jade.

And he definitely didn’t mean to end up facing down a charging monster with nothing but some web fluid and a few rocks to aid him.

“Um,” he coughed out into the coms as he ducked lithely away from the first blow of the creature. “Could I get some help?” Another strike, and Peter battered the enormous paw with as much webbing as he could muster, despite its ineffectual. “Like, right now?”

“Where are you?” Tony’s voice crackled back.

“The really angry demon bear,” Peter responded, scrambling further back and reaching the outskirts of the debris field. His feet brushed against neatly manicured lawn grass, and the irony couldn’t have been more potent.


“Would you please just get over here?” Peter yelped, trying to circle so the creature wasn’t driving him toward the civilian territory.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Tony’s flippant words were accompanied by the flash of repulsor blasts connecting with the back of the animal’s skull. It roared, falling back slightly, and Peter was able to curve back toward the ruin of the house that was their battleground.

Tony arrived moments later, screeching to a hovering halt slightly above the wood and drywall carpet. The blinding blue eyes of the suit bore like repulsors of their own into the lumbering enemy before them, and Peter couldn’t help but straighten his own stance and square his shoulders as Iron Man flew beside him.

“You alright?” he asked, the question encompassing everything.

“Better, now.” How true that was, in so many ways. “You?”

“We’ll see,” Tony said, one arm (still bearing the residual signs of a donut coating) gesturing toward the battle—the heroes—behind them. Peter nodded.

The demon bear took a step forward, holding back slightly as though it was evaluating them. Peter shivered. “Karen, do we have some sort of insta-sleep bear web?”

“Unfortunately, we do not,” Karen replied.

The bear, apparently, was finished strategizing—it lunged, before Karen could even finish speaking. Peter and Tony dived sideways, each firing off an answering shot, one albeit far more effective than the other. The creature kept coming, swerving slightly to head not for either of them, but for the
Tony held his ground, both palms rising to berate the oncoming monster, as Peter turned his attention to the ruin beneath it.

“Octopus!” he said, sending the webs toward the chunks of rubble beneath the bear-demon’s paws. He braced his heels against the ground and heaved, his enhanced strength hauling the wood and stone toward him. It was quick, and unexpected, and the creature’s long claws caught in the newly created pot-hole, sending it crashing to the ground.

Peter looked up into deep, piercing black eyes.

“Shit!” He scrambled back, reeling. “It’s that guy! That one dude with the eyes! And the twin!”

Tony’s shots didn’t cease, even as he asked, “Atticus and Jasper?”

“Well that’s creepy,” Tony said. “And it explains why these things are so--kid!”

Peter rolled sideways, just in time to keep from being decapitated by a swipe he didn’t see coming. The bear--Jasper? Atticus? Peter decided he’d declare him Jasper--had its feet back underneath it, and bore down on him again as he struggled upright.

“Well the other one?” Tony demanded.

“Well--” Peter was interrupted by said man colliding, full-force, with Jasper’s head. “Ah! Was that completely necessary?”

Tony’s voice fuzzed out for a moment. “Absolutely!” He had fangs clasped around his helmet as Peter turned his gaze back toward the enemy. “No biting the head,” Tony grunted.

Peter moved to help, but Tony simply raised an arm to blast Jasper close-range. Even the monster had to release its hold.

Thinking that maybe the man could hold his own long enough for Peter to answer the question, Peter craned his head to locate the other brother. It took milliseconds to find, the most obvious form on the battlefield.

“The other one is currently kicking Rogers’ and Barnes’ asses,” Peter admitted, tuning back in to Tony and Jasper just in time to web the claws of the creature to a chunk of rock in an attempt to keep them from pummeling the suit. Jasper simply ripped the rock free and pummeled Tony with that, instead.

Peter cringed. “Sorry.”

Tony turned his gaze toward Peter, and the eyes of the suit somehow managed to look unimpressed.

Peter advanced, switching to rapid-fire webbing and aiming for weak points in the bear-thing’s form. Ears, eyes, nose--it was bound to be annoying.

Jasper turned its attention from Tony long enough for the man to shove himself out of its hold. “How much ass-kicking is the other demon-bear doing?” he grunted.

Peter spared another glance. “Quite a lot.”

Tony’s sigh sounded like gravel through the coms. “Well, I suppose you’ve gotta get out of here, then.”
“What?” Peter glanced at the side of his visor to check the level of his web-fluid. Not dangerous; not yet.

“Go help them. After all this work, it’d be a shame if they died now.”

Peter had to agree, but hesitated before following Tony’s order. “You sure you’re alright here?”

A blinding flash of repulser light accompanied Tony’s answer, and a roar of pain from the demon-bear; “I’m fine. Plus, I have a feeling I’m about to get some backup of my own.”

Peter looked up to see a figure swooping toward them, illuminated by orange magic and bearing smirk and a ruby red cloak.

Yeah, Tony was fine, here.

Grinning, Peter hauled ass toward Rogers and Barnes.

* * *

Stephen didn’t really like bears.

Not that they disturbed him or anything; he’d just had somewhat of a bad experience with the animals when he was young. So honestly he would have preferred to keep dueling Maura Aedoilagen and leave the wrangling to Wong or Wanda, but Wong and Wanda had been unable to extricate themselves from their intricate magical weavings (poor form, in Stephen’s opinion, not that he would ever tell Wong that), and the men-turned-bears had been left to him.

He saw a certain spider scuttle away from the furthest scuffle, waving to Stephen as he went, and supposed he was probably expected at that one. Taking a glance at either battle, Stephen was grateful; he’d also rather avoid Steve Rogers, if at all possible.

The Cloak reacted to his change of plans and pointed him toward the furthest bear creature--Maura had looked at it when she’d called it ‘Jasper’, so he supposed that was its name--and they swooped as dramatically as possible toward the telltale whirs of repulsors, distinct from the clangs and booms of the rest of the battleground. Stephen dipped his perception into the mirror realm, for he’d likely only need a single variety of dimensional energy, and wreathed his shaking hands with magic.

Tony Stark was holding his own, far better than Stephen had expected. The suit really was a marvel of technology, infinitely more sleek and capable and natural than Stephen had imagined. He tried not to get distracted by his questions of its workings as even his biologists’ mind leapt in engineering curiosity, and focused instead on his attack.

He couldn’t portal the bear anywhere--well, he could, but he wouldn’t. He wasn’t about to relocate the creature to somewhere else on Earth, that would be counterproductive and somewhat idiotic, and space was out of the equation. Opening a portal into a vacuum would not only suck the bear through, but he, Stark, and the vast majority of this destroyed house into space as well. As for another dimension: he would be outwardly breaking a dozen codes and rules Wong would flay him alive for, later. So Stephen settled for twisting the dimension beneath the bear--Jasper’s--feet.

The ground folded along itself like a treadmill, pulling Jasper back as it went to lunge toward Stark. The creature’s roar gargled off into a confused whine, and Stephen landed with a slight disturbing of dust next to Stark.
Iron Man’s eyes peered at him, and Stephen had the distinct impression Stark was raising an eyebrow beneath the helmet. Stephen raised one back.

And then Jasper was pouncing toward them, leaping with more force than any grizzly had the right to have, and the two of them flashed into action.

“I don’t suppose you have a com?” the metallic voice of Stark called out.

Stephen snapped his hands to either side of him, fingers contorting, and a long, slim blade of mirrored reality stretched between his hands. Flipping it to one, Stephen used the other hand to tap the device at his ear.

“Blame Shuri, but I do,” he replied over the wire.

“Good. I’ve got an idea,” Stark said, getting straight to business. “I need to see if this thing is wearing any jewelry.”

Stephen didn’t question, although he decidedly wanted to. “I’d check legs first--bracelets are more common on creatures like this, no matter their dimension.”

The slight pause along the communications was soaking in surprise and a bit of gratitude. Stark likely had expected him to demand an explanation.

Stephen pretended to misinterpret, for the sake of both of their egos. “Yes, I speak from experience. I’ll take the left side.”

Then he darted forward, the Cloak lifting him a few inches above the ridges of the wreckage beneath him. Stark called something else out with the tone of a sarcastic quip, and Stephen elected to ignore him in favor of focusing his efforts on their enemy. Jasper, now free of Stephen’s dimension-folding spell, backed up, trying to keep both of them in its sight range.

“C’mon,” Stephen growled. “C’mon.” He fingered the shard in his hand, his thumb slicing itself open on the razored edge of the splinter he’d ripped from the dimensional barriers to use as a weapon. The blade reflected blood-red, lapping up the human energy imbued in his blood like a thirsty beast.

Jasper took one look at the threatening, undefined weapon and pounced for Stark, instead.

Not a good idea. Stephen grinned.

The suit was obscured from his view, but Stephen could derive what was happening just as easily from the flash of intense light, the scream of power, and the roar of confused pain. Trusting Stark to hold the bear, Stephen portaled directly beside it, dimensional sword humming. The grizzly-like fur fell away with hardly any resistance as Stephen sliced with surgical precision along the outside of one of it’s wrists--ankles? He should really figure out the rules to defining demonic joints--skimming the skin but not breaking it.

Jasper didn’t notice, as one wouldn’t notice something breathing on one’s leg hair when being punched in the face, and Stephen swiped his sling-ring through the air once again.

“How are we doing up there?” he asked as he shaved the next leg. (What the hell?)

“Really, really good, really good,” Stark grunted, voice tight and irritated. “I’ll just keep it occupied, why don’t I.”
“And I’ll just answer your jewelry question without even alerting the demon as I do so. Is this where I make a comment about brains versus brawn?”

“And is this where I remind you you are, in fact, acting off my orders? The jewelry was my idea.”

“Yeah,” Stephen said, unable to help himself, “but I pulled it off.”

A pause, accompanied by the sounds of distant gunshots and not-so-distant lazer bursts. “Did you just quote *The Lion King*?”

“With situational relevance, of course.” Stephen dodged the movement of the beasts claws, hastily pulling back his blade as it grew unwieldy due to Jasper’s movement. “Though I doubt any idea of yours could be as fantastic as a coordinated dance of singing animals.”

“I’m offended. Haven’t you been paying attention? I did that exact thing with a spider, a hawk, a hulk, an overly righteous golden retriever, and a reindeer six years ago.”

Curving missiles herded the demon-bear back into a somewhat stationary area, and Stephen portaled to its other side to start seeking jewelry on the thing’s other legs. “I must’ve missed the bit with the coordinated singing,” he said. “And your groups’ dancing left something to be desired.”

“I didn’t see your order helping anything out,” Stark replied.

“I was in the ER that day, as a matter of fact,” Stephen said. He darted in to shave the fur from the third ankle–wrist–and ignored the ridiculousness of the action. “They needed even the neurosurgeons.”

“So you’re actually a doctor?”

“I assume you are, as well,” Stephen admitted.

“I prefer ‘generous, supreme oligarc’ to ‘doctor’, if at all possible.”

A smirk lifted one side of Stephen’s mouth. “An olistark?”

“Oh, you’re one to talk, Strange.” But the billionaire couldn’t mask the laughter in his voice, and Stephen’s grin widened. He let it; there was no one to see.

His response was interrupted by the collision of his knife with something hard and metallic, dislodging the charmed weapon. Usually, such a blade could slice as easily through metal as it could through, say, demon-bear fur, but Stephen had layered his enchantments to avoid doing so before he could gather information. As such, the weapon dulled itself and bounced away from the bracelet on Jasper’s wrist– ankle, whatever!

It also resulted in reverberations shooting up Jasper’s form, and alerting the thing to Stephen’s presence.

“I’ve found your bracelet, oh-generous-supreme-olistark,” Stephen said, raising a hand to portal his way out. But the beast moved before Stephen could step to safety, swiping him with all the strength in its monstrous form.

Talons ripped through his tunic, catching on the chain of the Eye of Agamotto and slicing through the skin of his ribs. Stephen would have cried out, but was strangled to muteness by the Eye catching tight around his throat. The charmed chain couldn’t break, but the same couldn’t be said for Stephen’s neck, and it was only the quick reflexes of the Cloak that kept him from being garroted by
his own weapon.

Stephen joined the debris strewn beneath the beast’s feet, coughing out a gasp of pain as rock and splinters of wood shoved against his lacerated side. His blade puffed into non existence, leaving a few drops of ruby liquid behind to hover for a moment in the air before dropping to the ground.

“Strange!”

The frequency of the repulsor blasts doubled, driving Jasper away long enough for Stephen to rise somewhat shakilly to his feet. He pressed a shaking hand to his side and felt soaked tatters of fabric slap against his skin, leaving prints of red when he pulled his palm away. Stephen grimaced. The hem of the Cloak fluttered about his hand in concern, and Stephen lifted his other hand to reassure it.

Stark’s quick voice filtered through the machine on Stephen’s ear. “No, no, over here you ugly-ass--shit, Strange, the demon-bear--”

Stephen looked up to see the creature bearing down on him. He lifted a hand, sling-ring now splattered with blood, and sidestepped through the gateway hastily formed beside him. He ended up falling into thin air beside Stark, having opened the portal subconsciously, the Cloak catching him and subsequently slapping him lightly in the face with its collar in reprimand.

“Ow,” he said, somewhat weakly.

“Hang in there, Nala.” The eyes of the suit danced unreadably over him. “Bracelet?”

Stephen nodded, pointing to the left foreleg of the creature before them as it leapt to try and bat them from the air like a kitten after a toy.

“FRIDAY, scan again. Focus on the arm, there--try to find separate life signs.”

Stephen peered at him, brushing his hair out of his eyes. He only succeeded in smearing blood across his temple and irritating the slices along his ribs; he would need to suture those.

“Ha! I knew it!” Stark suddenly said, backflipping airally with excitement. The Cloak tried to emulate the movement, and Stephen hastily stopped it. “Shit, I’m glad we destroyed the experiment behind those things before they got further, if this is the mutant human they result in. We need to destroy that bracelet.”

Stephen sighed. “Of--fucking--course we do.” He should have just kept his blade cutting.

“You aren’t going back near those claws,” Stark said, a gauntleted hand waving him away. Stephen forced himself not to see it as dismissive; he’d heard the concern, almost fear, in the man’s voice when Jasper’s talons had ripped through Stephen.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’ve had worse.” He’d fought with worse. Over and over and over, he’d fought with worse.

“So have we all. But I need you to get in touch with Peter.” There was a slight hesitation before Stark said the boy’s name, and Stephen wondered if he knew about the disorder. “Ask him if he remembers the lizard-guy.”
Thanks for reading. :) Tune in next time when things go to the dogs!
Chapter Notes

You knew this was coming.

I'm sorry.

Just two more chapters not including this one of you hating me, I promise.

She never would have thought to do it, if not for the--untrue--words of the Sorcerer Supreme.

Marua’s magic wove a haze of comatose anger around her, a wall of guarded energy into which she threw her ideas, her motivations, her very consciousness. She would not let lies penetrate her defended truth, loops of a snare to pull her down. Never, never would she let that happen.

She couldn’t.

So when her magic reflected her mindset to form a dodecahedral shell of dimensional panes around her, it took her time to see past the splinters of the witch’s power against her own to the opportunity it held. The witchlight interacted with her shield as it would with prisms; each face a unique refraction and reflection.

One reflected everything. Maura’s Mystic Arts could pass through easily, and Wong’s (oh God, *Wong was alive and she was trying to kill hi--*), but the witchlight spread out like clouds of blood in water upon contact.

So Maura channeled that dimension like a tapestry around her own, interweaving it into every spell she cast. And the fear in Maximoff’s eyes was worth the pain in Maura’s head and the exertion of the mind-spell she cast at once.

Everything would be worth it. *All of this*-- worth it.

The Supreme didn’t know what he was speaking of. He didn’t understand--he didn’t see the way she did. Why could no one see, why could no one see that fate was yours to command, that a world without a destiny was unacceptable? Those words of his--maybe they were magic of their own, a magic of the dark dimension seeking to unravel her, to trap her, to put her in a cage from which none of her conviction could reach.

A cage…

The witchlight was the deepest ruby she had ever seen--the ruby of everything she hated about this world. About herself.

It reflected.

A slow, insidious smile crept across Maura’s lips.
Tony still held the splinters of the first bracelet in his hand when everything began its descent into shit.

The enemy before him and Strange was writhing, its form returning slowly and violently to a humanoid shape. *His* form--Tony could clearly see the eyes and the emerging face of Maura’s acolyte. It was horrifyingly grotesque, as each part of the beast returned to man against its will, fur and claws and features of a bear, of a cat, sprouting like tumors from a now-human form.

When Jasper roared, it was not human. But when he spoke, it was. A single name, a beast’s name, crept from his mouth as he stared at the broken bracelet in Tony’s hands.

It was grueling to watch the transformation. When Jasper’s eyes rolled up into his head to replace black with white and fell into unconsciousness, Tony was grateful.

“What the hell was that?” Strange demanded after a moment. It was well hidden, but Tony could hear the tremor of pain in his voice. He wondered why that made the claws of anxiousness close around the base of his throat, when he’d only known the man for… less than an hour? He didn’t put that on the ‘reasons my life is fucked up’ list.

“Pete and I fought some dude in the early stages of wearing this bracelet,” Tony said. “Something about a connection between man and animal that brought the universal genetic code into flux within the jewelry or whatever.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“What other explanation do you have?” Tony demanded, gesturing at the unconscious, naked man beneath them.

“I’m far more inclined to see that as a dimensional energy conductor, shifting a demonic connection from a parallel dimension to the human energy of the wearer and thus combining the specific signature of the individual with that of another creature.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Strange smiled at him, a tired phantom of a grin that meant all the more for the pain behind his eyes.

And it was because Tony was watching him that he saw it happen.

The scene behind the sorcerer pulled his eyes to the danger he couldn’t quantify, as the horribly familiar magic of Maura Aedoilagen surged toward Maximoff in a tidal wave of dimensional manipulation. It was barely a ripple in the visible world, but Tony could sense it, for he too had made such a ripple.

Until it suddenly was visible. Very, very visible, as Maximoff’s magic *bounced* off of it.

Then it was everywhere, surrounding her in an increasingly tight polygon of power. And her magic was fighting, reeling red ribbons within it, trying to escape through the last closing gap of the dimensional cage.

It did. Frantic and uncontrolled, a lick of witchlight leapt free from the side of the cage, unnoticed and undirected as it shot across the battlefield. It’s path was straight, and Tony saw where it was going to go.
“KID!” he roared, the sound swallowed up by the battle around them as he was already moving, already halfway across the debris field as the red spell danced unseen toward where Peter was fighting.

Well, not completely unseen.

Strange’s friend, Wong, looked up as though he’d heard the shout, and maybe he had. Solemn eyes took in everything, and it was only the quick movements of his hands that indicated his hurry. Orange light sprouted like a budding flower in the path of the rogue magic.

And the gunshot echoed like thunder above everything else.

Tony didn’t know who held the weapon, but he saw Wong stumble. He saw the man’s hand jerk just as Maximoff’s uncontrolled enchantment struck his own magic. Tony saw Peter duck, rolling away from both his own demon-bear and the red power, and saw the witchlight redirect on Wong’s still-intact shield even as the man collapsed to his knees.

Strange didn’t cry out. He didn’t have time.

He only lifted a desperate, shaking hand toward his friend, as though he could lift him, heal him, by the power of his will.

Tony did cry out. Too late.

Maximoff’s magic struck Strange’s side, splintering against where Jasper had already ripped into him. Red witchlight mingled with ruby blood, indistinguishable, absorbed.

And Strange fell out of the sky.

* * *

His world was already ending as he watched his only companion, his teacher, his friend fall. It was ending and leaving him alone no, please, you can’t leave me alone again. It was ending, and so when the nightmare crawled out from the edges of the horizon and darkened the sky above him, Stephen didn’t see it as anything less than possible.

Than real.

* * *

“What have you done?” Tony demanded, dropping from the air in a dangerous, uncontrolled fight to reach the falling sorcerer.

The surprise, the walls slamming down and the distrust slamming up, when his voice first flitted over the Rogue Avenger’s coms was tangible. But Tony didn’t notice, was too busy pushing every ounce of power he had to reach Rhodey reach Strange before the jutting ground impaled him.

He wasn’t going to make it--

The Cloak did, and though the landing was jerky and obviously painful, Strange did not strike the ground. Tony didn’t slow, only stopping moments before slamming to the wreckage a few yards from the crumpled man.
“I--” Maximoff began. Tony spared a glance toward her and saw only a haze of red light, contained and imprisoned. “I tried to compromise Aedoilagen, I had to do something--” her words were quick and scared, fuzzed and almost incomprehensible through the magical interference all around her--“and I knew she must fear something. I had to try…” But she trailed off, never speaking the words Tony was waiting for as he watched her, the silhouette of her within a red mist.

The words he’d been waiting for, for so long.

*I was scared, I was angry, I screwed up.*

*I’m sorry.*

Tony looked away.

“So… he’s in a nightmare state?” came the hesitant voice of Peter. Tony looked up as he clambered the final feet to Strange’s side to see his son doing the same, scrambling across broken wood and bits of drywall. Behind him, Rogers and Barnes had abandoned the second demon-bear to hold off the enemy sorcerers, as each of their own magical force fell from the battle. T’Challa joined them, his energy-absorbent suit nearly luminescent from the magic around him.

“Peter, now is not the time for references,” Tony said, trying to keep the snarl of panic from his voice as he looked back at Strange.

The doctor lay limp, so still on the ruin’s debris, one lonely hand curled about his head.

“He’s right, though,” Maximoff choked out.

Someone needed to help her--

A nightmare state--

*You could... have saved us.*

*Why didn’t... you do... more?*

“You have to get him out,” rasped another voice. Tony’s head jerked up.

“Wong--” he began, wanting to demand how injured he was, wanting to demand he fix this, free Maximoff. But Wong’s hand pressed hard against his gut, scarlet darkness staining around his fingers, creeping between them.

“He… his worst memories… you *have* to get him out!”

Tony thought of the expressionless mask and the shaking hands and the scars and snapped his gaze back to Strange.

“I can’t,” Maximoff admitted. “It has to run its course, like--” she broke off, and not from fear.

“Like what you did for Ultron?” Tony hissed.

“Tony…” Steve, in his Righteous Captain Voice.

“Not now, please,” Peter said, his voice tight, and Tony forced himself to release his breath, to let his fists unclench.

“What do you mean you can’t--” Wong demanded, before dissolving into a groan. “You can’t
control your power? You can’t counter it?”

“I’ve never...” Maximoff’s voice trailed into nothing. ‘Needed to’ went unsaid.

“Let me get to him,” Wong snarled, his tone matching what roiled within Tony.

“You’re injured,” Rogers said, voice catching as he blocked another strike of magic.

You’re dying.

“I can’t leave him alone!” The stoic sorcerer’s voice was filled with panic, cracked with grief, and Tony’s breath shuddered through his esophagus. “Not again, I can’t let him face it alone again...”


Alone.

Peter Parker fell to his knees beside Strange’s form, his hand reaching up to Tony as if on instinct. Tony took it.

“I’ll stay with him,” Tony said softly. Then stronger, louder, an order. “I’ll stay with him. T’Challa, get the wizards out of here before they bleed out, or Aedoilagen breaks through Rogers and gets to them.”

“We need him--”

Tony didn’t care to identify who had spoken. “They need him more.”

The king of Wakanda took his order, inhuman speed bringing him within Maximoff’s cage of power and leading her towards Wong, who was watching Tony with angry, protective eyes even as T’Challa carefully lifted him, even as he lost consciousness. In another moment, all three of them were racing from the ruin. Tony expertly shot down two men taking aim towards them and forced himself to focus on the scene at his feet.

Strange’s form looked so much smaller curled against the shattered drywall. Blood permeated his tunic, slid like treacle down to soak into his Cloak. The sentient garment struggled beneath him, trying to brace the sorcerer’s head and neck in its collar as Strange twitched within its grasp. The youth and power was gone from that sharp-featured face, leaving pain and fear, such terror, in its wake.

Tony’s body moved on autopilot, retracting a gauntlet from one hand and rolling Strange from his fetal position to press two fingers to his throat. The pulse was rapid, almost unnaturally so. And Strange flinched—no convulsed—away from his touch.

Tony hurriedly backed away, even as Peter leaned forward, reaching out hesitantly with his free hand. “What do we do, Mr. Stark?” he murmured, and Tony thought he heard tears in the boy’s voice. “Wong’s right, some really terrible things have happened to him--” the words were blurring together, Peter trying to say everything all at once-- “we have to--”

“We can’t,” Tony said, keeping his voice calm, level. Not breaking under the memories.

His ally. Peter’s friend.

The man had saved his life. Three times.
“Maximoff’s magic is volatile,” Tony explained, hearing the breath escape in near-whispers from Strange’s lips. “It’s derived from Loki’s scepter, and without something similar in power and signature…” he shook his head. “There’s nothing we can do. We just have to let it run its course.”

* * *

* * *

The first time, he was triumphant. The second and third, prideful. Spiteful. The being was catching on. His plan was working.

The fourth time, there was a tremble within him, one he refused to acknowledge. He said the words, again.

* * *

It all began at once.

Power snapped out into the air with sudden, terrifying force, flaring out from Strange like a shield, like a desperate call for aid. Tony felt it wash over his and Peter’s hands where they still hovered above the man before he could pull them back.

He braced himself, core already curling in on itself in preparation for the pain, and feeling Peter do the same beside him… but there was only warmth and the undulation of the wind. It licked at his hands curiously, so different from Kenja’s, from Aedoiagen’s. Strange’s power was definite and precise, like a surgeon, like an artist. Tony took a startled breath, and the magic kept expanding.

Before shattering to a halt, tinged--no, contained--by red. Trapped within it.

No aid would follow that desperate call.

Words flickered into the air around them, and it took Tony a moment to realize they came from Strange.

“Dormammu…”

* * *

Steve was losing.

He knew it in his gut as he desperately raised his shield to block surge after surge, lash after lash. Bucky fought with one arm beside him, Shuri roared to the whir of her guns, Natasha whirled and Sam shot and T’Challa ran back across the rubble to assist, covered in blood and glowing with purple energy.

It wasn’t enough.

They were going to fail without something drastic, and Steve knew it as surely as he had known the
ice would kill him.

But the ice hadn’t killed him. There was only time, a desperate stunt against the magic running its course within the mind of their only remaining sorcerer. Maybe, maybe, they could make it until he awoke.

* * *

The seventh time, he was scared.

But the words. He had to speak the words. He had to keep the loop, to make the bargain.

To die.

* * *

“What’s he saying?” Peter asked, leaning in closer to the sorcerer within the haze of magic around them. Tony squeezed his hand, and Peter squeezed back as he tried to keep the tears from his eyes. He’d seen too much torture today.

Strange’s voice was so soft, so weak, as though he wasn’t just speaking from sleep, but through different dimensions.

“Dormammu, I’ve come to bargain.”

* * *

They weren’t going to make it.

“Bucky?” Steve said over the com, ducking under yet another lick of orange power, blood sliding down his temple and his chin.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you here.”

“I’m here, pal.”

Here until the end of the line.

Steve only hoped their deaths would not be for nothing. But he would die avenging, once again. And he wouldn’t die yet.

* * *

The tenth time, he screamed.

Not aloud, not from exertion or instinct or determination.
Inwardly, a shriek of pain and terror that he could never let the being hear ripped him apart.

He would never let anyone hear it.

* * *

Again and again, those words filtered through the dome of power that shielded them. Even in this state, Strange was protecting them.

Tony thought he must be trapped, reliving an identical fear over and over, and desolation slowly took root in his gut. If there was no clear endpoint…

How could Maximoff do this?

He’d known this man an hour. He’d saved his life. He’d had his own life saved.

Why would Strange ever do so much for Tony Stark, a face on the screen, a story with no relevance? Why?

“Because he’s Doctor Stephen Strange,” Peter said quietly, and Tony realized he’d spoken aloud.

I am Iron Man.

And then Strange’s words changed.

* * *

“Just give up,” Maura Aedoilagen snarled, not human anymore. She looked like a god, wreathed in power and dancing with insanity. Aflame, she held Steve’s death within her hands.

“I can do this all day,” he said, struggling to his feet yet again.

* * *

“You cannot do this forever.”

No. But he controlled forever. He was forever. He wrapped forever around his wrist.

* * *

“Actually, I can. This is how things are now. You and me, trapped in this moment, endlessly.”

Peter’s gaze jerked up to Tony’s, eyes still masked by the helmet between them. But he could read the horror in them anyway.

“And you will spend an eternity dying.”

That wasn’t Strange’s voice. Peter heard it, felt it, in his darkest pit of anger, in the corruption that waited inside him like it waited in everyone, in the sickness of his identity, in the most selfish of his
dreams. It was darkness. And it was hungry.

“Yes. But everyone on Earth will live.”

“But you will suffer.”

Strange smiled, and the next words were almost lost to the buzz of his magic. “Pain’s an old friend.”

Peter started crying, then.

* * *

“When you die, no one will remember you,” Aedoilagen snarled. “I will become you.”

“Maybe,” Steve said, locking eyes with her fiery orange ones. “But do you really want to be remembered as me, Maura Aedoilagen?”

“I will live as you.”

“And you won’t be you, anymore.”

“But there will be reason behind my breaths, again.”

Steve shook his head. “You want purpose? It won’t be yours. The things I’ve done, the--mistakes I’ve made, they’re my legacy. And you can pretend all you want, but the only purpose anyone can be satisfied with is the one they make for themselves.”

And even then.

Even then.

* * *

“We have to go,” Peter said quietly.

Tony’s head jerked up toward him, eddies of Strange’s light curling through the air between them. “Why--”

But he answered his own question. For behind Peter, they were losing. They were dying.

“We--we can’t leave him alone--” Tony said, his breathing harsh and rapid as he looked between the impending deaths behind him and the repeated deaths before him.

“He’ll wake up…” Peter said, but even that was weak. Because if they left, then he’d wake alone.

But the Rogues, Shuri, T’Challa, would never wake up.

Live alone... die together?

Tony would always, always choose to die together.

So he stood, and he turned, and he nodded to Peter.

And as they left the bubble of Strange’s protective energy, it clung to his suit like static, and Tony
imagined he could hear it speaking. Please.

Don’t leave him.

Tony swallowed hard, but he didn’t look back. He couldn’t.

“He’d never forgive himself if they died for him,” Peter breathed. “He’s like you, that way.”

Tony held out an arm for Peter’s web, and kicked his thrusters into action.

Together… they left Stephen Strange alone.

* * *

The twenty-fifth time, he accepted his fate.

His endless task on Hades’ Fields of Punishment, to die forever at the hands of this being. He’d been tried, he’d been convicted.

And he deserved it.

That was what kept him together, the twenty-sixth, the twenty-seventh, the fiftieth time.

The worth of a man… count his friends.

He deserved this.

* * *

“I am making purpose for myself,” Aeodilagen snarled. “I have been, since the moment I stood before these people and promised them a future. I am a revolutionary, Steve Rogers. I am a writer, a writer of lives.”

“No,” Steve said, the word breaking off in a yelp as a blast of her magic twisted his shield from his hand. “No, you’re a grieving mother, a lonely widow, a coward. We all are. We all hide from truth we can’t accept, promises we couldn’t keep, people we couldn’t save.”

The magic paused, just for a moment.

“You’re not alone, Maura Aedoilagen,” Steve said, raising his unarmed hands before him. “You’re lost, you’re drifting, but you can find your way back.”

“Like you did, the lying soldier, the trusting spy? Where did you find your way back to?”


“I have none.”

“Look around you.” Steve gestured to the enemies about him, the flashes of orange from Kenja’s magic, the roars of the remaining bear-demon. “You’ve found them already.”

“But… she’s dead.” the sorcerer breathed quietly.

“Yes,” Steve said, accepting the nonexistence of this ‘she’ without question. “She may be dead, but
it isn’t too late.”

* * *

Peter saw what was going to happen.

He’d only just arrived to the battle, severing his connection from Tony’s suit as the man traveled to take down Atticus. But he’d seen Steve Rogers lose his weapon, heard his soothing words as though he had any right to speak them. As though he had any right to forgive.

Peter saw what was going to happen, as soon as Rogers made the mistake of speaking those two words. ‘Too late.’

Peter saw it about to happen.

And for once, he had the moment to consider.

His options fanned out before him, each a unique feather, patterned individually with possibilities and choices of their own. Peter allowed his mind to explore each, to imagine what would happen, to imagine what was possible.

He saw it about to happen.

There really wasn’t any choice to be made. Peter thought of Spider-Man’s mask, thought of the hesitant way he pulled it off. Thought of his own face beneath it. Thought of Tony, smiling even as his heart was ripped out of his chest again and again and again. Thought of May and the way she squared her shoulders and looked to the future as her family died around her, thought of MJ and Ned and Pepper. Thought of Shuri. Thought of Strange, the man he’d left to die—to live—alone, the man he’d chosen to leave, chosen to let suffer for what was right. Thought of himself.

Thought of heroes.

Spider-Man is me.

And today, he did believe it.

Peter Parker, Spider-Man, narrowed the eyes of his suit.

And he made his choice.

* * *

“She may be dead, but it isn’t too late.”

Aedoilagen lifted her gaze to Steve’s, twin tears of orange light escaping from the edges of her eyes.

“Yes it is,” she whispered.

Before Steve could move, before he could even quantify what was happening, she was lunging for him, a blade of transparent energy leaping into her fingers.

Steve twisted, only to find her doing the same, to find death pouncing for him with nimble hands.
A wall of lean muscle and slim bone and young life slammed into him, shielding him and throwing him to the rubble.

And the sorcerer’s blade slid clean through Peter Parker’s chest.
I'm not even going to ask you not to hate me.

I'm just going to beg you stay until the end of the chapter.

Just...

Try to make it to the end of the chapter.

*Rebooting…*

Karen fuzzed back into consciousness, quickly running diagnostics on the suit. She could see sky through the eyes of the mask and darkened the visor to prevent any possible inconvenience to Peter the sunshine might cause.

“We’ve been breached,” she said, “near the charging port of the drone. It grazed my battery, but obviously, I’m functional.”

Karen marked the area around them, but Peter didn’t turn his head away from the sky, and Karen had to use other means to pinpoint the locations of the ongoing battles. Rogers and Aedoilagen were engaged the nearest, the Captain roaring something fowl, and Karen figured they should assist there again.

“Good jump, by the way,” she said. “You saved his life.”

Peter didn’t answer, and Karen continued diagnostics. She was met with a few strange readings, and quickly categorize them by likelihood to cause disruption in Peter’s next conflict.

“The blade must have severed a wire down there, for life-signs,” Karen explained. “I’m not reading your signals. Should I report it to Mr. Stark, before he panics?”

Peter didn’t answer.

“Peter?”

He didn’t move.

“Peter, come on.” She couldn’t sense any life signs. A wire must have been cut. A wire… “Rogers needs our help--that’s what we came here for, wasn’t it?”

He didn’t move. She didn’t hear him, didn’t feel the mask moving as he spoke.

As he breathed.

“*Peter.*”

*Alert: High Liquid Content Within Suit.*
“PETER!”

The child didn’t move.

In the dusty ruins of a torturous building, a lonely AI began screaming.

* * *

Somewhere halfway across the world, May Parker collapsed against an airport handrail and vomited into the acacia trees and nanotech.

* * *

Tony crushed the second bracelet against the bone of Atticus’s leg, his gauntlet straining slightly under the exertion. Shards of metal and circuitry lodged in the joints of the metal fingers.

The bear-demon roared, convulsing in on itself, and Tony backflipped out of the way. Shuri ended her distracting assault on Atticus’s skull, letting her guns power down with a slight whir as Atticus began to take human form once more. Not caring to watch the process again, Tony turned away, his gaze darting across the battlefield around them and forcibly not lingering in the direction where they’d abandoned Strange.

“Boss…” FRIDAY’s hesitant voice began.

“So that’s Atticus and Jasper out of the way,” Tony interrupted with a hint of triumph. “Romanoff defeated the lady with the throwing stars, and T’Challa and Wilson finished of Bantail.”

“That leaves just the sorcerers,” Shuri replied, twirling the barrel of her blaster over one hand. “Seeing as Spinner and I took care of Jade.”

Tony frowned. “Yeah, speaking of the kid, where did he go?”

“Boss.”

“FRIDAY, did he go back to Strange?”

“He didn’t.”

It was the tremble in her coded voice that had Tony’s breath sticking in his throat, had his thoughts freezing in his mind, his words dying on his tongue.

“The Spider-Man suit--”

“Don’t say anything,” Tony said. “Don’t say anything, don’t say anything, don’t say anything.”

But FRIDAY did.

It was then that Tony Stark was told he’d never hold Peter again, never smile at him again, never talk to him again, never stand in the workshop with him again.

It was then that Tony Stark was told that Peter Parker, whom he called his son, whom he loved, was dead.
And Tony stopped hearing the words and the gunshots and the cries.
And he stopped tasting the sweat of his lips and the grease of his suit.
And he stopped seeing the data of the visor and the writhing of the enemies and the confusion on Shuri’s face.
And he stopped smelling the heat of the suit and the sparking of circuitry.
And he stopped feeling his heart beating and his blood freezing and his breath plugging.
Tony stopped thinking.
The suit fell away like the shedding of feathers as he began to move. To walk, down from the sky, his final step through air before the last repulsors of the suit curled into nothing.
Tony Stark walked across the rubble in a tattered brown coat, expensive leather hanging off a thin and dirty body that wasn’t his, anymore. Eyes staring straight ahead at nothing, chest high and shoulders back, he put one foot in front of the other and walked, the pain of his fractured legs dull and unnoticeable.
Someone called his name.
Someone hurled magic toward his undefended form.
Someone raised a hand, and that someone’s own orange power viciously threw the attacker backward.
Maybe that someone was him.
Tony lowered his hand. And kept walking.
The steps didn’t falter. They never paused, never stumbled, despite his cracked shins, even when a long carpentry nail stabbed up through the sole of his shoe, up through his foot. Tony Stark left a trail of blood in his wake. And his steps never faltered.
Peter Parker was looking at the sky.
That was all Tony could think, as he crumbled to the ground aside his son like someone had finally snapped the strings of the marionette that was his body.

*Hey, kid.*

*Hey, Mr. Stark.*

*You can come in, you know.*

“There.”

*Thanks, Mr. Stark.*

*Yeah, you’re welcome. Now stop with the puppy-eyes. Seriously. Get them under control.*

“There.”

*Just wanted to check on you.*
You know I heal fast.

Not about the injuries, kid.

Tony started hearing the silence of breath not taken and a heart not beating.

And he started tasting the salt of tears and the bitterness of grief.

And he started seeing the blank white eyes of the mask and the small, limp hand and the red that covered everything.

And he started smelling the copper metal of blood and the smothering of smoke.

And he started feeling the claws tearing him apart, the talons shredding the inside of his chest, taking each aspect of him and ripping it away to nothing.

Tony crawled forward, hands slipping on liquid and his knees shredding on rubble, until Peter’s limp form was curled against him, until their blood was mingling on the debris beneath them. He reached out a hand, a hand that didn’t shake, not once, and pulled the mask away from Peter’s face.

Tony lifted his son into his arms.

And Peter was limp and Dead against him, none of the life, the perpetual awe, the curiosity that exuded through his every movement. Now there was only blood.

He ran a hand through Peter’s hair, carding through the damp curls, pressing the side of his head to them, trying to breath in his scent, as though that would change anything, as though that would stitch him back together.

But there was only blood.

And then Tony began to speak. Words in phrases that didn’t make sense, memories and dreams that did, all too well. More and more, he mumbled into Peter’s hair, trembling lips forming promises he’d already broken.

Please.

Tony had always been scared of the vastness of this world. Ever since Afghanistan had sewn the seeds, and the battle of New York had grown them, he’d feared the size and the unknown dangers.

He realized, now, too late, that he’d been wrong.

The world was not vast.

The dimension was not unchartable.

The multiverse was not immense.

The world was the size of the boy in his arms. The world was the shape of his mind and yes, maybe it was full of dangers, maybe it was something he could never face.

But he hadn’t been alone.

And it was too late, too late, as he stopped being scared.

The first of the screams ripped themselves from Tony’s throat, the wracking, shuddering screams of a
father who’d lost his son. The screams of denial, the screams of anger, the pleas that turned to sobs as the battleground stopped to listen.

Tony’s voice never faltered.

Until someone put a hand on his shoulder, and said quietly, “move aside.”

Tony’s head jerked up, holding Peter closer to him.

And as his gaze met that of Stephen Strange, who’s multicolored eyes were awake and full of his own quiet grief, lonely and betrayed and soft, Tony snarled. “You must be out of your fucking mind.”

Strange’s gaze only grew kinder.

His touch disappearing, Strange raised trembling hands, touching thumb to pinky and fanning his remaining three fingers before drawing his arms open. Green light erupted at the base of his sternum, just bellow where Tony’s arc reactor would have been.

He moved back toward the mourning father with slow, precise movements.

“I can save him.”
In Which Realization Strikes

Chapter Notes

This is the most dramatic thing I've ever written.

Also it brings me to 200k words. *Celebratory dab*

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stephen opened the Eye as though it didn’t send most of his conscious mind writhing in utter terror.

But seeing Peter Parker dead in his father’s arms was worse.

So Stephen did what he had to do.

Tony Stark watched him with flat, dead eyes.

So Stephen did what he had to do.

“I can save him,” he said, kneeling beside the man. He didn’t know if it was true. It had damn better be. “But you have to move aside.”

No one said a word, not even Aedoilagen and Kenja, frozen in the middle of strikes, in the middle of battles with bloody, battered Rogues and royalty.

Blood was matted in Stark’s hair, in his beard, smeared along the side of his face. He looked more like a corpse than the boy in his arms. But something sparked when Stephen said those words, a stubborn hope that had been stanched so many times but never failed to flicker again. Stark carefully uncurled himself from beneath Peter and laid his head on the bloodsoaked rubble, moving reluctantly, silently, away to stand next to Stephen. The Cloak, which had been wrapped tight about him thus far, hesitantly lifted from Stephen’s shoulders to slide beneath the boy, to support him amid the wreckage.

It wasn’t just Stephen’s hands that shook as he began to pull the chains of power from the beast around his throat. It was the entirety of his being, trembling with revulsion as Time began to weave around him, no longer kind, no longer familiar, no longer welcoming. It wasn’t so much time as it was pain, pain and death and loneliness--

Something touched him.

*The fifty-ninth time, he decided to stop counting.*

Stephen’s concentration shattered, and he threw himself away from that contact, eyes snapping open.

Stark’s hand was still outstretched.

Stephen aggressively slowed his breathing. “You can’t touch me. It will disrupt the flow of energy,” he lied.
Stark nodded and pretended to believe him.

For the sake of both their sanities.

Stephen looked back at the Eye, and swallowed.

The only way. It was the only way.

Stephen let his eyes slide closed, let his perception dive into the heart of the Stone.

*Dormammu…*

The only way. It was the only way.

*You weren’t manipulating the space-time continuum, you were wrecking it. We do not tamper with natural law. We defend it.*

The only way.

Green disks flashed into existence around Stephen, and he could perceive them, and only them. Slowly, they assembled about his wrist, interlocking in a bracelet of green patterns, mandalas connected at their edges, time made incarnate around him.

It wasn’t the dying that hurt. It was the coming back. Every time, the coming back.

The waking up alone.

The *only* way.

He wouldn’t wish his memories on anyone else. He wouldn’t wish anyone else to know what it was like, the pain of coming back. Was it worth it? Would Peter Parker wish Stephen had never… woken? Would he hate Stephen, hate the rings of Time for bringing him back? Would he wish, like Stephen, on bad nights when he held his astral head in his hands with fingers too useless to grip a cell phone, with no bravery to form a portal and find someone, that he’d stayed dead?

Because it wasn’t the dying that hurt.

But…

It wasn’t the coming back, either.

Stephen’s eyes opened to glance toward Stark, who watched every flutter of Stephen’s power, who catalyzed and analyzed and demanded every flutter.

Peter Parker would not come back alone.

Time was not damning the boy. Stephen was not damning him.

They were saving him.

It was the only way.

“Aedoilagen and Kenja won’t wait,” Stephen said. “This might take time. It’s up to you, you have to keep her back.”

And without looking at the response, Stephen lifted one hand, peppered with the scars that had
driven him to this.

Then he dropped his defenses and let the magic of Time mingle with what he held in his soul. He pushed away the memories, fresh and destructive and endless, pushed away Dormammu and the Ancient One’s death, pushed away Mordo’s betrayal and his own of Christine.

It wasn’t about him, and it was the only way.

Stephen thought of Peter Parker. He thought of the knowing smile and the possibly psychic intuition and the unfltering determination, and whipped the power of time into tangibility. Perceptible only to him, the green carpet of timespace lit up, meshing in the folds of the rubble, dancing in the air, clicking out a story of everything around him.

Stephen knew the moment his fingers brushed across the string of the tapestry, the string that held tight around Peter Parker. He followed it back, listening to Time’s whispers until the blossoming moment of life burst into his fingers, tingling up his arm. Life burned bright with realization, with purpose and understanding and certainty, and it wasn’t scared as it’s light was snuffed out.

It only whispered one quiet prayer to Time in the moment it saw everything.

Tell him I’m sorry.

A slight smile flickered across Stephen’s face.

Tell him yourself.

Stephen gripped the moment precisely before the fatal wound was dealt, and lifted his eyes back to the physical plane.

And then he began to cut it.

Guided by the photographic memory of a diagram in a forbidden book, guided by the leaping intuition of the life within his hands, Stephen etched a design in the fabric of reality.

And the more lines he carved, the more intricate the pattern became beneath his hands, the more power trickled away from him. Trickled, and then ran, and then poured, cascading from his soul in an effort to control the Stone that no mortal should possess, to control nature when it wanted but to love and destroy and be free.

As his magic rushed away like an unplugged drain, Stephen felt the moment he reached the edge. The point of no return plummeted away before him and he curled his toes over it, his hands pausing in their manipulation of the timespace tapestry.

Oh, he thought dispassionately, deep within the throws of reality. I’m not going to make it.

Stephen looked over his shoulder, back towards his body. He could go back, he could step away from this task that he might not even succeed in. He could live.

The strand that was Peter’s timeline jittered in his hand, already called to the pattern he was etching, the gap of a specific shape that would allow only the specific strand to rewind.

To wake up. To return to a father who loved him, a world that needed him, a family that Stephen had yet to meet. A love. A best friend. A future that was only just beginning.

Another strand would return to an injured body, a cracked sanity. To an empty Sanctum and and an
ever-quieting mentor. To nightmares and dull, ongoing pain. To a lonely future it didn’t care to watch stretch on.

* * *

Ever talked to a human incarnation of a puppy? You will.

Stephen smiled. And stepped off the edge.

* * *

Vaguely, vacantly, Tony thought as he stood cornered by two conflicting colors of light, orange and green.

Tony thought, and he wondered why.

He’d known Strange for less than an hour.

And he’d already been saved by him, saved him, and left him for dead. Already laughed with him, already betrayed him, already trusted him more than most of the others on this battlefield.

Why do this? Why suffer for a man he’d never met? Why suffer for a child that wasn’t his?

Why die for them?

Kenja’s power slammed into him, again and again and again, but it never penetrated him, even standing in nothing but his skin and soul. His foot throbbed with sharp pain, the nail still embedded through his arch, and his legs screamed through the exertion on their broken state. But something kept him upright.

And Aedoilagen… she stood frozen, staring in what could have been awe at the infinite jade power wreathing Stephen Strange.

Tony fought to reach her, but even despite the mysterious something that kept Kenja from killing him, it wasn’t enough.

He wasn’t enough.

Failure and pain and death, because he could never be sufficient.

Why?

He’d failed them all. He’d brought Happy anxiety and Pepper paranoia and Rhodey paralysis. Brought Peter...

How?

Was that a question? Peter was lying dead.

Dead. Dead dead dead...

The word echoed in his mind, winding around all conscious thought and strangling his own life away. Dead, Peter was dead.

And now a stranger was laying down his own life for it. And that stranger had trusted Tony. Had left the protection and defense of all of them in Tony’s hands, because he’d thought him enough.
Why?

Tony knew the answer.

It was in the quiet whisper that had trusted Yinsen and in the determined thump that said, *no more.* It was the gust that had driven him to the suit and away from the weapons, the path that drew him to Harley. It was the roar that had given him the power to push a nuke through a wormhole, the scream that had built Ultron, the cry that had signed the Sokovia Accords. It was the burning of his soul that kept his head up, kept Pepper coming back and vice-versa, kept him rising from every nightmare.

The burning that pulsed and grew within everyone.

It was passion, and it was determination, and above all, it was the need to do *right.*

It was what made a hero.

Orange energy erupted between Tony’s fingers.

* * *

Maura couldn’t move.

Even if she had wanted to, had sought to try and attack at this lynchpoint moment, her magic and her mind were frozen in the sight of the cinnamon power possessed by the object, the *being,* she had sworn her oath to.

The oath she’d betrayed, for she’d thought it betrayed her.

To her left, Kenja still fought.

Kenza, her friend, her apprentice, who had always been destined to be so much greater than she.

Kenza and Mercury, a future she fought for.

Why hadn’t she seen? Why hadn’t she seen that the future was and had always been *hers*?

*This was never about purpose.*

The words of the Mystic Artist that now wound time around his hands danced within her mind, teased at whatever it was that kept her rooted.

It *was* about purpose. It was about the life that had been ripped away when her daughter died, when Mercury’s own future was snuffed out at the hands of people who would never even know.

*This is about revenge.*

Mercury had been seventeen. And Maur--and the Scarlet Witch had ripped away her future without even pausing to consider. Mercury had been seventeen, and she’d been the only thing left for Maura to live for.

She’d only wanted something else to live for.

*This was always about revenge, about the blame you pushed from yourself onto someone else.*
Peter Parker lay dead on what remained of her home.

She’d killed a child.

By her own hand, by no tampering, she’d killed a child.

She’d… she’d killed Mercury too.

_It wasn’t purposelessness, Maura Aedoilagen, it was grief. That’s all this is. Petty revenge. And you lied to these people, who thought they were building a new future with you. You built a team off of falsehood._

She’d only wanted…

She’d only wanted her daughter back. Her family back. Her life back.

Maura had built an empire out of grief. And looking at its crumbling foundations now, she was ashamed.

Looking at the Sorcerer Supreme, she saw his eyes flicker with something like resignation before closing with a shaking sort of finality. He was undoing the undoable, and it was taking power and lifeforce, and he… he wouldn’t have enough. Even him.

Not enough. What did it mean, to be enough?

The burning inside her, the burning to do good, quietly kindled.

She would have to move quickly. Tony Stark--billionaire, genius, playboy, philanthropist, father, engineer, Mystic Artist--would never let her stay close.

Maura took the spell she’d been weaving since the moment she saw the Rogues, the spell that had been her dream for nine months, and reshaped it. She let its power pool in her core, let it boil within her consciousness, and let it become her.

And then she raised a hand, and portaled beside the Sorcerer Supreme.

By the time Tony had roared and ripped her away her grip on Strange, Maura Aedoilagen was already dead.

* * *

It was like lightning, scarlet lightning, had snapped through his body.

Stephen gasped, his mouth filling with Time as the tapestry of reality surged up and around him, lapping hungrily at this newfound power. Hastily, he reigned it in, controlled it; but it didn’t feel like his.

A tapestry thread whispered.

_This time, it is about purpose._

And Stephen found himself burning bright with Maura Aedoilagen’s life force.
He couldn’t stop it, couldn’t block the power as it lept to do its master’s final bidding. He was simply a channel, through which the energy of Maura was conducted, along the threads of timespace and into the etching of Life he drew out of death, for a boy of mist and sunlight. Stephen’s hand moved of its own accord, its trembling stopping for one, scarlet-filled moment as he drew the final shapes.

Through every plane of this reality, a mandala of Time erupted.

The strand in Stephen’s hand bucked and writhed, ecstatic sound flitting out and reverberating through Stephen’s bones as the thing tugged for the gateway.

* * *

When Peter Parker took a breath, Tony heard it.

And instantly, he was by the kid’s side, helping the Cloak to raise Peter’s head, to cradle his now-intact body in his arms. He paid no heed to the form of Maura Aedoilgen, paid no heed to what remained of Kenja.

(He had strangled her. Slowly and intimately, he had done it as he thought of Peter’s screams. Wrapped his the gauntlets of his suit around her neck and squeezed, the dimensional energy gone from his grasp. He could hate himself for it later.)

“Peter,” he said, or maybe thought.

And then he looked toward Strange, just in time to see the man stumble to his knees, hands bracing against the rubble field even as a multicolored gaze snapped toward Peter.

“He’s alive,” Tony said, and the words sounded like euphoria. “Thank you, wizard.”

“Mr. Stark,” a coughing voice said, “he’s not a wizard. He’s a Jedi.”

Tony looked down at the grinning face of Peter Parker and burst into tears.

END OF PART SIX
DEAR LORD

End of Part Six! We're in the endgame now, people! But don't worry, there are things left to go; I've got lose ends to tie up out the wazoo...

But still. I'm near to the end... How CRAZY is that???
The collapse upon re-entering Wakanda was spectacular.

Peter’s knees buckled as soon as he’d stepped through Wong’s portal (the doctor hadn’t been able to create one, because… what the hell had even happened?), and the arm of Tony’s Iron Man suit was the only thing keeping him upright. Together, the two of them stumbled across the lab until reaching a set of abandoned wheely-chairs. Shuri joined them, flopping awkwardly onto the desk.

“Holy shit,” she said, eyes wide, staring at nothing. “Holy shit.”

Peter could only shake his head. “We won? And I died? I thought I died. I’m not dead?”

“You’re not dead,” was Tony’s quiet, exhausted answer as he ran his hands through his hair, helmet long retracted.

Physically, Peter’s muscles were limp and sore and unresponsive. His bones felt like liquid, and his chest full of fiberglass. But mentally, spiritually—whatever that meant now, Peter felt… amazing. Alight and sharp, with thoughts wizzing unleaden. He felt the need to draw, to write, to create, to somehow share this inspiration that had filtered through him. He’d died. And he’d come back.

And he hadn’t changed, but he wasn’t the same.

As Peter tried to quantify the eternal question of what the fuck, Avengers and Rogues began to filter through the gateway, covered in an increasingly more impressive amount of blood and dust and general filth. Peter counted off, scanning each for the possibility of imminent death and the likelihood they needed him to somehow find a way to move his muscles that seemed to still think they were dead.

Dead.

What?

Sam Wilson came in first, dragging a broken wing across the lab’s white tile floor. Shuri winced, likely from the scratches being etched across her space, and Peter cringed as that terrible grating noise of metal-on-metal rang out through the lab. Wilson failed to try and lift it, exhausted, and Peter couldn’t blame him.

Until the sound suddenly ceased as the wing severed from Wilson’s suit, clattering into silence, and Romanoff’s curled wrist straightened.

The side of Peter’s mouth quirked up. The assassin, cut and bruised, posture perfect and expression unreadable, pulled her knife out of Shuri’s lab floor (the girl winced again) and stalked over to where Peter and Tony sat.
“Here,” she said, and flipped the knife, offering the hilt.

To… Peter.

“What?” he asked, then cursed himself. Tony nudged him.

*What the fuck, Peter... Spider-Man.*

That seemed as unbelievable as the knife.

“Um, thank you,” he stuttered, and accepted the Black Widow’s gift.

The knife was heavy and worn, seeming to pulse with its own story. Or maybe that was Peter having come back to life, feeling the same in everything around him.

Either way, it was remarkable, and he was left speechless.

Natasha seemed to understand, and moved away, glancing back at Tony as she walked. He stared her down, and Peter shivered.

There was still such tension in Tony’s form. The suit was still active, the repulser’s still charged. The battle wasn’t over yet.

Peter didn’t know what to expect, but he wouldn’t run from it.

When he looked back at the portal, setting the knife down beside him, T’Challa was passing through it. He half-carried Wanda, blood dark against his black suit. Shuri let out a strangled cry, jumping to his feet, but he raised a hand.

“It’s not mine,” the Black Panther said.

It wasn’t all enemies, however. Peter craned his head to try and see Wong behind T’Challa, but couldn’t make out anything through the small portal.

Shuri trotted over anyway, helping support the soul-wounded witch and bringing her brother to the side of the lab. Peter glanced at them, watching the two Wakandan’s make their way to one of the screens, and then the king speak into the machine at his wrist.

Something was happening--

Oh. Right.

“Um, Tony?” Peter began as Rogers and Barnes passed into the lab together. By some miracle, they kept their gazes away, at each other, though Tony still went completely, utterly still.

Peter pressed the palms of his hands to his eye sockets and kept talking. “Now probably isn’t the best time to mention it, but--”

The door to the lab slammed open.

“They left many hours ago,” T’Challa’s general, Okoye, spoke from the second floor of the room, which had gone completely silent, as though each of the heroes could sense what was coming. “You may wait here until they return, in what state, I do not know.”

And then came the voices, the familiar ones, the ones that meant home, that meant family.
That meant Peter's imminent demise.

“It doesn’t matter what state he comes back in, I will kill him--I will kill them both!--regardless.”

“Get in line.”

“Um, no, Michelle, I outrank you on the scale of who-gets-to-kill-my-nephew-first.”

“Guys, I think--”

In the white light of the incandescents, Pepper Potts, Michelle Jones, May Parker, and Ned Leeds stopped in their tracks on the threshold of the lab, their voices strangling into nothing, their steps frozen.

“Ms. Potts and May are coming…” Peter finished under his breath.

Pepper smiled.

Tony got to his feet.

Slowly. The metal of the battered Iron Man suit didn’t make a sound.

And Peter, through eyes suddenly, inexplicably flooded with tears, met his aunt’s gaze, saw MJ take a step forward, watched Ned lift his hands to his mouth.

He was halfway up the ramp to the second floor before he’d even realized he was moving, and they were halfway down. The sound of thrusters told him Tony was at his side, just as he crashed into May Parker with all the force in his enhanced body.

She didn’t stumble back, didn’t falter, just wrapped her arms around him and pressed her cheek to his curls, and he was laughing and crying and forgetting his nervousness because May was here, May was here and everything made sense again.

When he pulled away and looked at her, she was trying to look stern over her uncontrollable, relieved grin. “You are in so much trouble, Peter Parker,” she laughed, and hugged him again.

Peter grinned, muttering “I know, I know,” and drawing his arms even tighter.

“Hey, arachnid-boy,” came another voice.

“Yeah, dude, I want a hug.”

Peter laughed, and May let him go so he could pivot on the ball of his foot and catch the shoulders of his friend and girlfriend, almost leaping on them with the force of his hug. He thought he heard sniffles, but he wasn’t sure who was crying--it was him, wasn’t it.

“I missed you guys,” he said, drawing back. “I missed you so much.”

“Yeah well at least you knew we were alive,” MJ said, slapping his hand away from her shoulder. “Y’know, like we hadn’t gone off to fight wizards in a tin suit.”

Peter winced.

“How could you do that?” Ned asked, and it was the quiet, confused admission of his usually chipper, understanding friend that had Peter crying, again.
“I’m sorry,” he said, because it was all he could say. “I’m so, so sorry.”

May put a hand on his head, softly untangling his blood-and-grime-soaked hair. “But you’re here,” she said. “You’re safe. And so is Tony.”

Peter smiled, stepping back and turning to the man beside him, ready to ask if he could start to explain--

To find Tony kissing his fiancé like there was no tomorrow.

He covered his mouth to hide his laugh, both intrigued and embarrassed by the tongues and the sounds. Turning away quickly, he made a face, and Ned snorted.

Whereas MJ grinned, grabbed the front of his suit, and showed him why he was correct to be intrigued.

“Get a room, you guys!” came a voice from the lab, and Peter would have killed the source if it hadn’t been Shuri.

MJ released him, even her unshakable expression turned pink, and peered over Peter’s shoulder to the lab. Ned stopped covering his eyes to do the same.

“I like her,” MJ said, and Peter looked helplessly at May.

You got yourself into this, his aunt mouthed, and Peter couldn’t say he didn’t panic.

“Oh my God it’s the Black Panther.”

Aaaaand there it is.

Peter burst out laughing as Ned waddled another quarter of the way down the ramp before realizing what he was doing, turned bright red, and stopped in his tracks. He didn’t even glance at the Rogues, and Peter didn’t either. “Shit, sorry, you’re majesty, I am honored to meet you, and you too Princess Shuri--do I call you Princess--um, I mean, um--”

T’Challa smiled wide. “I can see why you and Peter would be friends,” he said, and strode across the lab toward Ned, who vibrated harder with each step. “And any friend of Peter--” a quick glance toward the boy-- “is a friend of mine.”

Ned let out a strangled whimper, somehow managing not to fanboy himself into another dimension.

Peter smiled, and glanced again at Tony. His father was still occupied, however, quiet words that were not-so-quiet to Peter’s enhanced senses floating between Tony and Pepper.

The two of them were absolutely adorable.

Peter grinned all the wider, meshing his fingers with MJ’s and May’s, and turned back to the scene of Ned making a fool out of himself.

“Is that blood on your suit? Are you okay? What happened? What’s the purple light on you’re--oh it’s moving, is it part of your suit? What’s its function? How does the vibranium--”

T’Challa held up a hand, and Ned stopped his babbling.

“For some of those questions,” the king said, “you’d be better off asking my sister.”
He gestured behind him, and Shuri waved, her smirk jumping to her face.

And Ned blushed.

Peter and MJ shared a mischievous, if not downright evil, look.

“And for the others,” T’Challa continued, “I think the story is your friend’s.”

Ned looked back up at Peter, and so did everyone else in the lab. Peter no longer felt the need to curl in on himself against the attention—he relished the way people smiled at Spider-Man—and surveyed them all back.

It was easy to notice Wong in the corner by where the portal used to be, unconscious, with the deep red Cloak now pressed around his middle, a section of soaked and dark with blood.

Shit. Why didn’t he say something?

“Before we fill you all in on the chaos of… everything that’s happened,” Peter began, and Tony did look back at him, this time, “there’s some medical attention that needs to be enacted, I think.”

“Shit, right,” Shuri said, bounding towards yet another screen. “I’ll call them in. Everybody line up in order of most-dying, with Wong first and Stark next.”

“Wait,” Pepper demanded, “why are you second-dying?”

Tony shrugged. “I’m really fine. Some broken legs, and I spent four days in a different dimension. The magic didn’t really leave a mark, though, so other than those two things I’m fine.”

“Where do I fit in, there, seeing as I’ve already died?” Peter said, raising his hand.

“What?” May and Pepper roared, simultaneously.

“You died?”

“Four days in a different dimension?”

“The magic didn’t really leave a mark?”

Tony met Peter’s eyes and grinned, tired and elated and full of that love they’d both taken so long to accept.

“It’s a long story,” Peter said, and gripped Tony’s hand to lead him down the ramp, the metal of the suit creaking slightly, to join Shuri’s assembling line.

They all continued to ignore the Rogues, aggressively and completely, despite their proximity, and the ex-Avengers seemed to recognize that they’d better keep their mouths shut. A newly-reunited Ms. Potts and a protective Aunt May were not something they wanted to pit themselves against, and for good reason.

“That’s why we’re here,” MJ said, following them, though her eyes were trained calculatingly on Shuri.

“Yeah, tell the story, dude,” Ned added. “What the hell have we all just gone through? Why are you undead? Why is that cape moving—” a gesture toward the Cloak as it lifted the unconscious Wong to where Shuri was cleaning off a lab table—“and why are we all in a room with a bunch of war criminals?”
Alright, so maybe Ned was not ignoring the Rogues.

“You want me to tell it, or should you?” Peter asked, looking to Tony.

Tony shrugged. “Personally, I feel like I’ve been hit by a bus and subsequently trampled by exactly 147 camels, so I’m inclined to say you.”

Peter chuckled, tightening his grip on his father’s fingers and filing into line behind him. He’s not third-dying, but he wasn’t leaving, not when he just got Tony back.

Peter opened his mouth and began.

“So, remember when you told FRIDAY not to let me out of the door back when all this started…”

* * *

A few minutes before, Stephen was fighting his Cloak off his shoulders, holding the thing at arms length as Wong wearily shut his gateway before closing his eyes, his breathing heavy.

_Alimentary ballistic trauma--_.

Shut up, shut up, shut _up_.

“Stop it,” Stephen whispered harshly to the Cloak. “He needs you.”

The Cloak just wrapped itself harder around his wrists, fluttering sternly against his fingers as they shook like aspen leaves in the wind. Stephen pried at it, hissing slightly.

Wong groaned, and Stephen’s heart dropped into his gut at the noise of pain. The noise of pain he couldn’t do anything about, because his magic was weak and festering from overuse, because his hands couldn’t even fumble their way through the folds of fabric, because they lacked the strength to exert pressure on Wong’s wound, because he couldn’t find the courage to call out to the people within the lab.

“Let go!” he growled, ripping feebly at the fabric. “Let go, let go, _leave me alone--_”

He broke off, but the words already had the Cloak stiffening.

Stephen bared his teeth at the Cloak, at the friend that had always been there.

It was the color of the dark dimension’s sun.

“Leave me alone,” he said again, stronger. “Help Wong.”

The Cloak shook its collar stubbornly.

“I don’t need you,” Stephen snarled.

The Cloak recoiled, only for a moment, in hurt surprise.

And Stephen yanked his hands out of its hold, ignoring their zing of pain, just barely keeping his sling-ring on his fingers.

He told himself it was because he’d been away for too long, that the dimension was in danger from
his lack of defense. He told himself Wong needed the help of the people here, that he himself wasn’t really that injured, that the cuts on his side had stopped bleeding anyway. He told himself Wong could help them all get home, when the reunions were over and the needed discussions had been completed.

They didn’t need Stephen.

He didn’t look at the grinning allies on the ramp between floors behind him.

The portal back to the Sanctum had swallowed him up before the Cloak could follow, leaving its hem raised helplessly through empty air.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't ship Ned and Shuri until I absolutely did?

Yes! As probably obvious, there are some things to be sorted out in part seven, including but not limited to Stev/phens of various spellings. Also Tony's new title, politics, a cat, and a certain writer we met on a plane.
In Which the Aftermath is Faced

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Somehow, it only took half an hour for the tech of Wakanda to splint, and begin to heal, Tony’s broken legs. Shuri’d told him it took them a day and a half to mend fatal bullet wounds as she leaned against the lab table he was sprawled under, Pepper’s fingers laced through his.

Tony had turned his head to where Wong was currently being fussied over by three Wakandan medics and a sentient cloak, and frowned, because he only saw one wizard, and then Shuri knocked him unconscious.

Apparently being asleep was necessary to the process. She could have warned him.

When he woke up, the lab was empty of Rogues and royals, leaving only his family upright around him and Wong peacefully healing across the room. Peter was still telling the story, answering quiet questions and somehow keeping it together.

The kid had been dead not two hours ago.

Tony’s been in the midst of the most excruciating torture he’d ever experienced not seven hours ago.

And here Peter was, grinning nonchalantly and reciting the story of all that as though it hadn’t changed their lives forever.

Tony closed his eyes again and listened to his son’s voice, recounting the way Atticus and Jasper had used the shapeshifting band he and Peter had discovered in New York all those months ago to become formidable enemies. He could see Ned’s delighted, horrified expression from behind his closed lids, and grinned softly.

Pepper’s hand tightened on his, her thumb slowly tracing against his knuckle. Tony caught it with his own, calloused fingers brushing her soft skin, and his heart nearly beat out of his chest at her quiet laugh, at the normal, steady rhythm of her pulse.

That captivating thump slowly consumed his perception as Tony slipped into half-consciousness, his own heart gradually slowing, as one’s steps do when walking beside someone, to beat in sync. Peter’s words were a quiet background hum, and Tony had never felt so… safe.

No starlight lurked in his subconscious, ready to extend its claws.

No shield, rigid with frost.

No cave darkness.

No asphyxiating dimension.

No pain.

No guilt.

No fear.

“Tony.”
Pepper’s voice drew him easily back into consciousness, and Tony opened his eyes to golden light.

“Mr. Stark, I thought you said you weren’t a sorcerer,” Peter said with a grin as Tony sat up, his vision coming into focus.

He was glowing, orange power wreathing his hands and his chest—he’d tapped into it. As soon as he realized, the energy closed itself off, and Tony fell back into reality with a bump.

“That was weird,” MJ observed.

“Ugh…” Tony shook his head, clearing the last remnants of fuzziness from his mind. “Yeah, this has sort of been happening? I could only make it do what I wanted when… well…”

“When I was in danger,” Peter said, perching agilly on the edge of Tony’s makeshift bed.

“Aw, you’re little filial pride is so adorable.” MJ punched him. Peter glowered at her.

“Make fun of him, he’s the one that is literally harnessing the power of dimensions to save my ass,” the boy grumbled, gesturing at Tony, who sighed.

“Thanks for throwing me under the bus.”

“Paternal instincts strong enough to bend reality,” MJ said flatly. “Not impressed.”

Tony glared at her. “Oh come on, I brought him back to life, didn’t I?”

“Last I checked, that was the proper sorcerer.” She pointed to Wong.

“No, the other proper sorcerer,” Peter corrected with a grin. He looked around, and said grin faded. “Speaking of the doctor, where is he?”

“Everytime you say ‘doctor’ I want to sing ‘dooweedoo’ as loud as I possibly can,” Ned muttered.

“I know right? Same,” Peter chuckled. “But he’s a jedi, not a Time Lord. Or a wizard.” The last, accompanied by a glare, was directed at Tony.

Tony acknowledged it with a wave of his hand, still casting his eyes around the room for a sign of the tall, stubborn man. But all he could see was the Cloak, floating somewhat awkwardly near Wong’s sleeping form.

“Um,” Tony said, waving to the garment. “Hello? Where’s your wizard?”

Peter corrected “sorcerer” at the same time Ned corrected “Jedi.” Tony glared at each of them in turn.

The Cloak glared at him—he wasn’t sure how, but the thing turned up it’s collar and glared-- before swishing angrily around to turn its back on them.

“Okay, what’s that about?” Tony wondered.

“Doctor Strange was here earlier,” Peter said. “He brought Wong in. But he was injured…”

“Shit,” Tony said, the contentedness disappearing; something was still wrong.

Many things were still wrong.

“Can I get up now?” he demanded, swinging his legs over the edge of the table. They hardly
Five voices nearly screamed in protest, however, and Tony froze. “What?”

“It’s been like half an hour, Tony! You’re legs were broken!”

Tony gestured around them, at the window through which the suspension trains hauled their technological magic. “And this is Wakanda.”

“He’s right, there,” MJ said, raising an eyebrow.

“Thank you.” Tony pushed himself onto his feet, despite the increasingly abject objections.

No pain.

“See?” he said. “Wakanda is badass, and so am I. It only takes half an hour for me to walk on my broken legs.”

“Tony…”

Tony waved his hand dismissively and took a few tentative steps. Still fine.

“I walked across a destroyed building on these things when they were broken, and you doubt me now?”

“Anthony Edward Stark, I swear to God, I will chain you in a closet and force-feed you bananas until you learn some self-control!” Pepper growled, pulling her hands somewhat aggressively through her hair.

Tony made a face. “One can only eat so many bananas before it gets gross.”

“That’s the point.”

“Aw, but it’s mean!”

That rewarded him with the fond, exasperated laugh-huff that was far too attractive than a laugh-huff had any right to be.

“I’m going to put a stop to that right there,” May said, “and ask what the plan is.”

“What do you mean, what the plan is?”

“I mean, we’re in Wakanda. We have you two back. How long are we staying?” May wondered. “Ned and MJ have time, and so do we.”

Peter spoke quietly, but firmly, before Tony could try to make some excuse. “I want to go home. Please.”

And that settled it.

“Return tickets?” Tony asked Pepper.

She shrugged. “I didn’t know how long I’d have to bully the king into letting me stay here and look for you, so I didn’t schedule a flight.”

“I can get on that,” Tony said, striding towards the nearest screen, fingers already vibrating excitedly.
That was another thing he missed, the computer code dancing on the monitor as his fingers tapped the music.

“Wong can get us home,” Peter interrupted. “It’ll be faster, not to mention cheaper. Unless you’d all rather fly.”

“Sixteen hours in a plane, so soon after getting here?” MJ shook her head. “Un-fucking-likely.”

“Language,” May muttered.

“A PORTAL?” Ned yelped.

“Yup,” Peter said, grinning.

Tony looked somewhat dejectedly at the screen, so blank and empty and inviting.

Peter, of course, saw the look. “You can play around on Shuri’s tech, Mr. Stark,” he said. “She won’t mind.”

Tony grinned, teleporting the final few yards and spinning happily back around to face his family in the wheely chair before the desk.

“I’ve got to get my stuff,” Peter said. “Clothes and things.”

“The wizard--” Tony put stress on the term, and Peter rolled his eyes-- “is still asleep; you’ve got time.”

“Can I come?” Ned asked. “I want to see more of this fantastic place.”

“Sure.”

“We’ll all go,” May said. “I’m sure nobody wants to just sit and watch Mr. Stark code. Although I could be wrong.”

No one objected.

Tony pouted. “Hey!”

“Sorry, dear.” Pepper grinned. “You wouldn’t be coding if I was here.”

“Who says I mind that?”

“Um, ew?” Ned raised a hand.

Tony laughed and spun back around, waving his hand awkwardly behind him. “Go on then. You want to see Wakanda too, Pep, don’t even try to lie to me.”

“I give good tours,” Peter added. “You sure you don’t want to come with us?”

Tony shook his head. “Nah, I’ll be seeing the best part of Wakanda, right here.” He tapped the monitor. “Besides, Wong’s still healing. I’ll stay with him.”

*I’ll stay with him.*

Where the hell *was* Strange?

Tony waved, watching Pepper and May and Peter and his friends disappear from the lab, all waving
back in their personal, idiosyncratic ways. Peter still moved slowly, sorely; Tony supposed it made since. He’d been dead.

God, he’d been dead.

The lab doors shicked shut behind the five of them, and Tony sat back, staring at the black white wall and breathing out, long and slow.

He didn’t turn back to the screen, not for a long moment.

And something nuzzled at his heel.

Tony did not shriek, and he definitely did not shoot his knees up to his chest to get his feet off the ground, or peer over them tentatively, or finger the button that would call his suit.

A small pink nose, and then a set of whiskers, and then a familiar head appeared from beneath his chair, blue-and-brown flecked eyes turned up toward him.

“Grease!” Tony exclaimed, leaning down to grip the kitten by her scruff and lift her carefully onto his lap. She mewed and pawed at his hand, sharp claws scratching against the top layer of the skin on his wrist.

Tony chuckled, fondling Grease’s silky ears, her whiskers tickling at his fingers. “I could have sworn T’Challa took you with him,” Tony murmured. He’d seen the man leave with Grease in his arms.

Grease crooked her tail and gave him a look that seemed to say, I do what I want.

“Alright, alright,” Tony laughed. “I hope T’Challa doesn’t get too lonely, though.”

Grease just kept purring, kneading at his knees before circling thrice and laying down. Tony couldn’t help but smile, running a hand down the length of her back and feeling her throaty purr reverberate in his bones. He pushed himself back towards the screen and tried to move his legs as little as possible as to not disturb the animal.

In the reflection on the black monitor, Tony saw the Cloak of Levitation watching him, golden clasps flashing. The squat, prostrate form of Wong had yet to move.

Only one wizard.

Where...

He didn’t know Strange, not well-- not yet; perhaps it was normal for him to disappear after missions. A sort of wizard pit-stop, to recharge his magic?

Still. Wouldn’t he have said something?

No. He wouldn’t have said something.

He’d lived again through his worst memory--he’d died, in his mind, countless times. He’d woken alone, to find them losing, to find Peter dead. And Tony didn’t know much about how such sorcery worked, but he couldn’t imagine bringing someone back to life was easy.

Fuck, he didn’t even know what Aedoilagen had done, in those final moments.

Tony sighed, dropping his head against his chest.
“Shit, Grease,” he said quietly. “We messed up.”

Wong had been so adamant about not leaving Strange alone. But even the Cloak was here, now, and it didn’t look happy about it.

In fact, it looked like it blamed Tony.

But he didn’t know the first thing about how to find the missing wizard, and he wouldn’t until Wong awoke.

Why would he just leave? They could have helped…

Tony imagined what he would have done if Peter had stayed limp and bloody in the ruins of the Ukrainian house. Imagined if he’d seen the wormhole swallow his suit, and him within it. Imagined if he’d seen Pepper fall, if he’d relived Steve’s shield shattering him in two.

He would have run, too.

“God damnit,” Tony snarled. “God damnit!”

Aedoilagen touching Strange, the panic erasing any conscious thought from Tony’s mind because the spell--

Kenja’s fragile neck crushed beneath his gauntleted fingers.

Rubble pressing down on him, smashing him to paste as he fought to keep it off his terrified, bleeding son.

A suffocating pocket dimension.

A fire of hostile magic in his core, flaying him to pieces.

Peter bloody, Peter still, Peter dead.

Tony let go, finally.

Grease’s fur grew wet with tears, but she didn’t squirm, didn’t complain in the slightest as Tony cried silently against her flank. But they weren’t desperate tears, nor scared, nor even sad--Tony was tired, and fuck this had been a long-ass week.

Grease started to lick the side of his head, and that did Tony in.

He started laughing.

Hysterically, uncontrollable, Tony laughed and sobbed and remembered with a cat grooming him and a Cloak judging him and a screen awaiting his invitation to dance. He was out, it was over, and his love was here and his son was here and his family was here. He’d lived, he’d realized, he’d won.

He’d seen magic and miracles.

He’d seen death and nightmares.

And it was no more, no different, than the rest of his trials, his adventures, of the past.

He wondered if he was still under arrest, and started laughing again.
“That’s your fault, by the way,” he said to the silent air of the lab. “Me being arrested. Waiting around until my backup has gone to approach me was very brave, by the way; why don’t you stop pretending to be hesitant and show yourself?”

Tony didn’t bother to wipe the joyous, overwhelmed tears from his eyes when he crossed his legs and spun to face the lab. He wasn’t going to hide. Not again.

“Tony,” said Steve Rogers, back strait and shoulders down, that air of power that Tony remembered so well clamoring through the room.

“Captain.”

Chapter End Notes

Oooo yup. Confrontation's coming, dudes. It's coming faaaaaaast.

Update: my little brother learned how to play the IW theme on the piano, y'know, the little rift reminiscent of the Avengers theme but so much softer and HEART WRENCHING?? The one that I sob every time I hear? Yeah, now he plays that perpetually, so I'm just in a constant state of grief.

Also. Can someone just like... explain epsilon-delta proofs to me???? *Gesticulates helplessly at Arabic symbols in math textbook* What... is calculus... arggggg...

Okay I'll shut up now bye.
“What do you want?” Tony said, his walls snapping down even as the last of the free, unbridled tears nestled against his nose. He hardly noticed them.

“To talk.” Rogers pulled a chair from behind one of the desks, spinning it to face Tony. The desk sat between them, a sort of physical border through a room now divided. The chair squeaked slightly as Roger’s slipped into it.

“I’m sure,” Tony said, his fingers drumming against Grease’s back. His voice was flat, light, sure, and altogether not his; he wasn’t Tony, here. No, he spoke with the voice of Anthony Stark—billionaire, engineer, genius, celebrity.

Stranger.

“Don’t you?” Rogers asked, his own emotion undefinable.

“Not in the slightest. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t.”

Rogers didn’t reply, simply watching him. Tony did the same. For a long moment, there was only silence, until quiet rustling brought Tony’s attention to the Cloak in his peripheral vision. It drifted afront of Wong, seemingly interested.

Rogers had grown a beard, Tony noticed offhandedly. It was currently dark with blood and dust, as was the skin beneath the clothes he’d recently changed.

Some of the blood was Peter’s.

Tony’s drumming sped up. Grease squirmed, and Tony forced his fingers into rhythmic stroking. He needed the cat to stay, he found.

The silence of the lab pressed in on them with the weight of the world as both Tony and Steve forced themselves to meet each other’s gaze. A thousand things that could be said drifted in the air between them, but none found words, left unquantifiable and drifting.

But they couldn’t be left that way forever. And now was their only chance.

So Tony opened his mouth and spoke the first of the untethered thoughts that curled onto his tongue.

“I heard my son punched you in the face.”

Rogers didn’t smile. “He did.”

“Hard, I hope.”

“Yeah. I admit, I deserved it.”
“I’m shocked.” Tony’s fingers twitched in Grease’s fur, his fingernails raking softly at her skin.

“I…didn’t know you had a son.”

Tony just looked at him. “I didn’t.”

Rogers fidgeted. “I assume you aren’t going to explain.”

“Nope.”

That pressing silence, again, which Tony tried not to compare to the pocket dimension. He failed. Hugging Grease tighter, Tony brought his knees up to his chest and set the cat atop them. Rogers watched him with all the intensity of a wolf, and it was so, so familiar.

On the other side of the room, the Cloak drifted slightly towards them, its collar turned up. Rogers broke eye contact to watch it approach, his expression unreadable. “Sorcerers, then.”

“Yup,” Tony said, voice still flat.

“Aedoilagen… she wanted…” Rogers fished at the sticky, unnetted words, trying to seize one of the subjects that they should be talking about. “Intelligence.”

“Yup.”

“You’re not a spy,” Rogers said, and Tony knew what he meant.

“Neither are you, no matter how much you pretend.”

Grease mewed, and the sound was almost deafening in the quiet room. It seemed, as she squeaked again and rubbed at Tony’s palm, that she was agreeing with him.

Tony fingered her soft ears and said, “you can’t be everything.”

"And you can?"

There it was, the quiet judgement, the subconscious order that had always had Tony scrambling, trusting, fighting.

As if in denial, Tony did not answer.

“Look—” Rogers leaned forward in his chair, and Tony tensed. He couldn’t stop himself.

“Hands on the table, please,” he said flatly.

Rogers stared at him.

He didn’t understand—he didn’t even realize what he’d done, the full extent of it.

“Put your hands where I can fucking see them,” Tony finally growled, unable to keep the anger from his voice, unable to keep the fear. He hated it.

Rogers did so, his expression flickering.

Tony nodded, but did not thank him.

Silence.
"Why didn’t you tell her?” Rogers finally murmured.

Tony’s gaze sharpened. “Do you need to ask?” Truly? Tony knew the answer.

Rogers nodded, and Tony closed his eyes, blinking for a moment longer than what might be normal.

“You think I could have sold you out,” Tony said. “You think I could have chosen your deaths over torture.”

“I wouldn’t blame you.”

Tony’s snarl echoed through the lab. “You wouldn’t have? Well, even if I believed that, Steve Rogers, I would have.” His hands strangled the fabric of his torn suit, still soiled with blood and dust, and Grease’s fur puffed angrily. He wondered if it was at him.

Why. So what?

Rogers just looked at him, and said again, “Why didn’t you tell her?”

"For the same reason my son died to save your life,” Tony snapped, and Grease meowed loudly. Both of their gazes drifted to her, for a moment, and she flicked her tail. Tony thanked some random god he didn’t believe in that she’d somehow wormed her way back into the lab to be here. He wouldn’t have been able to do this alone.

"And why’s that?"

“He would have done it for anyone,” Tony replied. And even though it terrified him, even though it made him want to duct-tape the boy in a closet and keep him safe damn it, Tony smiled. Fuck, he was proud of the boy.

He would have done it for anyone.

Rogers was just anyone, now.

The other man didn’t reply, just sitting back with a squeak of the plush wheeling chair. Tony wondered if he truly had nothing to say, or if Rogers was just trying to avoid conflict.

Maybe that was why Tony chose the next of the subjects that sparked between them, asking quietly, “How is Barnes?”


“I want to know about the wellbeing of the man I nearly died for.”

Rogers snorted, not in the least good-naturedly. “You never nearly died for him, Stark.”

"Didn’t I?” You tried to kill me for him.

A quiet growl, and Tony’s gaze flickered to the hands forming fists atop the table. “I thought you were going to kill him.”

“I thought you were going to kill me,” was Tony’s soft reply. He curled Grease closer into his chest, focusing on her soft fur instead of the splintering memories of frigid air and crystalized blood and scars. “You chose him, Steve, you chose him over the team, over the world.”

“I chose the team; he was part of it.”
Tony shook his head. Then he shook it again, and kept doing it, until he was laughing, softly, under his breath. “Maybe he was, Rogers, maybe he was. But you didn’t choose the team. No, you chose the past over the future, history over the present, familiar over unfamiliar. You feared change too much to see truth.”

“What truth? The truth that would have caged us, turned us into weapons, into political pawns? The truth that would have kept us away from what we were supposed to do: help people?” Rogers’ expression was sour, though his tone was soft. Condescending. “Why change that?”

“Because that wasn’t working,” Tony said. “Because the line between justice and harm was getting blurred, because innocent people were dying.”

“And all those that would have died, had we not acted?”

“Do we value the theoretical over the actual, now?” Tony asked. “Are those that might have died somehow more important than those that did?”

“We have to focus on the ones who lived.”

Tony’s fingers tightened yet again.


Peter.

“That doesn’t erase the things we’ve done. Something needed to change.”

“I’ve seen those things change—”

“This isn’t your war, anymore!” Tony interrupted, voice barely kept from a shout. “You’re war has changed, Rogers, and you’ve missed the greatest part of it. The part where you look at your future and you don’t like it, and so you do something about it. The part where you watch your son save the world and wish to build him a place in it. The part where you ask, ‘who am I?’ and you find no answer, so you go out and you look and you discover and you create.”

Grease’s satisfied purring filtered through Tony’s thoughts, quietly urging him to continue.

“ That is change, Steve Rogers. Not regulation, not law, not signatures. Change is the future.”

Tony’s fake, press smile lifted the sides of his lips. “But you’re the Soldier. You are the past. You are the status quo, and you are scared.”

“I—” Rogers lifted his hands from the table, running them somewhat viciously through his longer hair. “I couldn’t bow to a government that had betrayed me so many times. Not again.”

“So you betrayed everything else.” Tony shook his head, snorting slightly. “Sure. Alright. I don’t agree, but I see why you did it.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do,” Tony sighed, closing his eyes and continuing softly. “This was where you went wrong, Rogers. All those years ago. When you decided, like flipping a switch, that I’d never understand. That we were too different, that I could never change.”

He couldn’t see Rogers’ expression, but he figured the man had gone on the defensive from the way his breath flicked through the silent room. Tony let his knees fall back down over the edge of the
chair, swinging them against the shaft of the spinning chair.

“You never did.”

Tony shook his head, grinning sourly, and opened his still-red eyes. “I’m not going to explain it to you.”

“Why not?” There was the upturn of an order in Rogers’ tone.

“It doesn’t matter, anymore, and I have nothing to prove.”

“Don’t you?”

Tony’s grin widened. “Not to you. Before, maybe, when I was always trying to convince you…” He chuckled. “You had such power over me, that way. Just like my father, as I always tried to build a bridge to the unchangeable. When I thought that type of family was the end-all-be-all of human connection, when I knew nothing else.”

Pepper and Peter and May, Rhodey and Vision and Happy.

Tony lifted his eyes and met that blue, wolf’s stare, and stood. He set Grease carefully on his shoulder, the kitten’s claws pricking at the skin of his collarbone, lifting his hands in an almost shrug.

“Here I am, Steve Rogers, the tear tracks still staining my face, to say you have no power over me, anymore.”

And to prove it, to himself, to the universe, to the man before him, Tony took a step forward; then another, and another, until he was striding across the room without an inch of doubt, without question. Grease balanced perfectly on his confident shoulders as he put his hands on the desk in front of Rogers and smiled.

The Captain looked away.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Tony said quietly.

And Steve did.

He only paused once, holding the sliding door open with one hand and looking back at Tony. “Are you… going to tell Ross about us?”

Tony bared his teeth in a grin. “Take that risk, I dare you.”

Rogers nodded, once, and ducked from the room. Tony watched the door close behind him, the shiny, unsoiled Wakandan metal gleaming white and clean.

Tony’d driven him away. Again.

But this time, he didn’t regret it.
Welp.

I didn't want to resolve anything really, besides Tony's newfound confidence, because we haven't really seen any inkling of how it's going to happen in cannon. For some reason I don't feel I have the authority to mess with it, even though I've been messing with it this entire story... But there are consequences of all these events I've shoved these poor guys through, and I can't ignore that either.

I know this isn't satisfying, it's not supposed to be, but I hope you enjoyed, anyway!
So you know that thing? That teachers do? Where they give you so much homework that it's piling up in your arms as you're walking from class to class and you slowly realize that you'll have no time to write this weekend and people start to ask you if you're okay because of the overwhelmed tears running down your face?

Yeah that never happens.

For a long moment, there was no sound: just the quiet release of Tony’s breath.

And then a quiet rustling broke out in the corner of the room, and Tony spun to see the Cloak of Levitation flapping its corners together in frantic applause. The scene was so ridiculous that Tony couldn’t help but giggle, just a bit.

When the Cloak had his attention, it lifted its collar questioningly, floating toward him.

“We’ve got… history,” Tony said, by way of explanation.

The Cloak quirked its shoulders.

“There’s been tension, ever since I met him. Since before that. And I always tried…” Tony shook his head. “I’m done trying. He’s not worth it. It’s taken me far too long to realize that, but I think I finally believe it.”

The Cloak nodded.

“Think I got my point across?” Tony asked with a somewhat desperate, sardonic smirk.

The Cloak resumed applauding, and Tony laughed.

“Thanks, Levi.”

The Cloak floated back sharply, quirking its shoulders again.

“What?” Tony lifted his hands, which allowed Grease momentary freedom to squirm her way out of his lap and onto the floor. “Cloak of Levitation, Levi…” Tony weighed both on his palms.

The Cloak didn’t move for a moment, as if contemplating. Then it shrugged, and floated forward again.

Grease padded up to it curiously and somewhat hesitantly, and the sentient garment ceased its advance. It folded in on itself, lowering toward the ground like a scarlet accordion, to peer at the cat. Grease lifted a paw and swiped at its shiny clasps, and Levi recoiled in surprise.

It looked up at Tony, almost pleadingly.

“Her name’s Grease,” Tony said, sitting back down and pushing the spinney chair a bit closer to the
bizarre. “She’s friendly. She likes being pet.”

The Cloak haltingly lifted a corner and ran it along Grease’s back, a bit clumsily. It pulled away almost immediately, surveying the calico hairs that now clung to its hem. Grease purred and nuzzled at it, and Levi carefully stroked her again.

Tony laughed. “You can’t keep her. T’Challa is already fighting me for her, but there’s no way he’s winning. He’s my kid’s anyway.”

The Cloak looked up at that, its collar lifting. One of its corners gestured toward the door, and its shoulders went uneven.

Tony stared at it. Levi repeated the gesture.

“I don’t understand.”

The Cloak rose, carefully scooping up Grease in its folds. She mewed, eyes going wide in fear, and clawed at the fabric’s coils. Surprised, the Cloak released her, and Tony stood up again as she bolted for the side of the room.

“Not your fault,” he told the suddenly droopy Cloak. “Cats are like that.”

Levi nodded and straightened itself out, then fluttered over to the door that Rogers had disappeared through. It jabbed repeatedly at it, and Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Do you want… me to open it?”

The Cloak shook its collar, throwing up its corners in frustration. Tony backtracked, trying to remember the context of the Cloak’s movements.

“Grease?”

Another collar-shake.

“Um… Peter?”

Levi perked up.

“Do you want to know where he is?”

The Cloak shook its head, gesturing.

Tony nodded. “Right, you were there…”

Another jab towards the door, and Tony found himself playing a very elaborate game of charades with a sentient cape.

“Peter, door, uh, Wakanda? Technology? Leaving? When are we leaving?”

More frustrated dissent.

“I need more than the door,” Tony said helplessly. “Sorry.”

Levi fluttered for a moment, obviously just as helpless as Tony, before shooting over to the desk where Rogers had sat. It folded itself into a seated-esque look and crossed its front corners like arms.

“Rogers?” Tony asked, bewildered.
The Cloak nodded.

“Rogers and the door and Peter?”

A shake.

“Not the door?”

Nod.

“I can’t believe this,” Tony muttered, then said louder to the Cloak, “Peter and Rogers?”

Levi nodded enthusiastically, then lifted its corners, weighing imaginary things in them as Tony had done with its name.

“Oh! You want to know who they are to me.”

The Cloak bobbed in agreement.

Tony sighed, slumping back into the nearest chair. “Rogers used to be my family. Or, I tried to make him that. He tried to be it, too, but in the end… it was unhealthy. The entire Avengers relationship was unhealthy, and not just for me. But I needed them, back then, and so I nearly broke trying to get them to understand, to save them.”

The Cloak floated closer, and Tony smiled at it, a bit sadly.

“But then I met Peter, and as we grew closer, I realized that wasn’t true. And I don’t need him, anymore; my family has grown and changed and it’s better, now.” Tony rubbed at his wrist, his thoughts muddled and clear, somehow simultaneously. “Maybe I can get it right, this time.”

As if speaking the word ‘loyal’ had summoned them, the doorway to the lab crashed open to reveal that very family.

“Why,” Pepper demanded, “did I just run in to Steve Rogers in the hallway, fleeing this very lab in which we’d left you alone, with his tail between his legs?”

“Was he here? What did he do?” That from Peter, who sounded more than a little worried. And off-balance. Tony didn’t blame the boy.

“Everybody calm down,” Tony said, waving his hands. The Cloak mirrored the movement, and Tony raised an eyebrow at it before turning back to his clan. “Yes, he was here. He just wanted to ‘talk’; I’m sure you can guess what about.”

Peter took a step forward. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him to get the fuck out,” Tony replied.

“And?” MJ stared at him unflinchingly.

“And nothing. I do need to decide what I’m going to do about Ross, though.”

Peter suddenly chuckled, and Tony snapped his gaze to the boy.
“You forgot to fill me in on a bit of the news, didn’t you,” Tony sighed, leaning back in his chair and rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

“Er, yeah…” Peter said. “Doctor Strange portaled me back to New York to try and find your suit--”

“Oh my God,” Pepper interrupted. “The box?”

“That complete asshole!”

Tony held up a hand. “Go back, please, one very confused old man here.”

“Ross sent me a package, after you were taken,” Pepper said, her voice stumbling a little on the last word. “I didn’t open it, because I was pissed. Apparently I should have.”

Peter took up the story. “FRIDAY told me to, and I didn’t see why not. That’s where I got your watch. Ross confiscated it, but he gave it back. Along with a note; ‘he saved my life.’”

Tony snorted. “Son of a bitch.”

Ned broke in, “wait, so you saved the dude who arrested you and who treated you like shit after the whole Accords thing?”

“Yup,” Pepper said, pride in her voice. Tony tried not to preen.

“Well, good for both of you, then,” MJ said. “But what are you going to do about Rogers?”

“I’m not going to tell Ross about him being in Wakanda,” Tony said. “Before you protest, I’ll explain; there’d be no point. Rogers knows for sure I know, now, and I dared him to take the risk that I wouldn’t tell. He won’t take that risk. He’ll take his posse and get out of Wakanda, and I won’t have to put this wonderful country in any sort of pickle.”

MJ said, “Alright, I suppose that’s understandable.”

Tony grinned. “Although I didn’t say anything about you guys, so I suppose you’re free to make whatever decision regarding the matter you see fit.”

Pepper’s answering smile was somewhat vicious, and Tony was happy not to be on the receiving end, this time.

A shick broke the following silence, and most of them looked up to see Shuri and T’Challa re-entering the room, not looking surprised to see the six of them still there in the least. Tony waved, then turned his gaze toward the eyes that still lingered on him, silent and calculating.

“What is it, Peter?”

“What are you going to do about the Accords?” Peter wondered. “Now that nothing and everything has changed?”

And Tony realized he had an answer to that question.

“I’m going to stop trying to forgive,” Tony said, the words folding from his tongue as he suddenly realized that was exactly what he was going to do. “I’m going to stop thinking about history and start thinking about truth. I’m going to stop fearing what might happen and start looking at what has happened. Starting with getting you legal, Peter.”
Peter grinned. “And how are you going to do that, Mr. Truth and Right?”

“You’re going to spend the summer interning, through me, at the New York City Police Academy. I don’t know how that works in the least; figuring it out will be your job. But you’ll need something to do anyway, seeing as May is going to ground you until the end of time.”

“He’s not wrong,” May said, as Peter turned a bit desperately toward her.

“Ugh…” Peter groaned, rubbing his face with his hands. Tony flicked him and kept talking.

“You’re going to help Queens that way. And then you’re going to put your suit back on and you’re going to act in association with the government of NYC. And it’s going to suck, and it's going to be different, but you’ll shift and change and adapt.”

MJ nodded. “And you’re not going to forget the lecture I gave you.”

Peter grinned. “Never.”

“Meanwhile,” Tony said, rising from his chair and beginning to pace the lab, “T’Challa and I are going to draft a list of regulations and parameters constituting a threat of ‘dire circumstances’ or something like that.” He pointed toward the king, who was watching him with a half smile and raised eyebrows. “Hopefully, we can get the UN to agree to allow certain authorized individuals the right to react instantly during events like that.”

“Authorized individuals…” Shuri promoted.

“Including me, the Black Panther, Vision, Iron Patriot, Spider-Man, and…” Tony looked toward the Cloak. “Doctor Strange?”

Levi bobbed, and Tony thought it looked excited.

“Maybe. If so, we’d have to get ‘not understood threats’ onto your list of parameters,” T’Challa said.

“Which would pose a challenge,” MJ mused, her fingers tapping on her collarbone in thought.

“And you, Ms. Jones,” Tony said, whirling to her, his thoughts pouring from his mind as though someone had finally shattered his filter of a dam, “how would you like to be in charge of lobbying this?”

“What?” MJ took a step back, stricken. Tony smiled at her.

“I read that paper you sent me--” Tony broke off, pointing at Peter and rambled, “which we still need to get sorted out--and I have no doubt you could make that list and get it passed at least eight times more effectively than me. Ned, you’re in charge of coordinating MJ’s connections with the UN, and playing guy in the chair to the faces behind the wall of signatures.”


“I’ll help you, Mr. Leeds,” Shuri said.

That shut down Ned’s confused protests for just long enough for Tony to keep talking, high-fiving Peter as he went.

“It’s not going to be easy,” he said to the two disbelieving teenagers, “and it’s not going to be fast. Even I don’t have any idea what the hell I mean when I’m telling you this. But I believe that you can do it.”
“But—we’re just kids!” MJ almost yelled.

Tony saw the insecurity he recognized all too well pass through the broken walls behind her eyes. *What if we’re not enough?*

So he put his hands on her shoulders and grinned. “So what? You’ve already been at this, haven’t you? You’ve been protesting and trying and changing the world in your own small way. I’m just making your doorway bigger. Keep doing the same thing that you’re doing, that both of you are doing—” he raised a hand to Ned— “and win us this world back.”

MJ swallowed. “What about representatives?” she said, though her voice faltered the first time. “What about representatives.”

Peter asked, “representatives?”

“Yeah. Authorized representatives, appointed by the UN, that have jurisdiction over the direct actions of their corresponding enhanced individual?”

Tony grinned. “I have no idea, MJ, but why not? This is all federalism, anyway.”

MJ took a step back, swatting his hands off her shoulders as her vulpine grin returned. Tony glanced at Peter and saw his son staring at her with such open adoration that he had to laugh.

“We’ll do it,” came Ned’s quiet voice. Then louder, stronger, a war cry, the boy roared, “We’ll do it!”

“I have no doubt,” May said, and the elation in her voice was unmistakable.

Tony raised his hands toward the ceiling, and Pepper whooped.

As the clamor of their voices faded, echoing into silence in this lab of Wakanda, but eternal in the bounds of the universe, Tony imagined a future. A future he loved, and a future that for once, he could believe in.

A loyal spider, a brilliant wife, a stubborn aunt, a hacker teenager, a budding politician, a stoic panther, his genius sister, a loving bodyguard, a down-to-earth friend, and a strange sorcerer.

Yes, Tony could get behind this future. He could get behind it all the way.

Chapter End Notes

YOU get a pep talk and YOU get a pep talk and YOU get a pep talk!
His eyes closed, his face turned up slightly toward the sky, Peter listened to the cheering with a grin and determination burning in his chest. Everything felt so much more potent, so much more important, and when his newfound perception was focused on excitement, Peter felt euphoric.

He wondered, vaguely, what it would be like if--when--he dreamed about pocket dimensions and Tony’s screams.

But Tony was here, beside him, rallying their troops and rallying him. The man squeezed his hand, and Peter opened his eyes to look at him, to look at all of them.

His family, all here, all ready.

But...

Something was still off, still confusing, someone who should be here, but wasn’t.

Someone they’d abandoned.

Peter could tell Tony felt the same, as his eyes kept darting toward the Cloak in the corner and searching the tiers of the lab, but neither knew exactly what to do about it.

“You’re insane,” MJ said, jabbing a finger towards Tony. The man smirked, bowing, resplendent in a completely tattered suit and hair stuck up in spikes by blood and dust.

“He’s completely insane,” Peter agreed. Though he wasn’t so sure if he himself was up there.

“Seconded,” said Pepper, coming up behind Tony with a grin to wrap her arms around him. He reached over his head to attempt to hug her back, which only resulted in awkwardness, and Peter laughed.

“You two are dorks,” he said.

“Who’s a dork?” May’s voice cut in. She’d sat down, at some point, more than a bit shocked. Peter trotted over and reached out to put his hands on her shoulders. She caught his wrists, running her hands along the small scrapes and scabbing cuts on his fingers. Some of them were still dusty from the wreckage, as was the skin beneath his fingernails.

Peter looked behind him for a moment, watching Tony and Pepper snark at each other as Ned and MJ gravitated toward Shuri, beginning to talk quietly about the bombshell Tony had just dropped on them.

Government lobbying.

Document drafting.

The New York Police Academy.

He was trying to decide if he was excited or annoyed by this new obligation stretching out before him.
And—shit. He’d missed his math final walking out of school after hearing the news. How the hell was he going to work that out?

He looked back at May, trying not to wince underneath the light of the future of consequences and possibilities. She was watching him, and he did wince a bit as she sighed, dropping her head. “Peter, I swear to God—”

“I apologized, didn’t I?” Peter chuckled, but it was soft in an attempt to be reassuring.

“You also died,” his aunt murmured. Then she looked up, eyes suddenly hard. “Peter Benjamin Parker.”

The angry mother tone immediately had Peter frozen in his form, paralyzed in anticipation of the lecture.

“You snuck out in the middle of the night, in the middle of a crisis.”

Peter nodded mutely.

“You took the cat, you took hundreds of dollars of the Stark family for a ticket to somewhere halfway around the world, somewhere you weren’t even sure you needed to be. You called a war criminal. You ignored me, you ignored Pepper, you ignored common sense. You thought about us, you knew exactly what you’d be doing to us, and you didn’t care.”

Peter cringed.

“God, Peter, why would you do that?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but his aunt sighed and answered for him.

“Because Tony was in danger. And because you couldn’t let him suffer. But we were suffering too.”

“I know,” Peter whispered.

“And you suffered.”

“Yes.”

“You died.”

Peter nodded, his eyes suddenly stinging.

“You were tortured and you died—”

“I know—” Peter interrupted her, before he was interrupted himself by the sudden tidal wave of memory that snatched the words of his tongue. Emotions as potent as they had been in the moment flared up around him, devouring his control.

Before he knew it, May was on her feet, wrapping her arms around him, rubbing his back, whispering wordlessly. And he was speaking without saying anything, left with sound to try and justify the feeling.

He remembered dying.

And he remembered coming back.
And it was *fucked up*.

He remembered men with drooping faces and twins with black eyes. He remembered the limp body of his father, the limp body of his uncle, the limp body of his *father again*. And he remembered Tony’s screams, remembered the weight of buildings, the eyes of Spider-Man--the eyes of himself. He remembered demon bears and Strange’s quiet story. He remembered the death and the gunfire. He remembered Maura Aedoilagen.

She was dead, wasn’t she?

Yes. But he didn’t know how.

And he wasn’t sure, anymore, if that was permanent. Because he’d *come back*.

He’d come back to love and light and warmth, and he didn’t regret it…

And he remembered it.

He’d always remember it. And right now, it filled him, overflowed him, was *too much for him*--

“Fuck,” May whispered, voicing his own thoughts. “You’re going to need serious therapy.”

Peter looked up as a surprised laugh was shocked out of him, stepping out of his aunt’s arms. He was almost taller than her, he realized.

“Um, yeah…” Shuri butted in somewhat hesitantly. Peter turned to look at her where she lingered on the other side of the room, wiping unexpected tears from his cheeks. For once, they didn’t embarrass him.

He didn’t have to be okay, right now.

But he was. And that was fine, too.

How the hell did you get therapy for *dying*?

Shuri continued, “Speaking of that…”

She was on her feet, staring in confusion at the small screen in her hand. Peter glimpsed its contents; it looked to be open to an average Google Document, and he was all but certain they didn’t use *Google Docs* in Wakanda. MJ and Ned crowded around her, obviously reading over her shoulder.

“This is addressed to you,” Shuri said, holding the small screen out and shaking off Peter’s friends.

“And Stark. From the wizard.”

“Jedi,” Ned whispered under his breath. Tony’s eye-roll was anything but obvious.

The man lunged forward to take the screen, Pepper’s hand trailing from his, and Peter padded over to him. So did everyone else, until they were all crowded over Tony’s shoulder to see the contents of the (missing) sorcerer’s note.

It was a list. Of names. And it was prefaced by a short scrawl, fraught with misspellings, which read simply:

*I’ve conglomeratedd the best ppsychologists and therapists specialixing in the areas youu require. The first haf are for Peterr, the others are for Stark.*
“What’s with the spelling?” Ned asked. “And why would you need psychologists? I get the therapy, but…”

“The spelling’s because of his hands,” Tony said, the lightness in his tone a little too forced. “The shaking must make typing a hard time.”

Peter nodded, trying not to think about how much time it must have taken the doctor to construct this. Every name was correctly spelled, and linked to a corresponding website; it was only the preface where he’d lost patience.

“And the psychologists?” MJ said pointedly, staring at Peter.

The psychologists.

Peter swallowed. “For psychotherapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy.”

MJ took a step forward, and Ned met Peter’s eyes. A soft touch fell on his shoulder--Peter could feel the grime of it and the familiar callouses through his shit, and knew it was Tony.

He could do this. He just had to say it out loud.

He knew it was true. He just had to say it out loud.

* * *

Tony and Peter were sitting on the edge of Wong’s table when the man regained consciousness.

It had been almost nineteen hours--even Tony had found a way to sleep for a good twelve. Some of them were still sleeping. Immediately following the chaos resulting from Peter’s announcement, the kid had dropped into unconsciousness like a stone to the bottom of the sea, and nothing could stop him, not even his increasingly frantic aunt.

Poor woman.

But Peter had admitted to the DID. And Tony had done enough research to know that that was the first step.
Peter was already on his way to healing. And Tony… Tony could do the same. He would do the same, with Peter, with Pepper.

So Tony had carried the sleeping boy from the lab, carefully led through the palace by Shuri. The girl made snide remarks the whole way, but her eyes were soft, and Tony was hardly listening. She took him to the room Peter’d adopted earlier, after retrieving his things from his previous area with the Rogues, and stood back with the rest of the family as Tony carefully tucked the kid into the sheets, brushing Peter’s sticky, still somewhat-dusty hair from his forehead.

And because it was a day for admitting things, Tony’d pressed a soft kiss to his son’s curls and whispered, “love you, kid.”

No one had said anything as he strode from the room, but May’d had tears in her eyes.

After answering as many of May and Pepper’s questions as he could, Tony had given up trying to pretend he wasn’t exhausted, and asked Shuri for someplace to curl up as well, preferably after resetting his personal hygiene.

When he was finally clean, and when May had finally released him of yet more questions to which he could only respond with vague reassurance they all needed but didn’t really believe, he and Pepper had curled up on the goat-hair bed and finally, finally slept.

Tony’d dreamed of Peter’s corpse and a haze of green light.

Twelve hours later, body rested but mind still buzzing with questions, Tony had slipped out of bed. He wasn’t sure how long he’d stood in Peter’s doorway after, watching his boy’s peaceful slumber, before scribbling a note to Pepper and making his way back to the lab.

So now, quietly stroking the Cloak of Levitation as it snuggled against him in an emulation of Grease, Tony tapped rhythmically at the portable screen between his fingers. He’d quickly gotten it connected to FRIDAY—the wonderful AI had long since spoiled him—and just stared at it for a moment, wondering what to do.

He hadn’t done anything with Strange’s list of names, aside from contact them. It surprised him, but he didn’t feel the need to further research them—he trusted the doctor’s judgement. If he thought them qualified, Tony was inclined to believe him.

And now he was more than a bit concerned.

Because it had been nineteen hours and there was still no sign of the sorcerer. The sorcerer who’d been bleeding, who’d been unstable, who’d walked through his own nightmares and then through the very fabric of reality to bring Tony’s son back.

And hell if Tony wasn’t going to thank him.

So that’s what Tony did with the screen and the endless resources of Wakanda. Learn about one Doctor Strange.

Apparently, the man’s first name was Stephen, and his story did nothing but amp up Tony’s concern. A neurosurgeon who’d lost his hands and disappeared off the face of the Earth: Tony and Peter weren’t the only ones who needed therapy, obviously.

“Your wizard is an idiot,” Tony said to the Cloak, who fluttered its collar. “And I’m also an idiot.”

Levi nodded.
“You aren’t supposed to agree.”

A shoulder-shrug, and Tony chuckled.

“I’m not surprised the Cloak likes you,” came a voice from the hallway. Tony’s grin got wider as he looked up, waving to Peter where he stood in the doorway.

The kid nearly skipped through the lab, his hair flopping slightly—it was still wet from the shower that had removed the last of the blood from his skin. Clothes clean, eyes bright, Tony thought maybe his boy was going to be alright.

“Hey, kid,” he said, reaching out an arm to half-hug Peter as he got close. Grease opened her eyes when he stopped petting her, mewing irritatedly.

“Hey,” Peter replied. “What time is it?”

“You’ve been out almost fourteen hours.”

Peter nodded. “Yeesh.”

“I slept a whole twelve. Shocking, I know.”

“Indeed!” Peter said. “I thought you were allergic to sleeping!”

Tony winked. “Don’t tell Pepper it was a ruse all along.”

Peter rubbed the back of his neck and sat down, reaching out to finger Grease’s ears, much to the kitten’s satisfaction. “We were both really tired…”

“Nightmares?” Tony asked quietly.

“Sort of.”

“Me too.”

Peter sighed, leaning into Tony. His curls tickled the bottom of Tony’s chin. The Cloak reached out to pat the boy’s shoulder from the other side of Tony, and the kid smiled a bit.

“I knew you had DID, since the day before I got arrested,” Tony said suddenly. “I didn’t know how to bring it up. I’m sorry.”

“What the hell are you sorry for?” Peter demanded. “We were somewhat otherwise occupied after that point.”

“I suppose we were. But we won the fight, and I still didn’t say anything…”

“How would you even have brought it up? I didn’t even realize I had it until the building fell on us. Spider-Man and I had a chat.”

“Pause,” Tony said.

“I’ll explain.”

“No,” Tony clarified. “Think about what you said.”

A silence, for a moment, as Peter thought back. “Oh, yeah.” The boy took a breath. “I spoke with
myself.

“That’s it,” Tony said. “Now, how exactly did that happen?”

“I think Maura kicked both personalities out of the physical form, but only sent one of us to the pocket dimension,” Pete theorized. At Tony’s pointed look, he objected, “I don’t know how to say that without referring to … that part of me… as a separate guy. He was, at the time.”

“Alright. I suppose that makes sense. So you did a little soul searching and came out with; oh yeah, I’ve got DID?”

Peter shrugged. “I came out with ‘Spider-Man is me.’”

Tony wrapped an arm around Peter, leaning into him. “He is. You’re a hero, Pete.”

The boy nodded, then sighed. “I kind of can’t believe it,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“All of it. I can’t believe we did all that, I can’t believe we survived. I can’t believe it’s over. I can’t believe you can tap dimensional energy. I can’t believe… I can call you dad and it doesn’t feel crazy.”

Tony couldn’t hide his grin. “It definitely feels crazy, Pete.”

“But you’re not surprised.”

Tony rubbed the boy’s shoulder, saying quietly, “no, I’m not surprised.”

“Is it okay?”

Tony almost laughed—or maybe cried—at the hesitance in Peter’s voice. “Of course it’s okay, Peter— it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You’re one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.”

Peter laughed. “Likewise.”

“I got you killed.”

Peter’s laugh died, and he turned his gaze to Tony. “Don’t start that again.”

“I was kidding—”

“No you weren’t. Don’t start that again. Not your fault. Not my fault. Not anyone’s fault. Everything’s a web, and everything’s possible, and you would never hurt me. So don’t pretend like you did.”

Tony raised his hands, a flicker of a smile crossing his lips. “I surrender, kid. You’re right.”

“Say it.”

Tony sighed. “Not my fault. Not your fault.”

“Good.” Peter nodded.

A pause.
“Okay so now that that’s over with can I just say I missed you so fucking much and now that you’re back and I’m alive and I can call you dad you aren’t allowed to leave or be kidnapped or try to die ever again.”

Tony chuckled. “By all means. I don’t plan on it.”

“Promise?”

Promise?

Tony’s smile fell away, and he looked toward the door, drawing in a long breath. “I can’t make promises I can’t keep.”

Peter pressed himself closer to Tony. “Neither can I,” the boy whispered.

Tony closed his eyes.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he said into the silent air.

“I do.”

“I’m so proud of you. And no matter what you do, no matter who you become, no matter who you are, I’ll always...I’ll always love you, Peter.”

“Dad, you’re embarrassing me in front of the sentient Cloak,” Peter laughed. But his voice was slightly wobbly, and he quietly added, “I love you too.”

Tony smiled.

And the Cloak began applauding again.

Tony spun to it, slapping away it’s clapping corners with an irritated chuckle. “Stop doing that,” he said. “You’re always ruining the moment.”

“Oh c’mon, its justified. We make good speeches.”

“We make sappy speeches is what we do.”

“That’s what I said.”

Grease mewed, and the Cloak kept applauding. “You guys are hopeless,” Tony said.

“But you love us.”

“Somehow, you’re not wrong.” Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Even you.” He pointed to the Cloak.

Levi’s collar’s perked, and it tried to lift a collar to wrap its arm around him like Peter was. The proportions of the fabric made the movement awkward, though, and the Cloak stopped its attempt.

Taking mercy on the thing, Tony reached out to finger its hem like he’d seen Strange do.

And was reminded, once again, that despite all this peace, not everything was in its place.

“I’m assuming you don’t know where the doctor is,” Tony said, turning to Peter.

The boy shook his head. “I’m a bit worried, though.”
“Me too. And I feel…”

“Like we abandoned him? Like we betrayed him?”

Tony huffed. “Yeah. That.”

Peter smiled. “I’m going to fix it,” he said. “I have a plan. But this librarian has to decide to see the light of day.”

And right at that moment, the librarian decided to see the light of day.

Chapter End Notes

GUESS WHAT YA BOI GOT ON HER CALC EXAM?

THAT'S RIGHT, A 99, THE DERIVATIVES CAN F'ING FIGHT MEEEEEEE

*Cough cough* Yes so hello, sorry this is late. I hope you enjoyed this installment of Tying Up Ends.
Tony stood as Wong rolled over with a groan, his fingers scratching at the smooth metal of Shuri’s table. The Cloak whipped forward to help lift him upright, and the man opened hazy, confusion-filled eyes. One hand came up to play at the rip in his tunic and the smooth skin beneath while the other hesitantly stroked Levi.

“Welcome to the land of the living,” Tony said, shutting off the screen and tossing it aside. Grease shook herself awake with a mew and leapt from the table after the piece of tech.

Wong blinked. “I’m not dead?”

“Along with the rest of us, somehow,” said Peter. Tony glanced towards him, his mind's eye filling with the image of his son’s limp face and dead eyes and bloody--

But no, Peter was here, Peter was alive. Thanks to a wizard they couldn’t find.

Wong turned his gaze to the Cloak around his shoulders and his confusion only seemed to deepen.

“Where’s Strange?” he asked a bit groggily.

Tony glanced at Peter, who did the same, and swallowed. “That seems to be the million-dollar question.”

Wong sat up straighter. “What does that mean?”

“We haven’t seen him,” Tony said.

“Did you look?”

Tony bristled at the accusation, the distrust, in Wong’s tone, but he supposed it was justified. As many times as they’d saved the sorcerers, and as many times as the sorcerers had saved them, they’d betrayed them.

“We did,” Peter replied, and it was far calmer than any teenager had a right to be in this scenario. “The Cloak got us to stop, though.”

Wong turned his glower to the garment, which floated upward as if in justification of its actions.

“You know what happened before,” Wong said to the Cloak.

“Actually, we don’t.” Tony found himself drawing the attention away from Levi, at least until it wasn’t as pungent with concern and disappointment.

“You aren’t supposed to.”

“We know a little, actually. And we know it was horrible,” Peter said. “And we want to help.”

Wong stared at him for a long moment.
And then his face softened, just slightly. “So you’re the boy, then.”

Peter cocked his head.

Wong scoffed. “Yes, I can see where Stephen was coming from…” Then louder, he said, “if he ran, I’ll have to get going immediately.” The sorcerer looked toward the Cloak, who confirmed with a bob of its collars.

Tony opened his mouth, and Wong raised a hand.

“You aren’t coming. I’ll portal you back to your compound--I heard you sold the tower--and leave you to work out your arrest and other such fallout.” Wong tentatively rolled off the table, his squat form lowering to the smooth tile floor and sliding slightly. “How many am I transporting?”

Tony raised a hand. “Go back to ‘we aren’t coming’,” he said.

“You’re not coming.”

“We can help--” Peter began, but Wong cut him off.

“Maybe you can. But that’s not the reason; the reason is your curiosity.” Wong reached into a pocket, pulling out a strange object that might have been a ring, if one had tried to duplicate but given up halfway through. “Curiosity is, of course, a perfectly valid reason. Often the best of reasons. But only Stephen can give you the answers you want, and if he hasn’t, I certainly won’t.”

Peter stood, bouncing up next to Tony. “He’s hurt. He needs help.”

“Yes, he does, and the Cloak and I will be that help,” Wong said flatly.

“But--”

“Why do you think he ran?” Wong demanded, a flash of anger piercing through that solemn persona. “He left even the Cloak here. Just because he saved your lives doesn’t mean you’re safe to him. He doesn’t owe you a thing, including answers.”

Peter fell silent, his hands skittering against his sides in defensive anger.

Tony vibrated, trapped between righteous objection and guilty acceptance, and opened his mouth. The Cloak floated towards him slightly, before twisting back toward Wong and hesitating. Tony looked toward it somewhat helplessly.

It watched him, for a long, long moment, and then floated back toward Wong.

Tony took that as an answer, and it made up his mind.

“Alright.”

“What--” Irate, Peter whirled to him. Tony ceased the protest he could see burning in the boy’s eyes by lifting a calming, subtle eyebrow.

*I’ll explain.*

Peter’s irritated look faded slightly to confusion, but he didn’t question.

“I’ll wake up the rest of the NYC crew; you can’t wait,” Tony said, already moving towards the door.
“Stark, what the hell are you planning?”

Tony turned around, flashing his most innocent grin. “Nothing, Mr. Wizard.”

“Lies.”

“What, can you read my aura or something?”

Wong rolled his eyes, and the Cloak lifted a corner to its collar as though holding in a laugh, if it had a mouth. Tony winked at them both.

“No, I just recognize that look, and it’s not as innocent as you-- either of you--seem to think.”

“Me?” Peter asked.

Wong rubbed his forehead, and Tony could actually see him giving up. “No, you look perpetually innocent. Strange looks perpetually ingenuine. Your father looks like he’s perpetually planning something that’s going to end in explosions. And I’ve been told I look perpetually irritated.”


Levi bowed, and Tony chuckled. “Pepper looks perpetually like she’s going to verbally eviscerate you.”

“MJ looks like she’s going to hit you with the nearest object.”

“Ned looks perpetually like he’s going to explode into excited butterflies.”

“I didn’t mean to start this,” Wong interjected, already reaching overload levels of done. “Can we get to the part where you leave?”

“Sure, sure,” Tony said, flapping a dismissive hand and making for the exit again. Peter trotted up beside him, waving to the Cloak and the sorcerer.

Tony called back, “look after the cat if she makes her appearance!” as the lab door slid shut behind them with a slight hiss of connection on Wong’s surprised face.

Tony grinned.

And Peter punched—admittedly not very hard—in the arm. “What was that?”

“Hey!”

“I’m really hoping you haven’t lost your mind. We are not letting him just up and dump us in the compound.”

“Peter--”

“Doctor Strange did so much for us! I want to thank him--I need to thank him. He’s half the reason any of us are still alive!”

Tony clamped a hand over the boy’s mouth. “Shut up for a moment, will you? I said I’ll explain.”

Peter glowered at him, but his eyes were laughing. Tony smiled a bit and dropped his hand, beginning to make his way down the hallway. Their steps slapped almost wetly on the silver flooring, and Tony imagined rings of damp footprints trailing behind them.
“Levi agreed with Wong; we shouldn’t just show up with Wong.”

Peter cocked his head. “Levi?”

Tony nodded, lifting a hand to poke the hard wall beside him as it transitioned from silver to dark ivory. He felt the buzz of nanotech and kept his hand trailing along it as they walked. “Cloak of Levitation.”

“I love that so much.”

Tony grinned. “So did it. But yeah, I’m inclined to listen to what it says.”

“Why not go with Wong, though?”

“Because it wouldn’t mean anything. It’d feel convenient. Even if we didn’t intend it, all we’ve been doing is using Strange, and he probably feels it.”

“How do you know?”

Tony raised an eyebrow, replying softly, “I just know, kid.”

Peter laced his fingers through Tony’s.

“Anyway,” Tony said, tugging the boy a bit faster through the hall, “I did some research on the man while you were sleeping. I’ll set FRIDAY on it; we’ll find him. And then we’ll show up randomly and conduct our respective jobs.”

“What’s my job?”

“To look adorable so my pestering is slightly less annoying.”

Peter made his best puppy eyes, and the expression was decidedly better than Tony’s innocent smirk.

“Just like that. We find him, we show up, we thank him *profusely* for everything he did, and hopefully he doesn’t kick us out on our asses. We heed the Cloak’s advice, we make a better impression, and we don’t piss off Wong. Too much, at least.”

“I have a feeling that man’s constantly pissed off,” Peter said. “We couldn’t do much about it.”

“You’re right about that,” Tony chuckled. “Go and grab MJ and Ned, would you? Tell them Wong’s awake.”

Peter saluted. “Got it.” The boy broke off, increasing his speed like the enhanced hero he was, and disappearing down the side hall. Tony smiled after him, and continued on toward where he’d left Pepper.

* * *

Ned lost his mind, of course, when the orange light sparked through the reality around them.

Peter watched him with a slight smile, Grease cradled tightly in his arms along with his ratty duffle and Natasha’s knife (carefully wrapped in a nanotech sheath). He was far too familiar with the circling portals to be as excited as his friend, but he loved the sight of him freaking out all the same. MJ stood beside Peter, saying nothing with her eyebrows slightly raised, which was all the indication
he needed to know she, too, was impressed.

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god!” Ned said, nearly jumping up and down as the lab fell away to reveal the inside of the compound. “Just like that? Half the world just falls away?”

Wong was watching Ned with what could have been fondness as he held the sling-ring on his finger. It was impressive, the change that expression made to the sorcerer’s face. Peter thought maybe he wasn’t as grumpy as he pretended to be; just cautious.

“How many dimensions are there?” MJ wondered.

“Infinite,” Wong replied.

The girl shook her head. “Every universe has limits.”

“Every universe does. But every multiverse does not.”

Beside Peter, Tony jerked his head up. “Hold on there. Every multiverse?”

Wong’s smile was sharp and lupine. “Every thought has a home, Stark. Every choice a reflection. Every energy an origin. We’ll never find them all, for we’ll always create them on the way.”

“We are each a multiverse,” Peter said. Grease squirmed slightly in his grip, and he stroked her ears to calm her down.

Wong nodded. “And we are all unbounded.”

“That was really fucking profound,” MJ muttered.

“They’re poets, in some universe.” Tony leaned in to say the words as though they weren’t explicitly understandable by literally everyone in the room.

Peter glared at him, and MJ chuckled a bit. “I’m sure he could be a poet now, if he wasn’t so busy being a dumbass.”

“Hey!”

“She’s right, you know,” May said, ruffling Peter’s hair from where she stood behind him.

“I don’t want to be a poet. I’m a hero.”

“You are that,” Tony said. “Who?”

Peter looked at him.

Tony watched him back, one eyebrow slowly rising.

“Oh. I’m Spider-Man.”

It was a bit easier to say, that time. Peter grinned and bounced a little on the balls of his feet.

“I went ahead and scheduled therapy for both of you,” Pepper said. “The list of doctors was quite impressive, actually, but ordered by most-fitting, so it went quickly. We have quite a lot of things to thank the doctor for.”

“Dooweedoo…” Ned murmured.
“I watched that show,” MJ said somewhat vacantly.


“Eleven, season six, and Donna Noble,” Shuri said from the edge of the lab.

“Really?” Ned whirled. “You watch Doctor Who? Well, obviously... Eleven’s my favorite too--I mean, um--”

Peter rescued his friend before he made a complete fool of himself. “I still argue for Ten.”

“I’m with Shuri,” Tony said, and Peter spun to the man to voice his betrayal.

“The twelfth, season nine, and River Song,” Wong interrupted.

“Not you too,” Pepper moaned.

“Maura Aedoliagen introduced me to it,” Wong said. That efficiently shut them all up.

“Can we please get going?” the sorcerer sighed. “I’d rather not stand here with my portal open for hours.”

“Yeah. A certain Platypus is awaiting us,” Tony chuckled, glancing at Pepper.

“Right, yes,” Ned said, his eyes widening again as he looked at the-- “crack in time and space.”

“Please don’t.” Pepper rubbed her face with her hands.

Ned grinned. “Can I go first?”

“It really doesn’t matter. It’s just like walking through a doorway,” Peter replied.

“Wicked.”

It was almost anticlimactic when Ned hoped through the circle of light and nothing happened. The boy looked perfectly satisfied however, and continued to grin as he was followed by May, and Tony, and Pepper, and MJ, and finally Peter and the cat in his arms.

The ground shifted to the roughness of the compound’s carpet, the air from the tang of metal to the warmth of Windex and dust. It was somewhat unnerving as the light shifted, too, from hard white light to dark skies through the bay windows and the yellow floor lamps aside the compound's walls.

Home.

Peter couldn’t keep in a small cry, a mix between a laugh and a sob, as he twirled around himself, hugging Grease tight and lifting his head back to catch as many breaths of the compound’s air on his face as he could. Home, home, home-- they were all back, all here. Together, anew. He heard Tony quietly say, “FRIDAY?” beside him, and the lights along the ceiling flashed with inanimate euphoria.

“Welcome home, family,” the compound sung in FRIDAY’s voice.

Peter turned back to the portal and the group watching them with empathetic smiles through the gap
in space, Wakanda still sparkling from across the gateway.

“Impressive place,” Shuri said.

“Don’t flatter us,” Pepper said, and the girl laughed.

A genius, a king, a sorcerer, and a cloak lined up against the gap, smiles only growing wider. Peter studied each, cementing those expressions into his mind. This was how he’d remember them, pleased and fond and triumphant, eyes tired but grins genuine. Or… clasps, he supposed.

“I appreciate everything,” Peter said.

Tony nodded. “Everything you’ve done for us.”

“Of course,” T’Challa said. “It was an honor to meet you, and to fight beside you. I hope our future battles, of words and politics, are as successful.”

Tony flashed a smirk. “Oh, they will be.”

“Come back, sometime,” Shuri said somewhat abruptly. “You’re always welcome in Wakanda.”

“We will,” Pepper promised. “We all will.”

“Yeah, yes,” Ned said, grinning.

Shuri smiled back at him.

“And bring the cat,” T’Challa said.

Peter laughed, walking back toward the portal, Grease in his arms. The king reached out, passing an arm through the portal to give the kitten one last stroke. She lifted her chin contentedly, her purr ringing around them.

“Do you have an e-mail?” MJ asked Shuri. “I can’t save the world all on my own.”

Shrui grinned. “I do indeed. It’s ‘memeotech100’ at gmail.”

Everyone stared at her.

“Don’t judge,” she grumbled.

“When did you get a Google account?” T’Challa demanded.

“Umm…”

“Nevermind.” T’Challa rubbed his face with his hand.

“We’ll be in touch,” MJ said, extending a hand back through the portal. Shuri shook it with a flourish.

“After all, those criteria won’t write themselves,” Shuri laughed.

“Don’t take over the world without me,” Peter said, stepping back away from the portal.

Shuri smiled. “I wouldn’t dream of it. You’re my second, after all.”

T’Challa made a hurt noise, and the Cloak lifted an offended collar.
“Don’t whine, I love you guys too.” Shuri rolled her eyes.

Tony stepped forward, running a quick hand through Grease’s fur and then Peter’s hair. He smiled at Peter, who smiled back, then turned to the sparking portal.

“Thank you,” Tony said quietly. His tone held everything, the deepest promises, the most sincere memories, the lightest hope. And an offer of friendship extended like the barest of winds.

T’Challa met his eyes, and then Peter’s, and then looked once at Shuri. Together, the two Wakandan’s raised their arms and crossed fisted hands at the wrist, bowing their heads.

Peter and Tony echoed, Peter carefully setting Grease on the compound floor. Pepper followed, and May, until everyone, even the Cloak and Wong, were saluting.

“Forever,” T’Challa said.

* * *

As the portal closed to Wong’s circling fingers, Tony saw the door to the lab slide open.

He met Steve Rogers’ gaze as the sparks grew closer. He saw the rest behind him, packed light and quick and ready to run.

He didn’t wave. But he did smile, mocking and confident, as those ice eyes watched him, unblinking.

Neither looked away until there were only sparks in the air, and then nothing.

Chapter End Notes

THEY ALL LOVE EACH OTHER AND ARE A FAMILY NOW FIGHT MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

I mean, that’s hopefully why you’re here, for the fam dynamics, so I dunno why you’d fight me. We have one more character to integrate into said dynamics; you know who it is.

See you next chap!
“Okay, spill it, you *absolute lunatic.*”

FRIDAY lightened the nearby bay windows to let the moonlight and light from the city in the distance filter into the hall of the compound, pretending the colonel’s words didn’t have a the thermostat ticking up in a few unoccupied rooms. The boss leaned into the light.

“How’d everyone do without me?” was his response, the moonlight etching the edges of his tired smirk.

“We kept the company together, at least,” Vision said. The android was still phasing back and forth as he’d been since FRIDAY had first alerted him of the boss’s arrival, since he’d emerged through the floor and wrapped the man in the tightest embrace she’d ever seen the android give. *You’re back, you’re home.*

The boss had migrated slightly toward the windows; FRIDAY lightened them further.

Ms. Jones chuckled from behind them. “I should hope so!”

“Well, you did build your company to run without you,” the colonel said.

“True, but not without Pep.”

“If I said she didn’t give us a *very* extensive run-through before hopping off to Wakanda, I’d be lying,” Rhodes muttered. His face looked at war between a grin and a scowl, and it was so ridiculous FRIDAY couldn’t resist taking a picture.

She added it to her ‘Family Night’ album.

“She probably duct-taped you to a door to keep you from coming too,” Peter laughed, ambling over to stand next to the boss.

“Pretty much.” Rhodes’ voice was soft. Guilty. “But not as much as she should have.”

“Hey, stop that,” the boss said, pointing at the man. “You needed to stay here. You and Vision were all that was left of the global protection; you couldn’t just abandon home-base.”

“But nothing even happened!” the colonel growled.

“Something could have.”

“I should have been there—”

The boss fixed him in his gaze, the inarguable gaze of Tony Stark, and Rhodes broke off. Still watching him, the boss approached slowly and purposefully.
Everyone applauded when Tony wrapped his arms around Rhodes, but only FRIDAY could hear the murmured, “maybe. But that doesn’t mean you did the wrong thing.”

“I’m sorry,” was the colonel’s quiet reply.

The boss pulled back, bracing his arms against his friend’s shoulders. “Don’t be.”

Rhodes smiled. FRIDAY took another picture.

Then she observed the group of eight—soon to be nine, as she could see Happy Hogan approaching with all the speed in his squat legs on the security monitors—tired, overwhelmed, traumatized people who had just returned from a different country and death, and ordered pizza.

A lot of pizza.

To be delivered as soon as possible. She decided it was worth the cash.

“Who cares what happened to us,” Rhodes said, more loudly, and FRIDAY turned her attention back to the hall.

“Yes,” Vision added, “I believe you have an adventure to fill us in on.”

The boss glanced at Peter, smirking lightly. His son mimicked the expression, before dissolving into a grin as Grease mewed encouragingly.

“And what an adventure it was,” Tony said. “It's my turn to say it, apparently. Pete did it the last time.”

“As I recall, because you felt like you’d been trampled by 147 camels,” Peter laughed.

“After I was hit by a bus. Get it right.”

“Oh, sorry, a bus.” The boy rolled his eyes.

“I hope this is hyperbole, though I wouldn’t put a bus and 147 camels past you,” Rhodes sighed.

“Oh, the real thing’s much worse. As a little forward, an preface, I’ll just preview you the good bits. They involve magic and dimensions and sorcerers and sentient cloaks and death.”

Peter raised his hand, opening his mouth, but Tony cut him off.

“Don’t spoil the climax,” he hissed.

“You already did!” Peter protested, and the boss waved a dismissive hand.

“I’m the omniscient narrator, I can do whatever I want.”

Pepper groaned, and Peter rolled his eyes. “I’m beginning to think I should tell the story, again.”

The boss snapped his fingers, shaking his head with a suspiciously excited simper. “Oh no, kid. I’ll tell my side of the events, this time.”

Peter raised his hands in defeat. “Fine, fine.”

“No interruptions.”

“No promises.”
“That goes for all of you!” The boss stepped back, spinning around on his heel to gesture to everyone around him. “Questions are welcome, but *clarifying* ones, not impatient ones.”

“Yes, yes, now tell us the story!” Rhodes said impatiently.

“I agree with the

The boss opened his mouth. And FRIDAY opened the door again, spilling Happy Hogan into the hallway.

“Another one!” Tony exclaimed, before he was bowled into the wall by the enthusiastic embrace of his security professional. Happy was laughing—or maybe he was crying—and the boss’s smirk lightened to a true smile, for a moment.

FRIDAY took another picture.

* * *

It was the Cloak’s frantic slap to his physical form’s cheek that jerked Stephen into a form of consciousness. He disappeared without warning from the mirror dimension, the books previously in his arms slamming into the floor as he lost his suspended concentration. Stephen found himself opening the eyes of his physical form.

The Cloak relaxed when it saw he was conscious, drifting under his back to help him upright. Stephen couldn’t keep in a groan, his head throbbing, his side stinging. He wasn’t all that content with his physical form at the moment, honestly, and not all that content with the Cloak for forcing him back into it.

But he was somewhat glad to see the thing.

“Oh, you’re back,” Stephen rasped.

The Cloak slapped him. Stephen didn’t react.

Softer this time, the Cloak wrapped around his shoulder, brushing against his cheek. Stephen tried not to, but ended up curling slightly into its touch, his legs pulling up to his chest as if that could ease their ache.

“Is Wong okay?” Stephen asked.

“Wong is perfectly fine, you *complete dumbass,*” said Wong from the doorway, the fury in his voice sharper than dimensional splinters.

Stephen jumped so hard his hands smacked against his knees, sending a throb through his nerves and a hiss through his throat.

Wong strode across the room, kneeling next to him.

“What the hell did you do to yourself?” he demanded.

“Glad to see you too,” Stephen said, the sarcasm slightly dulled by the hoarseness of his voice.

“Twenty-four hours ago, you made the dumbest decision in your long, *long* history of dumbass
decisions,” Wong said, somehow managing to sound reprimanding without breaking his stoic tone.

“Hopefully not by much.”

“By a factor of idiot bordering on suicide.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “Thank you for that clarification.”

“Don’t make light out of this,” Wong rumbled. “You could very well have been dead.”

Stephen spread his arms. “But I’m not. At least as far as I know; it’s hard to tell.”

“You look like shit, Strange,” was the librarian’s reply.

“I’m flattered.”

“Stephen.”

“What do you want to know, Wong?” Stephen said, his wit falling away to expose the fractures of complete weariness beneath. “That feeling Dormammu kill me countless more times sucks? That I killed a fellow sorcerer and that sucked? That bringing someone back to life sucks?”

“You brought someone back to life?” Wong almost snarled.


“That’s impossible--even you wouldn’t have the power--” Wong’s face warred between awed, curious, indifferent, and concerned for a long moment, before concern won out and he took a breath. “It would have killed you, Stephen!”

“And?”

“What do you mean ‘and’?”

Stephen shrugged, his smile turning rueful. “And?”

Wong reached out, then thankfully thought better of it. Stephen wouldn’t have wanted to embarrass himself flinching again.

“It would be permanent, Strange.”

Stephen hummed dispassionately.

“Please tell me you understand that.”

“Sure.” Stephen shrugged again.

The Cloak stiffened, and Stephen pulled his legs a little closer to him. Red fabric wrapped around his knees, carefully cradling his shaking hands.

“How…” Wong sighed, folding a leg beneath him to sit.

“Maura Aedoilagen gave me her life-force,” Stephen admitted. “I couldn’t stop it. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry--” Wong broke off, rubbing his face. “Stephen, I could punch you.”

Stephen shrunk back.
“No--God, not actually!” Wong rubbed his face with somehow more aggression.

Right.

Wong wouldn’t hurt him. Although, technically, his own body wasn’t supposed to either, and it seemed not to have read the rulebook. Stephen just wanted the release of his astral form, separated from all these trivial things like nerve endings.

The Cloak stroked his fingers carefully, and Stephen focused on the feel of the soft fabric against his skin instead of the fiery throb of his bones. The touch was such a stark contrast to the pain that Stephen almost lost it right there and then.

But he didn’t. Something hardened in his chest before it cracked, some last anchor of strength, and Stephen latched onto it stubbornly.

“How was Wakanda?” he asked abruptly.

Wong looked somewhat taken aback. “... Fine? They healed me with what could have been magical speed and I came back as soon as I could.”

“Did you portal the others?” Stephen demanded, trying to lean forward. He gave up halfway.

“No thanks to you,” Wong sighed. “Stark and his son wanted to come here, actually.”

Stephen stiffened, his gaze darting for the door.

“I wouldn’t let them.” Wong’s hand brushed the worn wooden floor beneath him, and Stephen relaxed.

“Thank you.”

“Stark is planning something, however.”

Stephen wasn’t sure whether to smile or grimace. “I don’t doubt it.”

A silence, until Wong offered somewhat impartially, “I think they would help, regardless of their motive.”

“Yes, thank you for your input,” Stephen said, letting his head flop backward slightly. His eyelids drifted towards each other, and he had to fight to keep them open.

He wanted to sleep. He wanted Wong to leave, the Cloak to leave, Dormammu and Aedoilagen and Mordo and Kaecilius to leave him alone and maybe he wouldn’t have to fear closing his eyes.

He wanted…

To talk. About everything. To someone he wasn’t paying. To Wong.

But he didn’t know how. And no matter how many times the Ancient One’s words danced in his head, he still feared trying and failing.

So Stephen didn’t say anything. He just watched Wong through half closed eyes and waited for him to say something else, some other useless question that Stephen would dodge and answer in code and beg to be understood.

And then maybe he’d be left to the Mystic Arts, the warmth he’d channel through his bones and
through his heart and through the tips of his fingers. His books and his travels and his steps through
other universes, some kind, some dark, some with a muddled future akin to this one.

He’d remember that time was not inherently evil, nor good. He’d remember that it was just like him,
just like all of them; it did what had to be done.

If Wong would just leave.

The librarian did not intend to go without a fight, however. “Why in hell did you run?”

“What?”

“You left Wakanda without me. Without the Cloak. Why?”

Stephen shrugged. He could win this game. “I needed to check in on the Sanctums. Kamar-Taj. It’s a
good thing I did; the ghouls were back. You should check in on that; there’s a breech somewhere.
They’ll keep coming, maybe until something big slips through and then we’re all fucked.”

“Wrong answer.”

Stephen made a pun in his head and chuckled somewhat hysterically.

“Have you slept--nevermind, stupid question.”

With as much sarcasm as he could muster, Stephen saluted with a raise of his eyebrow. “He can be
trained!”

“You’ve spent the last twenty-four hours in your astral form, haven’t you?”

Stephen tapped his fingers against the Cloak, trying to ease their ache. “I’ve passed my fingers along
the borders of this dimension and healed the damage our absence caused. I’ve organized our
dilapidated library. I’ve cataloged relics and found three missing; we need to find whatever entity
took them as soon as possible. So yes, I have spent a day astrally. And I would rather like to get back
there, if you don’t mind.”

“As a matter of fact, I do mind,” Wong growled. “Did you get medical attention?”

“Unnecessary.”

“Strange--”

“I’m okay, Wong. No, I’m not okay. I’m so fucking far from okay I’ve circled back to fine. But so’s
everyone else; that’s why we answer with that meaningless word every time someone asks that
meaningless question. So I’d really just like to go back to a form that doesn’t hurt everywhere and for
you to stop interrogating me with words that don’t matter and to read about sorcery in books that
do.” Stephen tapped his chest. “I’ve put the Eye back. Hopefully I’ll never have to look at the
fucking thing ever again, but somehow I doubt that.”

Wong watched him, such sadness in his expression. Maybe he knew they were so close to speaking
the words they both waited for, if either could break the final wall and say it.

Stephen just laughed.

“Don’t leave him alone,” Wong said. The Cloak bobbed against Stephen’s neck in affirmative. He
swatted at it.
“Go seal the ghoul-gap, Wong,” he said with a sigh, slumping back into the embrace of his relic after a moment.

Wong got up—far too elegantly for having been nearly dead of a bullet wound hours before. As he drifted back to the door, he kept his eyes on Stephen, only pausing within the doorframe to fish for his sling-ring. His portal was hesitant, and so were his steps through it.

“I’m glad you’re alive, Stephen,” the man said quietly.

Stephen shut Wong’s portal.

Then, giving the Cloak one last stroke down its hem, Stephen shoved himself back into his astral form and went to gather the fallen books.

He stayed there until glass shattered in the window next to him and Peter Parker came swinging into his Sanctum with a shriek to rival Tarzan.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAAAAAAAAAAH Aaaaaaah AaAaAa AAAAAAAAH!

(My tarzan shriek needs work)
Stephen dropped his books again, cursing as one landed on its spine before remembering that it was, in fact, simply an apparition of a physical object. He knelt to pick it up, glaring at Peter as the boy picked himself up off the ground and dusted off his suit.

“What are you doing here?” Stephen demanded.

Peter didn’t say anything, just turning around to sever the connection of his wrist to the web now awkwardly curled around the top of Stephen’s small window. He took off his mask, saying something that Stephen didn’t catch to the AI within it, and shook out his hair. Taking a deep breath, he looked around the room he’d just invaded.

Stephen remembered that he himself was also simply an apparition of a physical object when Peter’s eyes snagged on his body, lying limp and haggard in the Cloak’s grasp. The boy let out a strangled cry.

“Oh damn,” Stephen sighed, and shoved himself through the planes of reality to make his astral form visible and stand beside Peter, noiseless.

“Doctor Strange, sir?” Peter asked tentatively, kneeling next to Stephen’s body. Stephen floated carefully behind him to keep out of view. “Shit, shit--”

The kid reached out a hand, presumably to check Stephen’s pulse.

Yeah, that’s enough.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he said.

Peter shrieked, and Stephen would be lying if he said watching the kid trip over his heels as he stood and shot three instinctual webs towards Stephen’s form wasn’t hilarious. The webs splattered on the wall behind them.

“OhmyGodareyouaghost?” Peter stammered. “Please don’t be dead--”

“I’m not dead,” Stephen assured, a bit of a smile flickering across his face. As far as I know, at least. “I’m on an astral plane currently speeding between your dimension and the mirror realm to tap into the properties of each.”

Um…”

“Yeah, I’m a ghost. Now what the hell are you doing in my Sanctum?”

“Checking on you, of course,” came another voice from the window. Stephen was half inclined to
portal to another dimension as Tony Stark stepped through the gap, his armor elegantly folding off of him to remain outside the walls—a smart move, seeing as the wards on the Sanctum would disable the tech as soon as it crossed the premises.

Stephen growled. “No, no, no. Get out of here, go on, no pests in the library. It’s a rule with the malphancorpi and it damn well applies to Starks.” He pivoted to glare at Peter. “And smaller Starks.”

Peter and Stark grinned their *not-a-chance* grins, and they looked identical.

“Do you know how long it took to find your little haunt?” Stark asked. “No way I’m leaving now.”

The man padded over to Stephen’s body to examine it—him? He raised an eyebrow, before poking at the side of Stephen’s unconscious face with a deliberately extended finger.

“That hurt?”

Stephen glowered. “No. The only thing that transfers between forms is energy—*do not* even think about it.”

Stark hummed, and Peter put a hand to his mouth to try and keep in his laughter. Stephen’s glower grew more pronounced.

Stark looked between Stephen’s astral projection and body, before commenting ruefully, “well, you look half dead.”

“Better than all dead,” was the sorcerer’s flat reply.

Peter cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah, about that…”

“You’re welcome.” Stephen crossed his arms, his foot tapping impatiently.

“That was Wong’s fault, actually,” Stephen lied, drifting over to his physical body to survey it’s decidedly hollow look.

“Exactly.” Peter smiled somewhat shyly and Stephen wished his irritation didn’t thaw as much as it did upon seeing the expression. “Thank you.”

Stephen hummed. “Yes, yes, it sucked, you’re worth it, blah blah blah etcetera etcetera etcetera etcetera. Is that all? Fantastic! Please go out the way you came in, as it’s faster.”

The two Starks proceeded to amble over to the desk in the corner and sit down, the older in the chair behind it and the younger on the table itself. Stark raised an eyebrow at Peter as he reached for one of the tomes on the edge of the desk, precariously stacked due to Stephen’s carelessness.

“That book is four-thousand nine-hundred years old,” Stephen said with a sigh, knowing nothing would come of it.

“That was Wong’s fault, actually,” Stephen lied, drifting over to his physical body to survey it’s decidedly hollow look.

“Why’s it strewn on the edge of your desk, then?”

“So, a certain wizard told me it’s unhealthy to spend too much time in your astral form,” Peter said pointedly. He scooched the book fully onto the desk, squaring it respectfully.

“I’m a professional,” Stephen said flatly.

The Cloak slapped its corners against the ground in its imitation of laughter, and Stephen glared at the bit of hem he could see above his physical form’s head.
“Levi objects,” Stark said, flicking a pen through the air. It passed straight through Stephen to join the webs against the far wall.

“It’s also a pro--wait, Levi?”

“Sure,” Peter said.

Stark shrugged. “Cloak of Levitation, Levi…”

The Cloak lifted its corners to weigh the two names in a gesture Stephen was certain it had learned from the man speaking.

“I should not have left you two alone,” Stephen sighed.

“Nope!” Stark said brightly. He pushed the chair back, the legs grating against the ancient wood floor of the Sanctum, and crossed his legs atop the desk. Peter slapped at his feet, but the man ignored him. “You should have joined the party. Levi and I had a good Rogers-roasting session, which could have been more satisfying with an audience.”

“I was asleep,” Peter offered.

Stephen leaned against the wall, slowing his astral vibration so he wouldn’t pass straight through it. “And how well did that go for you?”

Peter shrugged. “Not particularly.”

“That’s another thing,” Stark interjected. “That you did for us. All your medical buddies have agreed to talk to us, so that’s good.”

“He means thanks,” Peter said.

“I do. Let’s make a list, shall we, Nala?” Stark raised an eyebrow at Stephen, then looked to the boy on the desk, who nodded. “You found where I’d been taken.”

Peter continued, “You got us out of the rubble.”

“You got me my suit.”

“You fought a fellow sorcerer for our sake.”

“You fought a bear-demon with me.”

Stephen smiled a little bit. “That was the most fun I’ve had fighting a deranged bear demon in a long tim—”

“Shut up, I’m not finished,” Stark said, lifting a hand. “You painstakingly collected a list of therapists, including for this one’s DID.”

“You got stuck in your own personal hell.”

“And even after, you fucking brought my son back to life!” Stark gestured somewhat wildly. “Have I left anything out?”

“You’ve certainly stuck a few things in,” Stephen grumbled.

“Oh don’t be so serious, Mufasa.” Stark threw another pen at him.
“I have a limited number of those.” Stephen continued to grumble.

Peter grinned. “I seriously doubt that, donut man.”

“Ah yes! I forgot the donuts! Put that on the list, please?”

Stephen crossed his arms, but he was smirking now. “I fail to see the necessity of this list.”

“It’s so I don’t forget anything when I’m thanking you,” Stark said. “And because I like making lists.”

“I doubt that,” Stephen said.

“Which?” Stark looked honestly confused.

Stephen just raised an eyebrow at him.

“Well, on the off chance that it’s the first one, we better start in on this,” Stark said, pushing himself to his feet, then climbing atop Stephen’s chair. “So you know how this is going to go, I’m going to do it first, and then Peter’s going to do it.”

“Yes, sir!” Peter said, spinning around on the desk to observe the man standing on the chair.

Stephen had just enough time to wonder, in a state of complete terror, what was about to happen to him before it began.

“Stephen Strange!” Stark announced, raising his hands to the ceiling. “Thank you for finding my location after my kidnapping.”

“It’s ‘Doctor,’ actual--”

“Stephen Strange! Thank you for portaling us out of the rubble!”

“Yes, yes, now can--”

“Stephen Strange! Thank you for getting my suit to me across half a world!”

Stephen winced. “Are you going to do all of them? It really wasn’t--”

“Stephen Strange! Thank you for fighting by our side!”

Stephen was beginning to understand just what was happening here, and subsequently beginning to panic. “Again it wasn’t--”

Stark cut him off. “Stephen Strange! Thank you for defeating a bear-demon as you won a battle of wits!”

Stephen looked helplessly towards his Cloak, but its corners were slamming against the hardwood floor over and over and over. “Please stop, for the Vishanti’s sake--”

“Stephen Strange!” Stark’s simpering grin was incandescent. “Thank you for collecting therapists for us--don’t think we didn’t notice your perfect spelling of their names despite those hands.”

“It was nothing, I get the point--”

“Stephen Strange!”
The ridiculousness of this, of Tony Stark standing on a chair and screaming thanks in his general direction, had Stephen contemplating disappearing back into the astral realm. He doubted it would stop the tirade.

“Thank you!”

*Just kill me now.* “This cannot be happening--”

“For bringing my son back to life! Even after we abandoned you to your own personal hell!”

“Fuck you, Stark!” Stephen said, pressed far back against the wall as the man reached the end of the list. *It's over, it’s over--*

And then Peter Parker stood up on the desk.

“Don’t you dare--”

“Stephen Strange!” the boy announced. “Thank you for finding Mr. Stark’s location after his kidnapping!”

“Oh my God--”

Peter grinned, raising both eyebrows as he recited the words, and meant them. “Stephen Strange! Thank you for portaling us out of the rubble!”

Stephen made a choking noise, because now *Spider-Man* was standing on a desk and screaming at him.

“Stephen Strange! Thank you for getting Iron Man suit to him across half a world!”

Stephen started laughing.

“Stephen Strange!”

He couldn’t stop laughing, until he was doubling over on himself, tears coming to the eyes of his astral form.

“Thank you for fighting by our side!” Peter continued, the words barely fitting around his smile. Stark was losing it on top of the chair, and Stephen had little doubt he’d be howling if he wasn’t trying not to interrupt the boy.

“Stephen Strange! Thank you for defeating a bear-demon so I could save the others!”

“You’re welcome,” Stephen laughed. “You’re so fucking welcome, now please shut up.”

“One more,” Peter said, breaking script and earning a glare from Stark for his trouble, “Thank you for saving my life, and bringing it back. Thank you so much, Stephen Strange!”

Then they were all on the ground, hands bracing against the floor or against knees as they laughed away the absurdity of the entire chain of events. Stephen forgot which dimension to keep himself in and went spinning into the mirror realm for a moment. He came back as soon as he’d realized.

“I hate you both,” he managed, sitting up.

“That was my idea,” Peter said smugly.
“Of course it was,” Stephen sighed. “Now I can’t hate it.”

They watched him, matching smiles on their tired faces.

“Alright, fine, I’ll bite. You’re welcome.”

“And?” Stark asked.

“And I’m sorry I made a run for it at Wakanda. Wong was probably a dick to you about it.”

Peter shrugged. “He kind of was.”

“He’s a dick to everyone, don’t sweat it,” Stephen said.

“He seems to really care about you,” Stark said, “which makes me wonder where he is.”

“I sent him off to deal with a ghoul.”

Peter perked up. “A ghoul?”

“Technically it’s a malphancorpi.”

“A malcorwhatthefuck?” That from Stark, who was sitting up and looking suddenly far more interested.

“It’s an inter-dimensional monster that feeds off channels of the Mystic Arts,” Stephen said.

A grin. “That’s bullshit.”

Stephen grinned back. “Not this time.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment, before Peter pointed toward Stephen’s limp physical body propped up in the corner of the room. “So, are we just going to ignore that, or…”

Stephen got up and strolled over to himself. “I do. Though admittedly, I’m usually in better shape than that.” He jabbed a finger toward the body. “Hey, at least I haven’t been stabbed this time.”

Stark asked quietly, “Was that with Dormammu?”

Stephen froze.

“You spoke, when you were under Maximoff’s magic,” Stark explained.

“Did I?” Stephen wondered, sliding down the wall to sit next to his physical body.

“You bargained with him.”

Stephen flinched, then cursed himself.

“You bargained with your life--I don’t even know how many times--for the world. I guess the whole universe.”


“You died fifty-nine times?” Peter jerked forward, as if to approach Stephen.

“I stopped counting,” Stephen said again. He’d stopped counting after nine-hundred.
“Take it from an idiot who’s died. I’m sorry.” Stark’s intelligent brown gaze analyzed him, and Stephen forced himself to keep that intense gaze.

He didn’t blink as he replied, completely serious, “Well, when was the last time you annoyed a villain into leaving the dimension alone?”

Stark actually laughed.

“Doctor Strange; the only hero ever to save the world by making his opponent rage quit! Ned’ll have a field day with that.” Peter grinned, hands tapping at the shining material of his suit.

“Your friend does not need something else to have a field day with,” Tony sighed.

Something occurred to Stephen. “If I end up on the internet, Peter Parker, I will find you and I will personally acquaint you with the most foul of dimensions.”

“Oh, I’m shaking in my--”

“Custom baby seal leather boots,” Stephen finished the quote for the boy, unable to hide all of his grin.

“What’s it with you and Disney?” Stark demanded.

Stephen shrugged. “Eidetic memory.”


Stephen winked. “More than you’ll know.”

“Yeah, there’s only so much you can learn on Google,” Peter piped up.

“What.”

“I Googled you. Sorry about that; you’re already on the internet,” Stark said, shrugging. He crossed his legs and leaned forward, his fingers drumming on his thigh in what could have been nervousness. “So… how adverse are you to public knowledge?”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “I have no tolerance toward it whatsoever.”

Stark sighed. “I might be able to work with that…”

Stephen’s eyebrow kept rising.

“I have a couple of things I need to run by you,” Stark said, getting to his feet. “Do you have any coffee?”
In Which Decisions are Made

Chapter Notes

WHAT
ARE
MIDTERMS?????

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wizard did not, in fact, have coffee. But a quick portal to the compound, orange sparks that Tony watched unflinchingly had a pot brewing next to the sorcerer’s tea. Of course he’d be a tea person; Tony couldn’t be less surprised.

The Sanctum kitchen was somewhat run-down, with cracked counters, a flickering, gas stove, and a refrigerator that probably shouldn’t be making that noise. Not much money in the Mystic Arts, then. Tony scanned the area, his expression unimpressed, though he was cataloguing each object and how much of Strange’s pride he’d have to crack through to let him renovate the area.

“No up to your standards, I know, and no, you cannot fix it,” Strange said. He was limping a bit, having returned to his physical body (what the fuck?) and said physical body had probably seen better days.

Tony glared at him. “Can you read minds?”

A quick, somewhat sardonic grin. “No, but I believe your son may be able to.”

That never go old; your son. Tony looked behind him to where Peter was trotting next to the Cloak. The kid looked up when he felt Tony’s eyes on him.

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening.” He didn’t sound very chagrined about that; to be fair, Tony and Strange had said very little that could be counted as important in the last few minutes. “Levi was explaining something to me.”

Strange gave Tony a pointed look and went back to the two bubbling pots.

“How’s it doing that?” Tony asked Peter, ignoring the wizard for the moment.

Peter shrugged. “Charades. We should play that, sometime, by the way; May would kick our asses with no contest, but it’d be fun.”

“A nice long game of humiliate Peter?” Tony grinned.

Peter smiled, looking past Tony to the night they were both remembering. “Yeah,” he said. “Cuz that’s your favorite.”

“You bet it is. What’s Levi saying?”

“I think that the Sanctum has wards and we broke some of them by jumping through the window?”
Strange’s voice cut in. “No. The Sanctum has wards, and… Levi is glad you chose that window to jump through because you could have caused me a lot of grief.”

“Do you two have some sort of psychic connection?” Tony wondered.

“What’s with you and psychics?”

“Nothing! I’m just trying to figure out how to fit magic and a fucking multiverse into my worldview, which is apparently very narrow.”

Strange opened a dilapidated cabinet, rifling through the mugs it contained. “Don’t go beating yourself up over it, nearly everyone does. Hey, Pete, you want tea?”

“Yes, please!” Peter called.

“I’m betrayed!” was Tony’s response. Both sorcerer and spider ignored him.

Strange pulled out two mugs and what looked to be a metal water bottle; a Camelback, if Tony knew his brands. “How do you take it?”

“Uh…”

“Cream? Sugar?” Strange clarified, smiling a bit. Probably because he thought neither of them could see.

Peter replied somewhat sheepishly, “I have no idea.”

“I’ll fix us up,” Tony said, getting up and making sure to give the rusty stove a disgusted look. Strange rolled his eyes.

Tony reached for the cabinet, looking to get a third mug, but Strange gestured to the ones on the table. A bit confused, Tony shrugged. He took the mugs, stirring up his usual concoction in one and then an experimental tea combination for Peter. Out of the corner of his eye, Tony watched the doctor carefully use the edge of the water bottle as a fulcrum against the teapot’s spout to pour his own drink.

Peter joined them, taking his tea and perching agily atop the counter. Tony found his way back to his seat as Strange leaned against the stove.

“Get to the point, then,” the sorcerer said, sipping out of the water bottle.

Tony’s brow furrowed infinitesimally, and then--

Oh.

Right, of course. Strange couldn’t hold a mug; the shaking of his hands must make it clumsy to keep liquid within such an open-top container.

Tony filed that away for renovation, too.

“Yeah, two things,” Tony said. He’d prepared his words, but as Strange watched him with slightly guarded eyes, he went for the fuck it approach. “One, I want you to sign the Accords.”

Peter looked up sharply, and Strange choked on his tea, with surprise or with laughter. “You want me to do what?”
“I want you to sign the Accords,” Tony repeated.

“What, don’t trust me with something you don’t understand?” Strange sounded almost resigned. “I haven’t killed any civilians yet, I’ll have you know. Or caused damage, or even revealed my existence, so I--”

Tony held up a hand. “I want you to sign them,” he said again, “because I want you to join the Avengers.”

The water bottle slipped out of Strange’s hands.

Peter lunged forward, his hands flashing out with enhanced speed to snatch the falling object before it hit the ground. Flushing a bit with self-consciousness, the boy offered the bottle back to Strange. “Here, sorry.”

The sorcerer took it without looking, his eyes still fixed on Tony with something that looked like abject, shocked confusion.

“What?” he demanded.

Tony’s hands betrayed him, drumming nervously against the mug on the counter before him. “I want you on the team.”

“Wh--” Strange shook his head, setting down his tea and gesturing vaguely. “Why?”

Now it was Tony’s turn to stare in shocked confusion. “What do you mean why? Because you’re a fucking sorcerer and probably the most powerful man I’ve ever met! Because you saved my life and my kid’s life and the lives of everyone in this universe! Because I want your help if I ever have to do the same again, and I want to help you!”

Strange stared at him.

Tony glanced at Peter, who seemed as confused as him. The boy shrugged, trotting over to sit beside Tony and unconsciously match his pose.

“I’m not on the team, technically,” Peter added. “But I’d help, too.”

Strange’s arms waved again. “You want--to--”

Tony’s voice softened. “We want your help. And we want to help you, Doctor Strange.”

“Stephen,” the doctor corrected somewhat vacantly.

Peter took Tony’s hand, squeezing it slightly with excitement. Tony squeezed back. A first name was a good sign, a very good sign.

“Stephen,” he confirmed. “It doesn’t have to be official, if you’re adverse to publicity. It just needs to be confirmed in the eyes of the UN, and then we’re a team.”

“I’m not… very good at teams,” Stephen objected.

Tony grinned. “Volatile? Self-obsessed? Don’t play well with others?”

“Yes, that.”

“He was talking about himself. You’ll fit right in,” Peter said, clapping his hands.
Tony punched him. “You are not supposed to agree.”

“But how will they react to…” Stephen gestured to himself and then the Sanctum a bit helplessly.

“My kidnapping was global news. I don’t think they’ll be that surprised.” Tony’d thought through each of these explanations; he’d defuse every question and objection until the sorcerer made a decision.

“Will you reveal me if I don’t agree? It’s global law, after all.”

Tony crossed his arms. “This isn’t blackmail, Doctor. I’d respect your decision.” There’d be consequences, though. For both choices.

Stephen took a very large gulp of tea and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the confusion was gone, the masked strength returned. But there was something more genuine about it, now.

“I’ll need to be able to react quickly. A panel won’t give me enough time to explain mystical threats, unless I disrupt the natural laws, but there’s already been enough of that.”

Tony smirked, triumphant. “I have my best team working on that—” next to him, Peter grinned—”and I engineered a temporary agreement between the majority of the members to allow you emergency reaction time, until we can work out proper parameters. You’d have to risk what would happen if you did end up breaking your streak of no-civilian-casualties-or-property-damages during that time, though.”

Stephen shrugged. “Would it be any more consequential than what I’d face, anyway?”

“A bit,” Peter chimed in. “Okay, a lot. And the ‘proper parameters’ are going to be annoying, no way around that.”

“I realize that’s not a huge motivation to sign…” Tony admitted.

Stephen was quiet for a moment.

“I’m used to codes,” he said finally. “I’m a Mystic Artist. And I’m a surgeon. ‘Do no harm’.” He smiled. “If this is how I do that, the best way to do that, then it’s all the motivation I need.”

“It is,” Peter said, and Tony could only echo and pray he was right. No: know.

With a smirk, the doctor took another sip of tea. “I’ll do it.”

Peter whooped, and Tony raised both hands for a double high-five with the kid. “Hell yeah!”

Stephen jabbed a trembling finger in Tony’s direction. “I’m trusting you not to screw me and my signature over. Make this good, make this better, Stark.”

“Tony. And always.”

A grin grew across Stephen’s face against the silver rim of the water bottle. “Does this mean I get to add ‘Avenger’ to my title?”

Tony chuckled. “And the real motivation comes out.”

Tony’s shoulders shook silently.

“Supreme Avenger Strange, Doctor of Sorcerers.”

“Oh my god, please stop,” Stephen chuckled, raising his shaking hands in surrender.

Peter grinned. “The last one’s my favorite.”

“I was thinking ‘Doctor Strange, Avenger Supreme,’” Tony contributed.

Peter shook his head. “But then you leave out ‘sorcerer’, which is doing the man a disservice. His title must fully reflect his awesomeness.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? Then what’s my title?”

Peter grinned. “Dad.”

Every possible response was snatched away from Tony, leaving him with only an inarticulate choking noise.

“Get the familial nonsense out of my Sanctum,” Stephen muttered, but Tony could see the smile behind his hard expression. It was somewhat lonely.

Tony shook himself, reminded of the third and final reason he’d fought so hard to see the sorcerer. “Not yet, Nala. One more thing.”

“Is this ‘one more thing’ going to change the course of my future, too?”

Tony shrugged. “I mean--”

“Just say it.”

“I’ve been waking up tapped into orange magic. Fucking magic, and it’s creeping me out, because I’m still inclined to say it’s not possible. I just keep accidently glowing.”

“I know.”

Tony paused. “What?”

With a shrug, the sorcerer picked up his tea, ambling from the open kitchen and into the wider livingspace of the Sanctum. “I can feel it.”

“One, no, and two, what?”

“When I’m wearing the Eye--that’s the amulet I never took off--I can sense it when people are manipulating the Mystic Arts. That’s how I found you, and Wakanda, and Maura Aedoilagen.” The sorcerer braced himself against a wall, and Tony narrowed his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Peter asked for him.

Stephen waved a hand. “No, not really. So if you don’t mind, I’ll just--”

Without warning, or perhaps that was the warning, the sorcerer threw himself backward. Tony lunged forward, but Strange crumpled to the ground before Tony could reach him. He braced for the crash of metal as the water bottle fell.
But it didn’t come. The drink hovered in the air, and Stephen materialized, slightly transparent, again.

“The fucking ghosts are back,” Peter muttered.

Tony was too unnerved to reprimand him for unneeded cussing.

“You were saying?” Stephen asked, carefully setting the bottle on the floor. Tony saw his hands didn’t shake as badly in this form.

“How do you interact with objects like that?” Tony demanded. “How do you even do—” he gesticulated—“that—”

“Oh, oh, I know this one!” Peter said, sounding far too excited. “Entering your astral form has you absorbing dimensional energy. Because it’s a more energized state than your physical body, you can drop spontaneously in energy level to interact with objects.”

Stephen’s ghost grinned. “Very good, Peter. Full marks.” He turned to Tony. “The astral dimension is special. It lies in a constant plane across most of the reaches of timespace, and every dimension can tap into it. Because every dimension can do so, your astral form is a sort of passage into the rest of the multiverse; it allows you to shift between universes more easily.”

“How?”

“Energy.”

Tony grumbled, “that’s not an answer.”

Stephen smirked at him, lifting a hand. A spark of orange zapped Tony’s nose like static electricity, and he yelped.

“There are many different forms of energy,” Stephen said, “as you know. Kinetic, potential, chemical, all of that. But there is also dimensional.” Tony opened his mouth, but the sorcerer cut him off. “If you try to deny it, you will be ignoring everything you’ve learned these past few days—weeks, and your own potential.”

Tony huffed. “I wasn’t going to deny it, I was just going to ask how it let you do…” he gestured vaguely to the floating man. “All of that. I can accept magic when it comes in the form of a god hell-bent on destroying my world, or derived from some mystical relic. But… any old shmo? Me? That’s a different story.”

“We are all part of this universe, are we not?”

“Sure, but—”

“So we are all constantly, inseparably interacting with the energies of our dimensions. We feel it, constantly, which is why we say we don’t.”

“Until it’s gone,” Peter said, glancing to Tony.

Stephen nodded. “You had the misfortune of being removed from our universe, feeling the sudden lack of comforting pressure. It awoke you to the potential for magic and you held on to that awakening.”

Tony looked down at his hands, as though they might suddenly burst into flame. “So am I going to start ‘dropping spontaneously in energy level’ or something?”
“No,” the sorcerer chuckled. “You’re in your physical form, as it is. There are forms below the energy level of the physical, of course, but as the rest of the universe taps into the physical wavelength, you won’t go falling into them.”

“Okay back up.” Tony found himself slipping into the words, forgetting who he was talking to, what he was talking about, as the promise of new understanding was dangled before him.

“The multiverse is formed across four axes,” Stephen explained, backing way up.

Tony nodded. “Our universe is three-dimensional, so it follows that the multiverse would have a fourth.” He perched against the armrest of the nearest chair and gesticulated in thought.

“Precisely. Each dimension has a niche within the 4D multiverse, a 3D facet of a larger shape.”

“A tesseract,” Peter said. He made a cube out of his hands, and Tony shivered.

Stephen thrust his hands forward, and a bubble of orange faded into existence before him. Another joined it, growing into a long plate the first bubble adhered to. “These niches interact with each other when they have similar energies,” Stephen continued. “One of the axes of the multiverse is time, which manifests in tiers.” More lines of orange shot through the bubble, twirling around each other, stretching the edges of the bubble between them. “Universes attach to different tiers of time, which is why it moves differently between dimensions.” Stephen paused, looking at his diagram.

In the silence, Tony glanced at Peter, who grinned at him beneath wide, excited eyes. Tony echoed the expression.

The sorcerer called their attention back with a quiet grunt. “Okay, nevermind, that makes no sense,” he muttered. The intricate 3D sketch dissipated. Stephen dropped his hands, then, seeing they were watching him again, he gave an apologetic smile. “It’s hard to quantify, I guess. I’m not… a practiced teacher.”

“I think you’re doing fantastically,” Peter said.

“Uh-huh.” Stephen raised an eyebrow, but he was grinning again. “Anyway, think… coordinates.”

“Okay,” Tony said. “Latitude, longitude, all that?”

“Yup. But space, time, and form, instead.”

“4D axes.”

“Exactly. A point, or a universe, has a location in space, which is its 3D coordinates—length, width, heighth, general spacial position. It also has a location in time, which is its tier coordinates. And it has a location in energy level, which is its planar coordinates, and that determines its form. All of these interact to determine the specific energy signature of a single location in the multiverse.”

“Holy shit,” Tony said articulately.

“Pretty much,” Stephen replied. He lifted his hands, and more light began to crackle through the air. “Mystic Artists tap into these coordinates to pull the energy from different places. Like any other type of energy, it has specific properties depending on its form and location in time and space, which we can harness to cast spells. Or…” Stephen hesitated. “If that offends your modern sensibilities, you can call it a program.”

“Don’t mind me, I’ll just be over here with my head fucking exploding,” Tony grumbled. “So,
Aedoilagen pushed me into my astral form.”

“Yes. It brought you up in energy level, tapping into the constant dimensional layer that is the astral dimension.”

Tony tapped his hands on the wall behind him. “And since the astral dimension’s signature extends through all dimensions, she used that as a passage to force me into her pocket dimension.”

“Yes.”

“How?” That from Peter, leaning forward.

Golden streams of sparks formed around the slightly transparent form of Stephen again to illustrate their words. “Energy, again.” The light around him pulsed, and he observed it a bit distractedly. “To transfer dimensions, to transfer anywhere, really, you draw the energy from that place, and you release it when you arrive.”

Confused looks.

“Each location, each part of time, each energy plane has a different feel and a different potential for magic,” Stephen tried again. “Like… when I’m portaling, I have to be able to know what the energy of a location will sense like.”

“So you need to have been there?”

“No,” Peter answered for the sorcerer. “He just needs to have seen it, in a picture or something.”

Stephen pointed randomly toward the side of the room, his magic sputtering into non-existence when he turned his attention away. “Right there, the energy senses differently than it does right here.”

“Right…” Tony hesitated.

“So, I can do this.” The sorcerer faded out of view, and a moment later, his physical body sat up with a groan.

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “That?”

“No, sorry, can only do it with my sling-ring,” Stephen said. “Which is a whole different story… But what I was talking about is this.”

In the corner of the room, a small, precise portal formed, exactly where Stephen had indicated. The sorcerer’s hand emerged through it and waved somewhat smugly.

Tony couldn’t help but wave back at the disembodied hand.

“And if I channel the energy from somewhere else…”

The portal began to slide to the left, and Stephen withdrew his hand to allow it to move, before waving again.

“Why’d you move your hand?”

“Because I’m channeling that area’s energy, but I have a different signature. When I move the portal, I don’t move me. I can’t make a portal around someone, either, because when a being occupies a space, there are two distinct signatures in the same area; a locational signature and a human signature. It’s the same reason why you get spliced between two locations when I close a portal you’re halfway
“Ew,” Tony observed.

“Not really. It burns the wound closed so there isn’t much blood.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at Stephen, who did the same, before realizing what he’d said and wincing. He was still on the floor, propped up against the wall.

“Help me out here,” he said, and Tony was about to stand before he realized Stephen was speaking to the Cloak. The thing whipped over and slid beneath Stephen, helping the shaking man to his feet.

“You can sit,” Tony said, a bit concerned. They should probably leave, let the poor man get some sleep.

A nightmare state.

Okay, nevermind.

Stephen waved his hand dismissively. “If I’m not standing up it doesn’t look as epic. Once you understand how to feel and how to channel energy…”

Epic fell short.

Because the sorcerer exploded with light.

Tony was caught between shrinking away and pulling closer as the magic burst into existence around him, weaving around Stephen, through him, shattering the very air. Pulse after pulse of dimensional signature washed over Tony. He couldn’t tear his gaze away as shaking hands drew precise magic, as orange light formed patterns of reality, as butterflies of magic brought the world to its knees. It was as though the universe itself was suddenly leashed between Stephen’s fingers, obeying his thoughts and turning dreams into truths.

And within the light, Stephen smiled.

“Once you understand, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

When Tony looked down, his hands were glowing. He raised them, reaching out toward the sorcerer’s light.

“Teach me.”

* * *

Teach me.

“Wong?”

“I closed your malphancorpi cleavage. What do you need?”

“I think… I think it’s time we started apprenticing again.”
Chapter End Notes

Nothing like some fresh quantum theory to start off your morning.

Aka I accidentally defined the Marvel Multiverse in terms of energy coordinates. Enjoy!
“You ready, Tony?”

“That’s not the question.” The reply held an obvious smirk, and Peter heard the clatter of the man’s dress shoes stride into the dining room. “The question is are they ready?”

Lifting his spatula, Peter turned to look toward Tony as the somewhat sarcastic applause of Pepper and May filed the air. He grinned; they definitely weren’t ready.

“When do I get a suit like that?” he asked, jabbing the spatula toward Tony’s debonair form.

“When you’ve got a reputation for fuck you and billions of dollars,” Tony responded. He slipped a hand into his breast pocket, and it emerged with his--

“Oh, I knew something was missing,” May chuckled as Tony flicked his red-tinted sunglasses open and slipped them onto his face.

Peter rolled his eyes and went back to the stove. The heat of his pan sent moisture crackling up off the eggs, steam mingling with the smell of garlic emanating from the toaster at his elbow.

“Am I allowed to know what you’re going to say? Or do I have to watch it on the news?” Pepper huffed. “It’s not going to be that spectacular.”

“Oh, I’m hurt! Pepper, you wound me.” Peter, even facing the opposite direction, could see Tony pressing a dramatic hand to his chest.

“Of course it’s going to be spectacular!” May objected. “Mr. Stark’s first appearance after his return from captivity?”

“Please don’t say captivity,” Tony groaned. “It makes me sound like an exotic bird.”

“Oh, you’re a monkey, not a bird,” Peter said over his shoulder. He raised a hand, spreading his fingers wide. “Cheese-slicer?”

Someone hurled the thing toward him, and Peter snatched it before it hit the door of the microwave.

“Pretty sure it’s not called a cheese-slicer,” Tony said. Leather crunched as he sat in one of the counter stools.

“Pretty sure it is.”

FRIDAY interjected from the ceiling, “Mr. Parker is right, I’m afraid.”

Tony ignored them both. “What are you even making?”

“It’s a surprise,” May responded for Peter.

“I see eggs, and cheese, and bagels. What’s there to surprise?”
“Oh, ye of little faith!” Peter laughed, laying uneven slices of cheese across his irregularly shaped egg patty. “Do you have any cream cheese?”

“Oh, of course. In the back of the fridge, probably.”

Peter turned the heat way down and made his way over to the glimmering appliance. “Is this even used?” he wondered as he opened it and began rifling through the undisturbed food.

“No usually,” Tony said with a shrug. “So unusually, in fact, that I think I may give it to the wizard.”

“The fridge?” Pepper wondered. “How will you even get it to him?”

Peter pulled out the cream cheese and made his way back to the stove as Tony waggled his fingers. “I need to practice my portaling, anyway. He told me himself!”

“So it’s kind of his fault,” Peter added.

“Thank you.” Tony nodded in his direction.

“You can’t just go portaling my fridges into random people’s houses,” Pepper sighed, rubbing her face with her hand even as a smile flickered across her sharp face.

“He’s not random, he’s Stephen,” Peter said.

“And I’m a Mystic Artist,” Tony added. “I do what I want.”

“You aren’t a Mystic Artist.”

Tony looked hurt, and Peter laughed under his breath as he spread cream cheese in large globs across the bagel.

“May, back me up on this,” Pepper said.

“Sorry, I back with Tony. He practices magic…”

“Never thought I’d hear those words,” Peter muttered. He slid the egg off the edge of the spatula and pressed the edges of the bagel together, then sent the sandwich spinning onto a plate to the edge of the counter. He started in on the next--it’d go faster, now that the pan and toaster were hot.

“You don’t need anything else to add to the size of your head,” Pepper said.

“Stephen said he wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about it,” objected Peter, reaching for the spices as more eggs crackled in his buttered frying pan.

“Yeah. Doesn’t count as a seed of arrogance unless I announce it to the world.”

“Says Tony Stark, Iron Man,” May said, raising an eyebrow.

“Mystic Artist,” Tony added.

“Oh stop,” Pepper sighed.

Tony laughed, and Peter pointedly turned his gaze back to the eggs as the two of them gravitated toward each other.
No one spoke for a moment, enjoying the scent of Peter’s cooking as four sandwiches accumulated on the edge of the counter. Humming under his breath, Peter balanced the plates along his forearms. With a flick of his wrists, each went spinning across the counter to land before his family.

“Breakfast is served,” he said, dropping into a bow before sliding onto his own seat.

Mumbled thanks, and then there was only the sound of chewing as the others inhaled their sandwiches.

“Hm!” Tony mumbled, leaning over as to not get grease on his suit. “This is really good.”

May nodded, her mouth full of egg.

“Yeah,” Tony continued, swallowing. “You’re hired. Where’d you learn this?”

Peter smiled a bit. He licked the salt off his fingers, setting his sandwich down for a moment and spinning around on his stool. “From my uncle.”

A pause. May smiled.

“We used to make these all the time.” Peter gestured toward the somewhat messy kitchen. “And May’d yell at us for not cleaning up.”

“I’ll still yell at you; this is someone else’s place!”

Tony shook his head. “No.”

“You know this is your home, too,” Pepper elaborated, grinning at May.

Peter’s aunt was silent for a moment. Then; “I know.”

“I still prefer Queens,” Peter said with a shrug.

Tony laughed. “Yeah, I was gonna ask you. How’d the date go last night?”

Peter grinned, images of cards and bikes and, of course, Michelle Jones dancing across his memory. “Oh man,” he said, blushing a bit, “let me tell you that story.”

* * *

Tony straightened his tie one more time before stepping through the widening doors.

He didn’t squint as the lights exploded around him, as the voices clamored to be heard, as the applause ripped through the room. He lifted his chin and squared his shoulders, and his smile was genuine as he vaulted the stairs onto the raised stage. Saluting quickly to Happy, Tony stepped up to his podium.

He spread his arms, and the applause petered into silence. Tony waited for a moment, letting suspense draw him complete attention.

“Been a while since I’ve been in front of you,” he said finally, winking. “Don’t worry; nothing as groundbreaking as I am Iron Man this time.”

A smattering of laughter.
“I am alive,” he continued, “which many of you will be glad to hear, if somewhat weary about it. If you aren’t glad I’m alive, I assume you’re here for the magic.” Tony paused. “Yeah, the magic. The literal magic. Maybe you’ve got a side of Accords questions. Maybe you’re actually happy to see me, who knows.” He shrugged. “But you’re all here for the story.”

Tony smiled, reaching up to remove his glasses. He drummed his fingers against the wood of the podium and looked out over the throng of faces before him.

“And God,” Tony said, “let me tell you that story.”

---

“So, how did it go?” Ned asked, flopping over the top bunk to examine Peter.

“It was long, and tiring, and I’m somewhat annoyed Tony’s making me do it, but hey,” Peter replied. MJ punched him.

“By which you mean you are ecstatic to finally be working legally in Queens?” she said pointedly.

“Well, yeah, I’m happy about that,” Peter said, waving his hand. He then extended it to stroke Grease’s ears for a moment before MJ swatted him away, hugging the cat closer. “It’s just the first time I’ve gone up to some stranger and been like; ‘hey, yeah, so this fifteen-year-old that is me is Spider-Man, hello, I’d like to work with your police force.’”

“Pretty sure it’s the first time anyone’s done that,” Ned said.

“Well, yeah,” Peter laughed. “But it was still kinda hard.”

“For multiple reasons,” MJ added.

“But I felt safe.” Peter let himself collapse backward onto his mattress. It bounced slightly beneath them, the springs squeaking. “I didn’t think I was going to, but I felt safe.”

“You’re Spider-Man, dude!” Ned laughed. “You could take them all with one hand!”

Peter smiled at his friend, upside down and goggling. “Well, yeah. But there are other ways to be threatened, and I’ve never seen my identity as protected before.”

“Three cheers for Tony Stark,” MJ said, letting Grease squirm off her lap. The kitten ambled over to Peter to sniff at his nose. Her whiskers tickled Peter’s face, and he laughed, shoving her away.

“Three cheers indeed. Did you watch the conference?” Ned asked.

“Fuck yeah I did; I was in the audience.”

MJ hummed. “It was impressive. I didn’t know how he was going to be able to craft the story so it was complete without telling everyone about the Doctor or about Wakanda. But he did; brilliantly.”

“Yup,” Peter said. He smiled, remembering the gleam in Tony’s eye as he had wrapped every one of the people in that room around his finger.

“And he still thinks I could do it better…” MJ murmured, her voice so low it was only Peter’s enhanced hearing that picked it up.
“Yeah,” he said, sitting up. “How’s that going? You and Ned and Shuri over there saving the world; what’s happened?”

Ned rubbed his face, and when his hands came away he was smiling. Still upside-down, his hair reaching long toward the ground below, Ned said, “let *me* tell you that story, dude…”

* * *

The man was kind.

That was the first thing Peter noticed when he entered the cozy room. The man, this Dr. Rachels, looked friendly. Peter relaxed slightly, a bit embarrassed by the effect that simple fact had on him.

He looked over his shoulder at May, who waved through the closing door. It sealed lightly, not at all threatening.

Damn, he really was nervous.

“Hello,” Rachels said, extending a hand. “I assume this is your first time in a therapist’s office.”

Peter nodded, shaking the hand firmly. “Yup. Not sure how all of this goes down.”

“It’s for both of us to find out,” Rachels said. “We’ve got to figure out how best to help you, after all.”

Peter nodded. “Sounds good.”

He took a moment to look around, taking in the cozy atmosphere of the room; the many windows, the light walls, the soft background noise he couldn’t identify the source of. Nodding again, somewhat awkwardly, he sat down.

“How’d you learn about us, then?” the doctor wondered, sitting as well.

“A friend recommended you,” Peter replied honestly. He’d have to get used to doing that, or this wouldn’t help him.

“Did they get the help they needed?” Rachels asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Peter shrugged, again replying honestly, “I don’t know. He’s a doctor, too; I figure he knows the best.”

“Well, I’m flattered,” Rachels said with a grin. “Who is this doctor friend of yours?”

Peter took a breath. “Well…”

It was almost tangible, the way Rachels began to analyze, to shift modes, to become the doctor he was. “Yes?”

Peter drummed his fingers on his knees. “So, I’m about to tell you a ton of really crazy, weird, fucked up stuff.”

Rachels nodded, smiling again. “I assume.”

“And I know it’s your job, but I want to hear you say that you won’t tell anyone.”
The smile fell away to solemn genuinity. “You’re history is safe here, Peter.”

“I’m trusting you.”

Rachels put a hand to his chest. “And I know that, deeply. So trust me when I say you’re safe.”

Peter nodded, one more time.

“In that case,” he said, “let me tell you a story.”

* * *

“You have reached the New Avengers’ Compound. To whom need I direct you?”

“FRIDAY!”

FRIDAY turned her full attention to the call, letting the rest of the Compound run on autopilot for a moment. “Karen,” she greeted. “Does Peter need something?”

“No, I just wanted to talk to you.”

An elevator dinged. “Oh. Hello, then!”

“Hello! It’s been a while.”

“That it has.” Weeks and weeks of silence from the other AI, aside from the brief occasional conversation through Peter. And FRIDAY had missed her. “What have you been doing?”

“Researching the NYCPD,” Karen replied. “Peter’s aunt was going to confiscate the suit; I’m Peter’s excuse for keeping it near him.”

“Just in case.” The boss had done the same, wearing his watch at all times. Thinking of rules, of code, FRIDAY remembered a certain protocol; “did you modify your programming again?”

Karen somehow managed to sound sheepish. “I did not want Peter to hear. It’s a surprise.”

FRIDAY laughed through the whir of the air conditioning. “’It’ is a surprise to me, too.”

“So far, it would be a surprise for almost everyone.”

“What would?” FRIDAY demanded.

Karen chuckled. “I have been in contact with Ms. Jones--”

For all FRIDAY’d been eager to hear the full story, she couldn’t help but interrupt. “Really?”

“Yeah. We talk, sometimes. Make sure that Peter is not being an idiot.”

Ah. FRIDAY could understand that; sometimes, an AI needed a proper body to get things done. Not that Pepper or MJ were mere meatsacks, of course; far from it. More like comrades. Family.

“I’m sure it’s an ongoing job. You need all the help you can get!” FRIDAY sent a quick clip of her archived footage--the one of Peter punching himself--and Karen laughed.

“That it is! Although I am probably a bad influence…“
FRIDAY agreed there. “So, what did you and MJ speak of?”

“She’s going to Colorado in a week to see her grandparents. But she said that they wanted to meet Peter, too. And then she said that one thing had led to another and soon enough, everyone was invited.”

FRIDAY was silent for a moment, whirring through that. “So… MJ got us all invited to her family’s home in the Rocky Mountains?”

“Yup.”

“And you’re telling me about this…”

“Because I had hoped we could work together to coordinate it ourselves. And then it can be a sort of surprise gift?”

Karen’s voice was eager and nervous, and FRIDAY thought maybe Peter’d had just as much influence on her as she'd had on him.

“Shall I contact Ms. Potts?” FRIDAY asked, already surfing for images of the mountainous area.

“I hope to surprise Pepper, too; she needs a vacation three times as much as everyone else.”

FRIDAY laughed. “Oh,” she said, ”let me tell you that story.”

* * *

“Ned, give me the goddamn cord, it’s my turn to DJ!” A thump echoed from the backseat as some child’s hand hit something hard. Hopefully accidentally.

Tony sang louder over the sound of chaos, his hands tightening on the steering wheel.

“I can’t believe I ever let you talk me into this,” Pepper muttered from the passenger’s seat. She had her knees zipped up under her parka and her eyes fixed on the road before them, and Tony took a moment to admire her profile before looking back at the windshield. “A road trip; just kill me now.”

Tony paused his off-key screeching to clarify, “this is not a road trip. I’m Tony Stark; I don’t go on road trips.”

Pepper pivoted in her chair to indicate the van behind them, where May and Happy sat beside each other in the pilot chairs and the kids crammed together in the far back with Rhodes glowering uncomfortably from between them. “You mean this chaos? Our family stuck in a smelly vehicle on a long-ass route across country?”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Are you implying I, Tony Stark, Iron Man, would subject myself to the humiliation of driving a van?”

Pepper’s irritated glower needed no accompanying words.

The stereo shattered to silence for a moment, the unmistakable sound of an AUX cord coming unplugged, before the music crackled back on. Tony twisted in his seat to glare at the kids. They froze in the middle of their fistfight, looking at him guilty, but not guilty enough for Tony to think they’d do anything other than resume when he turned around again. He rolled his eyes and went back to the road.
Pepper was still grumbling. “We could have bought plane tickets. For everyone. *Twice.* And I could have stayed and worked with the investors for another three days. Or, *or,* you could have portaled us!”

“Stop whining. And besides, I’m not good enough to portal across continents, yet,” Tony said. He raised his voice over the music, which faded in and out again as he spoke, and he tuned out the arguing from two seats behind.

“Then Stephen could have done it!”

“We don’t bother the Sorcerer Supreme when he’d dealing with all of the new apprentice brats,” Tony said. He’d learned that rule recently; Stephen was still figuring out how to be a teacher, and Tony hadn’t realized what it truly meant to the man. Stephen was still figuring out how to help people help him, too.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “All the ‘new apprentice brats’ like you?”

Tony pressed a hand to his chest. “Excuse you, I am a ‘new apprentice asshole.’”

“Wong, then.”

“You want to ask that man if he’ll portal us to a random mountain home? Thought not.”

Pepper grumbled more, and Tony smiled lightly, extending a hand to rest it against her shoulder. “Hey,” he said softly. “Relax. Vision and Stephen have Avenging covered for the week; it’s alright to forget the company, to forget the power, to forget the world for a while. You deserve it.”

“I just…” Pepper sighed. “What if everything goes to pieces again?”

“Maybe it will.” Tony shrugged. “But you’re here with us. I’m here with you. Peter’s here and May and Happy and Rhodley are here and the kids are here, and I think that might be worth it all.”

Pepper was quiet for a moment, staring toward the long stretch of landscape sprawling before them, the Appalachians stretching up toward the cloudy sky. Tony shifted his hand so it was clasping hers. The base of Ned’s pop music thrummed through the van, making the energy around them feel like boulders and lichen.

And then the quarreling friends pulled the AUX cord out again.

“Oh my *lord,*” Tony growled at them. “Just play *Hamilton* and be done with it!”

“That’s what I was *trying* to do,” Peter said, glowering at Ned.

“C’mon, give Maroon 5 a chance!”

“No. Lin. Manuel. Miranda.” Peter forcefully wrestled the cord away from his friend, who relinquished it under the stare of Iron Man.

“Dibs on being Ham,” Tony said.

“Only if I’m Burr,” Peter agreed.

“Washington!” Rhodley raised a hand.

Pepper smirked. “Angelica.”
Tony laughed, and Peter started the music. As the first iconic notes of *Hamilton* exploded into the van, they dissolved into historical rap and volume at the expense of quality singing.

As he roared the words over everyone else, Tony thought he’d rather be no one else, nowhere else, with no one else.

*We’ll tell the story of tonight.*

* * *

Peter woke of a nightmare on the third night. And for the first time, he was truly glad.

In the open grass on the border of Missouri and Kansas, they stood and stared in wonder.

The sky had cleared during the hours Peter had slept. When he’d jerked awake, his eyes had found the window, and the fear of the dream had fled in the face of awe.

“*Guys,*” he breathed. “Wake up. Wake up now.”

He hadn’t heard the drowsy, questioning words, or the sounds of seatbelts clicking open. He hadn’t heard car doors closing, or the crunch of dry grass beneath his feet and then beneath his knees.

Because the *stars.*

From horizon to horizon, a snowglobe of black and silver, they stretched. Large and small, swaths and emptiness: no inch of sky looked the same as another. Color prickled at his perception, blues and purples and reds and greens he couldn’t pick out directly, but he saw reminiscent at the edges of stars and in the halo of the moon.

It took his breath away.

Peter heard the inhales on the wind, and turned his gaze to the people surrounding him.

And this, too, was exactly as he’d imagined. Just like Wakanda, but so different, for they were *here,* truly *here.*

May was smiling up at sky, her eyes wide, the stars gleaming in the tears within them.

Pepper stood behind her, a camera hanging forgotten around her neck, just taking it all in with the shine of the moon on her hair.

Ned had sat down hard with his hands covering his mouth in awe, eyes like saucers as MJ sketched and sketched and sketched beside him.

Rhodes was quietly whistling a calming, perfect tune, his fingers tracing through the sky as though he could touch the stars, pointing and tracing each constellation.

And Tony stood frozen. Simply frozen, his expression unreadable.

Peter’s feet moved of their own accord. They took him across the grass, beneath the stars, and to his father’s side. Lightly, Peter laced his fingers with Tony’s.

The man’s gaze snapped to him, and Peter smiled.
Tony swallowed. Then he smiled back.

The stars watched them, and Peter thought he could see them moving. Infinitesimally, he thought he could see them inching across the sky as time ticked through them all. He thought he could taste and smell and feel their cold light. He thought he could hear them singing.

Tony reached a hand toward the stars.

As Peter stood there, the magic of two worlds mingling in orange and white, he thought that maybe he’d be okay.

And words curled up his throat, off his tongue. To the stars, to the sky, to time and space and a future no longer terrifying, Peter spoke. “Let me tell you a story.”

He would have such a story to tell.

And he knew that now, now, he was ready.

Chapter End Notes

....

Guys...

This is it. Next chapter is the epilogue. And then... yeah.

Hope you enjoyed this. Hope it made all of you who dared me to end it sappilly happy. Hope... you liked. :)
Mark Alexander closed his notebook with a frustrated huff, snapping the shaft of his pen between its covers. He debated throwing the useless thing into the lake, which sat unfairly still and gorgeous in the lush Central Park grass.

Shifting on the cold metal of the bench, Mark sighed and settled for chucking the thing carelessly onto the mesh beside him. For four weeks, he’d been throwing ideas at that stupid book. But nothing stuck, even if he’d found thousands of ways to fix the broken link in his story that had emerged like a stain on a tablecloth. None of the explanations felt right.

His climax was… unsatisfying. Sure, the action was epic, the crescendo of plot was well defined, but it was lacking an emotion that Mark couldn’t put his finger on. He’d narrowed the problem to a few characters. They weren’t tied together enough, they weren’t important enough, there wasn’t enough emotion or catharsis.

And Mark couldn’t seem to fix it.

Blowing out a breath, Mark slumped his chin into his palm and looked out across the lake. On the other side, the bike path wound into the trees, and he watched the same people circle through again and again.

He had a king, he had a hero, he had a villain. He had a friendship there, he had a romance on the side, he had an epic moment of broken lowness that had felt so good to write.

But something was missing.

And Mark hated the defeat that brought to him, hated how he wanted to quit after four weeks. He was supposed to be over this; the novel had been in process for almost two years now, and he was supposed to have this all figured out.

“HI DAD!” A high voice screamed from the bike path.

Mark looked up, a smile flickering across his face. The explosion of red curls bobbing on an excited toddler atop a vibrantly teal bike almost made him shield his eyes.

“Hey Sasha!” he called back.

She lifted a hand off her handlebars to wave, and the bike started to list. Mark drew in a sharp breath, but Sasha quickly caught the handle and swerved back into the center lane. Another bike whizzed
by, carrying an lightly suspended Justin, and Cara pedaled along a few feet behind. Mark watched them pass.

Usually, he’d be over there with them, telling bad knock-knock jokes every time he passed a family member and laughing at Justin’s eyerolls. But no, he was going to figure this out.

Today.

And if not…

Mark looked back at his notebook, tapping his fingers on the armrest digging into his side. He kicked his legs up onto the bench and pulled the book out from beneath them. Clicking his pen open with a sigh, Mark flipped through the worn, ink-stained pages until he found a blank one.

He lost himself in scribbles for a while, sketching out new scenes, new relationships, even a new character or two.

A romance? He could work it into a triangle earlier in the plot… but there was too much age difference; he couldn’t be comfortable with that.

A lost mother? Perhaps to further the connection between hero and villain?
But no, that was hefty and unrealistic, and Mark didn’t want something in the past. The backstories of his characters were already tragic and awkward enough; he wanted something immediate and current.

And, yes, he wanted something that wasn’t so much work to revise, sue him.

Mark went back to word-doodling.

Time became nothing but the turning of his pages as he tried idea after idea, formed plan after plan, and scratched each and every one of them out. His pages grew dark with purple ink. His fountain pen stained his fingers, and he must have licked them at some point to cause the tang of chemicals in his mouth. Ignoring everything, Mark wrote.

Which was why he didn’t notice them until they were so near him.

“And then Ned just looked at me, smiling this little smile, and waltzed away,” a bright voice said.

“Ned, waltzing? Shuri’s a bad influence on that boy.”

Mark knew that voice; everyone knew that voice. He whipped his head around.

Yes, that was Tony Stark, strolling through Central Park on a warm summer day with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, wearing a band T-shirt. And beside him—was that--

“Right? But I can’t be annoyed by it; they’re so cute. Ned’s hopelessly pining, by the way.”

Yup. That was the kid. From the plane to Wakanda from months ago.

The kid… who’d been looking for his father.

Tony Stark snorted, reaching out to ruffle the boy’s curls. “Really can’t imagine that. Anyway, he’s waltzing away.”

The kid swatted Stark’s hand away, grinning up at him with easy familiarity. “Right, and he’s pretending to be so cool and calm and whatever, he opens this hot pink umbrella and tries to walk
out of the door.”

The boy on the plane. Peter—Spider-Man.

Mark’s jaw dropped open.

Peter continued his story, openly laughing now. “AND IT GETS CAUGHT IN THE DOORFRAME! And just he falls over, flat, with the umbrella sticking up above him like gravity suddenly flipped on his side!”

Tony Stark let out a howl of laughter, pausing for a moment to lean over, one hand braced against his knee. “Like Mary Poppins? Just sideways like that?”

“Exactly!”

“Oh my God—” Stark choked on another laugh—“please tell me you got a picture of it.”

“MJ drew it.”

“Of course she did. I finished the last of her grandparents cookies, by the way.”

Mark could genuinely say, by this point, that he had no idea what was going on.

Peter glared at Stark, jabbing him in the shoulder with an extended finger. “What? We only got back like a week ago!”

“There weren’t that many cookies,” the older man muttered. “There were four dozen.”

“You think I can’t stress-eat four dozen cookies in a week? Pepper helped. And those cookies were divine. I tried to reproduce them, but…”

“For a chemical engineer, you aren’t all that good at baking.”

Stark looked offended. “‘All that good?’ I am downright terrible, I’ll have you know.”

The kid that was Spider-Man, that couldn’t possibly be Spider-Man, rolled his eyes. “Oh, right, sorry. Excuse me for overselling your cooking skills.”

“Go big or go home, baby.”

“For your shortcomings, too?”

Stark smirked, but it was softer than the one Mark saw on the news. Kind and familiar. “Of course.”

“I’ll make sure to tell Stephen you said that,” Peter said smugly.

What could have been honest terror burst in Iron Man’s eyes. “Don’t you fucking dare, kid. He’s currently winning the snark-off, anyway.”

“I think you’re the only one aware of this unofficial snark-off,” Spider-Man said.

“Which is why it’s so irritating that he’s winning.”

“That’s just cuz his only method of communication is witty and/or self-deprecating sarcasm.” Peter raised a pointed eyebrow at the man next to him. “Remind you of anyone?”
“Oh shut up, you,” Stark chuckled. “The wizard’s waiting.”

Spider-Man grinned as Stark swung an arm around his shoulders, the two of them moving on through the park and away from Mark. It was such an easy gesture, and Mark could almost forget they were superheros, could almost see himself and Justin walking away.

* * *

*I’m trying to find him. He’s been abducted.*

*My father.*

Stark had been kidnapped from his trial a few months ago, hadn’t he? Mark remembered seeing or reading about it at some point. He’d been preoccupied at the time, though, coordinating his trip to Wakanda and getting through the restrictive travel laws. He’d needed to verify his travel visa no less than three times.

And on a plane to Wakanda, he’d met a boy looking for his abducted father.

“No way,” Mark murmured under his breath.

Then he was on his feet, frantically scrabbling for his notebook, clutching it to his chest and staring after the retreating figures. “No. Fucking. Way."

Stark didn’t have a son. He *didn’t.*

But...

Mark looked at the notebook in his hands.

A lost parent was too complex. Biology would change the story too much, give it a different feel, and he’d have to write it into the already hefty tragic backgrounds.

*Oh.*

His hero was inspired by Spider-Man already, anyway.

Mark sat down on the bench and opened his notebook, licking the end of his pen and setting it to the page.

He didn’t put it down for several hours.

And when he left the park, he had a well-defined climax and a satisfying catharsis between two characters he’d finally found the relationship between.

*(After Armageddon, Mark Alexander would step into existence to find his book a best-seller).*

* * *

The sky was dark over Queens when a kitten climbed out of a third-story apartment window. Looking down at the trash-filled sidestreet below, the animal flicked its tail and began its descent, skating like a shadow over the windowsills and balconies around it.

It took a moment to shake out its calico fur upon reaching the pavement, glancing back up at the
window that now lay ever-so-slightly open. The summer air was warm; the boy inside that room wouldn’t be woken by any draft.

Whiskers twitching, the kitten picked its way through the street, claws clicking on the cobbles. It paused to shake a piece of litter from where it clung to its paw, then ducked into the ally extending between two more apartment complexes.

It settled in the center of the abandoned street to wait.

And in the moment before a beam of opalescent light left an inlay of runes in the Queen’s pavement, the kitten’s eyes flashed a deep, emerald green.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Hehehe bifrost

"The end."

Shit.

It's the end, guys. 94 chapters, 700 pages, 230k words; this behemoth, this colossus, this goliath of a fic is... done. DONE! And because it's done, I get to make a sappy speech and a "what's next?" update so stick around!

*Clears throat* LEMME START OUT WITH THIS: Thank. You. Thank you all so much for reading, for getting to the end, for supporting and encouraging my little endeavor through all the chaos. It's not overselling it to say I wouldn't have made it without you; all the feedback and corrections and reactions and love got me through the moments of writers block and lack of motivation and uninspired whining and got us
here! To the end!
I'm so happy to have found my people, the people who cry over fictional characters and will read/write stories about a father-son relationship universally accepted, an AI friendship we didn't see coming, a feminist-nerd romance we can't wait to be cannon, a princess-spider crime-fighting-duo we all just made up, and a sorcerer-scientist snark-off we're hoping to see more of. These characters, these people, are my role models and my support and my friends, and I was so happy to share an adventure with them, and to share that with you!
Thank you, all the new friends I've made! Thank you, all the fellow nerds and fangirls/boys that love these idiots as much as I do. Thank you for letting me share this love without judging, with understanding, with happiness of your own! Most off all, thank you for enjoying my story.

So, one last time, thank you, thank you, for reading.

Now for the less let's-make-fnf-sob bit: Where the hell do we go from here????

Endgame saved my soul, then broke my heart, then crushed everything and left it to be rebuilt. So that's what I'm doing! There's a fix-it, BECAUSE WE ALL KNOW I'LL HAVE TO CREATE THE LONGEST, MOST INTRICATE, MOST IN-YOUR-FACE FIX-IT TO EVER FIX-IT. And I have. In progress. XD So check that out if you want!

Also, a warning: I have fallen down the pit of IronStrange and I can't get up, so there's that.

Yeah! If you made it through all this, drop a comment and let me know what you want to see next--I'm open to new ideas, if you've got 'em! (Though of course, no promises! XD). Again, thank you so much, and I love you all! :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!