Stars, Hide Your Fires

by YellowDistress

Summary

Starks didn't create beautiful things.
They created weapons that destroyed beautiful things. That was the way it had always been.

But when the four-year-old's wide eyes blinked at him, Tony was struck with the sudden realization that maybe that had been a lie.

Notes

I didn't mean to create an entire plot for this story, yet here we are my friends. So, if any of you have read anything I've written before, then you know I'm also working on my other story. Don't worry, I'm still working on that one too and updates will keep coming. I plan to take turns updating each story, but I've got this one plotted as well, so writer's block won't be an issue. They'll both get finished.

JUST A QUICK NOTE: In this story, May and Ben don't exist. I know, I know, I freaking love May too. But I didn't think I could go through with killing her again.

Hope you all enjoy! Let me know what you think with a comment. <3
Thirty-five was proving to be the age of aches.

Tony remembered a time, not so long ago, when waking up and existing didn’t hurt so much. When his used and abused body didn’t complain after a long night of drinking and messing around with too many substances to be healthy. His muscles hadn’t pulled and his head wouldn’t pound behind his eyes, just from the morning sun slamming into them. He missed when hangovers disappeared by ten.

He pretended though. Pretended thirty-five didn’t hurt.

There was a warm, foreign body lying beside him in bed and Tony rolled over, away from the heat. September in Malibu still held a bit of strength and even with the air conditioning kicked on, he felt too hot. Though, it could have very easily been his body trying to sweat the remnants of the night before out.

Opening his eyes just enough, Tony could see the woman’s bare back. She was blonde, lying on her stomach, the blankets stopping just above her waist. Sherry? Shannon? Sarah? Tony couldn’t recall. She had been handsy at the party though and almost relentless, so the result was rather typical.

“Tony,” A voice snapped.

He shut his eyes immediately, almost like a child. Pretending to feign sleep as the familiar voice tried his name again. Footsteps crossed the wood floor towards him and he felt someone grab the blanket over his body harshly and yank.

Tony rolled over immediately, and the intruder, Rhodey, let out a sound of disgust and looked up at the ceiling. The woman startled awake, not hesitating in hogging the blankets to cover herself. Rhodey continued to avert his eyes, ordering, “Tony, what the hell!? Put some clothes on.”

“Well, you can’t blame me,” Tony argued, leaning forward and grabbing his boxers from the floor, his head rushing at the movement, “You found me and my friend in a rather compromising
position. You were the one ballsy enough to rip the blanket off.”

Tony slipped the clothing on and Rhodey huffed in annoyance, shooting the woman an apologetic glance as she stood, wrapping the blankets around herself and retreating to the bathroom in the corner. Rhodey sighed, once the third party was gone, “Well, pardon me for thinking you’d be dressed. Especially since we agreed you’d be up and ready by nine.”

“What time is it now?” Tony rubbed his face.

“Nine.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head, “Just get up and get dressed. You have to give the weapon presentation to the freshies before they leave for the field next week.”

Tony groaned, “You’re perfectly capable of doing that, Rhodes!”

Rhodey picked up a pillow and smacked Tony on the back of the head harshly, causing the man’s head to spin even worse than it already was. He yanked it from his friend’s grip, throwing it across the room. Rhodey said, “I didn’t design the weapon. So, no, Tony. I’m not capable of doing it. Now get up or I’ll call Pepper.”

Tony hesitantly stood. Ignoring the way his body creaked, he avoided his own bathroom, opting to use one of the guest ones instead. Despite what seemed to be a time crunch, he took his time in the shower, trying to wake himself and maybe sober up a bit. There was bound to be alcohol still left in his system.

It was a vicious cycle. And he knew that. He wasn’t twenty-one anymore. The blur of nights out was shielded behind the mindset of “it’s not a big deal”. Because he was grown. He knew it was unhealthy at this point. The way his hands shook and the craving for an escape when things got the least bit stressful. Tony wasn’t stupid.

He was, however, the type to ignore the issues in his decisions. Pretended they weren’t there. He wasn’t blind by any means, but he pretended to be.
Once he was dried and had slipped on one of his many suits, Tony made his way downstairs. He supposed the woman had left, because her clothes were gone from his bedroom floor and he was slightly relieved that the awkwardness of not remembering her name hadn’t been addressed. Rhodey was waiting in the kitchen, ibuprofen already sitting out with a tall glass of water.

As he popped the pills down and chugged the water, Rhodey spoke, “Tony, you’re too old for this.”

“I’m too old for a lot of things,” Tony replied around his water as he finished it off, “But having a good time is not one of them.”

Tony ignored the frustration of being lectured by his friend. He was used to it. It was received regularly from Rhodey, Pepper, and Obie. And despite responding in the least caring way he could muster, they still tried and tried and tried.

Ignoring was easier.

The car was waiting for them out front. Happy opened the door for him and as he climbed inside, he was surprised to see Pepper waiting. Rhodey followed in after and Tony looked between them, humming in surprise, “Wow, no one told me this was a family outing.”

Pepper didn’t look up from the papers in her lap, “I told you three days ago.”

“Was I, per chance-“

“You were not.”

“That explains it.”

Tony turned his nose upward as the car went into motion. His stomach churned slightly and he shut his eyes, trying to ease it a bit. Los Angeles airbase would be a little over an hour drive and that was triggering enough. Pepper clicked her tongue from where she sat across from him, “I told you not to go out.”
Rhodey scoffed, “I tried to tell him, but as usual, I was ignored.”

Holding up his index finger, Tony interjected, “Silence please. I’m spiraling.”

“Oh, I believe it,” Pepper finally looked up and Tony opened his eyes to look at her as she questioned, “Did Sally make it home alright?”

Tony blinked, his brows furrowing. Sally? Way off.

“Rhodey scared her away when he exposed us this morning.”

Rhodey let out a disturbed sound, turning to face out the window.

Silence followed, besides the occasional word. Mostly because Tony didn’t want anyone to speak and a grumpy Tony was a force to be reckoned with. He let his head press against the glass window, listening to the hum of the car on the highway. Anytime actual work came up, he regretted it. Then he wanted to call Obie to do it. And he’d typically realize his father was right about him all along and hell no, he’d never say that out loud.

“How did I manage to raise such a useless child?”

“Well, old man, I hate to break it to you, but you didn’t raise me.”

That had been one of the many arguments that had ended with objects breaking and his mother having to intervene.

The nausea almost became overwhelming by the time they had arrived at the Los Angeles Airforce Base. Despite dreading getting the presentation done with a hangover, he knew the quicker he did, the quicker he could lie down and pretend he was never going to repeat such actions again.

Coming to a halt in front of the hangar, Rhodey climbed out without hesitation. Before Tony could however, Pepper stopped him with a hand on his wrist and held up what appeared to be a
magazine. Tony’s eyes squinted on the image, before he realized it was of himself, falling over, more than likely inebriated, because he didn’t even remember such a thing happening.

“I look rough,” Tony admitted, meeting Pepper’s eyes, “But it’s nothing they haven’t photographed before.”

Pepper sighed, dropping the paper, “We’ve got a company that needs a good face. Obadiah is pissed.”

“He’d be bored without my publicity scandals, Pep.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

She released him and Tony rolled his eyes, climbing from the vehicle.

It was the usual gig. Present the weapon. Show them the inner workings. Tony didn’t feel it was one of their finest or shiniest, but Obie had been excited when it had sold on the market. Just a silly rocket splitter, to hopefully expose mountainous enemy bases. Nothing impressive and if there was something Tony liked, it was impressive things. Things that were new. Never seen.

So this…This was boring in the worst sort of way.

He ignored how his hands shook when he spoke. Not from anxiety, but from the things that he used to drown.

The soldiers listened intently. Tony was charismatic. He looked like air, and they couldn’t see what Pepper and Rhodey could see. But the two people in the room that could look through him like glass made his stomach sick. He didn’t like that. When people got so close they knew. But Pepper and Rhodey had to know at this point and he didn’t think he’d survive if he cut them out like all the rest, so he dealt with it.

Life was made of that pain.

When he finished, he stepped aside as several of the men came forward to admire the not so
impressive machinery. Rhodey strode over, smiling, looking relieved that he had managed to get Tony there and get the presentation completed. Like he had done some sort of job, dragging Tony out of bed that morning.

“I always get it done,” Tony shrugged.

Rhodey laughed, “Can’t blame me for worrying.”

“Have some faith.”

“I live off of it.”

Tony’s phone rang, echoing across the hangar with a loud squeal. He jumped, almost surprised, because most of the time if someone needed his number, he gave them Pepper’s. Glancing over at the woman, he saw her in conversating with a few of the soldiers. Stepping away from Rhodey, he pulled the phone from his pocket and looked to find an unsaved number.

New York…?

What the hell?

Tony answered, a slight harshness in his tone, “Hello?”

A woman’s voice spoke from the other end, “Is this Mr. Stark?”

“Yes,” Tony answered. The pounding in his head was getting worse. It was thinning his patience. Turning away from Rhodey and taking a few strides to get out of earshot, he continued, annoyance seeping into each word, “And you’re calling my private line. So, I suggest you start talking fast before I ruin whoever handed it out.”

“Sir,” She sounded slightly offended, but mostly shielded it with a business-trained tone, “My name is Heather Reed with the Department of Social Services in New York. Your office forwarded me this number because of the importance of this phone call.”
Weird. But not the weirdest phone call he had ever received. His feet moved without his permission, taking the usual pacing that calmed his anxiety. Rhodey had turned his attention elsewhere, but somehow he felt like he was being pried into. He asked the woman, “And why is Social Services calling me?”

“I was hoping to schedule an appointment for you to come into our Queens office at some point in the very near future. The situation is...of the utmost importance.”

“Be more specific,” Tony ordered, tone flat yet carrying Howard Stark’s hardness.

She tumbled over her next sentence, “It’s not something that can be discussed over the phone, Mr. Stark.”

“Fine,” Tony shrugged, “Then I guess there’s no reason to continue our conversation.”

“Mr. Stark,” Her tone did a complete one-eighty, going from anxious to frustrated in a matter of milliseconds, “When I say it is important, I mean it.”

“You want me to fly across the country without giving me an adequate reason. You’ll have to excuse me for being finicky.”

There was a horrifically long pause. She sighed and Tony could imagine her leaning over some desk in a small New York office, a hand on her forehead, because most people looked like that after having a conversation with Tony Stark. His anger was receding, replaced with a strange worry. What was so important...?

“We have...” Another pause, “We have a child in our system. A child that we believe...you could have fathered.”

That...That was not what he was expecting.

Really, he didn’t know what was going to come out of her mouth, but that had definitely not been in the realm of coherent brain patterns. Tony backtracked, frozen in his pacing, palms immediately becoming drenched in anxious perspiration. Surely, he had heard her wrong...Because that was a
ridiculous notion.

Then his hands tightened and he felt a sudden urge to throw his phone into the concrete.

“What?”

She started to say it again, but Tony didn’t listen. He knew he had heard right.

Instead he defended, as if he had done something terrible; been caught with a bloody knife in his hand, “Do you know how many pregnancy claims I’ve heard over the years? And did you know that one-hundred percent of them have been false?”

“We wouldn’t call unless we had probable evidence.”

She took a breath…

“If you refuse, the child will officially become a ward of the state.”

Tony felt…a foreign anger fill his stomach. It wasn’t like when something didn’t go his way or someone was getting on his nerves. It was almost…territorial in a way. Shaking his head as if she could see him, he conceded, “No I…I can be there around five or six this afternoon, will you be in your office?”

Details were exchanged and the second Tony hung up the phone, he was taking long strides across the room towards Pepper. She was alone now, typing on her phone, probably replying to some e-mail or another, never a moment of calm. She glanced up as he approached, but there must have been a disturbed look in Tony’s eyes, because when her face lifted again, she looked worried.

“What?” She questioned, “What did you do?”

Tony gulped. What hadn’t he done?
Telling Pepper couldn’t have gone less awful.

It had resulted in them abandoning Rhodey at the airbase, catching the private jet, and almost immediately Tony found himself in the sky headed to New York. He sat slumped in his seat, fingers on his lips as he stared blankly out the window, thoughts berating him but not producing anything coherent for him to grasp onto. Just shouts and screams and worry.

This. This was a lie.

What else could it be? Tony was always careful. Always. Pepper must not have thought so though, because she had called their press agent the moment they had climbed aboard the plane, trying to divert the press away from them just for the time being, until they could get things straightened out.

The woman moved towards him, Tony could see out of the corner of his eye. Tony had thrown a lot at her since she had come to work for him, but this was possibly one of the most strenuous situations he had ever thrust on her shoulders. Shooting his eyes towards her, like a guilty child, he took in her tired appearance and the way she frowned at him.

Even so, she was inviting.

“I should call Obadiah,” Pepper sighed.

Tony shook his head, “No. He’ll meddle and we don’t even know if this is true.”

“Could it be true?” Pepper’s voice was laced with a tone that made it sound like she was talking to a two-year-old.

Tony scoffed, turning back to face the sky that had suddenly become more inviting than she was, “I don’t fucking know.”

“If so, who’s the mother?”
Throwing out a hand, he replied sharply, “Pepper, I’ve slept with two different women just this week. There’s no one partner I can pinpoint, especially without knowing how old the kid is.”

Pepper gave no sense of pity. Instead she leaned against the armrest and sounded like she was thinking out loud, “Why would the child be with social services?”

“Dunno,” Tony tried to sound like he didn’t care, because he didn’t, he couldn’t, not about some hypothetical kid, “Maybe the mother is a coke addict. A lot of models are and that’s usually the women I run into in New York.”

“What if the kid is yours?”

“Probably isn’t.”

“But, if it turns out to be true, we need an agenda,” Pepper argued.

Tony couldn’t hold in his shout, the rapid questions causing an explosion, “Then I’ll figure it out!”

Pepper didn’t even flinch. Tony shook his head, pushing himself up and walking towards the mini-bar. The drink was bitter, but not as bitter as the blank expression on Pepper’s face.

The remainder of the flight was then spent itching for another shot. Which he refused, knowing very well what it could mean to walk into a DSS office smelling like fresh alcohol. Pepper carried on business like usual, and if Tony didn’t know better, he’d feel like it was one of their usual business trips. Because she asked nothing more of the hypothetical kid.

He paced again. A lot. Because it was easier. It was calming.

It numbed without the alcohol.

Hours were wasted like that. With pacing. With Pepper carrying on. Because that was how it worked and Tony just wanted to be alone. He couldn’t do this, whatever this was. Disbelief and denial were reigning, but he didn’t know this fear could be possible. A terror he had never felt before in his life.
It didn’t get any better when they finally landed.

It was odd to get into a car that Happy wasn’t driving, but they were picked up nonetheless and brought to Queens. Even before getting out, he could tell the office was closing for the day, but Heather Reed had promised to stay late for them to arrive and true to her word, they were buzzed in, even when two employees were leaving for the day.

Heather Reed was a tall woman, and Tony had thought Pepper was tall before meeting Heather. Her face was littered with freckles and wrinkles had formed around her eyes. She smiled politely at both Tony and Pepper when they entered her office, shaking their hands and gesturing for them to take the two seats in front of her desk. She then moved around it, and as Tony imagined, the room was a cramped New York office.

She lowered herself into her chair and breathed, sounding slightly surprised, “I’m immensely relieved you were able to come in so soon, Mr. Stark.”

“Well, I’m relieved you don’t sound as frustrated with me as you did over the phone,” Tony hummed in response. He could have offered a few choice words, but that seemed dangerous to throw at the woman that was holding a file on his possible child between her fingers.

Instead of seeming angry though, she chuckled, “Please excuse my words earlier. I didn’t mean to get that way, but I’ve been very invested in this child’s case, so I wasn’t thinking professionally.”

Tony understood. Things got that way for him.

She then cleared her throat, “I suppose I should start from the very basics, Mr. Stark. Do you recall meeting a woman named Mary Fitzpatrick in the year 2000, approximately in December?”

He could feel Pepper’s eyes trained on him as he dug through his brain. 2000 was a blur, really it had been one big party and the only reason the company had survived a lot of the nineties and 2000 was because of Obie. Shaking his head back and forth, Tony spoke softly…a bit guiltily…

“No, I don’t.”
The woman didn’t react outwardly, just nodded in understanding and reached into the folder on her desk. She pulled out a small picture and held it for Tony to take. He took it gently between his fingers, as if it would turn to ash right before his eyes.

As soon as he saw her green eyes, his mind clicked.

“Oh shit,” Tony breathed, “She was…She was a geneticist.”

_Oh God, you idiot. You idiot. Christmas, you dumbass. It was Christmas._

“And so was her husband, Richard Parker,” Heather provided. Tony and Pepper must have looked horrified because she held up a hand in calming, “She wasn’t married at the time.”

She then intertwined her fingers on the table and explained, “The situation is this, Mr. Stark: we currently have a four-year-old boy who has been in our care for the past two months. His parents died in a plane crash and he had no living relatives. A blood-test was performed during a routine check-up and it seemed his blood-type was incompatible with that of Richard’s.”

Tony’s jaw set tightly…

“You’ve had this kid in your care for two months and it took you this long to contact me?”

Her face didn’t change. So much like Pepper. Able to take his word filled blows, “We had to start from scratch to find a possible biological father. We asked old friends of Mary’s where she was around the time of Peter’s conception. It seems she and Richard were on a ‘break’ in their relationship at that point. She had mentioned to some friends around New Year’s that she had, had a fling with the owner of Stark Industries. Right after, she rekindled her relationship with Richard.”

Tony could only shake his head in disbelief as Heather continued, “Because the child was a few weeks premature at birth, the timeline was somewhat askew. We wanted to ask you to willingly give us a sample of your DNA so we could perform a paternity test and the necessary steps could be taken towards placing the child in a comfortable environment.”

He hesitated briefly. Only briefly. But an angry fire was blooming. Maybe not at Heather. At himself, but she was there and she was the only person that he could blame.
“Fine,” he snapped, “Swab me. Do whatever the hell you want, but you had better hope that kid isn’t mine. You took way too long to figure this out, I ought to sue everyone here.”

Pepper elbowed him. He didn’t even get the satisfaction of the woman’s reaction, because she remained stoic.

Somewhere between there and leaving, he was brought into an adjoining room where the inside of his cheek was swabbed. When the new lady, a lady he hadn’t seen before, told him the test could take a few weeks, he had ordered darkly, “Rush it. I don’t care how much it costs, I want it here as soon as possible. I’ll pay whoever I have to.”

The walls were closing in, but Tony didn’t notice. He was ready to claw them down with his bare hands.

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Tony didn’t know why he chose to torture himself further.

There was really no reason to. The day had been full of unnerving events. Unreal events. Then night had fallen and lavish hotels were always nice, but Tony had grown numb to them some time ago. He had his laptop pulled up close to where he sat on the couch in the suite, a news article, two months old, displayed on the screen. It flashed off his eyes as he scrolled, mind trying to wrap around the time frame and the possibility…

A plane crash. A fucking plane crash had killed Richard and Mary Parker two months ago. An unnamed child was orphaned, because minors and all that shit.

He stared at Mary’s picture, remembering the green eyes, remembering the laugh that was drowned out by the large room of people, but he could hear it just enough to be captivated…

“Coffee?” Pepper’s voice cut in.

Tony looked up. She was standing beside him, holding out a mug. Tony took the coffee gratefully and Pepper sat down beside him, leaning over to look at the screen as well. She didn’t seem even a
little surprised to see Mary’s face, grinning, her hair wind-blown.

The memories were there for Tony. Still, he held hope. Hope that some poor kid out there wasn’t stuck with Stark DNA.

“Have you thought about what you’ll do?”

That was not what Tony wanted to be asked.

A lump formed in his throat, but he fought it away, speaking, voice monotoned, “I can’t be a dad.”

As an afterthought, he added, “I don’t even think my brain is really…Connecting it.”

Pepper’s eyes flitted back to the screen and she whispered softly, maybe even a bit like someone that was mourning, “She was very pretty.”

“And smart,” Tony didn’t know he was speaking until his lips were already moving with words that were not his own, “Fucking brilliant. I remember…It was Christmas. Her hair smelled like fireworks and I was impressed because she was only twenty-four, but was already so educated…”

Tony scoffed, self-hatred bubbling and wishing for some scotch, “Twenty-four. I should’ve known better, Pepper-“

“If this child is yours, it’s not your fault,” Pepper shook her head, “No one gave you the option to be there or to pay anything. No one told you.”

He stood, beginning to pace without any warning. It was there again.

Don’t freak out.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck as Pepper watched, her eyes holding pity. She said, “I really think we should call Obadiah.”
“No,” Tony replied, “His response to this sort of thing is to make it go away.”

It was welling. Full blown panic. Like a wildfire, digging and climbing out of him. He wanted to claw at his chest, make it go away, take so many shots that the world blurred and disappeared. Let numbness take him through the ceiling. Because this was wrong. Tony Stark couldn’t be a father, because Starks being fathers only ended up with broken children and Tony didn’t want that. He didn’t want to break a child.

But, another part of him. The territorial and dark part wouldn’t let it go away. Wouldn’t let him turn around and hand the maybe-kid off to someone else. He knew, he knew logically he couldn’t be a father, but he didn’t want anyone else raising a kid that shared his flesh and blood.

Flawed. Spoiled. It was because he was spoiled and he fucking knew.

His phone rang from its place on the table and Tony snatched it up before his mind could really process what he was doing. He didn’t check the ID, just simply answered with a sharp, “Hello?”

“Mr. Stark? This is Heather Reed.”

Her voice was already burned into his mind. He would recognize it forever.

“Did they rush it?” Tony questioned, voice hard.

“Yes,” She sounded…different. Not the same. Almost clinical, “She rushed the results. I suppose you had something to do with that but…She just sent them to me.”

“And?”

Swarming.

Ghouls in his mind kicked. Heather’s response sounded so much like the doctor who had told him his parents had died that night…
“The test came back a match, Mr. Stark. The child is yours.”

Tony didn’t respond.

No. Because he threw his phone into the wall with such force, it shattered on impact.
Chapter Summary

“Hi,” The boy greeted.

And now the child had a name. A face. A voice and eyes. Eyes that were Tony’s and God, it hurt. It hurt.

Tony sat slowly onto the floor beside Peter, shock keeping him stiff and his face was probably pale as he whispered softly, “Hi.”

Chapter Notes

Here’s chapter two! Hope you all enjoy! Let me know what you think. xx

He was hungover and before he even knew for sure it was bad, the question was answered when Pepper dropped a new cellphone on his head.

“Rhodey and Obadiah tried calling you.”

There was a cruel bluntness to her tone and Tony was half tempted to roll over, look her in the eyes, and beg for some sort of coddling. But Pepper didn’t offer such things, especially to men who didn’t deserve it because they had inflicted the pain on themselves. He owed the mini-bar a lot and there was a chance she had already checked the bill and could smell the alcohol on him.

She then ordered, “Get up and shower. We have to meet social services in two hours and New York traffic will be terrible this time of morning.”

Tony shook his head, “I can’t move.”

Pepper paused from where she was striding to the door. She turned, putting a hand on her hip and her mouth setting in a straight line. Her finger pointed towards him and he knew the words that followed were about to dig into him like a blade, but he let them come anyway, waiting patiently for the blow.
“A child is waiting for you to make a life changing decision for him. Get up and be an adult for a few hours so you can make the right one.”

Yep, that had hurt. Worse than he expected, but she was gone and Tony sat up, pitifully. He went through the morning rituals without any more complaint, mostly because Pepper had ordered him room service, even after being frustrated with him, so it didn’t feel fair to continue on whining. He dressed in a fitted suit, hooking bird shaped cufflinks near his wrists. If he was going to be a failure of a biological father, he was going to look decent doing it.

All too soon, they were loading into the car. The driver, again, wasn’t Happy and usually it wouldn’t matter, but Tony was tired and his head hurt, so a weird place in his chest was bitter about that. It had been a bad idea to drink. Very bad. Because the day would more than likely call for more patience than he had mustered in a lifetime and he was running on zero.

The DSS office was bustling more than it had been the day before. It seemed all the employees were in, and there were even a few children there that day, speaking with other social workers. Brought in by foster parents. The whole nine-yards. And not that Tony didn’t know that this world was the reality for some people, he had never in a million-years imagined it would become the reality for himself or someone he had fathered.

Men and women alike stared at Tony when he entered and his stomach twisted at the thought of anyone telling the tabloids that Tony Stark was spotted in a New York DSS office. Especially not when he had yet to know what to do with the kid that he had never even seen before, but knew existed somewhere. In Queens of all places.

Heather brought them back immediately. Maybe she shared the same concern.

Pepper sat as soon as they walked in, but Tony remained standing. The moment Heather shut the door and turned to face Tony, his shoulders had gone rigid. She stared at him, waiting, waiting for the explosion that was sure to follow and honestly, Tony was too. Because his chest felt broken into with an axe and he wanted her to explain how this could happen, but he knew very well how creating a child worked.

“Well, Mr. Stark…” Heather sighed, “Is there something you’d like to say?”

Tony sneered…
“You’re all fucking incompetent,” Pepper’s face blanched and Tony didn’t know why he was saying all of this. Maybe the acidic liquid he had been drinking all night had finally burned into his core or he was just looking for someone to blame, because it wasn’t fair, this wasn’t fair. He couldn’t make this decision for someone else. Especially not some little kid-

She cut off his thoughts, defending calmly, “Do you know how many cases come across our desks daily? How little resources we receive from the government? We did our best. And honestly, these things can sometimes take more than two months. Maybe even years. Or the biological father is never found at all. Would you rather that? Have your son grow up in foster care, not knowing who his true father is for the rest of his life?”

Gesturing to the chair, Heather huffed, “Now if you want information on your child, I suggest you sit.”

Stubbornness fought to stand, but he did end up sitting down. Pepper looked ready to slap him across the face, but she made no move to strike him. Heather took a seat as well, pulling a file from her desk, the same folder as the day before. Tony’s stomach churned and he felt incredibly nauseated.

“There are a few ways to go about this. I can give you the paperwork needed to have him released into your care. He is your biological son, which means technically speaking, he is yours, but we’ll need to do a basic background check and home visits are required for the first several months.”

Heather paused in her explanation, “However, if you don’t feel that you are…capable of taking him in, there is the option of signing away your parental rights and he will become a ward of the state.”

Tony looked almost…aghast as he asked fiercely, “There’s no third option? A way to have him placed with a family other than those offered by the system?”

“It’s difficult to have a four-year-old adopted,” She admitted, sounding bitter at the world for that, “People want infants. It’s a tragic fact, but it’s the truth.”

Tony leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and he covered his mouth with his hand, taking in a sharp inhale. His insides were fighting. Responsibility. He and Mary were responsible for this child existing and Mary was gone. This kid was alone in the world and Tony didn’t know how to wrap his mind around that bleak figure. His responsibility. His fault.
Heather must have sensed his growing distress, because she suggested, “If you’d like, you can meet him first. I can have his current foster parent bring him into the office within the hour, I’m sure. We don’t have to tell him that you’re his biological father. It seems as far as he knows, Richard Parker was his father. But I think it’ll help your decision if you meet him.”

Tony hesitated, but then nodded his head mutely.

Heather excused herself to make the phone call and once they were alone in the room, Tony’s head fell forward into his hands.

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The New York office was becoming painfully small.

It felt like he was being damned to his casket, trapped in there, unable to fully pace as far and wide as he wanted. But he didn’t want to risk leaving. Facing the people in the desks outside. It would almost certainly be too much if he had to wait any longer. An hour and a half was almost enough to cause an episode.

Pepper sat idly, responding to e-mails. She must not have known what to say, because nothing was exchanged between the two of them. Nothing but glances and silent stares. Tony felt, he could have made the wrong decision, with the idea of meeting the child. He should have just left it alone. Let Heather handle the situation.

He was in no state or mindset to be making decisions.

Especially not one this big.

His hands shook, either from the hangover or from nerves, he wasn’t sure. It just hurt and no matter how many ibuprofens he shoved in his mouth, it wouldn’t subside. The ache and the groans of his bones and mind. He thirsted for an escape from that tiny room that smelled like mints and paper.

He wished Pepper would say something. Break the quiet that was eating him alive. But she was still frustrated. Frustrated he had decided to drink after the news of his child’s existence. He couldn’t blame her, but damn it, she worked for him and a little sympathy wasn’t so hard to
produce. But then again, it was for Tony when people screwed up royally.

Tony screwed up royally often.

When the door finally opened and Heather appeared, his stomach jumped into his throat. He felt his heart rate spike and stiffness won over the pain. She had a small smile on her face, before stepping aside and gesturing for Tony to come out of the office.

“He arrived a few minutes ago. We’ve got him set up in one of the playrooms.”

Tony felt a strange pain in his chest and he thought he might be having a heart attack. His legs wouldn’t move, until he finally blinked to awareness and went through the door, leaving Pepper behind to wait for his return.

Heather headed down in front of him, past the people once more who shot him strange looks. They moved down a long hallway that was almost as thin as his shoulders, cheap art hanging on the walls of smiling children, but Tony had a hard time believing children smiled here often. Not when parents were taken away or children all in the same motions. Home as itself gone up in flames.

The room they stopped at had a small window beside the door, showing a space of brightly colored walls and tiny foam puzzle pieces covering the floor. It was too much, too…different from anything Tony had seen before, but he guessed it was pleasing for children. Toys littered the floor and at a small table near the center of the room, kneeling down on his knees, was a child.

Tony could only see the back of his head, making out a mop of chocolate curls. He seemed busy with something on the table in front of him, hands moving over it. Tony shot a look at Heather and he felt very ready to vomit right there in the hallway and high-tail it out of there, shamefully. She continued to smile, and Tony didn’t understand why because he had been so cruel blaming her and her office for his own mistakes.

“He’s just coloring,” Heather provided, “You can go in if you want.”

Tony felt frozen as he whispered, “What’s his name?”

Her smile grew a bit, “Peter. Peter Benjamin Parker.”
There was a weird jealousy at the final tag on Peter’s name, but he ignored it. Pushed it down, because he didn’t even know this child. Wasn’t sure if he wanted to know him in the future or would even get the chance to do so with the way he was drinking himself to death.

Tony had never opened a door so slowly or carefully in his life and the moment he shut the door he felt the same trapped feeling he had before. The child didn’t move. Must not have heard him enter and Tony approached him from behind like walking up to a wild animal. But instead it was just a four-year-old with messy hair and tiny shoulders. Were four-year-olds this small? Tony wasn’t sure.

He stood on the child’s left side, peering at what he was coloring. A print out of a space ship, shooting off to nowhere. That must have been when the kid…Peter…noticed him, because his head shot up and Tony felt his stomach drop and pain filled his chest almost immediately.

Starks didn’t create beautiful things.

They created weapons that destroyed beautiful things. That was the way it had always been.

But when the four-year-old's wide eyes blinked at him, Tony was struck with the sudden realization that maybe that had been a lie.

_Huge_ brown eyes, that were nearly identical to Tony’s. He almost had to sit down immediately, staring at Peter’s small face. His cheeks were round with remnants of baby-face and his nose was tiny. He paused in his coloring, regarding Tony and tilting his head, some of his curls covering his forehead.

“Hi,” The boy greeted.

And now the child had a name. A face. A voice and eyes. Eyes that were Tony’s and God, it hurt. It hurt.

Tony sat slowly onto the floor beside Peter, shock keeping him stiff and his face was probably pale as he whispered softly, “Hi.”
No child had ever been so perfect. And it was a shame he was Tony’s because Tony only broke perfect things.

Peter’s brows tugged, “Miss Donaldson said I was gonna meet a man. Are you him?”

His voice was tiny, words tumbling too quickly for his young mind to keep up. But Tony understood him nonetheless. Tony shrugged, “I suppose…Who’s Miss Donaldson?”

“I sleep at her house now,” Peter explained, “Her kittens make me sneeze.”

The child then paused and before Tony could speak, he asked, “What’s your name?”

“Tony,” Tony answered, still feeling awe in his bones. Awe and terror and guilt. Two months in the foster system. This kid didn’t deserve that. *Especially not this one.*

Peter blinked, “No, your grown-up name.”

“Grown-up name?” Tony questioned.

He jumped when Peter reached out, scratching at Tony’s beard. The boy made a face and said almost curiously, “Yeah, you’re a grown-up cause hair grows on your face like my daddy’s did.”

Tony’s skin turned cold, but he didn’t swat the child’s hand away. Peter lowered his hand, the curiosity gone. Tony couldn’t speak, the touch strange yet accepted and he didn’t know why. Peter then grabbed his crayon again and began to work on his picture, speaking without looking, “Mine is Peter Parker but right now it’s just Peter cause I’m not big yet.”

The man understood, somewhat now, where Peter’s logic was coming from, “Mine’s Tony Stark.”

“Mr. Stark is your grown-up name.”

“You don’t have to call me that,” Tony pushed, “You can call me Tony.”
Peter lifted his head from the picture and looked over in shock…

“Like a grown up?”

Tony could only nod. This was too much at once. Peter’s eyes looked at him with such a wide trust and Tony thought it was misplaced. He drank. He had fathered a child and hadn’t been there for four-years. Peter’s eyes shouldn’t hold such wonder. Such glee. Tony jumped slightly when Peter grabbed his half-colored picture and showed it to Tony.

“This is my spaceship,” Peter grinned, “I’m going to build one to go see my mama and daddy.”

A knot formed in Tony’s throat as Peter went on, “They went away. Their plane fell, but if I got a spaceship I could catch them.”

Tony only managed to croak, “That’s…That’s a good idea.”

He must have looked pained because Peter’s smile drooped and he lowered his picture, “Why do you look sad, Mr. Tony?”

“I’m not sad,” Tony insisted, but that was lie. Was he supposed to lie about that? Was that an okay lie?

Peter turned, grabbing a handful of crayons before holding them out to Tony along with the unfinished print out. Tony felt confused and Peter said, “Don’t tell Miss Donaldson. Sometimes I get sad too. Coloring and Legos help.”

He pushed them closer to Tony and insisted, “Here, you color!”

Tony took the objects, putting the paper on the table and using red and orange crayons to color the fire that was erupting from the bottom of the rocket. He wasn’t sure if it was to please the child or to give his hands something to do while he had a crisis.
He had only been coloring a few moments when Peter grabbed Tony’s sleeve suddenly, stopping him. Peter touched his cufflinks tentatively before speaking, “I like your birdies.”

Tony watched the boy’s eyes as he studied the silver before replying, “Thanks. I…uh got them in India.”

Peter’s jaw dropped, “That’s so far!”

The door opened, breaking the conversation. Heather stood there before looking at Tony and saying, “Mr. Stark, Peter has to go soon. He has a dentist appointment and Miss Donaldson is waiting.”

That was when it snapped inside of him. He wasn’t sure what it was, but it broke into completely opposite pieces. His eyes found Peter’s wide ones again. Wide and innocent and alone in this world besides strangers passing him around and not seeing what Tony could see. The man stood slowly, unhooking one of his cufflinks before handing it to the boy and ordering:

“Hold this for me.”

Peter took it in his hands, smiling so brightly Tony thought he was staring at the sun. Tony then turned and walked to Heather, getting close enough to whisper one warning…

“He’s not walking out of this building with anyone but me.”

…

It was selfish, he knew.

The split-second decision. The movement and the actions of calling in his legal team. The hours that they sat there just waiting for them to arrive and Heather kept insisting it was unnecessary. It was cruel to rip Peter out of Miss Donaldson’s home so suddenly. To bring such legal measures into it. But Tony didn’t care, he just didn’t, he wasn’t going to wait for due process. Wait for Peter to be moved.
It was *selfish*, he *knew*.

Spoiled.

It was just that dark place in him. Seeing things that belonged to him and getting angry when they weren’t with him. Peter was a human being, but the sudden feeling erupting in him, *that* feeling that he didn’t recognize, was overpowering what was probably better for Peter. Because right now this was what Tony wanted and he didn’t know how to consider others. It had been just him for so, so long. He never had to.

He knew Peter was being held in another room with his foster parent and that was enough to make him stressed even more. He didn’t know how these things worked, so when the lawyers finally arrived, relief flooded him while they went to work. Money could buy many things, and as sad as that was, Tony was glad for it at the moment.

Heather looked strung out, stressed, and enraged. And Tony should have felt bad because she had tried helping him and had been kind and he hadn’t listened. Hadn’t done what she had wanted but this was a different time. He had seen the kid. Talked to him. Looks into the eyes that were his eyes and all the proof Tony needed was there.

He wasn’t thinking it through. He didn’t even know what went into raising a child but in that moment he just did not care.

Tony signed paper after paper. Listened to Heather lecture him long and passionately about the right way to go about this. But at the end of the day, Tony Stark was Peter Parker’s biological father. His background check, despite some bumps in the road, had come back clean. Financial stability was a given. They would do home checks, but he *did not care.*

Pepper was a whole different matter. She was Heather times ten, practically begging him to reconsider what he was doing, threatening to call Obadiah and tattle on him. But he knew she wouldn’t. She was just desperate. Telling him over and over again that he had no idea how to raise a child.

He didn’t.

How hard could it be though? Peter was so small.
“He wants to know what we’re not telling him,” Pepper growled as Tony sat in Heather’s office, reading over another set of papers, “He knows something is up. We don’t just take the private jet and disappear.”

Tony didn’t even look at her, “I’ll tell him when we get back.”

“Tony,” She hissed, “You cannot do this. This child is four-years-old. That’s still so young and you don’t know the first thing about children. About even being attached to someone so permanently. You sleep until noon every day, you stay out and drink all night. Do you know how early kids get up?”

Finally, he looked at her, “I told you I’d figure it out!”

“You don’t just figure out how to raise a child properly; this isn’t that dog you got a year ago and sold a week later!”

“I know that!”

“I don’t think you do, Tony!”

Slapping the papers down, Tony leaned forward, grabbing one of the pens and signing his name. A release form. One his lawyers practically haggled for it. Calling supervisor after supervisor to get to the people at the top and it was cheating. All a power play, but screw waiting. Screw leaving the kid in the foster system.

But how much worse could the foster system be compared to an alcoholic?

He shook his head at the thought.

Pepper sighed, probably giving up. People left the office. The day started drawing to an end and they had been there too long. Far too long. Hours and hours and Tony wondered how the kid was faring in the other room, having to sit for so long.

Surprisingly, that was the only guilt he felt. The rest was impatience.
Heather stood behind her desk, after everything was signed, after words of cruelty were exchanged and lawsuits were threatened. Tony felt like all of the people in his world that he despised. The people who used their money and power to get what they wanted.

But this was only fair. They had taken too long.

Two months.

This kid shared his DNA. That in itself was a curse. He wasn’t about to let the kid suffer anymore.

Heather let out a deep breath and said, looking up at Tony with defeat on her face, “The Los Angeles DSS will be in touch with you. You'll have to schedule a home inspection.”

She had fought tooth and nail to get him to wait. To go through the process that would be better for Peter. She had fought the whole day. Hours. And not many could stand to do so against a Stark that wanted something. But she had done it. Tony was immensely impressed, but still pissed off she had tried.

“This is…practically taboo,” She continued, “And I don’t think you’re making the best decision for Peter. You’re throwing him into the deep end, taking him away like this to the other side of the country with strangers.”

Tony’s back went rigid.

“He’s with strangers right now,” Tony argued.

Heather shook her head, “From what I understand, he and Miss Donaldson have grown fairly close. She is always very good with the children she fosters.”

Tony scoffed bitterly…

“The fact of the matter is this: He shouldn’t have even been put into the system.”
Maybe it was the growing up with power and money that made him feel like he deserved to have been found sooner. That they had taken too long. But whatever. Whatever. He still felt it and she was trying to convince him not to take this responsibility home.

But Peter was his responsibility.

He and Mary had brought him into this world. Mary was gone and Tony wasn’t going to be the dick that left him alone.

They left the office. The lawyers still stood about, silently. Overseeing the exchange. Pepper was close to his left, eyes glowering, because he was rash. Too rash.

This was what he had to do. If he didn’t, he’d hate himself forever. The dark part would never let him forget that someone else was raising a human being that he had fathered. He wasn’t going to be a good father. He had resigned to that. Tony hadn’t been raised by a good man and he wasn’t a good man himself.

But, he was going to give the kid everything. The whole world.

He might not know how to show Peter the emotional shit, but he could at least do that.

When the kid was led out, gripping the woman’s hand, Tony felt like he was seeing him for the first time all over again. He was chewing on his tiny nails anxiously, glancing at the men in suits, Heather, and between Tony and Pepper. He blinked, eyes lingering on Tony a bit longer than everyone else.

Pepper leaned over, “Tony you’re not thinking about this. Look at him.”

And Tony was looking at him. His face was flushed with worry. Tony turned to Pepper, eyes narrowing at he said, “I see him.”

But you don’t, do you? You see your ego. Your spoiled soul that thinks everything belongs to you.
Miss Donaldson cleared her throat, speaking softly, “I’ll pack his things and have them shipped to your address in Malibu. I…hope you can find him something to wear and a few toys until then…”

Tony could see the pain in her expression. She was gripping Peter’s hand tightly.

His face softened, “We can do that.”

“Tony…” Pepper tried again, but he ignored her.

He stepped forward and Miss Donaldson released Peter’s hand. Tony hauled the boy up, resting his arm under him. He wasn’t heavy by any means. Peter’s hand went to Tony’s shoulder, confusion sparking in his tiny eyes as he stared at the man that was holding him. The man he had only just met. The man he didn’t know was his father.

Tony had never held a child. Luckily Peter was familiar with being carried and knew to hold around Tony’s shoulders. Peter then looked at the people around them, surrounding, blinking rapidly, as if trying to connect the dots as to what was going on but his mind just couldn’t wrap around any of it.

The guilt swiped. Tony swiped back viciously.

It wasn’t until after the anger shrouded good-byes, in the elevator, that Peter finally spoke softly to Tony…

“Mr. Tony?”

Tony’s head yanked in the boy’s direction. He was wrong before. Peter was getting heavier by the second, but Tony still held him, afraid that one of the social workers would run after them and inform them that they couldn’t leave.

The man’s voice came out softer than he had intended, the initial awe still keeping its grip. The awe that he had created something that wasn’t made for destruction.

“Yeah?”
Peter hesitated only a second, glancing at Pepper, before asking, “Where’re we going?”

Tony gulped. Fear. He was actually leaving with a kid in his arms. *His* kid in his arms.

It was the most terrifying feeling he had ever felt.

“Home.”
“We f-forgot Remy,” Peter quivered.

Tony’s brows furrowed, “Who the he…Uh, I mean…Who’s Remy?”

He could see Peter worrying on his lower lip again.

“My lovey.”

The child said very little in the car.

Tony had placed him between himself and Pepper. Mostly because Pepper kept droning on about how children Peter’s size needed booster seats but also partly to keep Pepper at a distance in case she tried to strike him at some point during the ride to the hotel. He wouldn’t be surprised. They had spent the entire day in the DSS office. The sun was already sinking. She was tired. Over worked. And Tony hadn’t made it easy.

He found it very hard to feel sorry.

Peter was twiddling the bird cufflink between his tiny fingers. He hadn’t asked anymore questions since the one in the elevator and Tony didn’t know if that was a good or bad thing. He just kept his head low, looking at the bird. Shivering slightly, but Tony could only assume he was overwhelmed with the entire ordeal.

Pepper was glaring at Tony darkly. He ignored it, like everything else. The advice from Heather. From the lawyers. From Pepper.

There was no point.
No matter what he did, people felt he wasn’t capable.

Peter was worrying on his lower lip, and Tony watched him closely the entire way to the hotel. As if the kid would disappear from the seat. As if he’d wake up and this would all be a dream. Had he really just signed those papers? Had he really just damned a child to the same horrific childhood he had, had with his own father?

There was no Maria Stark here to mitigate. To comfort. Just Tony and Tony wasn’t sure if he was any different from Howard, as much as he denied sharing anything with the man besides DNA… He wasn’t scared. He wouldn’t say that.

When they pulled into the parking lot of The Plaza, their doors were opened for them by two hotel employees and Tony pretended he didn’t notice the way they stared at Tony when he had to help Peter unbuckle his seat belt and pulled him from the car.

He slipped them a large tip. Told them they hadn’t seen anything unusual and went on his way.

They didn’t need that. Not at all. Rumors about a child, a Stark child, running around. The media circus made him nauseous. He didn’t want Peter to experience that. Even at four, he would be aware enough to feel the strain of it. Because Tony had been very aware when the media zoned in on his father to take shots at. Tony would be no different. He didn’t want that.

As they walked into the lobby, with tall chandelier laden ceilings, he felt Peter’s hand grip the hem of his suit jacket. When he looked down, the child wasn’t looking at him, but rather staring up with wide eyes in shock at the seemingly gold trimming on the walls. People were staring again, curious. Tony reached down, grabbed Peter’s wrist before tugging him to the elevators, and Pepper followed behind, hands gently ushering Peter forward.

Once in the elevator, Peter spoke in awe, “So big. Like a castle!”

“Almost,” Tony agreed, his hand was still gripping the boy’s hand as he wondered if he needed to slide a few hundreds to the businessman that was riding up with them, keeping his eyes down on his cellphone. He seemed unbothered and disinterested in Tony, Peter, and Pepper, but what if he was just pretending?

The paranoia was digging deep.
Tony walked so fast, Peter’s short legs almost couldn’t keep up and even Pepper struggled in her stilettoes. He couldn’t describe the relief he felt when they finally entered their suite.

Peter released his hand almost immediately, making his way to the couch that had its back pressed against a pair of tall windows. Peter stepped up, peering out at the city below and Tony turned, facing Pepper. What now? They were there, the sun was setting. Night would come soon and they had absolutely nothing. Peter’s things were being sent to Malibu…

God, he had thought nothing through.

But, of course, Pepper beat him to the punch.

“I’ll get some clothes delivered for him so he can bathe tonight,” She sounded bitter and Tony actually had to fight a flinch at the bite in her tone, “Since I doubt you thought of that, yes? And I’ll order room service, because children have to eat. They can’t be like billionaires that live off of coffee for days at a time.”

Tony fought the urge to shout, because the way she was looking at him made him feel like an idiot. Like he was being talked down to. He bit the inside of his cheek though, because right now he needed her help and employee or not, Pepper was the only person he had at arms reach right now and pissing her off would be a bad decision. He gave one jerky nod and Pepper turned on her heels, walking straight out of the suite almost as soon as they had come.

The man turned. Peter was still standing on the couch watching the city below.

Alone.

With a kid.

His kid.

Tony wanted to punch himself in the face. What in the hell was he thinking? He hadn’t even thought about feeding the kid…Christ. Clothes. Those were things even Howard knew. And fuck that guy.
I'm already screwing up. I'm already ruining it.

Tony approached slowly, like he had done in the playroom back at the office. Peter didn’t look over at him until he sat down beside where Peter was leaning over the back of the couch to look out the window. Peter glanced at Tony then pointed out the window and said, “Look, people-bugs are down there.”

The man forced himself to smile softly, but he was too terrified to do anymore. Peter slowly adjusted himself to sit down beside Tony and everything he had heard about kid’s lacking personal space must have been true, because Peter sat close, staring at Tony with his wide brown eyes.

Peter silently tugged on his sleeve, looking around the room, and Tony felt like he could see the wheels turning in his head, thinking long and hard about what was happening in the world around him. Peter then looked up at Tony once more and asked, “Will Miss Donaldson come?”

Tony blinked a few times. A part of him had hoped Peter wouldn’t ask about her again, but that just wasn’t realistic, especially if Peter had spent two months with her…

“No, Peter,” Tony said, his voice slightly harder than he had intended, but speaking to children didn’t come naturally. It was difficult and simplistic and he struggled to get the words to a place that a four-year-old could understand, “You’re going to come stay with me…At my house in California.”

“But when will she come get me?”

Tony sighed…shaking his head…

“She’s not going to. I’m going to take care of you from now on.”

Peter’s shoulders sunk. A strange look flashed across his face. Almost like anguish. Peter’s lower lip trembled slightly and his voice cracked, “Why for?”

Tiny tears were pricking the corners of Peter’s eyes and Tony looked away. That same envy from before bubbled up. Expect now it wasn’t aimed at Richard. Tony didn’t look at Peter when he said,
“You’re my responsibility now.”

“B-But,” Peter sniffled, and Tony shut his eyes. This wasn’t right. He’d never admit that Heather and Pepper had been right out loud, but he was starting to think the confusion of being ripped away from people again had been a mistake. Peter was confused. And it was Tony’s fault.

“I-Is it ‘cause I sneezed around the kittens? I w-won’t anymore…Was I bad?”

Tony’s eyes snapped back down at the small child, and if he had looked in a mirror he was sure terror would have been burned into his face. Peter had tears on his cheeks now, gnawing on his trembling lip to bite them back. Trying not to show how upset he was.

“No,” Tony’s voice came out harsh and Peter jumped, causing Tony to pinch the bridge of his nose. Why was this so hard? He continued, “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re just…You’re not supposed to be with Miss Donaldson, okay? You’re supposed to be with me.”

*Keep telling yourself that, you asshole. This is your fault.*

The envy grew.

Peter used his sleeve to wipe his face. He nodded as if he understood, but Tony didn’t think he really did. Tony’s tone had just silenced him and that, *that* was something Howard would do and Tony had the urge to break another cell phone.

The golden hue from the sun had disappeared. There was a knock on the door and Tony jumped up, grateful for the escape. He trotted into the entryway, throwing the door open to reveal Pepper. She held out a few bags for him to take.

She still looked pissed.

“They’re clothes,” Pepper said bluntly as Tony took them, “Room service is on its way.”

When she turned to disappear without another word, Tony couldn’t help it, he snapped angrily. “You know, I’m just trying to take fucking responsibility, right? I don’t need everyone looking at
me like some kind of criminal.”

Pepper paused, stared for a long time. Her face slipped from anger to loss.

“Tony,” She said, voice unfathomably even, “That child was orphaned two months ago. That child was attached to his foster parent. That child is in fact yours, but you were too rash. Too quick. He’s four-years-old and he has lost more in his short life than most can imagine ever losing. So, you’ll have to excuse me for being the slightest bit frustrated with how you behaved today.”

Then she turned again.

This time Tony didn’t stop her.

Tony shut the door and rested his head against it, taking in several calming breaths before he went back into the lounge where Peter was still sitting on the couch, staring at the cufflink between his fingers.

He set the bags on the table and dug through, pulling out a pair of pajamas with small owls on them. Tony held them up and Peter’s head snapped to attention at the movement as Tony cleared his throat, “You should probably bathe. We’re leaving early, so you’ll need to…sleep soon.”

Peter slid off the couch slowly, walking over and taking the clothes that were offered. However, the child continued to stand there, staring up at Tony expectantly. Tony shifted on his feet and raised an eyebrow, asking, “What’s wrong?”

The boy hesitated, then looked confused.

“Grown-ups always help,” Peter explained, “Or the soap burns my eyes.”

Tony stared, tempted to go open the door and scream down the hallway for Pepper to turn around and come back. But bitterness hung heavily, and he didn’t want her help, even though in reality that was a lie. Peter waited patiently as Tony’s mind raced. He had never bathed a child in his life. What if he got soap in the kid’s eyes? What if he did something wrong? He had already made the kid cry once…
He ran a hand through his hair and nodded mutely.

*Suck it up. How hard is it to bathe a kid?*

It was probably for the better. The bathtub was large enough to drown a kid Peter’s size. The edges almost went over the child’s head when Peter climbed in after Tony let warm water run for several minutes to fill it. Peter splashed a lot, and used half of the shampoo bottle to make giant bubbles when Tony wasn’t paying attention.

All in all, it was a mundane experience. Peter stayed in the water until his fingers pruned and Tony made sure the kid didn’t get hurt. No soap got into the child’s eyes, which Tony felt was a victory overall. The only other thing Peter really needed help with was Tony preventing him from putting his pajama top on backwards.

Tony stood from where he had been sitting on the closed toilet seat, rubbing the towel over Peter’s soaking mop of hair. When Peter peered out from under the towel, he said, “That was like a swimming pool.”

“*You think so?”* Tony questioned.

“*Mhm!*” Peter nodded, trotting behind Tony as they went back to the main room of the suite, “Just like one!”

Tony struggled not to step on the kid that seemed to stick to his heels. He wasn’t used to someone so small clinging. Peter even followed him to the door to let room service in, but Tony’s paranoia wouldn’t let him come all the way, for fear of the employee seeing him.

Tony set the food on the small dining table. He was glad Pepper had ordered it, because he wouldn’t have even thought of what to order a child. But Peter seemed content with his grilled cheese and apple slices. Tony found it difficult to eat, anxiety still running rampant through his body. Every muscle in him felt tense, and he wanted so badly for a drink. The mini bar had been restocked after the night before. Full of choices.

His eyes settled on Peter who was kicking his tiny legs, chewing on an apple slice. He was humming something quietly to himself, entertained in his own head.
Tony stood, trying to be casual as he went over to the small bar and poured a drink. The scotch burned the entire way down, but it calmed the frenzy that had begun behind his eyes. Peter barely noticed him, picking the crust off his grilled cheese as if he had done it a million times before, continuing to hum and swing his legs.

Tony filled up his glass only one more time before he put the bottle away.

An unfamiliar shame settled within the burn.

He walked around the tiny bar before asking Peter, “When do you usually sleep?”

Peter’s head shot up as he chewed and he talked with his mouth full, “When the clock dings eight whole times.”

Eight o’clock? Did kids really go to bed that early? Tony looked down at his watch, almost cringing when he saw they were bordering on it being a quarter past nine. He waited until Peter ate his last apple before showing the kid where the smaller suite bedroom was located. The kid easily climbed into bed, to his surprise.

He remembered being a pain about going to sleep. He drove his nannies crazy, kicking and screaming about wanting to see Maria before he fell asleep.

But Peter put himself under the blankets and Tony shut off the light.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so hard.

…

It was nearly midnight when someone poked his face.

Tony snorted, eyes snapping open where he had his right cheek buried into a pillow and the other was exposed to the tiny finger digging into his skin. The room was dark and Tony had to blink several times to get his eyes to focus on the short figure before him. For a moment, the day’s events slipped his mind. He only vaguely remembered. Then they caught up full force and his
brain connected that this was Peter poking him in the face, standing beside his bed.

Pushing himself up a bit, Tony shoved down the frustration in his voice as he asked through sleep, “What’s wrong?”

“We f-forgot Remy,” Peter quivered.

Tony’s brows furrowed, “Who the he…Uh, I mean…Who’s Remy?”

He could see Peter worrying on his lower lip again.

“My lovey.”

“You’re…” Tony shook his head. What the hell was a lovey? “You’re what?”

“My bunny,” Peter said, “H-He’s with the kittens at M-Miss Donaldson’s…”

A sniffle interrupted the boy and Tony felt a spike of panic. He didn’t know if he could deal with more tears, especially not in the middle of the night. Tony sat up slowly, the cold air hitting his chest like knives, leaving the warmth of his blankets. He slid to the edge of the bed and clicked on the lamp. Peter blinked, trying to adjust to the light, but Tony saw his eyes were already teary.

“Okay, okay,” Tony ran a hand through his hair, unsure of what to do, “Why do you need…him?”

“To sleep,” Peter had dipped into a desperate whine, his knuckles going to his eyes and covering them. The kid was obviously tired. Tony stood from the bed, taking Peter by the shoulder before leading him out of the bedroom and into the living area. Grabbing the remote, he gestured for Peter to sit next to him on the couch before clicking on the television.

He didn’t turn the sound up, but flipped through until he found a channel with brightly colored cartoon characters. Peter’s chest was rising and falling rapidly, his tear stained cheeks illuminated by the television, eyes drooping slightly with exhaustion.
Tony texted Pepper hurriedly…

I don’t care what you have to do, but I need you to get this kid’s lovey-thing. Right now.

He hoped she would be up late working on e-mails or something. That she’d see the text message and rescue him. Tony swallowed thickly and spoke, “Pepper is gonna get your…lovey for you, okay?”

Peter only nodded, his shoulders shaking. He had never seen a child look so distressed. A few moments passed of Peter shifting and wiggling on the couch before he turned to face Tony, sitting up on his knees on the cushions. Peter said through tiny sobs, “I want Mama and my Remy. He keeps the b-bad men away.”

Tony’s brows pulled downward and he frowned.

“What?”

Peter started to repeat himself, but Tony interrupted, “No, I mean, what bad men?”

Peter put his knuckles in his mouth. Tony reached out and removed them, asking again, “What bad men, Peter?”

“The ones that made Mama cry.”

Peter’s eyes had gone from anguish over the lost lovey to pure terror. Wide and soaked. As if he were sitting in front of a ghost. Tony released Peter’s wrist and asked, “Why did they make her cry?”

“’Cause they hate Daddy.”

Peter leaned forward suddenly, burying his face into the couch cushion. Tiny hiccups escaped him, and Tony wanted to ask more, but it felt wrong. The kid was crying and the guilt was eating Tony alive. He had done this. He had taken Peter too quickly.
Pain erupted from Tony’s chest and he nervously reached out, placing a hand on Peter’s back. He felt afraid to break him, rubbing small circles while the four-year-old tried to self-soothe in the fetal position. Tony had to look away, unable to watch anymore.

Hours were spent like that. Tony wasn’t sure when he fell asleep, but he did eventually when Peter’s small cries had subsided.

When he woke the next morning, there was a quiet knocking on the door. Tony shot up on the couch, but Peter didn’t jostle in the slightest from where he was sleeping. Tony hurried to the door, opening it just enough to see Pepper there, holding an object in her hand.

She held it out and Tony inspected it. A small blanket with the head of a rabbit. It looked worn and torn, but Tony’s hand shot out instantly and he took the stuffed animal gratefully, throwing the door open wide.

“Thank you, my God you won’t believe the night I just had.”

He stepped aside as Pepper entered the entryway. She shrugged, “Well, I found Miss Donaldson’s address and stopped by this morning. I personally think I deserve a raise.”

“I don’t disagree,” Tony breathed with relief.

Pepper hummed, glancing around at the silent suite before moving around the wall and seeing Peter asleep on the couch. She raised an eyebrow towards Tony and questioned, “Should I order breakfast? We’ll need to get to the airport soon.”

“Depends,” Tony stepped forward, “Are you still mad at me?”

“I am, but I’m not going to let the child starve.”

Tony watched as she moved towards the phone before pausing and glancing over her shoulder, “You really need to tell Obadiah.”
Tony waved her off, “I’ll tell him when we get back to Malibu.”

Something must have shown on his face because her hand stopped reaching for the phone and she raised an eyebrow in question. Tony put his hands in the pockets of his sweats and he said, “I need you to do a background check on Richard Parker. A thorough one.”

Pepper glanced at Peter again and asked, “Why?”

“I just…need you to.”

Before Pepper could press further there was a small sound from the couch. Both the adults looked over and Peter was sitting up, his eyes blinking blearily at the two of them. When they came into focus, they settled on the rabbit in Tony’s hands and a toothy grin appear on the four-year-old’s face. Peter shot up instantly, stumbling as he rushed forward.

“Remy!” Peter squealed.

Tony cringed at the high-pitched sound before handing ‘Remy’ over. Peter took the object in his arms and pressed it close to his cheek. How a child could seemingly forget hours of tears so quickly, Tony didn’t know, but he ran a hand over his face, sighing deeply. Peter looked up at him and exclaimed, “Thank you, Mr. Tony!”

“Oh no,” Tony chuckled tiredly, “Thank Pepper, she went and got it-uh-him?”

Peter looked over at Pepper before smiling at her, “Thank you!”

A small grin formed on Pepper’s lips, “You’re very welcome, Peter.”

The rest of the morning flew by like nothing. Peter requested specifically to have pancakes with a lot of strawberries, and the moment it was delivered, Pepper was sure to keep her distance. Especially after Peter’s fingers were covered in them. It was only after Tony cleaned Peter’s hands with a napkin and the boy went to sit in front of the television did Pepper’s mood turn serious once more.
Tony looked up from his eggs when she said, “Social Services is going to do a home check tomorrow around lunch. It should give us time to sleep off the flight today.”

He didn’t manage much of a response. He knew the place would be clean, he had people who would come take care of that. But his house wasn’t exactly equipped for a four-year-old. Tony shook his head and asked, “Could you order some toys to be delivered by the time we arrive today?”

“I could rush them, yes,” Pepper nodded, “What does he like?”

Glancing back at Peter who was unconcerned with their conversation, he said, “Well, he mentioned Legos at the office. And he likes coloring. So just a bunch of that kind of stuff I guess.”

Tony had liked building at that age, so he didn’t feel very surprised that Peter enjoyed it as well. It was just something else that solidified his existence as a Stark. Not just the wide brown eyes or the DNA test itself. But the personality. That was terrifying.

Things moved quickly from then on out. Tony helped Peter pick clothes that matched. Though the boy seemed to dislike the shoes Pepper had picked out, Tony felt nothing was wrong with them. They fit well enough around the toes.

Things only got bad after they had packed, checked out, and arrived at the airport.

Really, Peter had seemed unconcerned the entire car ride. Tony wondered later if the kid had any concept of how far across the country California was. He had seemed to know India was far, but the moment they pulled up several yards from the private jet, Peter’s entire demeanor had changed. He had gone from sitting quietly in the middle seat, holding his lovey, to staring out the window at the plane with wide eyes.

Tony didn’t understand it at first. It didn’t click.

The man climbed out, hardly noticing. The driver started to unload their luggage from the trunk and Tony turned to help Peter climb out. Peter moved slowly, methodically, his eyes never leaving the plane that was up and running and ready for their departure.

Raising an eyebrow at Peter after he shut the car door, Tony questioned, “What’s up, kid?”
Peter just blinked at the plane and then at Tony. Pepper paused while the driver handed their things off to be loaded into the plane. She and Tony briefly made eye contact and Peter hugged his lovey even closer, whispering, “What’re we doing?”

“We’re going to Malibu, remember?” Tony asked, reaching out and taking Peter’s shoulder.

Peter’s eyebrows shot up, “On a plane?”

Tony nodded, “Yeah…”

Peter’s eyes widened, and the child jumped back, yanking away from Tony’s hand. Tony flinched in surprise at the motion and Pepper looked just as off guard. Peter shrieked so loudly is echoed across the concrete, “It’ll fall!”

Oh. I’m a fucking idiot.

“No,” Tony started, holding out both hands, “This plane isn’t like that—“

“No, it’s gonna fall!” Peter screamed again, turning to run on his tiny legs around the vehicle. Tony lunged forward, scooping him up around his middle, causing the boy to kick his legs. Tony held tight, looking at Pepper with a pained expression. But unfortunately, she looked just as lost as to what to do.

“C’mon, hey,” Tony grunted, turning Peter so that the kid was facing him in his arms. Peter stopped kicking, obviously not serious about wanting to kick Tony. Instead though, he pushed desperately on Tony’s chest, squirming in his arms.

“It’ll fall! It’ll fall! It’ll fall!”

His voice cracked from sheer terror, tears streaming his face and his lovey falling to the ground, forgotten in his fear. Tony scooped it up, putting it under his arm as he grabbed the back of Peter’s head and used his other arm to support Peter against him. He must have realized he couldn’t overpower Tony, because his arms went limp and he settled for begging instead.
Peter cried, “N-No Mr. Tony. No-o!”

“Hey,” Tony whispered, only to hear the pilot calling for them. Tony glanced at Pepper and a silent understanding was made. They had to get on the plane. Social Services would be in Malibu the next day. Tony looked back at Peter’s splotchy face and he said, “I promise, it won’t fall.”

Devastation caused Peter’s body to fall against Tony, burying his face in the man’s shoulder. Tony ignored the thought of how many tears were probably seeping into his shirt. The boy’s arms wrapped tightly around Tony’s neck and a loud and long cry came from his throat. Terror filled, the closer they got to the plane, and the moment they boarded, it was worse.

Tony spent the first several minutes, strapped into his chair with the crying child in his lap, restrained to him, trembling. The moment they were free to move around the plane though, he stood and started to pace, swaying Peter much like he had seen mothers do for their crying infants. The way his own mother would comfort him when she had the time to do so.

Peter repeated over and over, “I want Mama, I want Mama! We’ll fall, we’ll fall, we’ll fall!”

Pepper watched on with a look of despair. Tony’s remained blank, pretending that each cry for Mary wasn’t a stab to his chest. Like a knife of guilt wasn’t being twisted. He shouldn’t have made Peter get on the plane. He shouldn’t have done that. He should have just forced Social Services to wait. Risked whatever they had to.

Combing his fingers through the thick curls on the back of Peter’s head, Tony whispered, trying to drown out Peter’s panic, “I’m here with you.”

The lovey was squished between himself and Peter. Peter buried his face deeper in Tony’s shoulder and Tony turned his head, speaking directly into the boy’s ear, “I’m right here, Peter. We’re okay.”

Tony continued to pace, swaying Peter like a squalling baby, hoping the boy would eventually cry himself out.
Chapter Summary

It was strange what amused kids.

“I wanna beard,” Peter said.

“Maybe when you’re grown.”

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for waiting so patiently and for the sweet reviews! I finally got this chapter done! Yay! I hope you all enjoy, let me know what you think <3 love you guys.

Tony thought, surely, Peter would eventually cry himself to sleep.

That didn’t happen.

The boy did in fact eventually stop crying, but he remained completely awake, trembling in Tony’s arms the entire flight. Gripping the back of Tony’s shirt and letting out sounds of distress any time the plane so much as jolted. Tony had never seen anything like it, but remembered a time when he had panicked on a train and his father had told him to be quiet, that there had been nothing to be afraid of. To shut up.

Tony really couldn’t imagine telling that to Peter, considering how Richard and Mary had died.

He paced most of the flight, only sitting when he felt his knees were going to give out from standing so long with the four-year-old in his arms. Silence reigned, as if either adult was afraid to say anything to the other. Afraid that it would disturb whatever world Peter had brought himself into in order to cope.

Tony sat finally, shifting Peter in his arms, but Peter kept his face buried into Tony’s shoulder. Pepper watched over her paperwork silently, her eyes holding guilt and Tony wondered why, because he had been the one to drag the kid onto the plane, not her. But the feeling was the same inside of him. He didn’t let it reach the blank expression in his eyes.
There wasn’t much to say though. Tony had realized quite suddenly that he had royally screwed up. The inklings had arrived the night before, but this was just a detrimental sign that he had made a mistake. That he was unprepared. Not ready to be a father. But he owed Peter. Owed him to at least try.

Tony was above very few things, but something he most certainly would rise above was being a father who abandoned his child. That was just…stupid. You didn’t bring another human into world to throw them out.

But he should have tried harder with the adoption deal. He could have supported Peter financially and found the kid a real set of parents. Not a billionaire playboy and his assistant.

After hours and hours of holding Peter, the plane finally landed in California. Peter was silent through the shakiness of the plane and Tony supposed the kid was so terrified he couldn’t muster the courage to cry. Tony awkwardly rubbed his back, much like the night before when he had been afraid that his touch would somehow break him.

Tony had never exited a plane quicker in his life.

As soon as they stepped out into the sunlight, he felt Peter physically relax in his arms. He unburied his face from Tony’s shoulder and leaned back looking at the man. His cheeks were still flushed from crying, but otherwise, the signs were no longer there. Peter’s head looked around curiously, yet his eyes were blinking like he was exhausted.

*Me too, kid.*

To his relief, Happy was already there waiting as a few members of the flight crew brought out the luggage. Happy stood by the door and Tony listened to Pepper’s heels following closely behind him. Happy’s eyes immediately found Peter, brows furrowing, and Tony knew that the next several days were going to be drenched with stares like that from people.

“Uhhh…” Happy started, but Tony was quick to interrupt.

“Questions later, Hap. I’ve just spent a flight across the country holding a wailing child, I don’t need to be interrogated again.”
Pepper warned, “Tony.”

Tony looked at Pepper, then followed her gaze to Peter’s face. She must have been worried the statement would bother him, but Peter looked far too out of it to keep up with Tony’s rambled sentence. He just kept his eyes on his fingernails, and Tony pulled the backdoor open, arm going numb again from holding Peter for so long.

How could someone so small get so heavy?

Tony ushered Peter into the vehicle. Pepper once again, briefly mentioned the booster seat, but Tony really didn’t want to think about everything he was screwing up on and everything that needed to be done. He hoped that the toys and clothing that Pepper had ordered would be waiting at the house. Most of the day had been wasted on the plane. He just had the desire to sleep.

Peter became more aware in the car, the droop in his eyes disappearing, much to Tony’s dismay. The boy wiggled around, looking out the windows. Tony could understand his curiosity, for a kid that had probably rarely left New York, it was a big change. The air always smelled of the sea and the sun shone constantly. Peter just looked amazed, but was mostly interested in the fact that there were palm trees.

“Are we on an island?”

Pepper let out a small laugh and Tony shook his head, “No, kid. Remember, California?”

“Oh,” Peter said, but his expression said he did not, in fact, remember that conversation. But that didn’t surprise Tony at all.

The kid’s brain was going at a million miles per hour.

Almost as if the plane ride was forgotten.

But not to Tony, the guilt was still chewing and scratching like a wild animal in the pit of his stomach. Still threatening to make him scream and pour drink after drink. But then the guilt would only worsen, and why had he done this? Why had he let selfishness win over what was better for
He was dreaming of home and his workshop and his bed when they pulled into the driveway.

Only for his eyes to settle on Obie’s car parked out front.

You’re shittin’ me.

Pepper gave him a side glance and just when Tony was going to order Happy to turn around and drive away, Obie stepped out the front door, standing at the entrance, his arms crossing over his chest. The thing about Obadiah was this: he had been there. Existed. Taken care of most of what Tony’s parents had left behind. But he hadn’t been overbearing like Howard. He had basically allowed Tony to do what he wanted.

But there were times where even Obadiah drew a line and apparently taking the jet and disappearing without notice was one of those lines.

Tony got out first. Even though Happy tried to get out to open the door for him, Tony had, had enough anxiety in one day and he just needed to get this over with. He paused, because Obie raised an eyebrow expectantly, waiting for an explanation. An excuse or something to explain his absence.

Tony would have thought of a good one, too, if Peter hadn’t followed him out of the vehicle.

The boy stumbled a bit, holding the car door from the drop. He looked up at Tony, eyes squinting because the setting sun was blinding him on the edge of the cliff mansion. Peter looked at the building before speaking in awe, “Another castle.”

Pepper’s heels moved around the car hurriedly and she took Peter by the hand as Tony continued to stare at Obie who had turned his attention to the small child. His smug, expectancy turned into shock and he almost looked like he was going to vomit.

“Tony…” Obie’s voice was laced with warning.
“Yeah, explanations,” Tony clapped his hands together, “Pepper, why don’t you uhhh, bring the kid to one of the guest rooms, yeah?”

Pepper seemed more than happy to abandon the two men. Obie stepped aside to let her and Peter enter the house and Tony too went inside, followed by Obadiah. There were boxes lining the walls, all addressed from various toy companies and clothing stores. Tony’s relief was flooded by the sudden realization that this was it. He was going to have to spill.

Pepper grabbed a random box and ushered Peter away. He waited until Peter and Pepper disappeared up the stairs before he turned to look at Obadiah. The man didn’t look angry, more confused now than anything. He held out his arms and asked, “You gonna tell me anything, Tony?”

“Uh well,” Tony scratched his chin, turning to move towards the couches, “We went to New York.”

“I’ve gathered that from the brief phone calls with Pepper,” Obadiah hummed, “What I also gathered was there was some sort of emergency. And now you’re back, but with some kid in tow… So I’d really like an explanation for that.”

Tony plopped down on the couch, letting out a built up sigh. It wasn’t difficult in the way he thought. He certainly wasn’t worried about disappointing Obadiah, he had done worse things. But Obadiah just…He just…

Tony tried to sound like it wasn’t a big deal.

“He’s mine.”

Obadiah tilted his head, “I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

“The kid, Peter, he’s mine,” Tony repeated, “His mother and step father are dead. I didn’t know he existed until we went to New York. He doesn’t have anyone else, so he’s going to stay here, with me.”

A drawn out quiet took place in which Obadiah stared at him. An uncomfortable and shocked laugh escape him, then returned to a straight mouthed danger. Running a hand over his balding
head, Obadiah questioned, “Are you sure?”

“DNA test was positive. So, I’m 99.99 percent sure.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Obadiah sounded at a loss, “I could have done something.”

That…That was what Tony had been afraid of.

Standing slowly, Tony shook his head, “This kid is mine. There’s nothing that could have been done about it.”

*Don’t you dare say it, Obie. Don’t you dare.*

But he did.

Obadiah threw his hands up and he exclaimed, “There are ways to have these things taken care of, Tony! I mean…Christ, it’d be a pretty penny but there are definitely other options. It’s a shame I didn’t catch it earlier on, this whole thing could have been avoided.”

Tony held up a hand.

Obie stopped mid rant, the look on Tony’s face obviously speaking volumes.

“You should go,” Tony’s voice was low. Warning. Something rarely used when speaking to Obie. He was one of the people he trusted most in the world but right now…he was just pissing Tony off.

“You should go…Right now.”

The insinuation had made Tony’s stomach churn. He was immensely grateful, suddenly, that the social worker had been forwarded to him directly. There was no telling where Peter would be at this point. Obie probably had the best intention, but shit…This was his kid.
Obadiah held up his hands in surrender, before saying, “You know the kind of shit storm this is going to bring, right?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

And that was that. Obie was gone. Tony was shrouded in the setting sun. He poured a shot. Limited it to one, because he ventured upstairs to find Pepper and Peter and he didn’t want to be stumbling in. But his hands were shaking and he felt like he had been stabbed in the back by the man. Pepper had no faith in him. Obie had no faith in him.

He didn’t have faith in himself.

How the hell was he going to be a father?

When he entered the bedroom, Pepper was pulling a pajama shirt over Peter’s head. His hair was wet and moppy and Tony felt slightly relieved she had taken the initiative to bathe and dress him because Tony wasn’t exactly competent at the moment and his patience was hanging on a wire. The box she had brought upstairs was opened and several pieces of Legos scattered the floor.

As soon as Peter was dressed, the kid scrambled to the floor to gather the pieces and begin to work on them. Pepper’s eyes found Tony’s and there was a silent understanding from across the room. She ventured over, glancing at Peter as she did so, but he barely noticed that Tony had even come into the bedroom.

“Is this room alright?” Pepper questioned, “I tried to the pick the one closest to yours, in case he needed something.”

Tony waved her off, “Yeah, it fine…”

He took a breath, “I told Obie.”

“I’m guessing by the look on your face that it didn’t go well.”

“You would be correct,” Tony looked at Peter who was building, his hands working methodically.
and his tongue between his teeth in deep focus. Tony sighed, “I was responsible though. Sent him away before I could explode.”

Pepper put a hand on her forehead, “I’m grateful for that. Would have been terrible to explain to the kid why his new father is throwing punches downstairs…”

She paused, then continued, “You’re going to have to tell him you’re his father, you know? Preferably very soon. Because there’ll need to be a press release and I don’t want to risk him seeing it on the news before anyone has told him…”

“He’s four,” Tony scoffed, “He won’t get it. He thinks Richard is his father.”

She glared, “Still, we’ll need to make him understand. Because he’ll start pre-school and need childcare. What if…he gets lost and needs to know to say your name to the police or something to find his way home?”

“That’s an unlikely scenario.”

“It could still happen. That’s why they teach kids their addresses.”

Pepper paused suddenly, sniffing the air between them. Tony stepped back a bit, and a sudden realization sparked in her eyes. She glared, crossing her arms over her chest. It didn’t take many shots for the smell of liquor to linger and she had noticed. Of course it’d be Pepper that would notice. Not someone he could excuse it from.

“You need to straighten up,” She growled, “Social Services is coming tomorrow, remember? For the home check? And having an alcoholic serving as a father is not what they deem acceptable.”

Tony snapped coldly, “Alright, no need to get-“

The look on her face made him stop mid-sentence. Yeah. That wouldn’t be a wise thing to say to one of the only people in his corner at the moment. She stepped around him, pausing in the doorway to look back at Tony and then at the boy playing on the floor with his Legos. Shaking her head, she whispered, “You made this decision, Tony.”
“I know.”

“This isn’t going to be easy.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do,” She shrugged. Pepper then turned and disappeared, and Tony heard the door open and shut downstairs. He ran a hand through his hair and turned slowly to face Peter who was too busy to notice that Pepper had gone.

Approaching him, Tony slowly sat down onto the floor beside Peter. Peter paused in his building and looked at Tony, smiling crooked. Tony questioned, “You like those things?”

“Mhm!” Peter confirmed, nodding.

He held out several pieces and explained, “When I finish it’ll look like a race car and it’ll even have wheels and everything. Ms. Potts says there’re other boxes too!”

Tony turned his head slightly, “When you finish those, I’ll order you loads more.”

Peter grinned brightly, looking down at the small pieces. His face shifted without warning, as if his mind thought and thoughts connected to his expression. Peter tilted his head slightly, chewing on his lower lip as he spoke, “No more planes, please.”

A grim feeling washed over Tony. He cleared his throat, trying to sound nonchalant as he spoke, “You don’t have to be afraid of my plane. I own it. It’s very safe.”

Peter looked away anxiously, hands folding together, “Mama and Daddy fell.”

“I know,” Tony said, pretending that his tone didn’t have a bite to it, because he was talking to a four-year-old and it was wrong to get annoyed. The envy was still there, and with the thought of the ‘bad men’, Tony felt more irrational disdain towards Richard. Because maybe…he had endangered Mary and Peter in some way.
Tony pushed that thought out. Even he knew it was wrong to think cruelly of a dead man.

Instead he focused on watching Peter build, admiring the child’s focus. It almost made Tony forget how much he wanted another shot.

…

“Sir?”

Jarvis’ voice startled Tony out of his sleep so unexpectantly, his heart found his throat and his eyes weren’t in his bedroom, but somewhere else, getting a phone call that his parents were dead. Blinking blearily, Tony rubbed his eyes and groaned, trying to get a hold on the racing in his chest, shoving the panic down because stupid, stupid, stupid, that was so many years ago.

“What?” Tony snapped at the AI.

“What?” Tony snapped at the AI.

“Peter has wandered outside, a bit too close to the pool…”

Tony’s head snapped towards the window, seeing that the sun had yet to come up. The darkness and the moon contrasted on the sea, and Tony threw back his blanket, jumping from the bed and jogging out of the room. He made it to the back door, sliding it open and sure enough, illuminated by the pool lights, was Peter.

He was kneeling beside the water, splashing it with his hands. Tony approached, his steps hurried and Peter didn’t notice him until he was being lifted, turned to face Tony with his tiny feet dangling below him. Peter’s brown eyes widened and he placed both hands on Tony’s shoulders as the two came face to face.

Tony asked, voice still laced with sleep, “What’re you doing out here?”

Peter tried to turn his body back towards the pool, but Tony’s grip under his arms prevented it. He kicked his legs slightly, and Tony brought him closer, into a more comfortable position rather than being dangling. Settled near his chest, Peter was able to turn and point at the pool before saying, “I wanna swim.”
“Can you swim?”

“No.”

Tony let out a slow breath, “Good to know.”

He took note of that. Something else that needed to be done. Block off the pool or something because four-year-olds sneaking out in the middle of the night to nearly drown was not on his list of things that he wanted to experience. Tony turned on his heels, heading back into the house and sliding the door shut behind him, locking it.

They entered Peter’s room and Tony set him down on the bed awkwardly. The moon was brighter in Peter’s bedroom, clouding it in a silver hue. Just as he started to stand to full height, Peter grabbed his wrist, and said, “The bed will eat me.”

Tony blinked, face pulling into confusion.

What?

Tony looked and really, the bed was quite large for someone Peter’s size. But the room had never been intended for a child. It was just an extra room that the people who decorated his house had furnished. Carefully prying the boy’s fingernails from his skin, he replied, “Beds don’t eat people.”

“This bed does.”

That didn’t make any sense, but maybe kids just didn’t make sense sometimes. Tony scanned the room, looking for an escape from Peter’s wide-frightened eyes. Instead he noticed the bird cufflink, sitting idly on the bedside table next to Peter. Tony’s body tensed. Running a hand through his hair, he shook his head back and forth, the familiar feeling from the DSS office returning.

“Scoot.”
Peter scurried over, making room for Tony. Lying on top of the covers, Tony laid down and Peter did the same, though less gracefully, falling next to Tony. The boy grabbed his lovey, hooking it under his arm before turning to face the man. Tony turned his head just enough to see Peter and the boy reached out, scratching the man’s beard before letting out a loud laugh.

It was strange what amused kids.

“I wanna beard,” Peter said.

“Maybe when you’re grown.”

That was really the last of the conversation. Tony laid there until Peter’s breathing evened out and when it did, he slunk from the bed as carefully as he could. Peter was sprawled, though he still had the bunny protected in his arms. Scratching his face, Tony closed his eyes and he knew he wouldn’t be going back to sleep. The worry of telling Peter the truth seeping in.

He stumbled to the workshop instead.

…

Tony spent the night tinkering.

There was nothing in particular that caught his interest. He felt a lot like Peter, just building things that had no use. But then again, even Peter’s Legos could be built to play with. The things Tony built were typically scrapped early on. Put away. Because to everyone, if it didn’t benefit the company, then what was the use?

At least that had always been Howard’s idea. And that was instilled.

That was one thing Tony would make sure he would not do to Peter. Something he had decided relatively early into meeting the kid. Within the first few hours at least. Because that had been one of the things that had hurt him most about his father.

Tony knew he wouldn’t be good at this, but he could do that at least.
He could be better than Howard. He’d have to be. He wasn’t going to raise another Tony Stark.

It was around seven in the morning when he decided another pot of coffee was in order. His eyes were heavy from lack of sleep, but he had gone much longer durations without it. He just hoped it wouldn’t be any different having a kid around.

Especially one that seemed to sneak off to the pool and couldn’t swim.

Tony was about halfway up the stairs to the main floor when he heard a sharp crash. It was brief and short lived, but Tony hurried his steps just a bit more. Just as he rounded the fountain, he peered straight ahead and on the other side of the kitchen counter he could see a small head of hair and the fridge door was open.

When he could see fully, Peter was standing perfectly still, surrounded by glass and what appeared to be grape jelly.

Peter looked up at him, eyes widening when he saw Tony. The boy’s fingers grasped at nothing and he exclaimed, “I’m sorry!”

When the boy went to step back, Tony moved forward quickly, snatching the kid up and hopping over the shards to the other side. Setting the kid on the counter, he studied the bottom of Peter’s bare feet, seeing that he was free of any glass. Tony sighed. That was the last thing they needed for when social services came. A kitchen covered in blood from the kid running through the glass.

“Pete,” Tony sighed, looking at the mess, using his foot to shut the fridge door, “Maybe… ask if you want something out of the fridge. Especially if it’s glass…Alright?”

“Alright,” Peter’s lower lip trembled and Tony felt his heart race stop, stop, stop.

Tony ran a hand through his hair. He knew it was his own fault. The pool thing. This. He wasn’t used to having to keep an eye on a child. Looking over his shoulder to make sure he wasn’t getting into anything. He used to wonder how people forgot babies in hot cars, but if anyone was absent minded enough to do that, Tony was.
Wow, day one in the house and I’m already screwing up.

“Are you gonna send me away?”

Tony’s head tore in Peter’s direction. Tony sounded shocked as he replied, “No. Of course not.”

“Jarvis,” Tony called upward, “Get one of the little guys to clean this up.”

“Of course, sir,” Jarvis responded dutifully.

Peter jumped, looking up at the ceiling with wide eyes. His jaw dropped as he looked around, and Tony fought the urge to laugh. Reading his mind, Tony explained, “That’s Jarvis. He helps me.”

“He lives in the roof?”

“No,” Tony grinned, “He’s an AI…A computer, basically, but he has a personality.”

Peter still looked amazed, just as a small vacuum rolled into the room, beginning to clean up the shards. Peter did that squeal again, but Tony ignored it as he watched the boy clap excitedly over the small robot. Peter exclaimed, “He’s a pet!”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, “Much smarter than DUM-E, I’ll tell you that.”

After waiting for the vacuum to shut down, Tony turned to help Peter off the counter. But he was stopped when the boy looked at him with a faraway stare and spoke softly, fingers picking at his pajama pants…

“I heard my mama last night.”

Tony stood still and silent, before questioning, “What do you mean?”
“While I was sleeping,” Peter rubbed his eye with his fist, “She was talking to me.”

Then, without pause, Peter asked Tony, “Where’s your mama?”

“She…” Tony studied Peter. The way he spoke was just so matter-of-fact and short and Tony wondered if all children spoke like that. If they interpreted dreams as reality and just believed so fully in what was in their heads. He couldn’t remember having a real conversation with a child before Peter. He had nothing to compare it to, but it was just so strange…the way Peter’s mind connected things and how he didn’t hesitate to ask weird questions.

Tony then went on, regaining himself, “She died. A long time ago.”

Peter’s eyebrows shot up, “Did she fall?”

“No,” Tony answered, trying to chase any thoughts of falling from Peter’s mind, “No…She and my father got into a car accident. They both died.”

“Is that why I live with you now?” Peter questioned, “Because we don’t have mommies or daddies?”

Tony didn’t know why that question felt like a punch to the gut and why sudden anxiety filled his bones. Maybe it was because he knew now the conversation about him being Peter’s father was open. That this was where he needed to step if he was going to do what Pepper wanted and tell the kid. But he was four…he wasn’t going to get it, Tony was almost sure he wouldn’t. It was confusing and didn’t make sense and even Tony was struggling to grasp at it.

Peter wouldn’t get it.

Not until he was older.

Tony tried anyway, “No, Peter…You live with me because…”

He took a deep breath. Peter was staring at him with expectancy. Trust. And he had only just met Tony, but the reliance was there too and no one had ever needed Tony the way this kid did. Putting
both hands on either side of Peter against the counter, he let the air out of his lungs slowly, trying to chase the nerves away.

It was so hard. Why was it so hard?

“You live with me now...because I’m your father.”

There wasn’t shock. Sadness. None of that. Just complete and utter confusion, clawing up Peter’s face. And Tony knew, he knew this was what was going to happen. That Peter wouldn’t understand, but he had tried. He felt a pat on the back was in order, but it didn’t stop him from feeling completely shitty over it.

“You don’t look like Daddy,” Peter said matter-of-factly, as if he were the one explaining it to Tony.

Tony pushed the envy down again.

“Look,” Tony explained, grabbing Peter’s wrist, “I didn’t know when you were born...But I’m your father by blood. Your other dad...he was your dad too just not by blood.”

That didn’t seem to help in the slightest. Peter shifted on the counter, brows tugged together, face perplexed as he tried to take in what Tony was saying. He then tilted his head slightly, before repeating his words from earlier, “Daddy fell.”

“I know that,” Tony snapped, causing Peter to jump. Tony’s eyes widened when the kid’s lip started to shake again and Tony stood to full height, holding out his hands, “Sorry, sorry...hey, don’t cry.”

But Peter’s eyes were welling, and Tony tried again, “Peter, please don’t cry.”

Peter rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands and sniffled, but didn’t say anything else. He started trying to get off the counter and Tony assisted in the long drop to the floor. Once Peter was on his own two feet, he looked up at Tony, stiffening his lip as he spoke, “I’m a big kid.”
No, no, Tony thought desperately that’s not what I meant…

He didn’t want to be like Howard. He didn’t want Peter to think it wasn’t okay to cry.

But those words didn’t come out of his mouth. Instead he suggested, “Why don’t you go watch T.V.? You can tell Jarvis whatever you want to watch and he’ll put it on for you.”

Peter nodded in agreement, his short legs scurrying into the living room before he climbed onto the couch. Tony turned his attention away, beginning to brew the coffee he had originally come up for. As it brewed, he pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to grasp at the straws of what had just happened.

The sounds of cartoons playing filled the house and Tony never thought such a sound would exist. But it did and Peter was standing on the couch while watching it. Which was strange, but Tony didn’t care. It was relatively fascinating to see the kid’s mannerisms and the way he recovered so quickly just because of the distraction that television offered.

Beeping from the coffee pot caught his attention and Tony turned, fixing his mug. He heard the front door open and shut and he didn’t need to call out to know the clicking of the heels belonged to Pepper. She rounded the corner, holding a box in her hand.

She paused, taking in Peter who didn’t look away from the television and then at Tony who stared at her over his drink.

“Why’re you both still in your pajamas,” Pepper sighed, setting the box on the counter in front of Tony. Donuts. She crossed her arms over her chest and said, “Social Services will be here in an hour, you know?”

Tony looked at his watch. He did, in fact, not know.

As if Pepper read his mind she shook her head and sighed. Tony leaned onto the counter, opening the box and plucking a donut as he said, “Tried the tell the kid I’m his father. Didn’t work out.”

Pepper looked surprised. She must not have thought he’d really try to tell Peter, especially not so soon after their conversation the night before. She glanced back into the living room at Peter who was still standing on the cushions, watching the brightly colored figures on the television move.
She whispered quietly, “It didn’t work out?”

“Nope,” Tony popped the ‘p’, “Not at all actually. He doesn’t understand, like I assumed he wouldn’t. He probably won’t until he’s old enough to know how kids come about in this world.”

Pepper pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, “Well…At least you tried. That was very adult of you.”

*You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew how shitty I handled it.*

“Peter,” Pepper called into the living room. The boy’s head snapped in her direction, his focus broken. She asked, smiling, “Would you like a donut?”

Peter jumped off the couch and Tony kicked himself for not even thinking to feed the kid. Right…Kids don’t drink coffee for breakfast. Chances were that was what Peter was trying to do when he dropped the jelly on the floor.

Another strike. Was that three? Four? Five-hundred?

Peter trotted over and Pepper opened the box, showing an assortment of choices. Of course Peter would choose the messiest chocolate one that the box had to offer. Within the first bite, Peter’s face was covered in the stuff and Tony cringed inwardly before beginning to explain, “So…kiddo. We’re gonna have someone come by in a bit to make sure everything is good here, alright? You cool with that?”

His head bobbed up and down and he offered a thumbs up as he chewed on the pastry. Once the kid had gobbled it all down, Tony used a wet rag to remove the excess chocolate. Pepper picked Peter’s outfit for him, since Tony’s first choice had been ‘horribly’ uncomfortable for a child to wear all day, according to Pepper.

The social worker arrived at eight-thirty, on the dot. A woman by the name of Meredith Crenshaw, short and small, full of smiles and bubbly delight upon meeting Peter. Tony was relieved they had gotten someone nice. Not that Heather hadn’t been nice, but she seemed to lack any funny business, whereas Meredith laughed whenever Pepper or Tony offered a joke of some kind.

She moved through the house methodically and Tony supposed she had done this many times.
before. She knew where to start and end, and Peter skipped behind her every step, because she had promised him a candy at the end of her visit and since the sugar from the donut had yet to dissolve, he was a ball of energy. And was definitely not going to let her forget her promise of the sweet.

Tony’s heart only fluttered slightly when she looked at the mini-bar. She pointed her pencil at it and questioned, “Is there any way you can have some sort of childproofing installed?”

Before Tony could reply, she added, “As well as for the pool. I noticed there’s no fencing up.”

“Of course,” Tony shot her his best ‘dazzling’ smile, “I’ve already thought about it, actually.”

Those seemed to be the only two blips. Things that were easy to fix. A pile of papers were set on the counter top and Meredith explained, “You’ll need to get these filled out and mailed to our office as soon as possible. They’re nothing huge, just a few details in Peter’s records. Richard Parker signed his birth certificate, so things of that sort that will need to be amended. If you’d like us to send someone down to go over them with you, that’s fine.”

Tony took the many pages between his fingers, flipping through briefly while Pepper assured Meredith that they’d have a lawyer from the company take a look. Tony’s eyes scanned it though. All documentation of Peter’s existence. Tony still struggled with that. This kid was real, and he was going to spend the next fourteen-years with Tony.

Probably longer.

Unless he sucked as a father.

As Meredith left, she slipped a small package of smarties into Peter’s hand. Peter bounded away, waving good-bye briefly and as soon as the woman left, Tony breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t know what he thought would happen. If he felt like she was going to come in and snatch the kid or something, but he was happy it was over.

There would be other visits. Though the first was probably the hardest.

Tony watched as Peter turned his attention to some of the several boxes that had yet to be brought upstairs. The kid used his tiny fingers to pry one open, tugging out a puzzle. Peter looked over at Tony and asked, “Will you help me?”
He’d be lying if he said that the anxiety of Meredith being there didn’t make him want to hole up in his shop. Calm down a bit. But the look Pepper gave him told him that wasn’t a good option and Tony nodded, agreeing as he followed Peter into the living room. Peter opened the box, spilling the pieces out onto the table and Tony watched as Pepper went into the kitchen, beginning to flip through the papers left for them.

Tony kneeled beside Peter, and the kid had already begun to separate the edge pieces. Tony chuckled, “You do this a lot?”

“Mhm,” Peter didn’t look up from his focus, “Lots and lots.”

A sharp tune played on the television, distracting Peter just a moment. Tony looked over as well, seeing small cartoon, sea creatures flitting across the screen, dancing to music. An octopus appeared, pink and bright, swaying with the terrible sound. Tony didn’t understand how kids could watch this sort of thing all day…

“Bad men.”

Tony’s head whipped around. Peter was staring at the creature with a nervous expression, chewing his bottom lip. Tony looked at the octopus one more time before turning to Peter fully. That same worry hit like a punch to the gut again. He didn’t like this…

“What?” Tony asked, “The bad men you talked about before?”

Peter looked at Tony, blinking rapidly.

“The ones that made your mom cry?”

He nodded.

Peter reached out and poked the side of Tony’s neck, saying, “One had that right here.”
Tony pointed back at the television, “The octopus?”

The kid nodded again, averting his eyes back to the puzzle, bringing the terror with him. Tony watched silently as Peter disappeared. The Scared Peter, that came out and went away again like he had never existed. But Tony saw the look. Saw the pure fear and his stomach was ice. Something had happened. Something that had Peter terrified…

Tony stood slowly, watching for Peter’s reaction. When Peter didn’t even seem to notice that Tony had stood, he moved to the kitchen, approaching Pepper who was still focused on the papers in front of her.

“Did you run that background check on Richard I asked for?”

She jumped in surprise, clearly having not seen him approaching. Tilting her head, Pepper hummed, “Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you…Nothing very interesting came up. No criminal record or anything. Mostly, I just found papers he wrote about his genetic research. He wanted to use cross-species genetics to cure terminal illnesses.”

“And what about the plane crash?” Tony interjected.

“Engine failure,” Pepper shrugged, “It was a small, private plane. Mary and Richard were the only passengers. The pilot and crew perished as well.”

Tony ground his teeth together, “I want the black box.”

Pepper scoffed, “Tony, we’ll never get our hands on that…What is this about?”

Tony didn’t answer. Simply turned and pulled his cellphone from his pocket, dialing and listening as it rang twice…

“Hey, Rhodey. How fast can you get to my place? I need a little favor.”

…
Tony knew that when Rhodey arrived it would be a big deal.

A really big deal.

Maybe even bigger than the deal with Obie. Because the thing was, Obie had always done his best to please Tony. Because, after all, Tony did own Stark Industries. But Rhodey…Rhodey didn’t owe Tony anything. Sure he appreciated having the direct line to the military tech, but other than that, their friendship was a friendship and Rhodey didn’t need to have a filter.

It was a lot like Pepper. But even then, Pepper had to hold her tongue sometimes since Tony was her boss.

Rhodey didn’t work for Tony.

That was part of why Tony opted to hide in the workshop, basically abandoning Pepper with Peter. Which was shitty, he knew. He knew a lot of the things he had been doing concerning Peter were shitty, but it was hard. And a part of him knew it must be difficult for Peter as well. Probably more so. But Tony’s response was to duck and avoid things that made him tizzy and that was precisely what he had been doing the entire day.

Another reason he should have thought things through.

When Rhodey arrived, he didn’t hesitate before entering the workshop. In fact, he practically stormed in, face shocked and confused. Like he had just seen some kind of ghost, but if Tony had to guess, he had probably run into Pepper and Peter up in the living room on his way in. Rhodey stood by the door, finger pointing behind himself briefly and that confirmed that Tony’s theory was correct…

“Ah, so you met the kid,” Tony stood from his desk and moved around it, shoving his hands deep in his pockets, “Pepper tell you?”

Rhodey raised an eyebrow, “No details, I didn’t speak to them…But I was a little shocked to see a child playing in your living room with a mass amount of toys…”
There was a beat of quiet before Rhodey continued, “Why do you have a child in your house?”

“Oh him,” Tony shrugged, looking up at the ceiling as if he could see through it into the living area, “That’s Peter. He’s why Pepper and I had to go to New York so suddenly.”

Nothing sparked behind Rhodey’s eyes. Tony spoke quickly, like ripping off a bandaid…

“He’s my son.”

If it hadn’t been so serious, Rhodey’s face would have been funny. The mixture of shock and disbelief was priceless, but Tony couldn’t laugh because he knew the lecture that was going to follow. Another person who didn’t think he could do this. Which was fine. He had nearly lost faith in himself as well.

Rhodey whispered, approaching Tony slowly, “He’s your…son?”

“Yes,” Tony nodded, “Flesh and blood. Had no idea he existed until a few days ago, but shit happens I guess.”

“No, no, no,” Rhodey shook his head vehemently, “Tony, you can’t raise a kid! I just had to drag you out of bed for a weapons presentation, and all of a sudden you think you’re equipped to be a father?”

Tony whirled, voice coming out dangerously low, “It’s not like he has other options. His mother and…other father died in a plane crash. Which is why I called you here in the first place, not to receive a lecture. I want the black box from their plane and you’re the only person I know that works with air travel.”

“Military air travel, Tony,” Rhodey scoffed, dropping onto a nearby chair, running both hands over his head, “Christ, really? A kid?”

Waving a hand, Tony ordered, “Drop it. We’re talking about the black box.”

“Tones-“
“Stop,” Tony tried again, “Alright, you know what? First Pepper, then Obie, now you. Who else? Is my father gonna crawl from six feet under to come lecture me too? If I wanted to know how bad a dad I’ll be, I’d go see a fucking oracle, so cut the bullshit and stick to the task at hand! Can you get the damn black box or not?”

Rhodey leaned back in the chair, studying Tony’s face. Tony returned his hands that he had been flailing back into his pocket, clearing his throat awkwardly from the outburst. An understanding passed. Rhodey had been his friend for longer than Tony could remember. He knew him too well. And he knew when Tony was about to break over something.

And this was something.

“Okay,” Rhodey leaned forward again, “Okay, but I’m going to need more information. I can try to do this, but I’m not going to make any guarantees. It’s difficult to get information on a civilian plane outside of military reach.”

Tony nodded, “Knew you’d pull through, alright…”

He reached over his desk, grabbing a piece of paper before approaching Rhodey and handing it over, “This is all of the information about the flight that I could scrounge up. Should at least get you a transcript, maybe a recording if we’re lucky.”

Rhodey let out a deep sigh, looking over the pages. Slowly looking back up at Tony, he breathed, “You know this kid isn’t one of your inventions—“

“Not this again.”

“I’m serious,” Rhodey snapped, “He’s not something you can just get bored with and scrap.”

Tony opened his mouth to return words just as vehement, but he was interrupted by the shop door opening. Both men looked over to see Pepper entering, hand gripping Peter’s tightly. Pepper approached, pulling Peter along with her.

Once she was close to Tony, she whispered, “I’ve got to go. I’ve got tons of papers to work
through for Stark Industries. I’ll start looking through resumes for a nanny and send over the ones that look the most promising.”

“But-“

“Tony,” She insisted, releasing Peter’s hand, “I have to work.”

Tony huffed, watching as Pepper turned and exited the workshop just as quickly as she had come. Tony looked down at Peter who was staring at Rhodey curiously. Tony introduced, “Peter, this is Rhodey. He’s sometimes my friend, sometimes just a useful sidekick.”

Rhodey glared briefly at the other man before his eyes landed on Peter. He smiled kindly at the child, offering a hand, “It’s nice to meet you, Peter.”

Peter took the hand slowly, shaking it before he asked, “Do you like puzzles, Mr. Rhodey?”

Rhodey chuckled, “Well, it’s been a while since I’ve done one. But I used to enjoy them quite a bit.”

Peter leaned forward on his tip-toes, “Well, Mr. Tony bought a lot-a lot, and some are kind of hard, so if you wanna help me, you can.”

The underlying tone read ‘please come play with me’ but Tony pretended that didn’t exist. Pretended that Peter probably wasn’t already wishing for interactions outside of Tony and Pepper. That he wouldn’t eventually need to go to pre-school or leave the house for that matter, because they still didn’t have the black box and Tony wanted to know who the ‘bad men’ were before Peter ever went to the outside world.

Tony watched as Rhodey was led upstairs by the four-year-old, tucking the paper Tony had given him into his back pocket.

He had to do this.

For Peter.
He couldn’t keep sucking at this. Because eventually Peter would notice and Tony didn’t want Peter’s memories to be shrouded with the pain of having a half-decent father who was emotionally distant and lacked reassurance.

Peter didn’t have a Maria Stark to stand between them. To comfort the harshness.

Tony *had* to do this. He had to get better

*For Peter.*
Into the World

Chapter Summary

A dark SUV pulled up to the end of the driveway. The camera was distanced, and the vehicle was a bit shrouded in shadows. But Tony could see enough as the figure of a man stepped out, leaning against his vehicle…and stood there.

Just…stood there.

It was like something out of a horror movie.

Chapter Notes

Hope you all enjoy! I love you all so much and thank you for such lovely comments. <3 Let me know what you think.

“Sir, might I suggest sleeping soon? You will need to leave for the press conference in approximately seven hours and it is projected to be a strenuous process for you emotionally…”

Tony paused, Jarvis’ voice ringing in through his ears. His eyes were nearly crossing, staring at yet another resume for a nanny. Pepper had been sending them in by the boatloads, but the decision was a horrific one. Choosing someone to watch his kid was…frightening. He had always had the worst nannies, that he could remember. He had kicked and screamed when his mother would leave him with them.

They always quit faster than Maria could hire them. It was funny now, but not so much then. He still remembered the day he had shoved two bull frogs into Nanny Shannon’s purse. She had screamed, thrown it, and never come back. Good. Her hair had been stringy and she had reminded Tony of a witch in a horror movie.

It was cruel, he felt, doing that to Peter. Leaving him with yet another stranger. Only a week had passed, since the kid had come to live with him. A week of tears and confusion and Peter wasn’t anymore adjusted than he had been the first day and Tony couldn’t help but feel that was his fault. He didn’t know what to tell Peter, in the dead of night when the boy woke wailing for his mother. When he’d wander the halls in a childish-sleep-daze, looking for her behind doors. Calling for Richard occasionally or even Miss Donaldson.

Peter never called for Tony.
But Tony was always the one who came.

He’d scoop the tired boy up, bring him back to bed and wrap him so tightly in the blankets that he was basically forced back into sleep. Sparkling tears littering his baby-round cheeks like shimmering glass. And Tony would sit, tell him everything was fine, even though it wasn’t, because he was swaying from the alcohol in his system. Frustrated and tired and worried. Guilt laden and Tony just wanted to sleep too.

But every time he seemed to doze into slumber, Peter was crying. Tony had never had a newborn around, but he had a vague suspicion this was what it would be like. And he just wasn’t good at it. He wasn’t good at any of it. Peter moved constantly. Peter was jittery, and Tony followed him now like he was frail and fragile, because the kid had already tried to dump a shelf on himself, twice. Had figured out how to unlock the new fencing around the pool. Was just…never where he was supposed to be.

Jarvis, the real Jarvis, had never let him forget what a pain in the ass he had been when he was younger though.

(“You were such a handful.”)

“But it kept me on my toes.”)

And Peter had basically built every Lego set Tony had bought. Which was absolutely insane and Tony was tempted to have the kid’s IQ tested, because some of the stuff he was capable of building and doing was just…out of range for any usual child. At least Tony felt so. It could be the fact he was Peter’s father, making him biased.

Tony leaned his head back against the couch, setting the papers in his lap as he hummed, “Is that an order or…?”

“I am in no position to order you, Sir.”

“Right,” Tony shut his eyes briefly, brows tugging close together, “Peter is sleeping?”
“Soundly for the past three hours.”

Tony sighed, “Think he’ll cry again?”

“He seems to be going through a bout of separation anxiety,” Jarvis explained simply, “It is unclear if he will cry again tonight. Waking up from sleep appears to confuse him. More so than the average child.”

Tony didn’t know for sure, but it was more than likely that kids took time to adjust to living in new places. He was tempted to call Miss Donaldson. Ask how she handled everything. But his pride wouldn’t let him call the woman he had taken Peter from. Which sucked for the more logical portion of his brain that screamed at the prideful part to cooperate and do what he had to do in order to make Peter more comfortable. It wouldn’t work though.

Pride screamed. Logic whispered.

He tilted his head towards the clock, sighing. Tomorrow was inching closer. Closer to the press conference that would force him to tell the world about Peter’s existence. Really, it had been their press agent that had suggested it. The longer they waited, the closer someone could get to figuring it out themselves and selling it to the media. They wanted the information released on their terms, at least that’s what Tony had been assured he wanted.

And he was too tired to argue with things he didn’t fully understand. He just knew the media was a pain in the ass.

Tony wasn’t sure when he dozed off.

It was somewhere in the thoughts about the press conference, he knew that for sure. But when he did, he dreamed of cars slamming into objects and bloodied faces. His mother’s final good-bye. A dream he hadn’t had in some time, a dream that had been repeated many times over. A dream. Just a dream.

“Sir.”

Tony sat up on the couch, the papers flying to the floor.
“Yeah,” Tony rubbed his heavy eyes. Still night. He didn’t hear Peter crying, so why…?

“Peter is outside again, sir. Front of the house this time.”

Tony jumped to his feet. Another sleep interrupted, though this time he was slightly grateful. His breathing continued to come out labored, either from the sight of his mother’s face or the frustration that Peter had wandered outside, yet again, in the midst of the night. He pushed the front door open, convinced he was going to have to tell Jarvis to sound a blaring alarm every time it opened just so he’d know the boy wasn’t sneaking out. Peter had figured out how to unlock the doors fairly early, always finding an object to stand on.

He didn’t know where the fascination with going outside at night was coming from, but he needed to get rid of it. Peter was near the driveway, squatting beside one of the trees the landscaper had planted. He was sitting at an angle to Tony, but the man could see that the boy appeared to be piling decorative stones and sticks in a line.

“What are you doing?” The words came out harsher than Tony had intended and Peter jumped in surprise, looking up at the man who had approached him seemingly out of nowhere. Peter’s feet were bare, still dressed in his space pajamas, knees decorated in Saturn and Neptune. Peter jerked his hands away from the rocks, poking out his lower lip in a pout.

“I’m sorry,” Was the automatic response.

The kid was well aware he wasn’t supposed to be outside. Yet he did it anyway. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering under his breath, incoherent, even to him. Probably one too many curse words. Tony waved a hand back towards the house, “Inside. Now.”

Peter didn’t move and Tony opened his eyes again, peering down at the boy. Sleep deprivation made Tony want to stomp his foot and shout, but the whispering logic said that wasn’t a good idea. Peter turned his head to look down the driveway, his pout contorting into extreme concern. Tony followed his gaze, seeing nothing in the dim lighting of the solar lights.

“What?” Tony questioned.

“There was a shadow-man,” Peter whimpered, not breaking his gaze, “I was making a fort…to keep us safe.”
Tony’s head snapped back in the direction Peter was staring. Still, nothing was there, but he felt his hands begin to sweat with a certain anxiety. The kind he got when he thought about the ‘bad-men’ and maybe Tony wouldn’t give a child’s midnight ramblings a second thought, if Peter was a normal child, but Tony had been on edge the entire week. He would be fibbing if the only reason he hadn’t brought Peter out of the house was because of the media.

The ‘bad-men’ played a severe role.

Tony reached down slowly, lifting Peter up into his arms without taking his eyes off the spot. Peter wrapped his arms around Tony’s neck, lying his head on his shoulder like he did when he was completely exhausted, but too afraid to sleep. Paranoia sunk deep and Tony backed towards the house, immediately locking the door behind himself.

The wise thing to do, for Peter’s fear, would have been to return him to his own bed and insist things were okay. At least Tony thought that would be the wise thing. However, he brought Peter to his own bedroom, only stopping to grab Remy-the-Lovey on the way. The moment he set Peter down, the boy plopped onto his back, head nearly swallowed by the plush pillow on the side that Tony rarely slept on.

Peter stared up at him, wide orbs blinking as he asked, “Are you mad?”

“No,” Tony muttered, grabbing his laptop, “Not at you, squirt.”

Peter hummed in contentment, seemingly perfectly fine as long as Tony’s anger wasn’t aimed towards him. Tony watched as the boy curled onto his side and pulled his lovey close to his chest. Peter said, matter-of-factly, “I’ll sleep here.”

Tony nodded, “That’s for the best…just tonight though.”

The man didn’t even get the chance to shut the bedside lamp off. Peter’s eyes had fluttered closed and Tony realized the kid must have been half-asleep, stacking those stones. Tony switched the light off, only illuminated by the glow of his laptop screen. He ordered in a hushed whisper, “Jarvis, play security camera-seven. Show any unusual movement in the last four hours.”

“Very well,” Jarvis responded, just as quietly.
The footage moved rapidly, fast-forwarding through the night. The trees wiggled like a small dance in the wind, sped-up, and Tony narrowed his eyes, leaning in close to the screen. Nothing was out of place, for the first two hours of the video. However, at the two hour and fourteen minute mark, the video stopped suddenly.

Jarvis didn’t need to say anything. Tony saw.

A dark SUV pulled up to the end of the driveway. The camera was distanced, and the vehicle was a bit shrouded in shadows. But Tony could see enough as the figure of a man stepped out, leaning against his vehicle…and stood there.

Just...stood there.

It was like something out of a horror movie.

Oh hell no. This isn’t Poltergeist, you stay the fuck away from my kid.

It really was like some kind of horror movie though. Seeing a figure standing at the end of his driveway, just watching his house for forty-five fucking minutes. And Peter had gone out there. Tony snapped, making sure not to be too loud, “Jarvis, if you see this guy, or...any person standing at the end of the driveway, I suggest you tell me or you and I will have an issue.”

“I am sorry sir, I was not informed I was meant to be on the look-out for such individuals.”

“I just thought, ya know, it’s common sense. Even for an AI.”

Tony shut his laptop, grabbing his cellphone and shooting a quick message to Rhodey for him to hurry the hell up with the black box. Then, slowly, he laid down under the sheets, vaguely aware of the warmth beside him. Glancing at the boy, Peter was completely out of it. His face lax and peaceful, despite the trauma from just moments before.

He wished he was as resilient as the kid was.
The dream world was no kinder the second time around than it had been the first time.

Except there were no bloodied faces. No parents. Just a shadow, standing in the window. And when Tony had woken, gasping and sputtering, there had been nothing there. Just moonlight and someone patting his head a bit too roughly. Tony’s head snapped in the source’s direction, still trying to catch his breath as he looked to see Peter, propped up on his knees beside him.

“It’s okay,” Peter’s tiny voice reassured and Tony grabbed at his own chest a bit, sucking in oxygen. He was the adult. He was the one that was supposed to tell Peter things like that, but the boy continued to pat Tony’s head like a puppy, “I have those too.”

‘Those’ must have been nightmares. And Tony knew that. He had held Peter a few times in the midst of his sleep-walking nightmares in which he couldn’t find Mary.

Peter held out Remy, offering, “You can use my lovey. I don’t need him tonight, I promise.”

Tony took the small bunny between trembling fingers.

“Thank you,” He just wanted Peter to go back to sleep. To stop staring at him with wide-worried eyes. It wasn’t right, for the child to worry about the adult and Tony didn’t want Peter to see him like this. Frightened by a shadow that wasn’t even there. Tony nudged Peter a bit and ordered, “Go back to sleep.”

Peter didn’t have to be told twice. He laid back down, but closer than he had been before.

“They’re all just pretend, you know?” Peter whispered, “The bad dreams are just pretend.”

Things had gone way past pretend though.

People who parked at the end of driveways in the middle of the night were not pretend.
Tony woke the next morning to Jarvis telling him they had two hours before the press conference would start.

He had rolled out of bed, Peter stirring and whining about the sun pouring in. Tony had learned that the kid didn’t enjoy being woken up before he was ready, but Tony just took the kid by the ankles, pulling him to the edge of the bed before lifting him and unceremoniously throwing him over his shoulder. Tony blinked, sleepily, the night not offering nearly as much rest as he needed.

Tony picked out comfortable clothes for the child, just a t-shirt and shorts. Pepper had managed to drill at least that into his head, that kids didn’t like wearing nice clothes. After combing through Peter’s thick curls and leaving him to brush his teeth, he opted to dress himself before going down for coffee.

The morning rituals ended with him leaning against the counter, rubbing his face as his saving grace brewed quietly in the coffee pot. Peter hopped down the stairs and Tony turned to face the kid as he continued hopping on the flattened floor until he was in the kitchen, staring straight up at Tony like a skyscraper.

The man raised an eyebrow, “Any particular reason for the dance?”

“Not a dance,” Peter said, “I’m a rabbit, like Remy.”

“Ah…okay, well ‘Rabbit’ what do you want to eat?”

Dressed. Hair and teeth brushed. Just gotta feed the kid and Pepper’s check list is complete.

It would be the third day in a row he got it right and he felt particularly proud of himself.

Peter struggled to pull himself up on the barstool, humming as he did so, “Ummmm…Carrots! Rabbits eat carrots!”

“We don’t have carrots.”

“Then…An orange. It’s the same color.”
Tony shrugged, “Can’t argue with that logic.”

He peeled the orange for the boy, not wanting to watch the kid struggle and squeeze every last bit of juice out of the fruit onto the counter and his fingers. As Peter popped the pieces into his mouth, he pointed as Tony’s chest and struggled to speak around his food, “You look like a spy.”

Looking down at his suit, Tony shook his head. He and the kid had spent all week in the house, mostly staying in their pajamas. The last time Tony had worn a suit, Peter had been ripped away from his foster parent and swooped into an entirely new life, so it made sense that it would feel like the first time seeing a Tom Ford suit.

The coffee finished and Tony chugged it down as quickly as possible. Three cups later and a kid with sticky orange fingers, Happy arrived, pulling up and honking.

After piling in and hooking the kid’s seat belt, Tony had gone to introduce the two. However, Happy was quick to say, “Pepper told me everything.”

“Well, don’t be rude then, Happy. Let me introduce you.”

The kid had been more impressed with the fact that the man’s name was Happy over anything else. Happy hadn’t been amused with Peter’s clapping and the repetition of his name over and over, but Tony couldn’t help but laugh, despite how tired and nervous he was. He tried not to think about the fact that they were going to a press conference where he’d have to tell everyone that Peter existed.

Especially after what happened the night before. The figure in the driveway.

Tony checked his phone. Still no reply from Rhodey, but several messages from Pepper about how the morning was going to go and that she would be waiting for him at the press conference. Tony glanced over at Peter who was chatting aimlessly to Happy, still stuck on the fact that it was the man’s name.

When they pulled up to the front of the building, Tony knew this would be the hard part.

Tony turned to look at Peter and he said, “Alright kiddo… I’m gonna need you to stay here and
keep Happy company, alright?”

“What?” Happy whirled in his seat.

Peter’s eyes widened up at Tony and he questioned, “You’re leaving?”

Tony stared at Peter, taking in the way the boy’s face had paled considerably. It made sense, that the kid would be stressed about it. They had spent seven days holed up in the house, just the two of them, and Jarvis had made it clear the child was showing signs of separation anxiety. He wished that he had thought to bring Peter’s lovey. But he couldn’t have left the kid at home alone and he just didn’t want to bring him into the zoo that was sure to be the conference.

“I’m just going inside…A few minutes, tops,” Tony reassured, reaching for the door handle. Happy was looking between the boy and Tony with an ‘on-edge’ expression, but the look Tony shot him said he was going to have to buck up while Tony went inside and that the kid was probably not going to be happy about it.

Peter whined, reaching for Tony’s wrist and latching on, “B-But...”

“It’s just a few minutes, Peter,” Tony said, opening the door and unhooking Peter’s tiny fingers from him. Peter scrambled towards the door as well, but Tony shut it quickly, looking away immediately as tears welled in the four-year-old’s eyes. Only a few minutes. Just a few and the kid would be fine. Happy was with him.

Peter banged his tiny fists on the window when Tony turned and began to make his way into the building, swallowing guilt that tasted like bile.

Pepper was waiting at the door.

“You’re on time,” She hummed, sounding a bit surprised.

“Well, this is important.”

His words were hard, but only because he felt awful. How was he ever going to leave Peter with a
nanny if the boy feared being left so much? Tony shook his head at the thought, going over the words in his head that he had been planning on saying. When he entered the large room full of reporters, Obie was waiting on the platform, smiling and conversating with a few of the press members. It had been Obie who had insisted the most that having a press conference was important. He was always trying to spin things in their favor.

The reporters immediately started to flash photos and speak as Tony stepped up beside Obie, getting behind the podium. He wanted it to be quick. Just so he could get back outside to Peter as soon as possible. Happy was probably ripping his hair out as Tony cleared his throat, readying to address the crowd.

“I know you’re all probably really curious as to why we called this press conference. And I’m assuming you all think it has something to do with Stark Industries, but it more so addresses personal life, which can sometimes get tied into business…”

He paused, gripping the podium, “Rather than a call for publicity, this is to address an aspect of my life that has changed…drastically in the past week. It’s a call for privacy more than anything else. That’s what I’m asking from you all today: privacy.”

_Breathe. It’s alright. This is for the best._

“A week ago, I found out I have a biological son,” The moment the words left his mouth there was a slight roar, but very brief as Obie stepped forward and waved for them to put their hands down and hold their questions, “The fact of the matter is, I didn’t know. But he has come into my care and because of that, many areas of my life will involve him as well. Including the press. So, like I said, this is a plea for privacy on the subject. I will ask nicely this first time, but if I feel the media is stepping over boundaries, I won’t hesitate to react.”

Again, hands shot up and this time Tony pointed at one of the women on the front row. She held out a hand-recorder and spoke loudly enough for the room to turn into a hush…

“Mr. Stark, don’t you think, considering your past escapades, you may not be in the right place to be raising a child?”

It was a question he’d knew would come up, but the anger that coursed through him burned. He opened his mouth, ready to retort, ready to dish out a blow lower than most, but just as his voice began to break the barrier, the sound of a tiny one shrieking caught his attention.
Tony’s head snapped towards the entrance, and much to his dismay, Peter was standing there, breaking heavily, his cheeks flushed like he had been sprinting. Happy appeared suddenly beside him, gasping for oxygen as well. Tony grit his teeth, glaring at the bodyguard/driver and Happy cringed. Several of the reporters whirled around as well, another roar breaking through and the flashing of cameras startled Peter into looking like a deer in headlights.

Tony hopped down from the platform, not bothering with the steps as he pushed past men and women alike to get to the kid. Obie boomed, trying to regain control. As soon as Tony broke through the crowd, he snatched Peter up, looking at Happy with a dark glare and he snapped, “How hard is it to keep a kid in the car?”

Happy jogged after him, Tony’s pace quick down the hallway to escape the photos. Just as he pushed the door open to enter the daylight, Happy argued, “I didn’t know he knew how to work a manual lock!”

“He’s four, not stupid,” Tony growled, yanking the car door open and pausing to look at Peter who he had settled on his hip. Fresh tears stained his cheeks and Tony used his palm to remove them from Peter’s baby-face, saying, “You’re fine.”

But Peter wasn’t looking at him. Instead, the child raised his hand and pointed across the street, whimpering…

“Bad-Man.”

Tony whipped in that direction, eyes scanning the vehicles and people walking around. His gaze stopped on a particularly familiar SUV, a man leaning against the hood, staring directly at the trio with his arms crossed over his chest. Like it was nothing. Like he wasn’t…But Tony didn’t need to see his face…

He knew. Tony just knew.

Tony handed the kid over to Happy, ordering, “Don’t put him down.”

Happy struggled a bit with the boy, as Peter squirmed, saying, “No, no! Don’t!”
Tony ignored Peter’s cries, walking around the car to cross the street, rage fueling him like fire. To come to his house…To scare the kid and to…Just all around be a creepy-ass guy. Tony was almost insulted, but mostly terrified. Terrified of the man and what he was capable of and terrified of him coming anywhere near Peter.

Once he was in earshot, Tony called, “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Tony stopped only a foot away, eyes searing holes into the man. His hair was buzzed, face calm and blank like a stone. Tony almost cringed when he looked at the guy’s neck, a tattoo peeking out from below his collar…

He could make out tentacle-like arms.

Almost…resembling an octopus…

Tony swallowed thickly, looking back into the piercing green eyes that met his brown ones. Something about the man’s calm expression unnerved Tony, and he wanted to have a screaming match, really he did. He wanted something. Because this was just frustrating and scary all at the same time and Tony’s muscles were so stiff it hurt.

He stepped forward a bit more and growled, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know what kind of issue you had with Richard Parker, but you are going to stay the hell away from my kid. He’s four. You have no business stalking him.”

“There’s quite a bit of business I don’t think you understand,” The man had some kind of accent that Tony couldn’t place.

Tony’s fingernails were digging into his palms, “And you think a four-year-old does?”

“We think he’s an incentive for you to learn more and acquire the information we seek.”

The man moved away, walking around his vehicle and all Tony could manage to do was stand there like a confused, angry idiot. He tilted his head, eyes glancing towards Tony’s car several feet away on the other side of the street. He then looked at Tony again, commenting, “Until we get
what we want, he will never truly be yours.”

The man got into his SUV and started it, and as he drove from the curb, Tony slammed an angry palm at the passenger side glass. It did nothing, but make his hand throb and Tony turned, walking back to where Happy stood with Peter held tightly in his arms, who was completely beside himself and sobbing heavily. Tony grabbed Peter, pulling him close and gently taking Peter’s chin in his hand.

“Look at me,” Tony ordered, trying to keep his voice steady, “I need you to listen. Just for a minute. I have to ask you something really important and it’s gonna be hard to understand and I get that, but I need you to try…”

It wasn’t fair. Peter was too young. Too young to ask so much of.

“What do you remember about that man? What did he want from your parents?”

Peter’s lower lip trembled and the boy gasped, eyes moving around frantically. He tried to turn his head, but Tony kept his hold on the boy’s chin. Peter croaked, chest spasming, “H-h…he wanted Daddy’s pa-papers. But…Daddy said no-o. And Mama was crying…a lot.”

“Do you remember what the papers were for?”

Peter whispered, “Science.”

“Okay…okay,” Tony breathed, releasing Peter’s chin. He didn’t know if that answered his questions or if it made his confusion worse, but Peter leaned forward, pressing his face into his chest. Tony peered over the boy’s head at Happy who looked about ready to quit his job and run for the hills. The sound of heels clicking caught Tony’s attention and Pepper appeared directly next to him.

Pepper’s face was shrouded with worry and she asked, “Is he okay?”

“Does he look okay?” Tony snapped. It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. But Tony was so angry. He looked at Happy and ordered, “Bring us home, now.”

Tony dropped into the back seat, Happy shutting the door behind him.
Peter barely touched his dinner that night.

Tony had ordered pizza, as a peace offering for leaving the kid alone with Happy, but the boy was just too tired to do much of anything. Once he finished at least once slice, Tony bathed him and dressed him for bed. The kid was out like a light the moment his head hit the pillow, even though Tony knew it was just a matter of time before he woke up again and started his nightly wanderings.

That left Tony, a glass of scotch, and the long wait for Rhodey to arrive. Sometime after the press conference, Rhodey had finally replied to his many messages, telling him that he managed to get his hands-on recordings from the black box.

When Rhodey entered the house, his first expression upon coming down to the workshop was disappointment at seeing the drink. But Tony was just so…off. Unnerved. He really didn’t know what to think of anything at the moment. His fingers twiddled idly as Rhodey set the flash drive down on the desk beside him.

“Tones…” He started.

Tony shook his head, “Lectures later. I told you…today has been…trying.”

Taking the flash drive, Tony asked, “This it?”

“That’s what I could dig up, yes. It’s only about a minute or so long,” Rhodey nodded, “It was…weird. I haven’t listened to it yet, but they had it locked away. A lot of encrypted security around it. I had to ask fifteen different people to get my hands on it, and even then, none of them seemed too keen on sharing.”

“Yet you didn’t let me down.”

“Do I ever?”
Tony could have listed a few times, but opted not to. Instead he tugged his laptop close and Rhodey took a seat next to him at the desk. After a few moments to download the file, Tony opened it without hesitation. He didn’t know what he expected to hear. Maybe nothing. Pilots yelling for help. But…that wasn’t it.

Instead…someone was speaking in a foreign language.

Tony didn’t have to understand what they were saying to know that they were angry about something. There was scuffling, framed by static and the sound of an alarm going off loudly. Then the crying appeared, a woman, while a man’s voice, different from that speaking the foreign language shouted, “Stop! Get off her, stop!”

“Is that Richard?” Rhodey asked, leaning forward. Tony hoped not. God, because that would mean the woman crying was…

Tony shook his head, “Why would they be in the cockpit?”

The man’s question never got answered. Instead, both Tony and Rhodey flinched when there was a sharp sound, similar to a gunshot. The woman’s crying stopped and the man, supposedly Richard, cried out, “Mary!”

Tony felt his chest constrict. Even though they couldn’t see anything…he had a vague feeling of what had occurred.

“Jarvis,” Tony snapped, “Translate the language that was being spoken.”

“Right away, sir.”

Tony’s laptop lit up, Jarvis taking control. The audio played, this time with subtitles appearing in the place of the words.

“Give Hydra the serum, Parker, and we won’t have to kill her.”

Then. Silence.
Tony stood, moving back from the computer. Rhodey shook his head back and forth before whispering, mostly to himself, “Why would they hide this from the official report?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Tony snapped, “But…I’ve gotta find somewhere to take Peter. These assholes are following us and I’m not risking…”

His voice cracked, looking at Rhodey, eyes wide, “Who is Hydra?”

“I’m not sure,” Rhodey stood slowly, raising a calming hand in Tony’s direction as the man began to pace madly, hands tugging at his hair. “But…Tony, you need to calm down.”

“Sir-“ Jarvis started but Tony interrupted, whirling to face Rhodey.

It felt like all the air had left him. Like he wasn’t in his body anymore and his skin was strangling him around his throat. He was on a cloud, floating away, fear climbing up like vines and Tony just…He couldn’t breathe. Pointing a harsh finger at his friend he shouted, “I need to calm down!? Rhody, someone is after my kid!”

“I know…but… panicking and packing up isn’t going to figure out who these guys are.”

Jarvis attempted again, a bit more urgently, “Sir, I-“

“What, we can’t figure out who they are while Peter is somewhere safe?” Tony sounded like he was about to fall off the deep end, hit the rocks full force on the way down. When Rhody opened his mouth to speak again, the AI interjected for the third try, this time loudly, overpowering Tony’s anguish and fear.

“Sir, Peter has fallen into the pool!”

Rhodey and Tony’s eyes met. Just brief. A split second, air. Then nothing as they both jumped into a sprint. Tony didn’t get time to kick himself. To be angry with himself for not waiting until he knew Peter wouldn’t wake up until morning. For not getting the new fencing changed the moment Peter figured out how to open the lock. For not doing enough, because the world was flying by as they climbed the stairs and Tony nearly broke the glass door getting to the back of the house.
Fuzzy brained and deaf, Tony’s eyes scanned the dimly lit pool.

Peter was there, floating…not moving.

And Tony thought…It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes. Jarvis would have said something sooner. But Tony had been freaking out and…how long did it take a child to drown? How long could they last under the water? Surely it hadn’t been that long. Surely not. But maybe it had and Tony’s mind wouldn’t work, but his body surged forward like it had been pushed, but Rhodey, being faster…better trained, made it to the pool before him, diving right in.

Tony slid to a stop at the edge, crouching as he watched Rhodey lift the limp boy from the water, immediately turning him onto his back and God, Tony hated himself. He’d bury the pool. Never let the kid near water again, if he’d just wake up, if he’d just open his eyes and look around with curiosity like he had for the past week and Tony’s chest just couldn’t take it-

Rhodey handed Peter off the moment he made it to the edge of the pool and Tony took Peter into his arms, falling back onto his bottom. He knew CPR, and Rhodey kept saying something about it, kept tugging on him as he dragged himself out of the water and tried to take Peter, but there was nothing…nothing and Tony patted the side of Peter’s face, shaking the child. He wasn’t blue. Didn’t kids turn blue when they drowned? Didn’t everybody?

Tony sat Peter upright and the moment he did, Peter’s body gave a sharp seize and he let out a loud, wet cough.

Peter gasped. Sputtered. And Rhodey stopped trying to get Tony to lay the boy down for CPR, and Tony took that as a sign that Peter’s choking and gagging was a good thing. Even though it sounded horrendous, Tony was so happy to hear it. The soaked child covered his own clothes and Tony hugged him close to his chest, despite Rhodey insisting the kid needed space to breathe. But Peter was crying then, and crying meant he was alive and if he was alive, Tony would get another chance to not screw up as bad.

“I’m fucking done!” Tony shouted, and he wasn’t sure when he started crying too, looking at Rhodey with Peter’s head tucked protectively under his chin. Somewhere in the chaos, the chaos that had felt like a lifetime but had only been a few seconds, the tears had begun to bleed onto Tony’s face and he couldn’t remember the last time he had cried. Maybe when his parents had died and he had been blind with liquor.

Rhodey seemed startled by the sudden outburst and the crack in Tony’s voice, rocking Peter, because Peter was crying too. He was the one that had nearly drowned, but Tony just couldn’t pull
it together.

“Call Pepper, tell her to find us a place to stay without a goddamn pool and help me figure out who Hydra is!”


Peter let out a particularly long cry and Tony buried his face in the boy’s moppy hair, whispering, “Shhhh…shhhh…I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

*I’m so fucking sorry.*
All That is Stolen and Lost

Chapter Summary

He’s gone. He’s gone. He’s gone. Oh God, I’m dying…

Tony gripped at his chest, panic swallowing him whole.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all TONS for the awesome reception on this story! I just appreciate it soooo much. I hope you all like this chapter and let me know what you think! Love you guys a ton. ❤

Tony couldn’t remember the last time he had been so exhausted.

There had been many times in his life when he had stayed up all night. He rarely slept, that wasn’t new. He had always avoided such as that in favor of doing things that were actually productive, and maybe that was just remnants of his father’s teachings still coursing through his veins, but it was true. He got tired, but it wasn’t the same as this kind. This was his body leaving him, abandoning him and Tony just…He could do it.

All in all, the ordeal had been…just that. An ordeal. Holding Peter, his pajamas making him feel much heavier than he actually was, because Peter was quite small for four-years-old, but sopping wet, he didn’t feel that way. It was like carrying a weight Tony had never touched before, rocking Peter as his tears died away and truth be told, the boy had recovered from everything much faster than Tony had.

Tony’s hands were still trembling, four hours later, sitting in the small examination room of the ER.

His heart hadn’t stopped racing either, and there were a few moments where he almost asked a nurse if she thought he was having a heart attack, but ultimately he decided against it, because that would mean tests and leaving Peter and he couldn’t leave Peter right now. Not ever. The kid had been floating. Lifeless, in his arms. Until he had coughed up that water and Tony had been so sure he had failed the kid in that moment. Failed Mary. Even Richard.
Rhodey had been the one to suggest the hospital visit, even though Tony had been insistent that he just wanted to get the kid to a hotel and safe in bed, but then Rhodey had to go and mention other repercussions to children inhaling water and Tony’s paranoia spiked. Then they were at the hospital, brought back almost immediately for privacy purposes and it was almost funny, the way the soccer mom with the fifteen-year-old who was puking from too much alcohol had glared at him for getting to skip everyone.

But also…not funny because nothing was funny in that moment.

Tony’s eyes raised from his seat in the corner of the room, studying Peter. The boy was sitting tall on the examination table, coloring diligently on a piece of paper the nurse had offered him after he had been particularly stubborn about having his chest x-rayed. Overall, Peter looked fine. His tongue was between his lips in concentration, scribbling something that Tony couldn’t see from his lower vantage point.

He was so unbothered.

And Tony…

Tony was still so terrified.

And Peter had smiled, when Rhodey had picked out mismatched pajamas for him. Peter had smiled when the nurse had given him the paper and crayons. Had smiled when the doctor had offered him a lollipop. But all Tony could do was frown. Order the doctor to run every test in the book on the kid to make sure he wasn’t going to take him home and have the kid die later on.

Because Peter had almost…he had nearly…

And Peter didn’t seem to be phased.

It made Tony feel guilty, for being freaked out. Because it would scare Peter and he didn’t want to do that. He didn’t want to freak the kid out after everything, so when Peter would glance at him, he’d force a smile and hope that didn’t count as lying. That it didn’t count as him being untruthful to the kid. They had only spent a week together and if Tony was already lying then-

His thoughts were interrupted when the door opened.
Doctor Bennett stepped in, smiling when Peter looked up at him. Peter smiled back, but returned to his drawing almost immediately, not giving the man a second glance. Doctor Bennett wasn’t concerned though, turning to Tony and taking a seat across from him, holding a clipboard in his hand and twirling a pen between his fingers.

“Well, Mr. Stark,” Doctor Bennett hummed, “You’ll be happy to hear that every test we ran on Peter came back clear. There doesn’t seem to be any symptoms of dry drowning or signs that he hit his head. If you asked me, I would think he never even fell in a pool in the first place.”

But he did.

I wish I could think the same thing. Unsee it.

“But…” Tony started, looking at Peter. He swallowed, thickly, unable to find the words.

Doctor Bennett nodded in Tony’s peripheral, “It can be scary. But trust me when I say he passed with flying colors. If you’re really concerned, monitor him through the night and call us if anything changes.”

Tony nodded. That was fine. That gave him a purpose…Something to work on. Monitor the kid through the night. Make sure everything was fine. Even though it was pointless, it made him feel like he was in control of something. Doctor Bennett passed Tony the release forms and bid them farewell. Tony then stood from the chair he had been sitting in for hours, approaching Peter on the examination table.

Peter looked up, eyes wide and with a smile that was brighter than anything Tony had ever seen and he just couldn’t understand it as Peter held up his drawing.

“Look!” Peter exclaimed, pointing at the orange scribbles, “It’s a goldfish! ‘Cause I held my breath like one, you see!”

The boy poked his cheeks out. It was innocent. Cute even, but Tony…Tony felt completely unnerved by it. He didn’t know why he felt so bothered, a cold ice sliding up his spine and settling between his shoulder blades. But he was…deeply disturbed at the thought of Peter remembering anything about being underwater.
Remembering how he held his breath.

Remembering what it must have been like to feel as if his lungs were going to burst.

Tony nodded silently, swallowing past the lump in his throat before reaching out and lifting Peter into his arms. He held him, like that, just a few seconds before grabbing the crayons and paper and exiting the room. Pepper was waiting for them at the front desk, ready to ride with them to the hotel, the Four Seasons, if Tony remembered correctly, but he didn’t care much what it was. Just somewhere to lie down.

He was pretty sure they had a pool but what the fuck ever.

Happy said nothing when Tony, Pepper, and Peter piled in. There was a cold silence and Tony wondered if they blamed him for Peter falling in. He wished Rhodey was there, but the man had been forced to leave, wanting to investigate more about the recording and why such information was hidden from the final report. Peter, not sensing the tension in the car, hummed quietly to himself like usual, kicking his legs.

It was just… Tony couldn’t stop shaking. And Peter was fine. Perfectly fine. But Tony wasn’t and he just couldn’t shake it off, no matter how hard he tried to remove the stone from between his rib cage, he still ached desperately and pain radiated through him at the memory of seeing Peter, lifeless, floating.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

Rhodey handing him over.

Peter lying limp.

Then coughing and Tony swore Heaven opened in that moment.

Peter should have never fallen in.
Mary and Richard shouldn’t be dead.

Tony should have never been irresponsible.

It was almost like he blinked and they were pulling to the front of the hotel. The car jolted slightly, and Happy cleared his throat. It was tangible awkwardness as they got out and were assisted with their luggage, Pepper handing Remy off to Peter. Peter hugged Remy close to his chest, reaching a hand for Tony to take expectantly and Tony took it, grateful that Peter was only four and probably didn’t notice the way he trembled.

Pepper walked them to the room, silent in the company of the employee that carried the luggage. It was only after the man had left and Peter had disappeared into the back room that she turned to face him, eyes holding something Tony couldn’t read. It wasn’t blame, like he expected, but there was certainly something there that hurt…

“Go ahead. Say I’m a shit father.”

Pepper sighed, shaking her head back and forth, “I wasn’t going to say that.”

“You were thinking it.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.” She snapped, before her shoulders sagged and her eyes went soft. She chewed her lower lip, studying the man in front of her and Tony suddenly felt a lot like a bug under a microscope, being poked and prodded and he just…God he was tired. And his chest was hurting. Everything. His eyes were heavy, blinking and waiting for the blows that he deserved. The words that would cut like knives into his skin.

Pepper then continued, “How did he fall in?”

“I don’t know,” Tony’s voice cracked, “Doesn’t really matter. He fell. I put him to bed and he…he fucking fell in while Rhodey and I were talking in the shop.”

Pepper looked at her phone, “We’ll need…a-a better fence then-“
“No,” Tony interjected, “You know…just no. Fill the thing in.”

Pepper shook her head, “Tony, we can find him a swimming class—“

“I don’t want him swimming anymore.”

“You’re kidding right? Children like swimming. You can’t keep him out of the water forever, especially living in Malibu. You’re upset right now. We can fill in the pool, but the whole thing about him never swimming again is irrational at best.”

And Tony knew that. He was just…pissed. And blaming himself and the swimming pool and the water was just a lot easier than everything. Than the world, melting and molding into nothing but ache and confusion. It was a fix to a problem that didn’t really have a fix other than Peter getting past it and learning to swim, but Tony didn’t want him to swim. Didn’t think he could see the kid in another pool without envisioning him floating.

Pepper left, and Tony shut the lights off in the main portion of the suite before moving to the back room where he found Peter jumping happily on the bed. Like he wasn’t tired. Like it wasn’t almost three in the morning and he hadn’t almost drowned. Like things were fine, but things were awful and the guilt…Tony was going to vomit and Peter wouldn’t stop jumping on the fucking bed.

“Peter stop,” Tony’s voice bit like ice and Peter fell onto his bottom immediately, his jumps ceasing. The man could have slapped himself, acting as if it was the kid’s fault that he was in a pissy mood. Peter’s small hands wrapped around his ankles, pulling his legs in and he looked at Tony with round, confused eyes.

Tony swallowed thickly, beginning to remove his watch. He sat on the edge of the bed, tightening it on Peter’s tiny wrist before activating the vitals monitor. There was no point. Peter was fine, but it would give him peace of mind. Maybe his own heart would stop racing. Peter continued to look at him like a kicked puppy and Tony shook his head, whispering, “Sorry. That was…not nice of me.”

He changed into some pajamas of his own before shutting the lamp off and lying down. Peter shifted close, and Tony could see the outline of his face in the darkness, blinking at him from where he had propped himself up above Tony. The man ordered, “Go to sleep, squirt.”

Peter was silent before whispering in response, “I’m sorry I fell in. A cricket was drowning and I
was trying to help him.”

A large lump formed into Tony’s throat again. He felt sick, all of a sudden. Not wanting to think about anything that had happened in the past several hours, especially not as to why Peter was leaning over the pool so far that he had fallen. The kid was trying to save an insect. An insect. He had almost drowned for an insect.

The silence must have worried Peter because his next statement was a whimper…

“Please don’t not be my new dad anymore, Mr. Tony. I’m s-sorry.”

The nerves from earlier coursed through him, making Tony’s eyes burn. He looped an arm around the kid, hugging him close, just to be sure he was alive. To comfort him. And to comfort himself before he had a complete mental breakdown and Tony hurriedly blinked the emotion away, refusing to let himself cry anymore in one night because that was too much for a grown man to cry in a lifetime. Or at least, Howard would say that…more than likely.

He buried his face in Peter’s hair and could still smell the chlorine.

…

Tony didn’t think he would fall asleep, but when he woke in the morning it was a clear sign he had been wrong about that notion. In fact, he woke blearily, like he had been off deeply in some dream land where things were better and his child wasn’t almost drowning in a swimming pool. His eyes opened, blinking against the sunlight streaming through the windows of the suite.

The first thing he saw was that Peter’s feet were in his face.

Rolling away, Tony sat up, rubbing the stubble on his face, glancing at the child that was just absolutely sprawled across the upper portion of the bed, sideways, his lovey squished beneath his head. Tony gently slipped his watch from the child’s wrist, looking at it closely as he studied the kid’s vitals over the past several hours of their sleep. Everything looked normal, not a surprise, but still…it was comforting.

Tony climbed out of bed, retreating to the bathroom before getting changed for the day and splashing cold water on his face, putting at least some effort into maintaining the facial hair that
was beginning to get a bit out of control. He made sure to shut the bedroom door before ordering room service. Almost as soon as he hung up with the hotel staff, Rhodey sent him a message that he was on his way over with news.

The man plopped down on a chair beside the window, staring out. There was idleness, waiting for the news and waiting for breakfast and just overall…waiting. Like watching the doctor run tests on Peter, while the boy squirmed and didn’t understand why he was being subjected to such ‘torture’, but Tony had just been so worried and he knew he’d never forgive himself if…

It was just so unwelcomed.

Nothing had ever dug its claws quite so deep and Tony kept fighting the urge to scream his head off. He was still angry with himself and the stupid cricket and just…the world. Life for not preparing him to be a parent, and Richard for whatever the hell he did to get himself noticed by the mystery ‘Hydra’. And fuck Hydra too because what did they think they were doing? Shooting people on airplanes.

Killing the mother of his kid, it was just all bullshit and crazy. The kind of thing reserved for films or story books. Not for real life. Not for Peter’s life. Peter deserved some kind of normal childhood, but nothing about any of this was normal.

Tony didn’t know how much time he wasted sitting there, but enough time that room service arrived and almost as if the kid could sense the pancakes having been rolled into the suite, the door to the bedroom opened and the ruffle-haired child walked out, rubbing his eyes and yawning as he dragged Remy behind him.

Raising an eyebrow, Tony asked, “You awake?”

Peter tilted his head, as if he didn’t understand, because obviously he was awake, but the completeness of it was in question. The child paused, looking at the pancakes and almost instantly the tiredness in his face melted to be replaced by excitement as he scrambled onto one of the nearby chairs and leaned over the table where the food was placed. Peter exclaimed, “Pancakes!”

Tony’s smile was crooked. Still trying to forget…But Peter’s genuine excitement almost chased away the nerves and the thought of what Rhodey had to show him. He scooted a few close to Peter, watching as he began to practically drown them in syrup. Tony imagined how the next few hours were going to go with a child on a sugar high in a suite without much space to run, but he didn’t have the heart to stop the kid.
Peter practically shoveled the food down, inhaling each bite like it was nothing. When he finished he chugged a glass of orange juice before jumping off the chair and going to the window, leaning against it and peering at the world outside. It had been dark when they had arrived, and Peter probably wondered where they were.

He turned on his heels and faced Tony who had barely had time to drink his coffee.

“Are we on a vacation?”

Tony set his mug down, clearing his throat, “Not exactly. But we’re gonna stay here a few days while some stuff at the house gets sorted out.”

Peter pursed his lips, as if thinking hard about Tony’s statement. Tony could practically see the wheels turning behind the boy’s brown eyes, deciphering, and digging, figuring it out and he was only four, but he was smart. Tony knew that. Even so, it made his skin crawl when Peter questioned, “‘Cause the water?”

A sigh.

“Yeah,” Tony tried to make it sound like nothing even though his hands had started to shake.

Peter approached slowly, like walking up to a wounded animal, eyeing Tony warily. Maybe expecting him to snap like he had done the night before when Peter had been jumping on the bed. Peter stood on the other side of the table, only his head visible. He put his fingers on the edge, placing his chin on it before he whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

Tony shook his head, “For what?”

Peter blinked, “I fell and you cried.”
Tony felt his chest tighten. He had hoped that Peter wouldn’t remember any of that. The tears and the screaming at Rhody. He had thought…Peter was too out of it. Too far gone to possibly recall it. It was bad enough Rhody had seen him freak out, but for Peter to remember it…it was a whole different ordeal and he hadn’t wanted Peter to see him cry…

He was the adult. Peter was the child.

“It wasn’t your fault…” Tony replied, “Just…don’t, you know, go near deep water. At least until we teach you to swim.”

His tone was taut and uneven. Hard to speak. Peter nodded his head, before questioning, “You will still let me stay with you?

Tony breathed…

“Of course, Peter. You’ll always stay with me.”

Peter smiled, nodding, satisfied by the reassurance. The kid was so quick to believe Tony. So quick to trust and Tony just couldn’t fight the guilt of it because he had almost let the kid drown and they had only spent a week together in the house.

There was a knock at the door and Tony stood, rushing to answer it. When he opened it, he was surprised to be greeted with Rhody, Pepper, and Happy all at the same time. Tony stepped back in surprise, questioning, “Uhhh…is this an intervention?”

“No,” Rhody had some kind of file tucked under his arm, “I actually ran into these two in the lobby. Looks like we’re your new fanclub.”

Tony scoffed, “This is a sorry fanclub.”

Happy pushed his way into the room, sniffing the air, “You got breakfast in here?”

“I’ve got bacon left over, which you shouldn’t have. I’ve seen your cardiograph,” Tony called, but Happy disappeared into the suite anyway. Tony whirled back around to face Rhody and Pepper
and Tony questioned, “You got whatever it is that you found?”

Rhodey nodded, patting the file. Pepper raised an eyebrow and asked, “What was he looking for?”

“Long story,” Tony hummed, “We’ll talk in a second. Somewhere the kid isn’t. Tiny ears and all that-“

Tony turned and called into the suite, “Happy, you’re on babysitting duty!”

He heard a startled shout from the man, but Tony shut the door before an argument could ensue, and also before Peter would notice he was leaving. There was guilt in that, but it was for the better not to discuss the people who murdered Peter’s parents in front of him. The three moved down the hallway, Pepper looking more perplexed by each passing moment.

It wasn’t until they managed to dip into an empty gym two halls over that Tony finally turned to face the two.

“What did you find?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Pepper questioned, holding up her hand to stop the conversation from moving forward, “What was he looking for to begin with?”

Tony sighed, his head tilting back in frustration. Right. Maybe he should have left Pepper with Happy so he wouldn’t have to waste time explaining. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose before asking, “You remember that background check I wanted on Richard? And the fact that I wanted the black box from his and Mary’s plane crash?”

Pepper nodded silently and Tony continued, “Well, last night…before Peter…you know…we listened to the recording from the cockpit of the plane. And we heard some kind of scuffling, then Richard and a woman crying and gunshots.”

The woman put a hand over her mouth, “Oh my God. Y-You mean someone…”

“Yeah,” Tony replied, “Someone called Hydra and that-“ He gestured to Rhodey, “-is why Rhodey
is currently the greatest friend in the whole world. So…Rhodey, what did you find?”

Rhodey let out a long breath, moving to a small table a few feet away, opening the file and laying out a few of the papers. Tony and Pepper both followed him over, glancing over the pages and Tony’s eyes scanned them, but most of it looked like gibberish military codes. Tony’s brows furrowed as Rhodey said, “It took me a while, but I found the word ‘Hydra’ in our database. Most of the information was encrypted, but I managed to pick out bits and pieces.”

He then laid a paper down, a bright red symbol clashing with the white.

The creature.

The octopus that had been tattooed onto the man’s neck.

Tony swallowed thickly and looked at Rhodey, eyes going hard. Rhodey cleared his throat, “It seems they’re some sort of terrorist organization that was damned determined to sink its claws into every corner of the globe. I couldn’t find an exact origin, but they’ve been around a long time… Longer than we’ve existed. But, supposedly there haven’t been any confirmed members since World War II.”

Rhodey pushed another page forward. A picture of a man Tony didn’t recognize, black and white, and terribly blurred.

“Johann Schmidt,” Rhodey said, “was taken down by the Captain America. Like I said, that’s the last confirmed incident. However, if these encryptions are any indicator…that’s far from the truth.”

“What does any of this have to do with Richard and Mary? Or my kid?” Tony snapped.

Rhodey paused, hesitating before picking up another page, “They didn’t recover Richard Parker’s research from the crash site…but it’s believed, and…I’m just going off of context clues because, like I said, a lot of the information was encrypted-“

Tony interjected, “To the point, Rhodes.”
“Right,” Rhodey huffed, “Well…it seems Richard was working on some sort of project that Hydra may have taken an interest in. Something having to do with his research to cure terminal illnesses…”

It was quiet. Heavy quiet until Rhodey spoke, “He was apparently trying to recreate Abraham Erskine’s super-soldier serum. They only had outlines of Richard’s research in the system, but it’s very similar and apparently he thought it’d turn medical science around.”

Tony stood completely still. He knew about the super-soldier serum. His father had rarely shut up about Steve Rogers and how the guy was a real patriot to the country. Tony had hated the guy, even though he had never met him, just because he heard his name so often on a daily basis.

It was hard to compete with a dead hero.

“They wanted the research,” Tony concluded.

“I can only assume,” Rhodey confirmed.

Pepper’s fingers skimmed the pages and she spoke, tone almost a whisper, “They killed Mary and Richard for papers?”

“They’re much more than papers,” Tony scoffed, looking at her, “If Richard was close to recreating the super-soldier serum, there’s no telling what someone could do with that information. Especially some sort of terrorist organization.”

Nothing good.

Pepper looked as if she was going to reply, mouth opening and the beginning of words escaping her. But she was interrupted by the sharp sounds of something firing rapidly outside of the gym. Tony thought at first…firecrackers. Someone was lighting firecrackers in the Four Seasons and that was just…stupid. Because fire alarms and all that and what kind of person would set off fireworks in the Four Seasons, especially when they were in the middle of a burn ban…?

But then he realized…much to his dread…that those were certainly not firecrackers.
They were gunshots.

Almost as soon as they started, they stopped and Tony made brief eye contact with Rhodey before they both rushed to the door. Tony threw his head towards Pepper and he ordered, “Call the police.”

“What?” She questioned, her face paling considerably.

“Call the police!” Tony shouted this time, frustrated, “Call them! Now!”

He didn’t stop to see if she was dialing, slamming the gym door shut and hoping she had enough sense to stay inside. Rhodey was already moving down the hallway, slightly crouched as he reached down to his ankle, pulling out a small handgun. Tony got close, whispering harshly, “You just carry that around?”

“I have a license,” Rhodey replied, his voice stone cold and serious in a way Tony had never heard it in all of their years of friendship. Though he hadn’t ever seen Rhodey on the field, maybe this was what they were trained to do. Rhodey leaned around the corner, peering down the long hallway and Tony did as well.

The hall was empty. Void of anyone. Both men made a move to go down it, knowing that Tony’s room was on the hall cornered to that one. Their movements were stopped though when the elevator chimed suddenly and both watched in horror as four men, dressed in dark clothes, walked out into view, guns drawn.

Tony’s stomach dropped when they began moving in the opposite direction, down towards the hall in which Peter was located…

He didn’t think. Tony moved around Rhodey, stepping out into the hall before shouting at the top of his lungs, “HEY! Assholes!”

“Tony!” Rhodey shouted, grabbing him by his shirt and yanking him back, just as a hail of gunfire rained down on the two of them.

Both men dropped, pressing themselves to the wall as the sheetrock and paint in front of them was littered with bullet holes. Dust surrounded them as it was shredded to pieces and when the gunfire
paused briefly, Rhodey leaned around the wall, returning fire, though it was much less impressive than theirs.

“Rhodes,” Tony breathed, panic setting in, “It’s Peter, they’re going to our room, Rhodey, what the fuck-“

“You have to breathe.”

“I can’t, they’re gonna take my fucking kid!”

More gunfire erupted and both men returned to pressing themselves to the wall, the dust from the sheetrock burning Tony’s eyes as the smell of gunpowder filled his nose. He was less than surprised when the fire alarm started to blare loudly, and water poured down from the sprinklers without much warning, as if to add insult to injury. Rhodey returned fire again, but Tony guessed that nothing came of it, ultimately, because when they peered down the hall, there weren’t any bodies littering in.

In fact…The men that had been there were gone.

Tony jumped to his feet, running down in a full sprint, despite Rhodey grabbing at him desperately. Shell casings littered the carpet, sliding under his feet as he rounded the second corner onto the hall which held their room. Rhodey rounded as well, hot at Tony’s heels, and Tony could see the door to their room standing wide open…busted into...

The water continued to pour viciously, soaking him to the bone and he slipped on the tile entering the foyer of the suite. As he transitioned into the carpeted area, it squished beneath him and the room was in absolute shambles. Smokey and destroyed, furniture turned over and broken. Tony couldn’t draw air in, eyes landing on Happy who lay motionless, a large gash across his forehead. Behind him was the window Peter had been looking out just that morning, shattered into a million pieces.

Tony stomped over the glass from the window and coffee table, listening as it crunched beneath his feet. Rhodey kneeled down beside Happy, checking his pulse before looking at Tony and saying, “He’s alive.”

“Peter!” Tony shouted, moving into the back room. He wished someone would cut the damned sprinkler system off, because if it kept dripping into his eyes he was going to lose his shit more
than he already was. Checking several spaces a child could possibly hide and finding nothing besides Remy the bunny crumbled up on the floor, Tony returned to the main room.

Happy was lying still, Rhodey kneeling beside him. Tony’s knees felt about ready to give out as he approached the shattered window, peering down at nothing but the sidewalk below. Flashing lights from emergency personnel skidded into the parking lot, sirens beginning to replace the sound of the alarm going off.

“Tony…Tones…”

Rhodey said his name at least five times, but Tony just couldn’t speak. It had been so fast. Like a strike of lightning, ripping through everything. As if Peter had fallen in the pool all over again, soaked to the bone, shivering. As quickly as Tony could draw air into his lungs, but now he couldn’t…now he couldn’t even see past the anger and terror befalling him.

*He’s gone. He’s gone. He’s gone. Oh God, I’m dying…*

Tony gripped at his chest, panic swallowing him whole.

Forgetting how to breathe, he sunk down onto the floor, not noticing the way the glass shards cut into his fingers like tiny razor blades. He dug his hands deeper, because he needed something to pull him back…to reel his mind back to his body. Because it was *wrong*. It was all wrong and there was nothing…nothing…everything and then *nothing* all at once.

The world was so loud and he just gasped for air.

His kid was gone. *Taken.* And all he could do was sit on the floor.

Like they had never been there, but the destruction was the evidence and Happy’s head was bleeding. It was a miracle they hadn’t shot him, but *shit* he was bleeding and Peter was *gone*.

*I’m dying.*

The blood from his fingers spread into the carpet like ink.
“Stark,” Phil Coulson’s voice would have been funny if Tony wasn’t trembling from holding a gun at him, “What the hell are you doing on this plane? Are you out of your mind?”

Tony shook his head, chuckling anxiously, “I won’t argue that I’m not.”

“Christ,” Melinda hissed, turning back to stare out of the windshield, “Put the gun down. Do you even know how to use that thing?”

The issue was this: Tony had lost his shit.

That was his own fault. There was no way to go around it where it wasn’t. He had thrown objects. Had shouted his head off at the police. Had punched a hole in the wall of the interrogation room where he had been brought after leaving the hotel. Refused to listen and ended up handcuffed to a table, screaming his voice raw at the officer that, in retrospect, was just trying to do her job and interview Tony on what happened.

But at the time…when it was all happening…Tony had thought everyone else was out of their minds. Not him. Because his kid was gone and he just wanted him back. He wanted the kid to be safe and that wouldn’t happen because the police were going too slow and Tony had never gone so long without oxygen, but he was breathless, like jumping into a cold pool, for hours.

His wrist was handcuffed to the metal table, clanking, irritating. “You’re not in trouble,” They kept reassuring, “You’re not being detained…but you’re being volatile, Mr. Stark if you’d just calm down-”

“Find my fucking kid and I’ll calm down!”
It wasn’t their fault. No, it was the assholes who were after Richard’s work and why they felt the need to drag a four-year-old into it like he knew anything at all about Richard’s genetic research was beyond Tony’s capability to imagine, so he just seethed with rage, hands gripping the arms of his chair.

Irrationality welled inside of him like a bomb.

Like menacing, violent fire.

And Tony just kept thinking: This is Hell, right? It had to be. Because there was no pain that could compare to what he felt. He had never experienced such panic in his life and for a few moments, back in the hotel, he had thought he was going to die. As if he was having a heart attack on the floor with the glass cutting into his fingers.

They were still raw and bloody.

It felt like he was sitting there, for hours, when the door finally opened. Pepper and Rhodey stood there, looking at him with pained expressions while an officer entered and uncuffed Tony from the chair. When Tony opened his mouth to berate the officer on information about Peter and how the search was going, Rhodey shot him a steel look that said they would soon find out, but he needed to follow and Tony was tired of following.

But he did anyway.

They were moved to a separate room in the station. Larger, with a giant desk adorned with small plants, a phone, and some kind of device that if Tony had to guess at first glance, was a tracer. Two people stood in the room, a man and a woman, both dressed smartly, but their suits were cheaper than Tony’s shoes.

The officer shut the door behind the three individuals when they entered and there was an awkward silence that passed through the air. Rhodey and Pepper must have already been made familiar with the two people because they didn’t seem surprised in the slightest, but Tony was impatient and just wanted someone to spit out what was going on before he exploded into another one of the blind rages that had destroyed half of the police station.

“What the fuck is this?”
Rhodey sighed, “Tones…”

“Oh sorry, excuse my manners,” Tony put a hand on his chest and looked at the man and woman, “I mean, my kid just got snatched and we’re looking at each other like a bunch of asses, so you’ll have to overlook my mental-outburst-”

The man interrupted, “Mr. Stark, I am Agent Phil Coulson with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division.”

“Oh right,” Tony’s tone was flat, “You a band or something? I’m not interested in buying tickets right now, Bill.”

Phil Coulson sighed and pointed to the woman beside him, “This is my partner, Agent Melinda May. Our director has assigned us to assist in the…arrest of these Hydra associates.”

There was a thick silence. Tony studied the pair with distrusting eyes, but at this point, he couldn’t very well be picky with who he asked for help. But he had never heard of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division and even if that was a real thing, why the hell were they there? What did they have to do with Hydra?

Moving forward slowly, Tony said, “I don’t care about arresting them. I want Peter back.”

“Then we have a common goal,” This time the woman, Melinda, stated.

Tony scoffed, “I don’t think we do. What do you people know about Hydra? Why did they take my kid?”

Phil replied bluntly, “Because they want information that we cannot disclose to them.”

“Richard’s research,” Rhodey breathed, “But…that was never recovered from the crash site.”

Nodding slowly, Phil responded, “Yes…because our division intercepted them in the investigation and recovered the papers ourselves. They’re currently under the utmost protection. Lock and key.”
A darkness spread over Tony like a blanket. Right…Right, of course. Some kind of top secret assholes would have the papers that Tony needed to get his kid back. Of course, because nothing could be easy or fixable with the push of a button and these people didn’t seem the least bit interested in rescuing Peter. They just wanted the people who had kidnapped him, but whatever. If they got to them, they got to Peter and that was all Tony wanted. He didn’t care if every evil person on earth got a copy of Richard’s research sent in the mail, he just wanted Peter back, safe, where he was supposed to be.

Tony moved forward slowly, Rhodey reaching out and taking him by the arm to stop him. He paused in his movements only slightly, before looking up at the two agents, taking in their blank expressions and cursing them slightly for not being as frightened and angry as he was. But in that moment, it was best that the others be level headed while he, as said before, lost his shit.

“Alright,” Tony breathed, “I’m not going to ask how you did that, got the research and kept it hidden. Obviously, you’re some weird pocket group that no one has ever heard of, and if I’m being completely honest, I don’t care. But help me. If either of you have even a decent bone in your body you’ll help me get that boy back.”

Phil glanced at Melinda and nodded his head before looking back at Tony.

“Our goal is to stop these men. But it doesn’t overshadow the goal of your son.”

Tony swallowed thickly and asked, “Okay…so what’s first?”

“Well,” Agent May moved to the desk behind them that had the tracer device and the phone, “Our division intercepted a message that was meant for you, Mr. Stark. The message gave a time and place for a phone call, so when they do call, it will be wired here, and we will be able to pinpoint a relative location.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. Right. Like the movies.

Melinda continued, “But…when they do call, you’ll need to be the one who speaks with them. They were adamant in the message not to bring the government into it. We’ve drawn up some questions that you’ll need to slip into the conversation somehow and keep it moving until we can get the location traced back to them.”
“And when will this happen?” Pepper chimed in.

“Approximately six minutes,” Phil answered.

Tony scoffed, “Oh that’s great. Just let me, you know, get myself under control in that amount of time. You couldn’t have told me sooner? Like during the time they had me detained back there four almost sixteen-hours?”

There was another glance between the agents.

No reply.

Right.

In retrospect, the entire situation should have been telltale signs of how the phone call was going to go. The tension in the room between Tony and the agents. Rhodey and Pepper on edge because Tony was completely out of his mind at the moment. His hands shook as they had him sit down at the desk and expected him to wait patiently for the people who took his child to call. They expected him to be calm and collected and it just wasn’t going to happen. It couldn’t happen.

Tony wasn’t capable of it.

When the phone rang, it sounded louder than any phone Tony had ever heard in his life. Sharper. He actually flinched and went to grab the phone, but Phil held up a hand to stop him and Melinda began to press several buttons on the object beside the phone. She put on a pair of headphones and only then did Phil step back and allow Tony to answer.

He didn’t even get the words out when a familiar accent snapped, “Stark.”

Tony glanced at Melinda who nodded her head to proceed.

“That’s me,” Tony tried to sound calm, but the anger was seeping through, “Any chance you’re the freak that was stalking my house and our press conference?”
"I'd watch the tone you use when speaking to the person holding your child."

Tony felt his blood run cold…

"Put him on the phone."

Phil and Melinda both shook their heads. Melinda was typing away, obviously working to find the location, but that wasn’t the point of the phone call. Still, Tony was the one talking so screw them. He’d get what he wanted, shoving the paper with the assigned questions aside. He snapped again, “Let me hear him.”

"First, I have an agenda, Stark, I’m sure you understand those," He hummed, “You see, the man that was raising the boy, Richard Parker, created a similar serum to that of the super soldier’s-“

Tony interrupted, “Yeah, I know all that. I also know that the research was never recovered, so how the hell do you think I know where it is?”

“Someone took those documents, Stark. And if anyone can get them for me, it’s you. As a weapons distributor, and a wealthy man, you have the means to get what I cannot.”

Tony grit his teeth, looking at Phil. If it were up to him, he’d hand the papers over in a heartbeat. But Phil was still shaking his head, as if he could read Tony’s mind and Tony tightened his hands into fists, desperation beginning to sting his chest. He shut his eyes and growled, “Let Peter talk.”

“Not until I’m given what I want.”

“I can’t give you what you want, you son of a bitch!’’ Tony shouted, Phil beginning to grab at him to stop him from standing, but Tony did anyway, “Now let me talk to my fucking son before I find you and kill you!”

The only reply was, “You have twenty-four hours to find what I want and contact me or I put a bullet in the boy’s skull.”
Dial tone.

Tony reached out, grabbing the phone before chunking it across the room. Both Phil and Rhodey worked to restrain him, pushing him down into the chair as Phil ordered, “Stark, calm down! You could have just ruined everything!”

“No, you ruined everything!” Tony returned, “You should have let me offer the research up!”

Phil’s jaw set, “You know we can’t do that. Not for one child.”

Tony reared his fist back, but Rhodey grabbed it as Pepper moved between the two men. Phil turned to look at Melinda, concern in his eyes as he asked, “Did you have enough time?”

“Barely,” Melinda sounded monotone, “I pinpointed it to a hundred-mile radius in the Russian wilderness. It’s a large expanse but it’s somewhere to start, at least…”

Phil nodded, seemingly satisfied. He turned to Tony, breathing deeply, replacing the anger with stone coldness. Tony’s chest was heaving, Rhodey still keeping a hand on his shoulder in case he tried something again. It was all…horrible. Terrifying and Tony was flashing back to the hotel, when he couldn’t draw air into his lungs and the glass was cutting so deeply that he bled.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Phil’s voice was laced with sarcasm, “Now if you’ll excuse us…we’re going to try and save your child.”

Tony threw the desk chair across the room when they left.

…

There was a long twist of events that led up to Tony Stark stowing away on a private government plane.

Very long.
First it started with Melinda and Phil informing them that they were taking said plane to Russia to confront the Hydra associates. That was mistake number one, telling Tony before they were safely taking off without him hiding in a storage compartment below the small kitchenette. Mistake number two was not detaining him after he had thrown a fit because Tony knew…he knew they were really there to arrest the guys.

Peter wasn’t their priority.

Someone needed to be there that had Peter as a priority.

Mistake number three was leaving the guard alone in front of the plane. That had been easy enough for Tony to take care of, hitting the guy in the back of the head with a rock from the parking lot wasn’t exactly difficult. It was easy, hiding him in the storage room for golf carts and even easier to take his gun off his hip and find a hiding place on the plane.

It was two hours into the flight when he started to consider coming out of his hiding place. At that point, he supposed they wouldn’t find a place to drop him off and even if they did, he had the gun. Maybe it would do him no good against two trained agents, but all in all it was something and he’d rather die than not be there to save Peter. To protect him.

He didn’t decide to move until hour four though, about thirteen minutes in. Tony had been watching his wrist watch like a hawk and the moment the time changed, he could no longer stand the wait and decided it was then or never. He hadn’t heard movement on the plane and was starting to think that Phil and Melinda were flying it themselves which was crazy because how trained were these people?

Maybe his gun really would do him no good what so ever.

Tony crawled out, looking almost pathetic, his knee aching from hiding for so long. He wouldn’t admit he was getting old, but the truth was, he was aging and he had probably never done something so stupid in his life, hiding on a private plane owned by the government, about to threaten the lives of two agents when he had very rarely shot guns in his free time. Sure he designed weapons, had even tested them, but using them on another human being…well…that was all new territory. Territory he wasn’t sure he wanted to explore himself. That was saved for soldiers, not Tony Stark.

He inched down the corridor slowly, turning each corner with the gun aimed towards the ground. As if danger would jump out and wrap its hand around his throat at any given moment. He wouldn’t even have time to flinch or duck or fire. He’d just have to…gasp. Scream. And die. That
was how it worked, right? When people started to die?

Had that been what happened to Maria and Howard Stark?

Tony would be lying if he said he hadn’t wondered if they had suffered. He would be lying and he was a liar, so he had lied.

There was a large main room in which no one was located. His assumptions of who was flying the plane were confirmed the closer he came to the cockpit. He couldn’t make out the exact words that were being spoken, but he recognized the tones well enough to know Phil and Melinda lay behind the door. Tony was the villain here, there was no doubt in his mind that it was wrong, what he was doing, but it was necessary and he wasn’t going to hesitate because Peter needed Tony to be there.

Peter needed Tony. Just like Tony needed Peter and he hadn’t even known that over a week ago.

Peter’s existence had seemed so terrifying then.

But now, the idea of existing without Peter was even more horrifying.

Tony could hear his own breathing, bouncing off the walls. He continued to point the gun at the floor, hands shaking until he flipped the handle and flew it open. The two occupants, sitting in the pilot and co-pilot chairs seemed startled. Slightly. They jumped, turned and looked at him but the shock soon melted into annoyance and Melinda’s eyes found the gun in his hand and her mouth set into a thin line, frowning.

“Stark,” Phil Coulson’s voice would have been funny if Tony wasn’t trembling from holding a gun at him, “What the hell are you doing on this plane? Are you out of your mind?”

Tony shook his head, chuckling anxiously, “I won’t argue that I’m not.”

“Christ,” Melinda hissed, turning back to stare out of the windshield, “Put the gun down. Do you even know how to use that thing?”

There was silence, a pause, breath, “I could figure it out.”
“We’re not the bad-guys here,” Phil interjected.

“I never said you were,” Tony snapped, “But you’re in the way of me getting to Peter and I took the gun as incentive for you to bring me with you.”

“You’re not going to shoot us,” Phil stated firmly.

Anger coursed through Tony, causing him to raise the weapon even more blatantly towards the man. Per usual, people were questioning him. Questioning his honesty, capability. Everything about him, but Tony wasn’t playing. Peter wasn’t a game and his life wasn’t something to haggle. He just wanted him back, safe, and if he had to shoot someone…if someone had to get hurt that wasn’t Peter…

Tony whispered…

“Try me, Coulson. My kid is gone and I want him back. *Try me.*”

Quiet overwhelmed. Neither agent said anything and Tony certainly didn’t. He had said what he needed to say. They knew what he wanted, what he needed them to do for him. It was too much and the air wasn’t properly entering his lungs, but he didn’t care anymore. Life was a lot of that now. Not caring because Peter existed and he had to do what he had to do for him. Everything. He had to give up the world.

Melinda shook her head slowly, “Our director won’t-“

“I don’t give a shit,” Tony sat slowly in the fold out chair, he supposed that was meant for flight attendants or such, “You’re taking me with you. End of story.”

He kept the gun trained on the two of them. Maybe they weren’t afraid, but they weren’t kicking him off the plane, which was a good thing. He just needed to get there. Just…get to Peter and he didn’t know how that was going to happen once they made it to Russia, but they *were* going to get there. They were going to find him. Be safe once more and that was everything.

He just needed that hope.
Coulson turned slightly to look at him…

“You’re making a mistake.”

Tony shook his head, “No. I’m not.”

Pausing slightly, he continued, “He’s my son.”

Coulson studied him for a long moment. Staring at his face as if he was some oddity, but also in a way that read that he understood. Maybe didn’t agree, but understood as to why Tony was doing what he was doing. Melinda’s face held that same understanding, if not, even more, but he knew they were going to make him pay later for what he had done. For even daring to point the gun at them in the first place.

But Tony didn’t care.

He couldn’t.

Hours were spent like that, in that painful silence of stares and understanding, but not caring enough. There were no deep talks or eyes of concern, or anything of the sort that Tony might would have had to deal with when it came to Pepper or Rhodey. He didn’t want that from them. These were strangers that were a bridge to getting his child back. Strangers that could lead him to Peter. That was all he needed and as time ticked on, he grew less uncomfortable. He relaxed.

That was where he had made his own mistake.

Somewhere in the many hours of their flight, Tony had barely dozed off. Barely. But when he woke, he woke to chaos. To shouting and falling and alarms blaring. He tucked the gun into his pants, standing to his feet and stumbling and Melinda shouted something into her head piece and the sun was ripping over the horizon like blood and it was empty confusion, filled with sounds. Tony grabbed the back of Coulson’s seat and shouted as loud as he could over the sirens…

“What the hell is happening!?”
“They spotted us and we were hit!” Coulson responded, flipping several switches, “We’re going
down!”

It was possibly the rudest awakening Tony had ever experienced. And Phil was right, they were
plummeting, quickly, without remorse. Gravity taking a firm hold and dragging them down to the
trees below and here they were, probably in that radius Melinda had mentioned back in California
where things were different, but now, just hours and an ocean away, things would never be the
same and Tony just hoped…Hoped in some other way Peter would be rescued and would be safe
with Pepper or Rhodey.

Tony fell back into his chair, clicking his seat belt, his brain stilled trying to fight the sleep away
and connect the dots of how the situation had risen, but shock was digging in its claws and Tony
felt like he was in a tunnel, inching towards nothing but the red sunrise and why had he fallen
asleep? The last few hours of his life would have been spent asleep and he was about to take a
permanent dirt nap.

He’d never regret getting on the plane, but what use was he to Peter dead?

Peter was going to have three dead parents.

If Peter even survived without rescue. And God, oh God, Tony tightened his fingers in the seatbelt,
bracing, because he needed to live for Peter’s sake, but planes hit the ground fast. And even with
the trees to block the fall it would be less than soft, and he heard the scraping first, then everything
followed along with the tree tops and the shatter of the windshield, spraying glass over all three
occupants of the plane.

Tony was never going to wake up, he thought.

Sure the burden would have lightened, but what did death have to offer that was more appealing
that this?

Than having Peter?

Having Pepper and Rhodey?
The belt yanked, hard against his shoulder and a scream ripped through his throat. It sounded like
the world was imploding, sucking the air out of his lungs as he shot forward and Tony didn’t know
where momentum thought it was going to take him, but it wasn’t far and something in his shoulder
cracked loudly. If he had to bet money, he’d bet his clavicle.

Something hit him hard in the forehead, which left him dizzy and disoriented, but everything was
tossing and turning anyway and Tony wondered if he had even lived at all. If everything had been
pointless. If Coulson and Melinda would have died anyway and Tony just…it was just funny, but
everything funny seemed to happen when it was inappropriate to laugh. Tony was unsuitable for
this. For any of it, because humor rescued, but it also smothered silently when one wasn’t looking.

And he wasn’t looking. Not at anything.

Then…after what felt like an entire lifetime…the spinning stopped.

Tony lurched, then slammed back into the seat and it was hot, but cool wind was tearing into the
broken glass. Fire was engulfing though and Tony felt the warmth from his bloodied forehead
beginning to try and invade his eyes as his hands scrambled for the seat belt. He gasped when he
found the clasp, unclicking it before falling forward on his hands and knees. The cockpit appeared
to be empty, or what was left of it, and Tony stumbled out, glass cutting him.

He crawled, feeling metal, burning, the dirt and he was covered with trees. Tall, never ending trees
that were framed in forest. And plane crashes…well people didn’t survive those, but as Tony fell
over onto his side, aching from head to toe, he realized he was in fact alive, if barely. And he had
survived a fucking plane crash. Which was nuts.

Insane.

He had the urge to scream, but didn’t know why. The pain wasn’t sharp, just ache and he ripped
the bottom of his shirt, pressing it to the source of the blood on his head. He propped himself
against a tree, ignoring the smell of jet fuel, but he supposed he had crawled far enough away that
the fire wouldn’t engulf him. The sun was bright now, no longer the deep red and even through the
trees, it made the world less blurry.

Maybe that was the sun. He couldn’t be sure.

But then again it could have been the giant fire ball that the plane had been engulfed in.
Tony leaned against the bark, feeling it scratch through his clothing as he looked up at the green leaves above his head, the gun poking him in the side under his waist band. It was like the world was spinning and spinning until it suddenly stopped and he was left breathing, but able to draw air into his lungs. Over and over again.

He was alive.

“Stark?”

The voice was a mixture of pained and annoyed. Tony’s head whipped in its direction, staring with wide eyes. A few feet away, holding his side was Phil Coulson and beside him, helping him stand was Melinda. And that was when Tony decided he believed in miracles, because this…All of it. It was just a fucking miracle.

“That’s me,” Tony groaned, beginning to use the tree to help him stand.

Phil gently pushed Melinda off of him, silently ordering her to go check on Tony’s bloodied head. She trotted forward, seemingly nursing an injured elbow and her cheek was sliced open, a thin line of blood reaching her chin. She took Tony’s face in her small hand, tilting it and studying his handiwork with the fabric of his shirt, before nodding in approval.

“He’ll survive.”

Tony laughed weakly, “Woah, what a relief.”

Not a normal person, he would laugh.

But again. Inappropriate.

His eyes scanned back over the wreckage and he asked softly, “What the hell happened?”

“Well, we found the radius,” Melinda hummed, taking in the area as well, “And…almost as soon
as we entered we were shot at. I tried to avoid them but…it didn’t work out, as you can see. Assholes hit us hard. I’m guessing the guy you pissed off earlier ordered it.”

Tony would have felt guilty, but he couldn’t find the energy. Both Phil and Melinda were doing something, looking around. Phil pulled an object from his pocket, staring down at it. But Tony couldn’t make his brain catch up enough to understand what he was doing and it was annoying because he knew technology and just couldn’t…make his brain work.

He probably had a concussion, but he didn’t have time to dwell on it because they were moving.

The leaves on the forest floor slid as Phil led them, still looking down at the device in his hand. Melinda followed, then Tony, but Tony rushed as quickly as he could to catch up, continuously glancing back at the burning plane. He questioned, “Will someone come looking?”

“Yes,” Phil sighed, “Our own people will know the plane went down and will send reinforcements. Hopefully we can find these guys before that happens and take them out so we don’t lose another one of our planes.”

Tony would be lying if he said the fact that the focus wasn’t on Peter wasn’t annoying. Because it was very annoying. It pissed him off, and he had to keep pretending that it didn’t.

Pine needles filled his nose, the smell outweighing that of the blood on his head and the pain in his shoulder. It came in and out, but when he kept his arm still and against his body, it wasn’t so much of an ache. Bearable. And that gun was still there. He still had a chance. He had survived and Peter still had a father. Which was all that mattered.

He could still get him back.

Tony looked down at the device Phil was holding, asking, “GPS?”

“Sort of,” Phil replied. He gave no further explanation.

Melinda said nothing.
Made sense. They were all in pain. All about to have to fight tooth and nail for different purposes and it was just…awful. Stranded in Russia in the middle of the wilderness, waiting for help to arrive. Insane and frightening had bones and blood and they were all growing inside the three individuals. Shedding hair and nails.

“I didn’t do this to fuck up your mission, you know?” Tony said, and the bitterness was uncontrollable, he didn’t mean to leave that taste, “I mean, you probably would have been shot out of the sky anyway, and you could’ve just overpowered me because I fell asleep in the plane-“

“We all have our motives, Stark,” Phil sighed, “I could have detained you, yes, but I didn’t. Because I know why you did what you did and I’m not heartless.”

Tony’s brows furrowed, “Then why-“

“Because orders,” Phil shook his head, “Something you wouldn’t understand, being your own boss and all.”

Orders. Tony understood orders. Howard Stark had raised him.

Phil glanced at his device, shaking his head…

“We’ll get your boy back.”

Then Melinda voiced from behind the two, “Not to break up this moment, boys. But look.”

They all paused, looking to their left. Phil’s eyes squinted, confusion etching as he looked over and turned, looking at the ‘GPS’ for a moment. In the distance, illuminated by the sun like something that was heaven sent, was a clearing. And in that clearing was one building, surrounded by a wire fence. It was nothing large and if it was where they were going, Tony wondered how they had managed to shoot down their plane.

But he didn’t question anything out loud. Instead he moved towards it without hesitation.

Phil grabbed his arm, yanking him back and Melinda stepped forward as if Tony was going to
break out into a sprint. Not that it didn’t cross his mind like fire, and they had been wandering. His body hurt, but if Peter was in there…just there and almost close enough to touch…he too needed to find a way in.

“Let go,” Tony ordered.

“We can’t just go in,” Phil snapped, “What do you think this is?”

Tony replied, “I think that Peter is in there and I need to get him out!”

Phil’s mouth set in a line, much like Melinda’s had done and Tony knew he had to be on these people’s last nerve, but it was killing him. It was killing Tony and he just…couldn’t handle it anymore. He had to go. Had to run, had to get to Peter. He’d never forgive himself if…if…

“We’ll work together,” Melinda said, voice slightly harsh, “And you will listen to orders. You came here. If you want that child to get out of this safely, you need to work with us.”

But please. This is Peter.

This is Peter and I can’t leave him.

I can’t abandon him, he needs me. He needs me.

The only person in the world who needed him and Tony was letting the kid down. Despite this, Tony found himself nodding, head swirling. Phil’s hold slackened and they crouched a bit lower. He took the orders to move towards the facility slowly, even though everything in him made him want to run forward without a plan. Without any idea of what he was doing.

They inched though, all three together. And Tony tried not to reflect on the fact that their plane had just crashed. That for some reason he had survived that and Tony certainly was not someone who believed in fate, but there had to be some point to all of this. All of these trials. There had to be…an end. All he hoped for was that holding Peter in his arms was the end he was looking for. The kid being safe.
As they approached the fence, Tony used the metal to hold himself up. His shoulder, in the crouched movements, was on fire. Melinda and Phil didn’t look any better off than he was, just not lacking as much blood from a head wound. The world was in slow motion as Melinda signaled for them to climb the fence. The wiring at the top was a bitch to get through, but they managed it and Tony felt his cellphone vibrating in his pocket, knowing very well Rhodey and Pepper had been calling for hours and it was funny, again, out of the blue, because how did he have service in the middle of the Russian wilderness?

The idea was born as soon as they were halfway to the building.

Illogical and stupid, but it was an idea.

And Tony just…ran.

The impulsive, stupid part of him caused him to rip away before either Phil or Melinda could say anything. Breaking out into a sprint towards the building, ripping the gun out. It was like something from a movie and each step he took he expected to be shot down by a guard of some sort, but all in all, the base appeared empty.

A part of him feared…maybe they had left. Run off when the plane had been shot down.

He shook the thought away. The front door required a key card, but with a few slams of his elbows against the small glass window, Tony managed to break it open. He nearly vomited from the pain in his shoulder, with each knock against the unforgiving glass, but the moment it gave he felt relief and he threw the door open.

It would have been silly if someone had seen him, his gun pointed downward in the way he had seen Rhodey doing in the hotel. Copying his best friend’s movements as he slid down the hallway. No alarms were sounding. It was completely silent besides his breathing and he prayed that Phil and Melinda wouldn’t catch up and stop him.

He didn’t know what he thought would happen. But emptiness was not it. Maybe an army of angry men with tattoos of an octopus, but God, it was a ghost town. Tony turned down each corridor, more panicked the further down he went. And if they had taken Peter somewhere…gone to a different base…run off. He didn’t want to think about it, but it was all he could see, glaring against the white walls.
It smelled too much like a hospital.

Like the night he had gone to identify his parents.

He had been tipsy, after a long night of partying, a head splitting headache and he hadn’t even… hadn’t even thought it was real until he had seen them and the real world hit and now it was hitting him. This wasn’t some action movie where he would rescue Peter and run off into the sunset, because he couldn’t see or hear the boy and he had no idea where the fuck they were. They were so far from home and…

He hated it. Tony hated it and himself and the world for giving him something nice and taking it-

Tony stopped, gun nearly falling out of his hands.

His body lurched at the odd sound and he turned another corner, listening closely. Waiting for it to return and when it did, Tony swore a light lit up inside of him. Pain from the crash forgotten. Blood dried on his face washed away and he realized it was a child, crying softly. And maybe that should have been scary, but it meant Peter was close and Tony followed it, all the walls looking the same. The floor echoed like a cave and Tony stopped in front of one door in particular, wooden, windowless, in need of a keycard. Tony stepped back, taking the gun off safety and firing twice at the card scanner. The sound was sharp against the floor and Tony’s ears rung, his head feeling like it was going to explode and if anyone was in the building they surely heard it. But the door buzzed, the light turned green and Tony yanked it open.

The room was dark, light from the hallway pouring in and mixing with the soft sobs. The stream illuminated a small body curled up on the floor and Tony found the room was devoid of any furniture. Just the little boy, his boy, lying there curled in on himself, wearing the same pajamas he had been wearing earlier…hours earlier. A day earlier. Tony didn’t know anymore.

The boy shot up, eyes wide and teary, glimmering against the light. Tony noticed his cheek was bruised, and the anger was shrouded with relief that, that seemed to be all that was wrong. Tony quickly slipped the gun into his waistband, ready to approach Peter like an injured animal as not to startle him. Peter stood quickly onto his feet, stumbling slightly as he sniffled, hesitating while Tony stepped further into the room. Air wouldn’t draw in. Peter was alive, standing right in front of him. But Tony couldn’t move towards him…couldn’t believe it.
Tony didn’t have to approach Peter fully though, because the boy launched himself forward, screaming, “Dad!”

And Tony didn’t have time to dwell on the fact that Peter had never called him that before. Had never uttered the words when he wasn’t talking about Richard. The boy was completely beside himself, sobbing as Tony took him into his arms and lifted him, pressing the boy’s head into his shoulder. Peter’s tiny fingernails dug into his back. It hurt his shoulder, but he didn’t care. Because Peter was breathing, chest rising and falling in cries, but *alive*.

It was like the moment Peter had coughed up the water all over again, taking in that first gasp.


Tony could barely speak, not wanting to sound upset for the boy’s sake, “Of course I did, kiddo. I’ll always come.”

Running his hand through the hair on the back of Peter’s head, Tony tried not to let his own emotions overpower that of Peter’s. But the tears that tracked his face were tears that he could not control and Peter was warm.

Peter pulled back, looking at Tony through his blurry eyes. His gaze found the blood from Tony’s head wound and the boy whispered, “You’re hurt.”

“No, no…It’s not as bad as it looks,” Tony reassured, running his thumb over Peter’s bruised cheek. Peter leaned into the touch and Tony didn’t have to ask to hear the boy tell him where the wound came from.

“He h-hit me,” Peter’s lower lip trembled, “The man who made Mama cry.”

Tony’s jaw set, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.”

Tony froze, the familiar accent catching his attention. Tony put Peter down in an instant, whirling...
around to face the source of the voice, coming from the doorway. He felt Peter’s hand grip the back of his shirt and Tony realized the man in front of him was in fact the one from before, but this time he had a gun trained on Tony’s midsection. His eyes were shrouded in shadows, but Tony could see that they were narrowed.

The man chuckled darkly, “You’re like a roach, Stark. The odds of surviving a plane crash aren’t terribly high.”

“Well, I tend to defy odds just by existing right?” Tony growled, “Being a billionaire, playboy and all.”

The man stepped forward and Tony felt his hand twitch towards his gun. He asked, “Did you bring what I asked for?”

“Sorry,” Tony replied, trying to sound steady, “I don’t make deals with assholes who steal four-year-olds. Especially ones with tattoos of their supposedly super-secret-boy-band.”

The man let out a dark laugh, shaking his head back and forth, and Tony felt Peter’s hold tighten. He breathed, catching his breath from allowing himself to laugh so hard, “I thought what they said about you was just a rumor, but I was wrong, Stark. You are as stupid as they say.”

It was sharp.

It burned.

The gunshot. It ripped through him like a hot poker, tearing into his abdomen and Tony went down in an instant. He didn’t shout, but the moment he hit the floor, Peter was beside him, screaming for Tony. And Tony had never heard something so horrible escape a child before. Something so terrified. Peter was grabbing at him, crying, because watching one’s father get shot probably wasn’t the best thing. And Tony wasn’t even sure what had happened. Even though he could see the blood spilling from his abdomen onto his hands, he still didn’t…it didn’t register.

Oh shit.

Peter whirled to face the man, placing himself over Tony protectively, crying as he shouted, “Don’t kill him! Don’t kill him!”
And no four-year-old should ever utter words like that, but his son had.

Tony grabbed at Peter, knowing he was smearing floor on his tiny pajamas, but he was trying to drag the kid out of the path of the gun because Tony could bear being shot, could bear the pain, but if he had to see Peter get hit with the bullet he’d never…he’d never survive it.

The man was smirking down at the pair, stepping closer, gun still raised and Tony continued trying to drag Peter down when the next bullet ripped through the air.

And Tony expected to feel more pain. Expected to see his child die.

But he didn’t.

Instead the man who had shot him fell forward limply at Tony’s feet. Tony’s body was shaking, either from shock or pure relief, because when he fell forward, Melinda appeared behind him, holding her pistol up. Tony thanked whatever was out there, but when he coughed and blood coated his chin, he didn’t get to celebrate. Peter was crying loudly, louder than when he had almost drowned. The boy had his hands over his ears, and Tony wanted to tell him everything was alright, but he was struggling to bring air into his lungs.

Melinda rushed forward, falling on her knees beside Tony just as Phil came in. Melinda’s hands found Tony’s abdomen, beginning to apply pressure and Tony pointed at Peter, making eye contact with Phil.

He managed to gasp out, “Get…him out…Don’t let…him see me.”

Peter’s eyes were shut as he continued to cry, hands covering his ears. Phil moved forward, scooping the child into his arms before leaving the room. Melinda looked down at Tony, her voice softer than he had ever heard it since they had met…

“Help is coming. Just hold on.”

Tony forced a laugh…
“What? No lecture on running off?”

Melinda shook her head, “That’s Coulson’s job.”

Tony laid flat, letting his head go limp against the cold floor. Or maybe he was just going cold. He couldn’t tell, but he was shivering a lot. The taste of blood still filled his mouth and he made eye contact with Melinda, ordering in a serious, yet shaky voice, “If I don’t wake up…Pepper and Rhodey…have to raise him. Don’t let him…get sent off.”

“You’re going to raise him,” Melinda sounded so confident, “Because you’re going to survive.”

Tony wasn’t so sure. The world was darkening too much at the edges.

And then there was nothing.

…

The first time he woke up, he was screaming because they had jostled him too much putting him on the gurney.

The second time he woke up…he was staring at the blades of a helicopter and worried briefly if they’d crash. If it’d be like the plane and he understood Peter’s fear so vividly now he wondered how he could have ever forced him onto that plane.

Then the third time he woke, he was in the helicopter. The face mask was thick plastic, filling him with oxygen. A man in a red medic uniform was adjusting wires to his right, while to his left was Phil Coulson and sitting in his lap was Peter, staring at Tony with blood-shot eyes and sucking his thumb anxiously. Peter said nothing as their eyes met, Tony’s bleary. Peter just stared, shaking, eyes wide.

Tony lifted his arm weakly, removing the mask, despite the fact that the man to his right was protesting…
“Coulson,” Phil’s head whipped in his direction, surprised at seeing Tony awake. Tony ordered sharply, though his tone held little strength, “Don’t…let him look.”

Phil looked at Peter, noticing the way the boy was almost in a stupefied gaze. Phil shifted Peter, turning him to face the opposite direction. Relief filled Tony’s stomach and he put the mask on his face, glaring at the medic who was just trying to do his job before he let himself slip off once again…

The fourth time was much more violent. The hospital room had been confusing and painful and too bright. He probably needed another dose of pain meds, but the blind panic had caused him to sit up in a fury, hands shoving him down and all he could see were nurses and doctors who were speaking a language he didn’t understand and nothing made any sense.

He just knew his abdomen was on fire and Peter wasn’t there.

“Where is he!?” Tony screamed, “Where is he!?”

And the needle that pricked him was sharp, but welcomed.

Because Peter wasn’t there.

…

The final time Tony woke, Rhodey was there.

“Peter’s alright,” Was the first words that escaped Rhodey’s mouth and sometimes it paid to have a best friend who understood the things going through Tony’s head. Because obviously the doctors hadn’t understood that when Tony had panicked. Blinded by pain and Peter had been gone.

Rhodey continued, “He’s with Pepper, in the cafeteria. He’s extremely fascinated that people here don’t speak English. He likes to hear them talk.”

Tony stared at Rhodey a long time. A lot of drugs were pumping through him and his brain was doing its best to catch up, but it was hard in the haze. He found the button to make the bed sit up
slowly and Rhodey stood from his chair when he did, as if Tony needed help to do that. But his throat was dry and after a large gulp from the drink beside him he finally managed to scrounge up some kind of a response…

“Phil and Melinda?”

“Hate you,” Rhodey smirked, “But they’re fine. Already headed home to report to their director. Melinda took out the guy, Tomas Birmington, but I suppose you already knew that…And all of his goons were caught fleeing the facility, which explains why Melinda and Phil said it was basically empty when you three arrived…”

Rhodey paused, taking a deep breath…

“That was really, stupid, you know? Stowing away like that. You could have been killed.”

Tony shrugged, “Well, I never said it was a smart decision. But I don’t regret doing it.”

“Well, Pepper wants to kill you.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Just in that moment, the door to the room opened slowly. Tony and Rhodey both looked over to see Pepper entering, Peter following in tow. Pepper and Tony made eye contact first, and instead of glaring and frowning at him like he had expected, she smiled. Tony didn’t get the chance to properly greet her when Peter squealed suddenly.

“You’re awake!”

Peter rushed forward and was about to jump on the bed when Rhodey grabbed him, scooping him up as he said, “Ah, ah, you gotta be gentle with your old man. He’s getting better.”

“I am better,” Tony raised a hand, “Put him down.”
Rhodey made a face, “But-“

“Rhodes,” Tony insisted and slowly Rhodey set the boy down on the bed beside Tony. Peter seemed to understand and was gentle as he settled beside Tony on his knees, smiling down at the man. He leaned forward, putting his head on Tony’s chest.

He hummed quietly, “I’m happy you’re getting better.”

Peter sat back up quickly and Tony looked at the boy’s cheek. The bruise was fading, but he could still see it, and Tony felt his heart hurt. No one would hurt the kid again. Never. Peter would never have to see something so horrific for the rest of his life. He should never have had to see Tony be shot in the first place and it was just…how was a kid going to recover from that?

How was Tony going to help him?

Peter reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He slipped it between Tony’s fingers and Tony looked down at the small, metal object…

The bird cufflink.

Tony’s brows furrowed and Peter whispered softly, as if only the two of them could hear…

“It’ll make you strong faster.”

Tony didn’t know where the logic was from, but he didn’t care. He pulled the boy’s head down and kissed his forehead. He had never been so relieved for another human being to exist. So happy to have them close. Despite the pain in his abdomen and shoulder, despite the trauma and the shit he was going to get from Pepper later…He was so…happy.

“Thank you, Peter. Thank you.”

But it was so much more than that.
It was everything.
Epilogue of the Mundane

Chapter Summary

“We have schooooool,” Peter sang.

Tony shook his head, “You have school. I already did my time.”

Chapter Notes

I'm so saaaaad finishing this! Gosh, this has been such a fun story to write.

A lot of you have asked if I plan on a sequel, and I do hope to do one. I feel there is so much to add to this story! But I've just started another semester of school and I have ballet. So I'll be very short on time when it comes to writing (this was my first week and it was insane haha!)

So, as to avoid any long waits between updates, I will have to wait until I have an extended amount of free time in order to outline and all that good stuff. I hope you guys understand! It'll be a short hiatus hopefully and I'll be back before you guys know it. ❤ You've all been such wonderful readers. I love you all so much!

Life fell into relative normalcy and Tony found himself wondering how he ever lived without it.

He spent two weeks in the hospital, flown from Russia to Germany within the first three days and eventually after he was able to get up and move on his own, they deemed him ready to fly home to Malibu. Out of everyone, Peter seemed to enjoy it all the most, because Germany was so different in their language.

The flights had induced some tears from the boy, but nothing compared to that first plane ride from New York to Malibu. Peter simply squirmed, but eventually fell asleep and Tony found the hardest part to be those few weeks of not being able to lift Peter due to his wound, so he had to rely on Rhodey or Pepper to comfort him.

Tony realized how old he was getting though. It took forever to get back on his feet, but he fought the doctors every step of the way.

They had a nurse visit the Malibu house for another two weeks, and Pepper stayed to keep an eye on Peter because Tony’s trust outside of their circle had dwindled and no nannies were even
considered. Not after everything that had happened, and Tony supposed he’d never be able to see putting Peter in anyone’s care as easy ever again. It had been hard to begin with but especially now…no, he didn’t want the kid out of his sight.

There was brief contact from Phil Coulson. Very brief. A phone call from a burner, and just the simple reassurance that the other Hydra members would not be bothering anyone ever again. Tony didn’t ask what that meant.

He didn’t really care.

That was the less human part of him. He didn’t care if they were dead, floating in the ocean, or just somewhere locked away. As long as they would never come near Peter again. Come near their tiny, makeshift family that they had created together and every time Peter smiled or tilted his head to the side with curiosity, Tony wondered how anyone could have ever thought to hurt him.

Peter’s bruise healed, but Tony kept seeing it.

Tony took him to see a child psychologist, because Pepper said it was the right thing to do and Tony was so scared of the nightmares that plagued Peter, the terror when the child woke up, inconsolable and Tony didn’t care if the doctor said not to lift the boy, he would do it anyway. Because Peter would run around the house, hide in odd places, and Tony didn’t like it. One night they had slept under the dining room table and Tony woke up sore in all places, but Peter’s tears had dried and that was all he cared about.

Then Tony started to get better, and the psychologist was helping. Peter liked the lab, enjoyed the technology, and Tony let him build simple things, but always with gloves after Peter shocked himself once. Peter’s night terrors slowed, because Tony kept him so busy during the day that by the time night rolled around, the boy was just too exhausted to even dream.

Tony didn’t know if that was a cure, but if it stopped Peter from seeing him get shot in his sleep, then that was that.

And the drinks still came. Tony couldn’t deny that. When Peter’s head would finally lull into dreamlessness, he’d down some shots, but he just ached, and the bullet had damaged some nerves. Both figuratively and not so much.

He’d wind his fingers, work in the lab, sometimes punch things. It was adjustment, and things
didn’t just get better overnight. But the next morning, every morning, seeing Peter smiling at him, awake, was enough to make him forgive himself and try again. Some days he was a better father than others.

He supposed it would always be like that.

The pool was gone within the month buried under dirt and grass and covered with a trampoline Peter had squealed over and the kid did flips. Tony worried about him falling on his head, but Peter didn’t seem scared, so he pretended not to be.

Every day was spent doing something, filling the time, until the end of October. Pepper finally finished filling out the papers for Peter’s preschool and sure, the kid would be starting late, but at least he’d be starting. And Peter had been so excited. Practically jittery in his skin.

So, Tony didn’t know why he was surprised to wake to two tiny hands on both sides of his face, pushing his cheeks together.

“Wake up!” Peter exclaimed.

Tony jumped, his eyes flying open and he blinked a few times at the boy. Peter was grinning, leaning over his father. Peter typically had to be dragged out of bed, but Tony knew it was just the idea of his first day of school that had him excited. Tony groaned quietly, fighting the urge to roll over and go back to sleep as he glanced at the clock. It was nearly time to get up anyway.

He sat up slowly, and Peter rocked back onto his bottom, bouncing slightly on the mattress. Tony blinked at him and hummed, “Could’ve slept twenty more minutes, kiddo.”

“We have schoooool,” Peter sang.

Tony shook his head, “You have school. I already did my time.”

He began to climb off the bed and Peter scrambled after him, standing on the edge of the mattress and waiting to be lifting off. Tony grabbed him and the morning rituals proceeded. Peter was a professional at brushing his own teeth and didn’t even need to be reminded, but Tony had given up trying to tame his curly hair some time ago, and the boy always whined about the comb. So, Tony settled for patting it down as much as he could.
They took their time. Not just because they had woken up early, but because Tony wasn’t quite ready to send Peter on his way yet. To drop him off at school and walk away. It was entirely heavy, but the normalness was needed. Peter insisted on dressing himself, and Tony only had to help him when he put his shoes on the wrong feet.

Breakfast consisted of grape jelly toast and the chocolate milk Tony normally wouldn’t let Peter have so early, but it was the first day of school after all. Tony drank his coffee, just watching and listening as Peter talked about all the things he would do at school and how many friends he would make, just like children on television did.

Tony would be lying if he said when they got into the car with Happy he didn’t feel even an ounce of anxiety. Because he did.

He felt a lot.

But he and Peter had spent so many weeks together, recovering and getting better, that Tony just didn’t know how to part with him. Especially for a whole day. Peter bounced excitedly, and Tony forced his smiles, but his hands shook and he knew he was on the verge of getting Happy to turn around but he wasn’t prepared to crush a four-year-old’s dreams so early in the morning.

It was just a vicious cycle, really, and he knew it was all in his head. Peter wasn’t the only one who needed a psychologist, but Tony wasn’t prepared to open himself to that option. He was Tony freaking Stark, he didn’t need to see a doctor just because he was worried about his kid being snatched up by someone. The planet was full of crazies, but their crazies had been handled, at least according to Coulson.

“You’re sad,” Peter’s voice filtered in suddenly.

Tony looked down beside him. Peter was no longer bouncing in his seat, but was now frowning and had his brows tugged together curiously.

The man shook his head, “I’m not.”

Peter poked out his lip disbelieving, “Yeah-huh.”
Tony glanced into the rearview mirror where Happy averted his gaze. Letting out a deep sigh, Tony returned his attention to the boy in front of him and he explained, “I’m not sad, Pete. I just… what am I going to do all day if you’re at school?”

“Maybe Uncle Rhodey can come over ‘til I come back,” Peter shrugged.

Tony couldn’t help the upturn of his lips. He ruffled Peter’s already messy curls, looking away for a bit. He murmured under his breath, “Yeah, I could always go bother him at work. Sneak on the air base and piss everybody off.”

“Swear word,” Peter spoke off handedly.

“Ah, yeah, sorry,” Tony apologized. He wasn’t used to filtering, but he was getting better and Peter always reminded him when he let one slip.

All too soon they were pulling up to the front of the preschool and Peter was bounding out, only stopping when Tony scolded him for nearly stepping into the street. Peter gripped Tony’s hand while crossing after a brief goodbye to Happy. The boy practically skipped and Tony selfishly missed the days where Peter hated the thought of leaving his side. Even though he knew this was good, that it was good that Peter wasn’t afraid…Tony still didn’t want to leave him.

The school smelled of crayons and there were a few parents there, seeing their children off. Tony only got one or two stares, most of the parents too tired and chugging their coffees to pay him any mind. Peter’s classroom was brightly decorated with drawings and the moment they entered, her was greeted by a young woman, smiling brightly and offering her hand to shake.

“You must be Peter’s father,” She greeted, “I’m Miss Thacker…”

She looked down at Peter and she knelt down in front of him, “And you must be Peter. My newest student! It’s so nice to meet you.”

Miss Thacker appeared to be the stereotypical young teacher, full of optimism. A few children were already in the class playing and Tony could tell Peter was itching to join them, but held his place at Tony’s side. Miss Thacker stood back up, and Tony found she was saying most of what she had said over the e-mail, explaining the kinds of activities that would go on in the classroom and the papers that would be sent home each day.
Given, Pepper had done a lot of the contacting, but Tony had paid close attention to the kind of things Peter would be learning. Just so he would know if Peter was on track. But the boy was smart, there was no doubt in that. And he genuinely seemed to enjoy learning. Miss Thacker spoke to him a few more minutes, until a mother with a wailing child entered and she stepped away to assist her.

Peter tugged on Tony’s leg and asked, “Can I play?”

Squatting down in front of the boy, Tony nodded, “You can…But, you remember what we talked about right? That I don’t stay at school with you?”

“Mhm!” Peter nodded, “All day.”

Peter patted the top of Tony’s head and the man’s brows furrowed. It was a comforting gesture, he supposed, or was meant to be. Peter then surged forward, wrapping his arms tightly around Tony’s neck and despite the gripping anxiety, Tony smiled, returning the hug. Peter whispered in his ear softly, “I love you, Dad.”

Tony swallowed thickly, “Love you too, squirt.”

That was something Howard had never said. And Tony tried his best to say it now. It felt easy, sometimes and other times it was like a foreign language in just a few words. But it felt important and different and true. Peter pulled away, rushing to join a few children as Miss Thacker took his backpack and placed it into one of the cubby holes.

Tony stood back to full height, watching as Peter joined a few small kids in building their blocks. They greeted Peter kindly and Tony knew the kid had longed for interaction with children his age. It was like removing glass from a wound, leaving that classroom without Peter holding his hand.

*It’s just a few hours.*

And as he moved down the hallway, he reminded himself that, over and over.

Tony wondered how his life had gotten to that moment in time. Loving another human being so much that it was painful sometimes, but it was the best kind of hurt he had ever experienced. Peter was a light in a life that had brought him a lot of ache and loneliness. And Tony found himself
looking forward to the future and the coming days to see what it had to hold. Even if it meant experiencing an anxiety attack every time he had to leave the child so he could grow into his own human being.

Hesitating in front of the school, Tony breathed deeply.

That was the world. That was the whole world in that school.

Spinning and spinning and spinning.

He found himself thanking Mary and Richard silently. They had only gotten four short years with Peter, but he’d make sure that Peter didn’t forget them. There was so much kindness they had instilled into such a small being, it was almost unfathomable.

And Tony smiled, given, it held sadness, but joy was there too.

Happy’s voice interrupted his thoughts, saying, “You did it.”

Tony laughed, sounding a bit exhausted, “Barely…Thought about getting you to turn around a few times there.”

The other man shrugged. His eyes held a sense that he didn’t completely understand what Tony was feeling, but he could decipher it. There was a scar on Happy’s head, where he had taken a beating for Peter and Tony would forever be grateful that Happy had done that. Stupid, angry, crazy Happy had risked his life for a child he barely knew.

“He’s gonna be fine.”

Tony nodded in agreement, “I know. But I have a feeling I’m going to worry…forever.”

Happy opened the car door and gestured for Tony to get in, “I’m not a dad, but I think that’s probably a part of the deal.”
Some deal. Tony snorted, good humoredly before climbing into the back.

“Where to, boss?”


The car went into motion and Tony chanced one more glanced out the window at the school. Peter would be fine and the boy would be so happy when he got home. Giddy with delight and full of life, more life than Tony had in himself, but that was okay. Peter had enough for the both of them. Actually, he probably had enough for their entire circle.

And for the first time since December 16th, 1991…There was the promise of happiness.

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