Revelations

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Revelations

by Anonymous

Summary

“I still don’t get it,” Ned says. “How you just... keep being ordinary in spite of all the craziness you’ve lived through. You were in space. You helped Iron Man save the universe. And nobody knows it was you.” His tone softens, becomes almost sad. As though he realizes that what he’s saying is so completely alien to him that he will never be able to understand this part of Peter’s life. “Peter, don’t you want people to know you for who you are?”

An AU where they get the Gauntlet off of Thanos that first time, on Titan.

Notes

Once again folks, your friendly neighborhood author would NEVER EVER wish to see a relationship like this develop irl, but in the fictional context of an alternate universe where the age difference and the power imbalances are not real, I hope you enjoy this work.
And for those who have asked, the tag for my anon starker fic is 'author has already arranged a ride to church trust me'.
Flying back to Earth is a long, somber experience.

Peter is beyond exhausted but he can’t sleep. Mr Stark said that he should get the bed and no one argued with him, so now he’s lying down curled on his slightly-less-worse-off side, wide awake. Quill’s small vessel judders and stutters as their pilot seemingly cycles through the five stages of grief over and over, but even without the baseline rattle Peter’s body would be in too much pain to settle. The unsettling lack of background noises his sensitive ears are used to picking up doesn’t help either; there is a sense of vast nothing beyond their spaceship that makes him queasy.

Drax is sitting next to Quill in the copilot’s seat, in contemplative and supportive silence. Mantis sequestered herself in one of the higher struts of the cargo hold in an attempt to get as far from everyone else’s emotions as she can. Nebula isn’t with them—after she killed her father she only ever said two words: “For Gamora.” Then she got on her own ship and left, refusing to answer Quill’s demands for explanation; refusing even to look back.

Mr Stark was appointed the unofficial custodian of the Gauntlet, and him and Dr Strange are huddled across the hull from Peter, within his line of sight. They are arguing in low voices—but not low enough.

“…to destroy it.”

“Of course to destroy it. But it’s going to take more than a bit of tinkering to figure out how to do that safely.”

“But you think you’ll be able to do it?”

“I think I can phone a friend, yes.” Mr Stark sighs. His armor looks surprisingly intact given all they’ve been through, but his hair is matted and windswept. The set of his shoulders is weary with the weight of the world. His gaze wanders from the Gauntlet in his lap to the floor and up to—

Peter closes his eyes.

“…Parker.”

Peter tries to keep up the pretense, letting his mouth slacken slightly and not reacting otherwise.

“Parker.” He hears Mr Stark sigh again. “Prometheus was a worthy prequel.”

Peter’s eyes fly open. “No way,” he whispers. It makes Mr Stark smile with his eyes, if not his mouth, but that exhausted expression is totally worth the indignation Peter injected into his tone.

Strange snorts. “Did no one ever teach you it’s rude to eavesdrop?” he says to Peter.

“I can’t sleep. It’s not my fault you’re talking about important world-ending stuff.”

Mr Stark gets up, carefully depositing the Gauntlet on the bench he was sitting on. It looks like a corny toy on its own; the shine of its four kitschy stones dulled while not in use. It still makes Peter shiver in cold, instinctive terror just remembering.

“Hey.” Mr Stark walks over to him and crouches down so they are as close to eye-level as possible. His metallic joints don’t creak even after all the fighting he did; the nanobots are holding together.
“How are you feeling? You okay?”

Peter nods, leaning up on one elbow and trying to square his shoulders, to look less like a powerless kid. “I’m fine. Regenerating already.”

Mr Stark leans over him to look at his right side. Peter took off the Iron Spider armor an hour into the flight and he’s in his regular flexi-cloth Spider-Man outfit now, which unfortunately withstood the wear and tear a little less comprehensively than the nanobots did. There are several gashes in the fabric along his side that reveal how much bruising and swelling is going on underneath.

For a few moments, they are all quiet again, and Mr Stark stares blankly at Peter’s injuries in a way that makes Peter inexplicably guilty for having gotten hit. He can tell Mr Stark isn’t upset about the rips in the million-dollar suit under his billion-dollar armor.

“I told you, it knew that I wanted to stay and help. I wanted to. I was joking, about it being your fault.” Peter deliberately shrugs through the pain, and feels proud of himself for not wincing. “It was my decision.”

Mr Stark gives a small nod, but his eyes disagree.

“I’m not… actually your ward, dude.” Too casual. “Sir.” Too formal. “Mr Stark.”

That makes Stark chuckle unexpectedly, and Peter feels like he won something.

“We could ask Mantis to take some of the pain away,” Mr Stark suggests, but Peter immediately shakes his head.

“I’m okay. Bet you it’ll heal before we make it to Earth.”

“If it doesn’t, bet you I’m covering your medical expenses.”

“Bet you I’m not letting a doctor see me and figuring out I have superpowers.”

“Bet you both forgot I was sitting right here.”

They both look at Dr Strange, who seems unamused with their bit of banter.

“Oh. Right,” Peter says. Mr Stark huffs, as though incredulous at his own lapse in memory.

Dr Strange stands up and walks over to them, pausing pointedly next to Stark until he moves aside and lets him near Peter.

“Do I need his permission or something?” he asks Peter, crouching down and rolling up his sleeves. His cape rustles despite the lack of a breeze and nudges Mr Stark back a step so he’s not hovering as close.

“No,” Peter mutters. They never got around to explaining their relationship to the doctor; ironically they ran out of time—but the word ‘permission’ makes Peter think all sorts of inappropriate things that aren’t in any way parental, and would probably scandalize even infamous playboy Tony Stark. “I’m an adult.”

“Um, no you’re not,” Mr Stark pipes up.

“I’m eighteen.”

“No, you’re not. Your birthday is two weeks from now.”
Peter rolls his eyes, and then hisses as Strange palpates his side.

“Hurt?”

“Yeah.”

Strange nods. “I feel a couple of step-offs. That means I can feel the breaks in your ribs.” He puts his palm on Peter’s flank and Mr Stark shifts out of the corner of Peter’s eye. “Any shortness of breath?”

“It just hurts a bit when I breathe too deep. M’okay otherwise.”

The doctor gives Peter a considering look. “Is your rapid healing just that? Rapid? Or does it realign the tissue?” At Peter’s look of confusion, he goes on. “Is there a risk of something healing incorrectly, the way it happens with humans?”

A bit unnerved at being so blatantly labeled ‘not human’, Peter nods. “I think it corrects itself. I’ve never had a bone heal wrong.”

“Broken a lot of bones, have you?”

“Well. Yeah.”

The doc nods, sighing. “And you’re seventeen years old. Forgive me, almost eighteen.” He holds up a hand before Peter can correct him. “Okay. I think you’ll be all right, but you should come see me sometime for a check-up. Or if you’re injured again. I live on 117A Bleecker Street.”

“…Thanks.”

He rustles back to the bench and sits next to the gauntlet, crossing his legs Indian-style and closing his eyes.

Mr Stark is still standing over Peter, looking down at him. His armor gleams, imposing and dramatic —maybe he hasn’t noticed that he’s still wearing it, and that’s why he didn’t take it off. Surely he’d be more comfortable in his running gear.

“I’m okay,” Peter tells him again, in case it helps.

“Good.” After a moment’s pause, he sits down on the floor with a heavy thump, leaning his back against the side of the bed, facing away from Peter. Like he’s keeping guard, even though there’s nothing to fight anymore. “Try to get some sleep.”

“…Okay.”

He doesn’t close his eyes, though. He watches Mr Stark’s neck and shoulders, the back of his head, the plates of each intricate juncture of his armor, and finds it difficult to fully embrace a sense of uncomplicated victory even though they won.

The stars pass them by in a blur, and it feels heavy. It feels like they brushed close to something terrible; something so vastly tragic Peter can’t put a name to it. There is relief, but the tendrils of that other reality cling, only letting go but slowly.

He’s really glad Mr Stark is with him, and wishes he were brave enough to ask him for a hug. For some reason he feels as though he is owed one by the universe.
Iron Man’s triumphant return with the Gauntlet amplifies the celebratory mood across the globe to something like a fever-pitch.

A spontaneous parade happens down 5th Avenue the day after he is spotted flying into New York, and when the King of Wakanda delivers the rest of the Avengers back to the United States safe and sound, including the much-missed Thor and Dr Banner, the party grows even bigger. The European Union awards Captain America and his team temporary diplomatic immunity in an emergency vote to counter the potential consequences of another breach of the Sokovia Accords. The United Nations schedules another summit to debate and re-examine the Accords’ mandates.

Uganda, Wakanda’s close neighbor, declares a national holiday. Fireworks light up the skies in Brazil, Australia, Spain, China—all over the planet, as a gleeful sense of victory permeates every city, every town. The world seems to relish being alive, as though everyone collectively felt just how close they came to the end.

Peter re-appears in Queens to find a distraught May who thought he had vanished from the face of the Earth, and hugs her so tight that he could have hurt her.

He gets roped into the jubilee the first few days, watching the pyrotechnics with May and going to the summer block parties with Ned and MJ, thinking back to the bloom of relief he felt when him and Mr Stark finally got that evil freaking glove off of Thanos’ meaty hand. He dons the mantle of friendly neighborhood Spider-Man once again, and if he has a bit of whiplash from transitioning from universal to local, he makes sure not to show it.

Days turn into weeks, and when the news breaks about the Avengers officially getting back together and no sports car appears to sweep him off his feet, he hides his disappointment and keeps studying for finals. Mr Stark and Captain Rogers appear at a press conference together and shake hands in front of a flurry of camera flashes, looking like they belong in a world Peter was crazy to think he could step into.

He turns eighteen, and then weeks turn into months and he graduates high school, and he decides not to go to college. Instead, he waits to hear from Mr Stark and his team, who are back to being revered by the general population.

He waits, and gets a part-time job at Mr Delmar’s.

He waits, and patrols every day.

Mostly, he waits.

“Did you see it?”

“Ned—“

“Dude, it’s blowing up. I think it’s number one on trending right now—“

“I saw it, Ned—“

“You should watch it again. Here, look.” Ned hits play on the YouTube clip and, before Peter can
protest again, he hears a tinny version of a familiar voice.

“—that it was two of us. I’m getting all the credit, but next to me was one of the strongest, bravest, smartest heroes I ever met, and he’s out there right now, living his life under the radar and not wanting any of the recognition he is owed for saving the universe.” The clip ends, and the newscaster turns back to the camera and leans her elbows on the table. “With that shocking statement, Tony Stark told a CNN reporter that a second, as of yet unidentified superhero was instrumental in the removal of Thanos’ Gauntlet and thus is responsible for preventing a genocide on a universal scale. After months of secrecy surrounding what is now being called the Infinity War by most, this revelation might provide further detail as to what happened on the planet Titan when Iron Man saved the galaxy. Speculation is rampant as to who else could have boarded the ship with Stark, given that all Avengers were accounted for—“

“Ned, seriously—“

“...strongest, bravest, smartest heroes I ever met, and he’s out there right now, living his life under the radar and not wanting any of the recognition he is owed for—“

“Dude, stop replaying it!”

Ned pauses it and looks up at Peter with wonder. “Why would you ever play anything else? He said you’re the smartest, strongest—“

“He said I’m one of the strongest,” Peter corrects him, feeling his face heat. But he can’t help glancing at the frozen screenshot on Ned’s phone, which is fogging up from the steam coming off of their dumplings.

In miniature, Mr Stark sits at a dais in the Avenger’s compound press room, flanked by Pepper Potts and James Rhodes at either side. He’s wearing blue-tinted glasses and he looks like he’s clenching his jaw. The headline below reads ‘Stark outburst at six-month Infinity War press conference’, but Mr Stark hadn’t sounded angry, just fed up. Peter watched a pirated stream of the whole thing live: Mr Stark had only snapped after the fifth reporter mentioned something about him single-handedly saving humankind. He looks tired, the way the video is paused.

Peter has replayed the clip upwards of fifty times. He knows Mr Stark’s words by heart.

“Peter. He totally thinks you’re awesome. Iron Man thinks you’re smart and brave and strong. That’s amazing.”

Peter fidgets with his chopsticks for something to do. They have a corner booth and he’s not worried about being overheard, but he feels exposed—the words make him all warm and flattered but they hurt, too, because if Mr Stark really thought that he would have invited Peter to upstate New York by now.

“I still don’t get it,” Ned says, quieter. “How you just... keep being ordinary in spite of all the craziness you’ve lived through. You were in space. You helped Iron Man save the universe. And nobody knows it was you.” He sounds almost sad, suddenly. As though he realizes that what he’s saying is so completely alien to him that he will never be able to understand this part of Peter’s life. “Peter, don’t you want people to know you for who you are?”

Peter looks up at him, meeting his expressive, kind eyes. He sits back and smiles. “I’m so glad you got into NYU, man,” he says.

Ned smiles back, and doesn’t ask his question again. They finish up their meal and Peter walks him
back to his dorm, this time remembering to send along his best wishes for Roommate Dev.

“He’s cool and all, but you’re still my best friend,” Ned says firmly.

Peter offers his hand for their handshake, and when they are done he says: “Yeah well, Iron Man is cool and all, but you’re my best friend, too.”

They hug and promise to meet up next week. It’s become a routine since Ned started college; they have dinner together once a week, usually dim sum though sometimes they change it up, and Peter takes a break from patrolling to hang around Ned’s campus a bit. He’s met Roommate Dev and a few of Ned’s new friends, but he prefers it when it’s just the two of them. He can't relate to struggling with classes, or feeling like finals is the end of the world; not with what he's lived through. His time in space only exacerbated the problem.

He wonders, not for the first time, if this will be the night when he catches wind of something major enough, dangerous enough, that it will warrant him contacting the Avengers. He hasn’t forgotten Mr Stark’s words from the Q-ship, the knightng—he’ll never forget it. He still hopes Mr Stark meant it, but the more time passes the more that hope withers. And now, with those words to think about...

Next to me was one of the strongest, bravest, smartest heroes I ever met.

It’s dark out tonight, without many stars. Peter makes his way to the nearest, most reliably empty alley (a dead-end behind the Wendy’s around the corner) and starts unzipping his hoodie to don his new suit. It’s not the nanotech armor he wore in space; Mr Stark fixed his adherent cloth and sent it via drone after they returned from Titan, and he’s been using that since. K.A.R.E.N is still the AI embedded in the software, though Mr Stark didn't try to pull the Training Wheels protocol stuff this time.

The alley smells intensely awful to his hypersensitive nose, but he powers through as usual. He’s shirtless and halfway out of his jeans when his cellphone buzzes, and he checks it just in case May is asking for an update on his whereabouts—she'd been doing amazing with the whole Spider-Man thing, but since Titan she’s slipped back a little into her old anxieties from the beginning, and needs him to text back quickly and reliably.

It’s not May.

Peter I’m very sorry about the press conference

Can we talk?

It’s from ‘TS’.

As Peter watches, another text pops up.

Can I meet you some place? Tonight?

Peter’s pulse doubles its rate. He hasn’t seen Mr Stark in person in six months—they haven’t even spoken over the phone. Instead, Mr Stark has been sparingly sending him text updates on how things are progressing, such as: ‘Cap back in NYC you’ll read about it online tomorrow’, or ‘Thor asking to meet you, we’ll arrange something when things have calmed down’, and ‘If you see anything in the press re: me & Pepper please ignore’.

He wonders what Mr Stark wants to talk about in person; surely something major enough that it can’t be sent via encrypted text.
sure

am in the city rn

i can meet u @ stower in 10 mins?

i'm near washington sq

park

A car drives past the mouth of the alley and Peter crouches down, only partly because he’s basically in his underwear.

We could do that, Mr Stark texts back.

Peter’s hairs stand on end.

The car didn’t drive past. It’s parked in front of the alley; blocking it.

Or you could get in the car

His heart leaps into his throat as the door to the backseat opens, and an elegant figure in a perfectly cut suit waves him inside. Peter gapes for a moment, body frozen, at a sight so dizzyingly inviting he feels as if he might be dreaming.

Then he breaks into a run.

He tumbles into the car shirtless, holding his suit in one hand and keeping his pants up with the other. A soothing, rich leather scent floods his nostrils and dispels the acrid alley stench, and there’s a faint blue-ish light in the interior—it’s the Maserati. Peter’s been in it before.

“Mr Stark!” He blurts, shutting the door behind himself. “What are you doing here?”

Stark takes in the sight of him with raised eyebrows and a rueful twist to his mouth.

“Why don't you tell me what's happening with...” He motions at Peter's state of undress. "First.”

From the driver’s seat, someone chuckles: “Tony, that's hardly the most inappropriate thing that’s ever happened in this backseat.”

“Happy!” Peter reaches through the window to tap Happy’s shoulder. “Hey, man. How are you?”

Happy pats his hand in response, looking around at him with a slightly exasperated, smile. “I’m all right, kid. Now please put on your clothes.”

Peter huffs an embarrassed breath and begins doing so, quickly glancing back at Mr Stark as he wrestles into his shirt again. He’s well aware of what a snapshot of this scene would look like to an outsider.

Once he’s made himself minimally presentable, Peter turns sideways in the plush, comfortable seat so he’s facing Mr Stark. He tries to sound casual. “So, uh... how are you, Mr Stark? How are the Avengers?”

Mr Stark adjusts the cuff of his suit.

“You have time for a drive so we can chat, Parker?”
It means no patrol for tonight, but there’s no way he’d refuse. “Mm-yeah, sure.”

The car starts up, smoothly merging with traffic. Happy puts up the screen between the front and back seats, and suddenly their little world darkens and gets cut off from outside noise, which means Peter can focus better.

He is slightly taken aback by what he takes in: Mr Stark looks as tired as he seemed in that press conference video. He still looks good, because Mr Stark always looks like ten billion dollars of raw, effortless power, but his skin is pale and there are dark bags under his eyes. He looks as though Titan happened yesterday, not half a year ago.

“Um. Mr Stark, is... everything okay?”

He almost wants to ask about Pepper Potts, but he’s afraid Mr Stark might not appreciate the reminder. The tabloids at Mr Delmar’s flew off the shelves with the news about the power-couple’s break-up, and Peter totally didn’t seek out gossip about them but MJ kept him informed about what the rumor mill was churning out because she was under the impression that he’d want to know.

It’s not like a highly publicized break-up is the only thing Mr Stark has been going through lately, though. Bucky Barnes was spotted in upstate New York recently.

“I’m fine, Peter, just busy. A bit tired, because of it, and so—prone to rookie mistakes.” He gives Peter a tight smile, and Peter can tell there’s a lot behind his eyes that Mr Stark is choosing not to share with him. “You saw my latest one, I’m assuming?”

“The press conference?”

He nods.

"Um, yeah. It’s... kind of everywhere.”

Mr Stark sighs and rubs at his eyes behind his red tinted glasses.

“I should’ve just kept taking all the unearned compliments and kept my mouth shut. God knows that’s not a stretch for me—it’s actually a skill I’ve perfected over time.”

“...Mr Stark?”

He meets Peter’s gaze. “I’m sorry, kid.”

“You said that.” Peter frowns. “Why?”

“It’s going to get out. That I meant—that it was Spider-Man who helped me take off the Gauntlet.”

Peter feels his pulse pick up.

“... How?”

“You were seen helping me against the Maw, before they beamed you up. Strange was seen, too, but no one really knows who he is, or he’s able to mess with people’s perception... it’s unclear. Either way, he’s less well known than local crime-fighting hero Spider-Man from YouTube.”

“Oh.”

“Before you freak out on me, you should know Strange has offered to say it was him. He was certainly there, and he did help, so it would even be technically true.”
Peter had taken up the offer to see the doctor at his sanctum for a follow-up visit after his rib fractures. He’s still a little unclear on what exactly Strange’s job is, or why it’s so important, but the Time Stone is safe and the last thing Strange needs is hordes of people knowing his identity.

“You should tell him no thanks,” he mutters. “And I’m not freaking out. I mean, it doesn’t mean anything if they find out it’s Spider-Man, right? It’s... it’s okay. People don’t know who I am, yet.”

Yet.

Mr Stark hangs his head a little, giving Peter a look from over his glasses. “Peter, this will speed up the process a lot. People are already obsessed with you and who you are; when this breaks that obsession is gonna lead to a man-hunt. It’s going to happen. The press will hire PIs, the public... they’ll figure it out, or someone will catch you stripping in an alley and not assume you’re a sex worker for once.”

Peter snorts at the unexpected allusion to his earlier thoughts.

“I need you to tell me what you want to do. I think there’s a decision to be made here, and it’s... we don’t have much time.”

Peter doesn’t ask him what the decision is. He gets that part just fine.

“What do you think I should do?”

Mr Stark smirks a little, shaking his head. “Oh, no. You don’t want my input, kid; I trust your judgment far more than I trust my own.” He’s probably just saying it, but it renders Peter temporarily breathless. “I think you should do what you think is best. And then...” Mr Stark motions with his hand. “That will be what’s best.”

It’s not as though Peter hasn’t thought about it. He’s had six months to stew in the title of Avenger without actually living as one, and every Avenger is open about their secret identity; even the ones with secret lives show their faces to the world, are known by their first and last names. He’s thought about that being a condition for him joining the team; even spent lonely, sleepless nights speculating whether that was why Mr Stark was making him wait despite what they went through together.

“Will that mean... can I be an Avenger, then?”

Mr Stark glances out of the window behind Peter’s shoulder. “You’re already an Avenger.”

“I mean... going on real missions. Staying at the compound.” He feels childish, like he’s begging. He doesn’t understand why Mr Stark isn’t offering it to him with all the seduction and flourish of that first time—except that wasn’t a real offer, was it? It was a test. So maybe he never intended for Peter to join the team at all. He’s probably regretting ever scooping Peter up to take him to Germany all those years ago.

Peter wonders what else he could possibly do to impress him, after following him to outer space.

"You know, Avenging full time. Like you."

Mr Stark takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose with his fingers. His voice, when he finally does speak, is scratchy and exhausted.

“Yes. And... yes. If you introduced yourself to the world, you would do it as the newest team-member of the Avengers. If you wanted.”
He does want it. It’s what he’s always wanted, even when it wasn’t the right time and he said ‘no’ he still desperately, full-throatily wanted it. He just wishes Mr Stark wanted it, too.

“And yes, that means having your own quarters at the compound, your name in the patrol roster, your abilities at the world’s beck and call—hell, your own action figure, probably. Ben and Jerry might ask to name a flavor after—”

“Mr Stark.”

He stops, and looks at Peter, and Peter tries not to feel hurt that this isn’t the reunion he’d pictured in his head. It’s still the ask he was waiting for.

He pitches his voice at its most serious register: “I want to join the team. I want to admit that it was me who took off the Gauntlet with you. That’s my answer.”

“I thought you might say that.” Mr Stark’s shoulders drop slightly. “Just... take a day or two to decide, okay? Talk to your aunt. Your friends. I’ll buy you forty-eight hours, and if you still want me to by the end of that time, I’ll call the biggest press conference in recent history; pull out all the stops. I promise.”

The car conveniently slows to a stop right after he says that, and Peter realizes they are already at his place. He wishes traffic had been worse, so this could have lasted longer. It’s been six months, and he gets that Mr Stark is one of the most important men in the country, but being in his presence makes him forget at times. He wishes--

“Peter, one more thing.”

Peter leaves his hands on his thighs and waits.

“What happened with going to college?”

Right. “Um, yeah. I thought about it a lot, Mr Stark, I swear. But... I decided not to go.” He looks away from Mr Stark’s piercing eyes. “You can’t be an Avenger and have a full-time job. And after Thanos, and... It would’ve been selfish to choose anything else.”

It’s not the full truth; it makes him sound nobler than he is. He never felt like he was sacrificing all that much by giving up the college dream. If he was being recklessly honest, he would tell Mr Stark that he feels closer to his superhero idol than he does his academic peers. He would tell him that sometimes he can’t relate to Ned or MJ’s struggles at all, and that all three of them know the reverse is painfully true as well, which eats him up with guilt. He would tell him that just the tendril of hope that he might be asked to join the team made it grossly easy not to apply. He would tell him he feels understood by him, and less alone; even now in this car after six months--especially now.

But he doesn’t tell him any of those things. No way Mr Stark wants to hear from yet another teen who admires him to the point of devotion.

“Okay. You can still change your mind, though.” Mr Stark smiles again, close-mouthed but softer. “Just say the word, and I’ll make it happen. Even if you say ‘yes’ two days from now, it’s not a binding contract—I’ll make sure of that. There would be ways—we’d create a new identity for you and your Aunt... I would find a way.”

Peter smiles back. He’s not going to give Mr Stark or the team any reason to want to send him back, and he himself certainly won’t change his mind.

“Thank you Mr Stark.”
“You’re welcome.”

Sensing the conversation is over, Peter finally turns away to open his own door.

“Text me after you’ve considered it. And please... really consider it, Peter.”

“I will. I promise.”

He shuts the door, taps the passenger-side window and waves goodbye to Happy, and then walks into his apartment building. A group of teens who had been chatting by the front steps gape at him, and the car, and then at him again, and that’s when Peter realizes he put his shirt on backwards in his haste to get dressed.

He snorts helplessly to himself and keeps walking. He’s just a young guy from Queens with rumpled clothing and messy hair who was hanging out in the backseat of a billionaire’s Maserati.

* *

When Starlord got them close enough to the atmosphere that Strange was able to portal them back, the first thing Mr Stark did was arrange for Peter to get safely home to Aunt May. She had been in a state of blind panic when he walked through the fizzing, sparking rift in space-time and he still hasn’t fully forgiven himself for putting her through that, and to talk to her about his move upstate just half a year later feels almost cruel.

But he has to.

He tells her that very same night after they’ve had ‘second dinner’ together (ice cream), while they sit on the couch watching *Queer Eye*.

“You don’t have to do this for him,” she says seriously, after taking a moment to process the information. “You get that, right? Stark may want you to make a grand declaration like he did, but you don’t have to do it at all.” She puts her hand on his arm, squeezing. “I know that would mean not joining the Avengers, but—“

“I want to.” Not joining the Avengers? “I want to, May.”

Her gaze gentles, and she smiles sadly. “I know you do, baby. These past few months... don’t think I don’t know what it’s been like for you. I know what it means to you that this is finally happening.” She lets out a heavy breath. “But I need you to be sure. The move, the work... that’s one thing. The fame is what I’m worried about. Not because I’m worried about you, because you’re perfect—” her voice thins a little and she swallows, smiling apologetically as she fights the tears. “—you’re my perfect, brave young man. But I’m worried about what it will do to you. It’ll mean no more casually walking down the street. No more dropping by Mr. Delmar’s for a sandwich. No more hanging out with your friends in public without people staring. Have you considered all those things?”

“I have. I know it’s not going to be easy, but... it’s still worth it.” To help people. To not feel like an outsider looking in, even when he’s on the inside of things. “It’ll be all right, May.”

“...Okay,” she breathes, shaky.

“I’m sorry—“

“No, honey it’s... it’s not like I didn’t think this day would come.” She wipes impatiently under her eyes and sniffs, still fighting to smile though it. “I knew this day would come. I knew it would.”
Peter shuffles over to her side and tucks himself under her arm, a feat that he can still get away with because he doesn’t seem to be getting any taller or broader now that he’s done growing. Still, he wraps an arm around her waist and hugs her, and she hugs him back, and they both cry silently for a while, and it’s okay. They’ll be okay.

“Oye Pedro me pasas la fregona?”

“Puedes llamarme por mi nombre, por favor?”

Oscar tips his head to the side, considering. “...Nah,” he replies. Peter makes a face at him and tosses him the mop he asked for, then goes back to manning the register. During lunchtime Mr Delmar usually has a line of customers that Peter needs to cash out, but it’s past rush-hour and there’s no one in the Deli right now.

“Hey.” Peter turns to Mr Delmar, who is looking at him with concern. “...You feelin’ okay, Pedro?”

He didn’t sleep the night before, with so much to think about how his life is going to change very soon. He’s still completely sure of his decision, but he can’t deny that Aunt May had a point, about what he will and won’t be able to do anymore.

“M’fine. Not sleepin’ too good, that’s all.”

Mr Delmar nods. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No, thanks.” Peter smiles wanly at him. He glances at the tabloids stacked nearby, with the large font and exclamation marks in the headlines—Mr Stark is on the cover of two different ones. He doesn’t seem particularly pleased to be photographed having dinner with Commander Rhodes, or walking out of the Stark Industries HQ building.

If Peter's being honest with himself, the thought of all that attention is a bit daunting. It's not just that his daily activities will change dramatically—it's that the amount of people who care about what he does will grow exponentially. The public has been speculating about his identity in the YouTube comments section ever since the first video was uploaded; they might be disappointed by what they find.

He wonders what Mr Delmar will think when he sees him on the news.

“But I do need to talk to you about something, Mr Delmar.”

He tries to give the man his two weeks notice but Mr Delmar tells him that it’s no trouble if Peter stops showing up tomorrow. “We don’t need you and your terrible Spanish, anyway.”

“Hey!”

Oscar snorts in the background.

“It’s okay, Pedro. I never got why you’d wanna work here with that brain of yours, all those nerd trophies you have. Did you finally decide on a college that’s good enough for you? My baby girl is really happy at Temple, y’know.”

“Rita is gonna be an awesome doctor,” Peter agrees. “But, um, it’s not ‘cause of college. My thing will make sense in a little bit, I promise.”
Mr Delmar shrugs. “If you say so.”

When his shift is over, Peter walks to the nearest alley to suit up and webs his way to patrol.

He swings his way towards Brooklyn. The afternoon is quiet, but not silent: sirens blare in the background, people laugh and argue on the streets, pets bark, bars play music, cars drive by... Outer space had been so silent.

He catches two more bike thieves near Bushwick and even finds the owner of one of the bikes, but he can’t help thinking... keeping the little guy alive comes first, before making sure their bike isn’t stolen. And he has that ability now—he’s strong enough to help defend the Earth on a larger scale. He's just going to have to deal with the rest.

* *

“When will you move?” Ned asks, leaning across the table to be quiet.

Peter glances around them for the third time to make sure none of the lunching college students overhear, and leans further in as well. “I don’t know yet. Mr Stark wouldn’t really tell me anything until after I’d really thought about the decision for two days. Deadline’s tonight.”

“What do you think, MJ?”

On Ned’s phone screen, MJ’s face is considering. She makes a gesture for Ned to turn her towards Peter.

“I think nothing anyone can say will change your mind about going through with the press conference, or the move, or anything.” She doesn’t sound like she’s against it. “I think neither I or Ned can understand some of the stuff you’re dealing with.” Her eyes are a bit sad, like Ned’s were two days ago. “I think it might be really good for you to be around people who do.”

“I’m in favor of it, too,” Ned says, nodding and turning his phone back on himself so MJ sees him do so. “He promised me he’ll visit the city often.”

“Good. You’d better come to Boston too, Peter.”

“I will.” Peter grabs the phone from Ned. “We miss you, MJ.”

As expected, her gaze slants to the side and she doesn’t reply for a moment. Then she nods and mutters: “Miss you guys, too.”

Ned nudges Peter’s forearm, looking thoughtful. “Have you thought about the fact that you’ll be living with Stark and all the others? Isn’t it going to be a bit intimidating to have Captain America as your roommate?”

“Nah, they’ll be my teammates,” Peter says, with more conviction than he feels. “It’ll be fine.”

“You’ll be the youngest one there by a decade,” MJ points out.

“Thor is the oldest by a millennium. I think it’ll be okay.” Another aspect that makes him a little nervous—will anyone respect his skills, or will they dismiss him because of his age? “I may not know the others that well, but I’ll have Mr Stark. He and I are...”

I’m sorry, I’m confused as to the relationship here. What is he, your ward?

“...friends.”
“Friends?” MJ echoes.

“Kind of. Yeah.” He shrugs, trying to sound casual and not defensive. “I know he’s rich and famous and stuff, but we’ve been through a lot together. We’re close.”

_Not that close_, a voice in his head says. _It took six months and a blunder on live television for him to come see you, remember?_

“He obviously likes you, but... he’s still Iron Man, Peter,” Ned says gently.

He’s right, of course; they both are. But admitting that he’s anything other than completely confident about this will only make them worry, so he can’t.

“And I’m Spider-Man,” he counters, forcing a smile.

Ned smiles back, lifting his hand for a high five which Peter reciprocates.

On the screen, MJ keeps watching him and doesn’t look like she fully bought it.

* In the evening, he suits up and climbs the tallest crane in the construction area on Filbert Street, since all the workers have left for the day. All the way at the top, with the sun setting and no one around, there is a sense of peace he can’t seem to find anywhere else. He straddles the jib and lets his legs dangle, then takes off his mask to take a deep breath in. The air up here smells different than it does at street level. Cleaner.

He's not going to be able to live his life the same way anymore. A lot more people are going to be aware of his every move. And he's joining a team of adults who've been working together for a long time.

The severely cracked screen of his phone reflects the orange light in a starburst pattern, but he’s used to typing on it.

_im sure_

He sends the text, and considers.

_about joining the avengers i mean_

He waits a beat. It feels insufficient.

_im very sure_

He nods to himself and looks to the horizon. He can see Avengers Tower from here, even though Mr Stark only owns the penthouse now as a private apartment, and the Tower itself was sold back when the Avengers moved. The ‘A’ doesn’t light up anymore, but they’ve kept it, and Peter stares at it for a long moment, letting the breeze rustle through his hair. He wonders whether Mr Stark is there now, or whether he flew back to the compound after driving Peter home two days ago.

His phone buzzes in his hand.

_Come to the Tower if convenient_

And again.
If inconvenient come all the same

Peter grins, recognizing the reference. For all his complaining about Peter’s pop culture knowledge, Mr Stark totally does the same thing every chance he gets.

Another text comes through.

Kidding by the way; if inconvenient let me know and we’ll figure something else out

He glances at the Tower once again and takes a deep breath, then tugs his mask back over his face and jumps with a whoop.
The Others

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The climb to Mr Stark’s apartment is pretty intimidating, but ever since the Washington monument expedition (and the flight he was on, not in, shortly after) Peter has gotten pretty good at heights. He climbed a spaceship earlier this year; he can handle the tallest building in Manhattan.

The wind whips at him ferociously and circumventing the security cameras and sensors means he can’t exactly take the direct way up, so by the time he makes it to the landing pad at the top his muscles are trembling with exhaustion, but there’s a satisfaction to it he can’t deny. He lies on the tarmac for a moment, flat on his back and catching his breath. There’s a sleek private jet parked nearby, but no one’s sitting at the cockpit.

And then he catches movement out of the corner of his eye.

He looks up at the walkway jutting out a level above and spots someone leaning against the railing: Mr Stark was waiting for him with his sunglasses on and a casually graceful pose, his elbows resting on the balcony and hands loosely clasped together. It’s dark out by now, and something clenches in Peter’s chest at the way he looks lit up from below. Unreachable.

He sees Mr Stark see him, and then he sees him reach for the cellphone in his pocket. Peter’s own phone buzzes against his hip, and he grabs it.

Stay put, I’ll be right down

Peter jumps to his feet in a kick up.

His phone buzzes again but he ignores it this time, and Mr Stark straightens and makes a ‘stop’ gesture with his hand but Peter launches a web that latches onto the railing and flings himself up off tarmac and onto the balcony, making Mr Stark take a step back in surprise when he lands in front of him.

“Hi,” Peter says, only slightly wheezing. He squares his shoulders. “Good evening Mr Stark.”

“Good evening, Peter.” Mr Stark looks concerned, but maybe a little impressed, too. The thing in Peter’s chest unclenches, unfurls into tendrils of warmth. “You have something against elevators?”

Peter takes off his mask and shrugs. “Nah, I just…” he runs a hand through his messy hair, feeling disheveled and sweaty compared to Mr Stark’s crisp put-together outfit and wishing he looked more composed; more to Mr Stark’s liking. “I like climbing things.”

Mr Stark’s eyebrows fly up at that, and Peter feels a rush of heat ignite his cheeks.

“I—I mean—“ He’s such an idiot. “It’s good training,” he finishes lamely.

"...Come on, let's get you inside."

He starts walking and Peter hastens after him, realizing as they enter the penthouse apartment that Happy is there, working at the kitchen preparing an elaborate meal.

“You hadn’t had dinner yet, have you?”
“No. Hey, Happy.”

“Hey, Peter.”

There are only two place settings at the kitchen table.

“Are you not eating with us?”

“I have a date,” Happy says, seemingly in a good mood. It makes Peter smile. “Looks like you do, too.”

Peter’s smile freezes.

Mr Stark rolls his eyes. “You’re killing me, Happy,” he says warningly, and turns to Peter. “Please disregard that Peter, that was inappropriate.”

“It’s fine,” Peter says quickly. Him and Mr Stark, on a date...? To quote the seminal classic *Clueless* from before he was born: *as if*.

“Well, this is all done, so. I’ll leave you guys to it.” Happy drops the washcloth he’d draped over his shoulder onto the counter and brings a platter of food to the table. The steam wafts into Peter’s nose and his stomach rumbles, loud, which makes a small twitch appear at the corner of Mr Stark’s lips.

“Happy, that smells amazing,” Peter says sincerely. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thanks, buddy. Have a good night,” Mr Stark tells him.

Happy’s departure makes the two seats even more reminiscent of his earlier comment, but Mr Stark doesn’t seem to be troubled by the setting—he’s probably forgotten about it. He sits down in front of one of the plates and starts serving himself the risotto, motioning for Peter to take the seat in front of him, which Peter hurries to do. He’s still in his Spidey suit from the neck down but it’s comfortable, and if Mr Stark doesn’t care then Peter won’t either.

“So,” Mr Stark says after a few quiet moments, deceptively casual. “Your decision is final.”

Peter swallows his bite quickly and nods firmly. “Yeah. I’d have to stop patrolling for the press not to find out, and even then I would risk it happening anyway. I’d rather have a say in how that happens.”

Mr Stark tips his head to the side in acknowledgement of this. “I get that.” *The truth is... I am Iron Man.* “We’ll help you do that, you understand.”

“Mh-hm.” He tries to swallow another giant mouthful of delicious cheesy mushroom and rice. “I do, yeah.”

“Okay. In that case... will you do one last thing for me, Peter?”

Peter stares at him. Mr Stark’s obvious reluctance notwithstanding, the question barely merits being asked. *I followed you to outer space, remember?* he thinks. “Y-yeah. What d’you—anything.”

“Would you be willing to fly up to the compound with me? Meet the others... make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

*I followed you to outer space,* he thinks again. *We fought the most powerful being in all of creation*
and won. I already know what I’m getting into.

And then what’s really being offered fully registers with him.

Meet the others...

There’s a jet parked outside.

“What d’you say, Peter? You wanna come over for a visit?”

Peter drops his fork with a clatter, elation climbing up his throat.

“Wait, really? Tonight?”

Mr Stark nods, smirking slightly, seemingly in spite of himself. “If that works for you.”

“I’ll have to call May first and tell her, but—yeah.” He grins. “Yes. That works.”

“All right then, finish up. You can change before we go; I’m sure we’ll find something that fits. Come on.”

Peter ends up picking out an Iron Maiden shirt and expensive designer jeans that are deceptively supple despite how tightly they hug his thighs. He’s shorter than Mr Stark, but rolling them up a couple of times does the trick.

Mr Stark eyes the band logo for a silent moment that makes Peter realize the inadvertent reference with an embarrassed jolt—but he doesn’t comment on it. He claps Peter on the shoulder and leads him towards the jet, and Peter almost says something, but then doesn’t. It’ll only bring more attention to it.

The last time he saw Avengers headquarters was three years ago, when Happy flew him over and Mr Stark showed him the Iron Spider armor for the first time and administered his test of Peter’s character.

It looks immediately different to Peter’s eyes, and not just because it’s nighttime: the place is bursting with activity and movement, a much livelier animal than it was three years ago.

The compound is made up of a series of buildings surrounded by dense trees all around except for the riverbank at its back. It’s brightly lit from within and full of people, including a well-staffed body of SHIELD personnel running around in their dark blue uniforms. Several planes are parked under the paneled glass roof of the hangar building, including the five-thruster design of several Quinjets, one of which is taking off even as they land. Floodlights from the main building spill out onto the perfectly manicured green field, and as they get closer he can even make out how the wind they are generating buffets the trees.

They touch down on the northwest landing pad, on top of the main building itself.

Someone is waiting for them there.

“Natasha,” Mr Stark calls as he exits the jet. The engines are still running so he has to project his voice. “What a nice surprise.”

Black Widow is accompanied by two SHIELD agents who quickly take off towards the jet; probably to park it, maybe even clean it. Neither of them do more than nod respectfully at Mr Stark
as they pass him by, but both shoot Peter covert looks.

Mr Stark draws level with Romanoff and crosses his arms over his chest in a mimic of her posture. The wind buffets his tie and hair but he makes it look on purpose.

Peter hangs back a little.

“Are you my welcome committee?”

“I’m your ‘where the fuck were you’ committee,” Black Widow replies, squinting slightly. Her silvery blond hair also whips around in the air but her expression is inscrutable. She certainly doesn’t look worried, or even particularly upset. “Two days of radio silence, Stark.”

“I’m a busy guy.”

She looks at Peter for the first time. “And that’s what you were doing?”

Peter’s cheeks flush hotly at her choice of words, but Romanoff’s tone wasn’t suggestive at all.

“...I was retrieving our newest member, among other things, yes.”

Hm. Mr Stark’s tone makes Peter think he may have also picked up on the inadvertent double-entendre.

"Anyway, here he is." He motions for Peter to step forward. "Be nice to the kid, please, Nat."

“It’s nice to meet you, Peter.” She lifts her hand for Peter to shake, which he rushes to do. She’s so beautiful that her face is almost hypnotic; big eyes that look expectant but reveal nothing beyond a hint of curiosity. “We didn’t really have time to chat when we hung out in Germany.”

“Yeah. I mean no.” He’s seen footage of this woman killing Chitauri aliens with gymnastic ease. He’s seen her disable Hawkeye up close in real life. “Y-you too. Nice to meet you, I mean.”

She smiles, and it makes her look warmer. “Let’s go inside. Most of the others are here tonight, as I’m sure Stark told you.”

Her and Mr Stark fall in step beside each other with Peter trailing after them, but Mr Stark glances over his shoulder several times to check in on him, which is reassuring as they pass SHIELD agents, techs, household staff and laboratory personnel in white coats, all of whom seem to be working even at this late hour. All of whom have a glance to spare for the kid walking with Iron Man and Black Widow.

They take two different elevators and finally reach the end of a paneled corridor that, for the first time, doesn’t have any SHIELD agents posted at intervals. The Avengers ‘A’ is subtly carved into polished wood double-doors, with a security panel on a silver stand to the right.


Mr Stark turns to Peter again. “We’re about to enter the Avengers quarters. You’ll have your own palm-print and voice-recognition passcode soon.”

To demonstrate, he places his hand into the blue sensor-gel.

“Trust fund.”
The doors open.

The space they walk into is enormous, and includes the living room and an open-plan kitchen, which are separated only by a bar counter. It’s more serious than Peter expected, with lots of dark paneled wood and steel finishes, designer furniture and a wall of glass windows overlooking a slice of the field and the trees. There’s even a glass table that looks like it could be used for a conference or a sit-down meal, but is meant for the former. It all smells of recent polish, and vaguely like an office.

To the left is an array of modern sofas and armchairs arranged around an enormous flat-screen television which is currently playing a football game. The game pauses as soon as the doors close behind them, however, and from the couch arises a man so tall and muscular that Peter’s first instinct is to step back, even though he manages to fight the urge.

Because it’s Thor, the God of Thunder. In the flesh.

He’s even more imposing than Peter could have imagined, no matter that he’s clad in expensive-looking teal sporting gear.

“Is that Peter Parker?” he asks, voice deep and rugged.

“The very one,” Mr Stark quips. “Peter, meet Thor. And that’s Bruce, over there.”

A second man Peter hadn’t even registered gets up off one of the armchairs with a small wave. He’s wearing a grey sweater that’s slightly large on him and jeans, with kind eyes behind his large plastic-y glasses.

“Hi,” Peter says to both of them, with all the confidence he can muster. “I don’t know what Mr Stark told you about me, but I guess I’m the guy to thank about the whole Thanos Gauntlet thing. One of the guys, anyway.” He motions to Mr Stark vaguely. “Fifty-percent of the guys.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Bruce chuckles. “Where’d you find this kid, Tony?”

Mr Stark smirks. “YouTube.”

Thor walks over to them and Peter looks up at him, of course remembering at that precise moment that Thor lost his brother during the Infinity War, and so his smartass comment was in poor taste.

“I know you said that in jest, just now,” Thor says seriously. “But know this, young Parker: we do. We do thank you.” He claps a massive hand on Peter’s shoulder, and for the first time in a while Peter experiences the reverberation of a strength superior to his own. “It was too late for my world, but Thanos was defeated before he could end all of them, and for that I am grateful. Stark told us what you did out there. You are very brave.”


“Yes, well; you are welcome. In time, I might even forgive you for not letting me kill him myself.” He tilts his head, considering. “Give it about a thousand years.”

Peter blinks, and then Thor smiles, rueful.

“Kidding,” he says. “A couple of centuries should do it.”

“All right, step away from the kid now,” Mr Stark cuts in, dismissing Thor with a businesslike shake of his hand. “Peter is only here for a quick visit tonight, I have to get him home to his Aunt soon.”
“So he’s not staying? This is just the meet and greet?” Romanoff says. Peter almost jumps; she’d been so quiet even his spidey-senses forgot she was there.

“Yes.”

“Well, there’s still a couple of people for him to meet,” she points out.

Mr Stark goes kind of still for a moment, and suddenly the tension in the room cranks up a degree.

“Peter’s met the Captain, Natasha,” Mr Stark says. It’s off-hand, but the pause lasted a few seconds too long for his casual delivery to stick its landing. “They fought, remember?”

“Oh I remember.”

They all turn as one to look at the door on the far side of the room; a corridor Peter had assumed led to the bedrooms.

Captain America is walking towards them, and with him are the Falcon and the Winter Soldier.

“I’m glad you’re back, Tony; I thought we’d have to send out a search party soon.”

Mr Stark shrugs. “Well, you know me; as long as the emphasis is on ‘party’,” he says. He’s subtly tense, Peter can tell. “I’m here to show our new team-member around.”

Captain Rogers takes that information in. “Did I miss Fury’s memo about teenagers being allowed into volatile combat situations?”

Mr Stark opens his mouth to answer at the same time as the Falcon sighs and Romanoff takes a step forward.

“Hi, I’m Peter,” Peter says quickly, slightly louder than he intended, fueled by his instinctive need to diffuse the situation.

Everyone’s gaze immediately focuses on him.

With a decisiveness that is born entirely out of fear, Peter walks up to the Captain and thrusts out his hand, meeting his blue, blue eyes. “And I’ve already been in quite a few volatile combat situations so far, sir.”

Rogers looks back at him and takes his hand, but doesn’t shake it. He seems concerned for Peter, not about him. “How old are you again?”

“Eighteen,” Peter replies. He doesn’t think about how he’s technically holding Captain America’s hand, or about the million texts he’s going to need to send Ned and MJ after this. “You?”

That makes him crack a small smile. “A lot older than that.” He finally shakes Peter’s hand and lets it go. “I’m not questioning your abilities, Peter. I know what you did on that Q-ship with Tony. I know what you did on Titan, too. Very impressive, especially for someone who’s eighteen.”

“Thanks.”

“I just wonder—sometimes what we do is war, and war isn’t for everybody.”

Peter nods slowly. “War is definitely not for me, but... I got through it. So if we have to go to war again, then I know I can do it. If I have to.”
Sam Wilson smiles approvingly at his answer. “Kid’s got heart.”

Rogers huffs out a little breath. “That’s what I said when I met him, too.”

Wilson nods, and meets Peter’s expectant gaze. “Well... I fought you, and he fought you—“ he points at the Captain. “—and he fought you—“ he points at Bucky Barnes. “—and you held your own. That’s impressive enough, in my book.”

“Uh, thanks.”

There’s a small pause and then Wilson turns to Barnes. “It’s your turn to say why you’re impressed with the kid, Bucky.”

Barnes appears more reserved than the other two. “Have you thought this through?” he says to Peter, and his voice is gentler than Peter remembers. “Wanting this life, when you could have something else? Because once it starts, it doesn’t stop.” Peter wants to tell him he already feels that way, but he doesn’t want them to doubt his motivations, or his resolve. He especially doesn’t want Mr Stark to feel guilty about introducing him to the life in the first place. “I hope you considered all your choices, that’s all.”

Behind him, he hears what he’s pretty sure is Mr Stark’s foot step forward. “I already—“

“That’s exactly what Mr Stark said,” Peter says quickly. “But I promise I’ve considered it. I really have.”

Barnes nods slowly, eyes flicking over Peter’s shoulder quickly and then away just as fast.

“Well... as long as you’re sure,” Rogers says. “There’s no doubt that you’ll make a great Avenger, Peter.” And finally, his eyes light up with genuine warmth. “I look forward to having you on the team.”

Peter smiles back, and the tension in the room dissipates exponentially. “Thanks, sir.”

“Call me Steve.”

“Uh, sure.”

The Falcon (“Call me Sam, kid”) and the Winter Soldier (“Please call me Bucky”) shake his hand as well, and Peter feels like he just passed some sort of very important test. One no one had expected him to, or told him to study for.

“Well... it’s late,” Mr Stark says. “Peter needs to get back to the city.”

“But he just got here,” Thor says, frowning.

“What about Wanda?” Sam asks. “Vision?”

“Date night,” says Romanoff.

“Rhodes?” asks Steve, looking around like he expects War Machine to appear around the corner.

“Retreat with his unit buddies. He gets back tomorrow,” replies Stark. “Peter, we should—“

Dr Banner frowns. “Are you going back with him?”

“I have some Industries business to take care of in the morning. I’ll be back here tomorrow night.”
To Peter’s surprise, Rogers offers to walk them to the hangar building where the jet is parked.

Mr Stark is uncharacteristically quiet during the trip, but Steve asks Peter lots of thoughtful questions about his arrangements for the move, including stuff about Aunt May he couldn’t know unless Mr Stark had told him about Peter’s living situation. That Captain America took the time to remember stuff about Peter is *mindblowing*.

Finally, they navigate through the busy hangar and make it to the jet. Every tech nearby is watching them with varying degrees of subtlety, but Peter can’t blame them; he’s watching Mr Stark and Steve Rogers, too.

“Well, Peter, I suppose I’ll see you back here in...” Rogers looks expectantly at Mr Stark, but Stark just shrugs.

“We’re airing out the details. It’ll be soon.”

“Good. Have a safe flight, kid.” And after an almost imperceptible pause. “Tony.”

Mr Stark nods, looking at the floor. “G’night, Cap.”

And that’s that. They climb into the jet and settle into the comfortable cabin, and unlike Happy Mr Stark doesn’t complain when Peter sits in the plush seat directly front of him.

The automated aircraft takes off shortly after, and Peter watches the compound get smaller and smaller until he can’t see it anymore, even with his enhanced vision.

When he looks back at Mr Stark, he notices that Mr Stark had been looking at him the whole time. A flush of embarrassment makes its way up his cheeks. He should probably tone down the dumbstruck awe going forward; he needs to look professionally unruffled. He needs to look like he already fits in. “...What?”

Mr Stark sighs softly, still watching him. “I don’t know why I thought this visit might knock some sense into you. I can see the stars in your eyes from here.” He smiles a bitter little smile to himself. “Can’t believe I managed to forget Steve has that effect.”

Peter’s throat tightens. Out of all the possible replies, somehow all he can think to say at first is ‘Those stars are for you,’ which would be a *wildly* stupid thing to say, not to mention it would sound inappropriately romantic.

“Mr Stark, I—” And suddenly he *is* able to think of something else. “Why don’t you want me on the team?”

Stark blinks, like he wasn’t expecting a direct confrontation.

“What makes you think that?”

Peter shrugs, dropping his gaze to his own lap. “You just... you keep trying to convince me not to accept the invite. You said it yourself.”

Mr Stark is looking at him again. Peter wishes he’d picked out a different shirt—he wishes he were less obviously in need of Mr Stark’s good opinion, his approval. If only Mr Stark could see him more as a coworker; someone he can rely on.

“Okay,” Mr Stark says finally. Peter looks up at him and meets his gaze. “Okay, I’ll—I want to be honest with you.”
The bags under his eyes are still dark and deep. His beard has looked neater, too. He looks so tired; Peter wishes he could help in some way, or at least not be so much of a needy burden—because he’s definitely contributing to Mr Stark’s stress levels, of that he’s sure.

“The truth is, Peter... I’ve been questioning my decision to recruit you. Since Titan.”

The hurt is immediate and gutting.

It’s exactly what he suspected.

“...Oh.”

“Now hear me out.” He leans forward on his seat, elbows on his knees. “This is not because of your age, or your ability—you are far more powerful than me, especially without my gadgets, but.” He takes a shaky breath. "When we were on that ship...” His voice gets quiet. His gaze shuts. “I thought you’d signed up to die in front of me.”

If it weren't for his enhanced hearing, Peter might not have heard him.

"I thought you were a dead kid walking, and I was gonna have to watch it happen. I was sure.” Peter flinches at the sudden hoarse intensity with which the word ‘sure’ is spoken. “I could feel it about to happen the whole time we were there; the whole time we were fighting him.”

It’s hard to think clearly with the tension in their dimly lit cabin, but it occurs to Peter that the phrasing of Mr Stark’s scenario doesn’t allow for his own death, or that it regards the event as so superfluous it doesn’t warrant a mention. He said ‘in front of me’, not ‘with me’ or ‘by my side’.

“Thanos was one of the worst things we’ve ever faced, but he’s one of many, and he wasn’t the last. You, on the team...” He sighs, heavy and short. The intensity fades, deflating just as abruptly as it had built up and giving way to weariness. “The reason I didn’t visit—didn’t really keep in touch, it’s... I wanted to postpone the day, and then it blew up in my face. I fucked up. I’m sorry.”

For several long moments, Peter can’t think of anything to say; he can only think of one thing to do, and he definitely can’t slide out of his seat and wrap his arms around Mr Stark to hug him, so he should probably stop picturing it.

Finally, he finds his voice again. “So... that’s why you didn’t come get me sooner?”

“Yes. And I’m not proud of how I handled myself, for the record. I know that keeping you away wasn’t fair. You must have wondered what the hell was taking me so long.”

“...Kinda. Yeah.”

“Well. I’m sorry about how it happened, but it’s happened. And I’m here now. With you.” He makes a hand-gesture between them. “No more delays, no more... gimmicks. Just me standing in front of you, asking you to join me.”

Peter’s mouth tugs into a little smile in spite of himself. “You know, there’s this really old rom-com with Julia Roberts—“

“Don’t you dare,” Mr Stark interrupts, but then he smirks, and the crinkles around his eyes make a welcome appearance, softening his face. He shakes his head in disbelief. “You’re something else, kid.”

Peter resolves to keep finding ways of putting that look on Mr Stark’s face; whatever it takes. He’ll
do whatever.

“Hey.” Mr Stark snaps his fingers like he just remembered something and points at Peter. “As long as you have me talking about my feelings, there is something else you should know.”

Peter’s exhilaration catches between his collarbones, suddenly choking him.

“With all this back and forth we’ve had going on the past few months... I want you to know that I trust you. Okay? I don't want there to be any doubt about that.” Mr Stark looks at him steadily. “I trust you to do the right thing during battle. I trust you to be responsible when talking to the press. I trust that when little Jimmy tells his mommy that he wants to be like Spider-Man when he grows up, he’ll have an amazing role model to look up to. There’s no doubt in my mind about those things. All right?”

It’s not what Peter expected him to say, but it's... so much.

He almost feels like he’s going to cry, which would get him kicked out of the team for being a baby for sure.

“Thank you, Mr Stark. That... it means a lot.”

Mr Stark leans back in his chair and loosely clasps his hands together in his lap. “Yeah, well. I’d gotten pretty good at being in touch with my emotions and all that crap, before Titan. Made some real progress there for a while.”

Peter doesn’t miss his use of the past tense.

“And now?”

Mr Stark smirks and shakes his head. “Oh, no, let’s not do that.” He pulls out his phone from inside his suit. “What do you want to watch? We have time for something short—maybe twenty minutes. Come on, hit me; we can project it onto the holo.”

Peter takes the shut-down in stride and tries to think of something that will distract Mr Stark; something he’ll enjoy, that will make him laugh.

“Have you seen the school specials Captain Rogers filmed for the New York Board of Education?”

Mr Stark blinks. “He what?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO much for the support for the story guys!!! I can’t believe how much love has been shared only 2 chapters in :D

Your comments are fuel and inspiration and mean the world!
He starts packing the very next day after his visit.

The nerves return as soon as he's out of Mr Stark's sight again--they manifest as a knot in his stomach that squeezes every time he remembers what he's about to do, but he grits his teeth and focuses on the good that will come out of this public reveal. The closer he gets to moving day the better he gets at confidently reassuring May that he’s ‘totally got this’ when she reminds him that his teammates include the smartest billionaire in the world, a living legend, and a god (terms she uses to describe three separate people, but which in Peter's mind could be adjectives for the one). He rescues a pet rat, finds a drunk girl's phone, works his last shift at Mr Delmar's, and eats takeout with May at Uncle Ben's favorite Thai place without ever mentioning him.

He resolves to be the hardest-working Avenger. He doesn’t want to disappoint anyone, and more than anything wants to show Mr Stark that he's worthy of all the faith he's been awarded.

*I want you to know that I trust you. I trust you, too*, Peter should have replied.

*heyyyy its peters moving day!*

Peter smiles faintly at his phone screen. It’s as if Ned knew that he was lying on his couch, overthinking.

*so is tony stark letting you pick out your furniture or what, MJ sends. bec Id jump on that sweet west elm credit*

*im pretty sure the quarters come prefurnished, Peter responds. He’s actually not sure at all, but his furniture hasn’t really come up yet. Mr Stark only texted him once since they last spoke, and it was to ask if Saturday would be a good day for him to move into the compound. When Peter responded that it was, Happy was the one who called him to arrange transportation. you have to tell us if theres really a pool*

Ned jumps back in with: *omg yes!! bet its awesome*

*MJ adds: tho if you get to see thor in swimgear Im gonna ugly cry*

Suddenly there’s movement out of the corner of Peter’s eye and then his arm snaps up before he consciously decides to do so.

“Dammit!”

Peter caught the pillow mid-air, a hairs breadth from his face.

He peeks around it in time to see Aunt May put her hands on her hips, all mock-stern. “You should let it hit you once in a while, you know. This isn’t good for my ego.”
“But then how will you get better?”

“I’ll never get good enough to hit you now! You’re Spider-Man!”

Peter shrugs. “Then I guess we’re at an impasse.”

“You’re face is at an impasse.” May grabs a pile of clean laundry and walks it to her room. “Are you done packing?”

“No, I’m hanging out on the couch because I still have stuff left to do.”

He hears her snort.

Peter takes the opportunity to peer above the back of the couch at the kitchen, to where a perfectly unopened can of Coke is sitting innocently on the counter, inviting him to practice his accuracy shots.

The soda smacks against his palm and he gives it a couple of beats before opening it and risking a bubble overflow. Ned replied to MJ’s text in the meantime, and now their thread ends with a: same but w black widow

He flips through Twitter for a while and then through his News app. The noises of the apartment building and the distant city ebb and flow in the background, like always. One of the news articles is a think-piece about Mr Stark titled ‘Earth’s best defender: Tony Stark’s journey from ‘merchant of death’ to ‘self-sacrificing superhero’. When he opens it, the embedded video is a clip from his recent press conference, and against his better judgment Peter watches it one more time. Mr Stark’s obvious annoyance and fatigue finally build to the comment that set everything in motion, and the squeeze of nerves in Peter’s stomach returns, so tight it almost hurts, but it almost feels good, too. Mr Stark says those words with such conviction, and it only makes Peter want to prove himself more. Want to make Mr Stark proud. Want to make him happy. Want to—

“What’s got you smiling like that?”

But Aunt May’s expectant look quickly becomes exasperation when she spots a bit of webbing Peter forgot to peel off the soda can.

“What did we say about using the shooters inside the apartment?”

A loud knock at the door saves Peter from answering.

“Yo, yo! Parker!”

Peter and May exchange a look. He leaps from the couch to the door in a single bound, and he makes sure his long sleeves cover his wrists without impeding his ability to use the shooters. He recognizes the voice, but if they are in danger he still needs to be able to protect May.

“Ramon?”

The door opens to reveal one of their neighbors from down the hall, and no signs of danger. Ramon has an excited sparkle in his eye.

“The car is back,” he says without preamble. “It’s for you, right?”

Peter tries to school his features into neutrality. “Hm? What car?”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re into but I’ve seen them come and go and it’s always for you. No
one else on this block—hell, no one else on this district has that kind of pull." He gives Peter an expectant look. "It is, right? I'm pretty sure I've seen a Maserati drop you off before, and Donna from 3F said a Jaguar was waiting for you the other day. Weird hours, too."

Happy must be here to pick him up. It’s time.

“That’s just... I’m interning at a fancy company, man, that’s it."

“Sure. Interning.” A flicker of concern breaks through Ramon’s car lust for a moment. “You’re bein’ safe, right Parker?”

Peter feels a surge of fondness at his protective tone. “Yeah, dude. M’good. Don’t worry about me.”

Ramon holds up his hands. “It's your business. Just making sure.” He smiles. “Those are some nice cars, man.”

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “Yeah, they are.” But he can’t tell Ramon that his favorite thing about them is the person who sometimes sits in the back seat.

“All right, well. Figured you’d want to know.”

“Thanks, man.”

“You take care of yourself, Parker.”

“Will do. Say hi to your brother for me.”

The door closes again.

He turns to look behind him, and the look on May’s face says she heard it all.

“...Guess it’s time.”

* *

Whatever it is that makes Happy pat the seat in front of him on the plane, Peter doesn’t question it. He curls up in the plush chair and scrolls through the pictures on his phone throughout the flight. He starts out with the most recent ones: a selfie he took with May last week, a picture of a dumpling that Ned thought looked like a turd, Mr Delmar’s ancient cat... and on and on until he gets further back: a picture of himself, Ned and MJ at high school graduation where his own smile is just a touch off, a picture of him and Ned winning first place at the senior science fair, a shot of MJ sketching during class. It’s a bit weird to already think of it as his past life, but it’s also fitting, in that... it fits.

The flight is short, and before he knows it they’ve arrived. They touch down in the hangar building, where a handful of SHIELD agents are waiting for them.

Peter keeps his expression as blank and contained as he can manage in order to appear superheroic and put-together, but he’s a bit disappointed not to immediately spot Mr Stark, as if the man has nothing better to do than wait around for him.

Happy stays with him as they walk to the main building, and chuckles a little when Peter tells the SHIELD agents that he can carry his own suitcase, thanks. “No really, thanks.” One of the agents does make him sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement form while they walk, while another one mutters to a third about how legal is going to ‘flip their shit’ that it’s dated so late, whatever that means. From the looks the agents are giving him he can tell that they’ve been briefed on who he is, or at least on
what his security clearance is.

It's late in the day, just like last time, but things still look busy, just like last time. A group of about a dozen agents (or maybe cadets) actually seems to be running drills out in the field. Once inside the main building, Peter is taken along the same route (two elevators, several populated corridors full of curious glances for the kid walking amongst such a large team) that leads to the quarters. They lose the SHIELD escort right before entering the last corridor, which is empty, and Peter wonders what exactly they were there for other than having him sign one meagre form. He hardly needs a security escort; if anything happened he'd be the one protecting them. Maybe he defeated their whole purpose by carrying his own belongings, and having so few of them, at that.

At the door, he pauses.

"Welcome, Spider-Man, Harold Joseph Hogan. A passcode is needed."

He turns to Happy. "Harold Joseph--?"

"Just say your code."

Peter puts his hand on the sensor, and smiles a little in spite of himself because Mr Stark picked:

"Itsy Bitsy."

The door unlocks, and the pleasant Irish woman says: "Welcome, Bravest Avenger."

Peter walks into the main room of the quarters, which looks the same as it did a few days ago.

Almost immediately, he hears a voice saying: "Is that him? That's him isn’t it?" And then he spots them; Mr Stark and War Machine, sitting at the kitchen bar, presumably having dinner. Peter had vague notions—he has tried not to set any expectations, but he had imagined joined meals with the team all sitting around the large conference table and eating take-out together. Apparently he was wrong, because there’s no one else around.

Both men get up as soon as they see him. Mr Stark is in jeans and a flattering black T-shirt, and Commander Rhodes is in a type of dark grey tracksuit; both clearly off duty.

"Hey, Peter Parker."

Commander Rhodes walks up to him and shakes his hand firmly. Peter met him in the same kind of rushed introduction that he met Black Widow, and never had a chance to exchange more than a greeting with him before things got really crazy. After four years, this feels like meeting him for the first time.

"You followed this asshole to outer space and made sure he came back. Thanks for that."

Peter puts his suitcase down. "Oh, thanks. But we fixed that spaceship with Peter Quill’s help; it’s not like I was the only one working on it."

Rhodes blinks, and the moment stalls. "Wait, you literally helped Tony return? I was talking about your presence as a moral guide—you know," he makes a hand gesture. "Like an incentive for him to haul his ass back to Earth." He turns to Mr Stark. "Is he an aerospace engineer, too? Who the hell is this kid?"

Mr Stark’s mouth twitches into a smile. "This kid can run circles around you and me combined; intellectually and physically." A beat. "Morally too, honestly."
The squeeze of pressure comes back, only it's not nerves so much as a fervent desire to live up to all those amazing things Mr Stark is saying.

“That said, there will be time to discuss how much smarter than the average Nobel prize-winner Peter is.” Mr Stark looks at him. "I hope you had a good flight. Did you eat? Did he eat?” he asks Happy.

“Not on the plane.”

“Okay. Dinner or tour?” And before Peter can answer, a dismissive: “Let’s take the quarters tour first, then I'll order you some dinner. Compound tour is tomorrow.”

Happy shrugs. “Well, my job here is done, so I’m gonna take off.”

“You don’t want to hang out with me?” Rhodes looks offended.

“I wanna fly back to the city before midnight.” Happy throws him a mock salute and then gives Peter a nod. “See you around, Parker.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Happy.”

“Thanks, Happy,” Mr Stark echoes.

Happy leaves, and Rhodes leans his weight against his biomechanical walking aide.

“So what, you ditchin’ me for the kid?”

“You can join us on the quarters tour,” Peter offers, then looks to Mr Stark. “Right?”

“Right.”

Rhodes shakes his head. “Nah. I see how it is. You’re swapping me out for the first young thing that comes along.”

Mr Stark shrugs and points Peter to a door at the far end of the room. “Let’s drop off your stuff first.”

But he turns before they are out of earshot to say: “What can I say; you’ve lost your youthful bloom, Rhodey.”

Rhodes snorts.

* *

“Almost done,” Peter tells Vision. "And then you tell me what you think."

He lifts his desk to arrange it against a different wall and test how the sunlight will hit his computer screen.

“Remarkable,” Vision says at Peter’s display of strength. “Rogers and Thor have much more obvious musculature, yet your strength equals theirs despite your frame.”

“Hey! Who are you calling skinny?” Peter puts the desk down, shooting Vision a rueful grin. He’s already taken a particular liking to his adjacent roommate; they met on Peter’s way back from having breakfast, and something about Vision makes him wonderfully easy to be around. “I’ve been totally ripped since I got bitten; look at this.” He flexes his arms and then lifts up his shirt to point at the eight-pack he has to put zero effort into maintaining.
“Am I... interrupting something?”

Of course.

Mr Stark is leaning against the frame of his bedroom door.

“Actually scratch that: I’d better not be interrupting something.” He lifts a finger in a mock-stern admonishment. “Vision is way too young for you, Peter; he needs time to mature into his own person.”

Peter awkwardly drops his shirt back down. “Um.”

Mr Stark's gaze flicks back up to meet his own. "I'm actually here for a reason." He puts his hands in his pockets. “They want to see you now, Peter.”

Peter swallows. “Oh. Okay, I’ll be right there.”

“Come on; I’ll walk you.”

Of course. If he didn’t want to talk to him about something Mr Stark would have just had F.R.I.D.A.Y relay the summons over the intercom.

Peter follows him out, waving goodbye to Vision.

“So.” Mr Stark claps him on the shoulder, but he doesn’t leave his hand there like he did in the past. Peter kind of wishes he would, and wonders if there’s anything he could do to make Mr Stark do so. “This meeting. It’s not important. They’ll make it seem like it is, but at the end of the day, all this fame stuff is secondary, Peter.”

Peter looks up at him as they walk down the corridor. “Secondary.”

“Yes.” Mr Stark keeps staring ahead, but he nods. “It’s extra. It’s the icing on the cake. It’s the cherry on top... I supposed the cherry is on top of another cake, technically, but however you slice it, your job is not to be a symbol. That’s a consequence. Your job is to fight the bad guys, and you’ve been doing that for years already. Quite well, even.” He gives Peter a curt smile that’s nevertheless honest. They’ve stopped right outside the glass door that leads to the living room area, where Peter can already see and hear people talking. “So let’s just get this over with.”

Mr Stark pats him on the shoulder again, and Peter has to resist the crazy urge to catch his hand before it withdraws and ask him to keep it there.

He enters the common room and walks up to the conference table, Mr Stark behind him.

“Hey, guys.”

Director Fury is projected in 3D at the table, if not actually present. Commander Hill is physically seated next to his projection, with another woman who is speed-typing into a computer tablet.

The other woman is Pepper Potts.

Mr Stark’s non-reaction to her presence tells Peter he knew she was there, but he finds himself caught off-guard by the surprise appearance of the Stark Industries CEO. As intimidating as Director Fury and Commander Hill are, this is something else. It makes him feel... he’s not even sure how. He’s thought about her sometimes, especially after he found out (along with the rest of the world) that she had left Mr Stark for good, this time. He can’t really justify why he’s taken the time, but
there’s a strange itch in his brain that thoughts of her seem to scratch, or at least get close to. She left Mr Stark. She had him and then left him.

And now she’s here.

“The Boy Wonder has arrived,” Mr Stark announces, and walks around the table to sit at the head, at a ninety-degree angle of Ms Potts.

Director Fury’s hologram takes Peter in, and his expression remains shuttered but he does sigh audibly. “Keep getting younger,” he mutters, rubbing his temple. “Excuse me people; Maria will be leading the discussion. I have other matters to attend to.” And then he looks at Peter directly. “Cap tells me you fight well, and Stark tells me he trusts you, so I said ‘yes’. Don't make me regret it.”

"I won't," Peter says firmly, quickly. "You won't."

"All right then. Good to meet you, Spider-Man. Welcome to the Avengers.”

And just like that, he winks out of existence.

“Charming,” Mr Stark comments, draping his tie over his stomach so it lies flat. “Always eloquent, our Fury.”

Hill shoots him a glare.

“Hello, Peter,” Ms Potts says. She smiles faintly, and motions for him to sit in front of her. “We haven't met; I’m Pepper. I’m here to help with the PR side of things for a bit.”

“She’s doing me a favor,” Mr Stark says casually. “So be on your best behavior, m’kay?” but he winks to show Peter that he’s joking. Peter smiles back with his mouth closed, noting the very deliberate lack of tension between them and wondering how often they've been seeing each other since they broke up.

“Let’s get started,” says Hill, whose job description remains nebulous but seems to include profiling superheroes and approving the Avengers roster. “Your qualifications for joining aren’t in dispute here. Stark has given us more than enough material, and the team is unanimous in their approval.”

“Okay. Uh, that’s good, I guess.”

“Yes, well. That said.” She looks at Peter with a hard gaze, and that's what makes Peter relax; she doesn’t feel the need to sugarcoat things for him, she’s going to be just as harsh with him as she is with everyone else. “We need the skeletons in the closet. Up front.”

Mr Stark puts up a palm. “He’s eighteen, Maria. Give the kid some time to store the dead bodies in there, first.”

Hill’s eyes narrow. “Either he’s an adult and he gets treated like one, or he’s a kid and shouldn’t even be sitting at this table. You can’t have it both ways.”

“What do you mean by skeletons?” Peter cuts in, before Mr Stark can make the comment his frown of annoyance heralds.

“Anything embarrassing,” Ms Potts jumps in. “Anything you think might make you look bad, or make the Avengers look bad. You are being screened and investigated--SHIELD started looking into things last week as soon as they found out who you were, but not everything leaves a trail they can find. We need to know about anything dangerous.” She sounds kind; guileless when she adds.
“Anything illegal.”

“I...”

And, suddenly, he can’t think of anything except for what happened with Uncle Ben.

Uncle Ben.

He doesn’t let himself think of Ben much, but when it happens, like now—the knot of nerves he’s been feeling lately returns full force, and this time it’s painful and travels up to his chest, squeezing the breath from his lungs, tightening around his heart. What if...? It could happen again; he could do it again—fail to save someone, he could—he could disappoint Mr Stark, fail him, and then the team will have to send him back and he won’t know what to do, and if he can’t be Spider-Man then what will he—

“There’s nothing.”

Peter looks at Mr Stark in surprise.

Mr Stark looks calmly annoyed, and isn’t looking at him, but for some reason Peter is able to snap out of his spiraling thoughts as quickly as he fell into them, just by watching him.

“I had him thoroughly vetted before stealing him away. There’s nothing but a collection of YouTube clips of him doing good deeds in an unflattering onesie.” The knot in his stomach unwinds further.

“The closest he’s ever come to not succeeding at something he attempted was an incident on a boat three years ago, but even that turned out okay once the cavalry arrived.” He shoots Peter a private, conspiratorial look. “So maybe we can move on.”

“Tony, when I agreed to let you sit in I thought it was on the condition that you don’t disrupt the meeting,” Hill says.

Mr Stark shrugs. “You should have known better, shouldn’t you? My presence is very disruptive.”

Ms Potts smiles down at her screen. “That’s true,” she mutters.

Hill rolls her eyes. “Fine. I’d still like to hear directly from Peter, please.”

Looking at Mr Stark, one thing does occur to Peter. Something he had managed to forget to worry about during all of his considerations regarding his secret identity reveal. Something he really should have thought to consider.

It’s not quite a skeleton, but—

“I like guys.”

Ms Potts goes still. So does Mr Stark.

“What?” says Hill.

“I... no one else on the team is officially out, right?” His ears are burning. “Um, there’s pictures—I mean, I’m bi, and it’s not a secret. Everyone in my old school knew, and most of my neighborhood. So. That’s... that could be something, right?” He looks around the table. “I mean I know it’s 2018, but like... it’s 2018.”

“Peter, you—“
“That’s not anything,” Mr Stark interrupts, clearly harsher than Ms Potts was expecting since she startles a little. So does Peter. “We shouldn’t even be asking him that,” he adds, pointing at Hill like it’s her fault. “That’s not a skeleton, Maria.”

“Well...” Ms Potts gives Peter a hesitant look. “Obviously it has no bearing on the team, but the press might be another issue.”

“Pepper—“

“This isn’t the time to be naive, Tony.” She swivels her chair to face him, casually authoritative, in her element. “You’re used to the spotlight. You know it’s not nothing that there are pictures. We’re in the era of social media; he’ll get asked about it. It’ll be a big deal to a lot of people.” She turns to Peter, smiling gently. “For good reasons, mostly. Lots of young kids who will feel seen and represented.”

“That’s a lot to put on him,” Mr Stark says.

Pepper shrugs, nodding. “Yes. But it’s what will happen.”

Mr Stark looks upset—it’s subtle, and he’s not angry, but his jaw is tight and Peter knows what that means. Mr Stark feels guilty, and consequently so does Peter; Mr Stark is going to blame himself even more for what he said at the press conference, for starting everything.

“I could announce before him,” Mr Stark muses. “Finally pick a label? The press would love that.”

Pepper shakes her head. “Bad optics. There would be...” she looks uncomfortable for the first time since Peter walked in. “They would conflate the two. There would be speculation.”

Peter’s ears feel like they are on fire at this point. Was she just--There have always been rumors about Mr Stark, for as long as Peter remembers being aware of him as a concept. But. What Ms Potts just—

“Moving on for now,” Hill says. “The press conference is tomorrow. I will defer to Pepper when it comes to the event itself, but as soon as that’s over with Peter will be listed as an active Avenger, and eligible for deployment. Are we agreed?”

She looks to Peter for an answer.

“Agreed,” Peter says.

And, for the first time, Hill smiles very faintly. “Good. In that case... welcome to the team, Mr Parker.”

*

The rest of the morning involves his compound tour, which is done by a SHIELD agent who is obviously dying to ask him questions about who he is, but refrains. Mr Stark stays behind after the meeting to talk to Ms Potts, and Peter bites back a frown of disappointment--but it was stupid of him to once again forget that Mr Stark has way more important things to attend to then his little protege. The walk around takes almost an hour; he finally finds out where the pool is (it’s an indoor sublevel) and Agent Phung points out the weapons storage lockers, the lab building, the offices... the place makes Peter think of an enormous technologically advanced mall.

When they reach the lab building’s third floor the agent has to tell him to go ahead, as Lab Room 377 is restricted to anyone who isn’t an Avenger.
Dr Banner is there when Peter enters on his own. The lab is very large, but the doctor has three lit up screens around him and that makes him hard to miss.

"Oh. Hey, Peter." He waves from where he's typing into a computer. Peter can see his writing in reverse because the monitor is 3D see-through. "Come in."

"Hi." It's hard to equate the mannerisms of the doctor to the Hulk. Peter's never met the Hulk in person but he's pretty sure he doesn't want to, at least not for now; not based off of what he's seen in footage. "Just checking out the place. I'm supposed to go back in a second, I think."

He's pretty sure one of the runs of code to Dr Banner's left are a portion of the math of the Infinity Stone on Vision's forehead.

"Sure, okay," he murmurs. He's obviously absorbed in the work; there's a very brown apple that someone took two bites out of and then abandoned on his standing desk. "You can come back anytime; this is your space too, now."

Peter nods. "Okay. Thanks."

Dr Banner looks at him just as he's turning to leave. "Hey, Peter. I mean it, about visiting the lab. You're obviously a very bright young man; Tony told me he was hoping you'd apply at MIT. This place--" he looks around at where they are. One wall of the lab is windows, overlooking the grounds. "--no one will bother you here." He smiles a little. "Well, no one but me or Tony."

"That sounds good to me." Peter smiles back.

"All right. See you later, kid."

"See you."

He rejoins Agent Phung and makes a mental note to read up on Dr Banner's research, as well as brushing up on his molecular biochem. The structure of the Stone was attached to Vision's 'brain' with needlessly complicated microcircuitry in individually programmed neurons, and he doesn't get why they didn't just reprogram the synapses to work collectively.

His tour ends just as lunchtime begins, and Peter gets back to the quarters to find... no one is there.

It cements the notion he had last night, but it's a bit disappointing. He hasn't seen Sam, Steve, Bucky or Natasha since he arrived, not to mention Thor, or the fact that he hasn't even met Scarlet Witch yet. He walks into the kitchen area, gaze roving over the gleaming counters and pristine coffee maker. He wonders who takes care of buying groceries for the fridge; probably housestaff, not one of the Avengers.

As the thought crosses his mind, he senses movement behind him.

He whips around, to find Natasha Romanoff standing just a couple of feet away, head cocked to the side pensively.

"Hey," she says.

"Hi," he rasps. He is not used to people being able to sneak up on him anymore. "Hi, Agent Romanoff."
Her posture deflates and she walks past him towards the fridge, barefoot in her comfortable athletic wear. "Natasha, please. Or Nat." She opens the door. "And if you try to call me ma'am I'm going to hurt you." She looks at him over her shoulder with a small smile and playful eyes. "Emotionally."

Peter laughs nervously. "I'm sure you could."

She seems to find what she was looking for (an individual tub of greek yoghurt) and starts making her way back to the bedrooms, but Peter hears faint conversation outside of the main door and it can't be a coincidence that she stops walking, even though no human ears should be able to pick up what Peter's did.

The door opens and in walks Mr Stark, who is with Rhodes.

"Nat." And then when he spots him: "And Peter." He smiles. "You're back."

"Yup. Hi, Rhody."

"Hey, kid." The Commander walks up to him and Peter instinctively returns his high five as they pass each other. "You eat lunch yet? I'm trying to get Tony to keep to a schedule. It's going terrible."

"Shut up, Rhody." Mr Stark makes his way to the sink, peering into the couple of dirty dishes there with some distaste. "I had a late breakfast."

"It's not breakfast if you never went to bed, man."

Peter almost gasps (almost) at the first confirmation of his long-held suspicions; Mr Stark isn't sleeping well, and he's not the only one who has noticed.

"Spare me the lecture today, please."

Rhodes sighs. "You're not going to win Pepper back by having a hypoglycemic seizure, Tony."

"Hey, seriously, shut up--"

But Peter has just realized Natasha is walking away.

"Nat?"

She turns.

"Aren't you eating with us?"

Things become silent, and Peter gets that he made some social faux pas but he doesn't understand why. He sensed from the get go that the Avengers dynamic was hardly the idyllic one shown on TV, but they've been living together again for six months. Surely they eat meals together sometimes.

And then Natasha shrugs faintly and says: "Sure. What are we having?"

"Rhodey's cooking," says Mr Stark.

"Uh, no I'm not."

Natasha rolls her eyes. "Let's order something."

As they debate over which cuisine will arrive at the compound fastest, Peter can't help but replay Rhodey's words to Mr Stark in his head. *Win Pepper back*, Rhodey said.
It makes sense--Mr Stark was engaged, after all. Him and Ms Potts have been on-and-off together for years, and the tabloids all agreed on one thing: she left him. Even after sorting through all the sexist bullshit that was put out there, that fact seemed to stick. MJ snapped screenshots of relevant updates to him for days while the drama unfurled; he had no choice but to read them. Obviously Mr Stark isn't fully over it, even months later.

He's not quite sure why, but the thought gives Peter something of a bellyache.

Mr Stark orders Malaysian at Peter's suggestion and directs them to the conference table where Peter sort of came out to him, his ex-fiancée and their boss just this morning. Peter finds himself only half-listening to the vague retelling of a time when Natasha fought Happy and embarrassed him in front of everyone at the rink--his mind is still caught up in this reveal about Mr Stark's plans to get back together with his ex even though he should have suspected it.

They make it halfway through the meal when the main doors open again, and Sam, Steve and Thor walk in.

"Hey," Nat says, with a conspiratorial look at Steve that seems to say: 'look what happened while you were away'. "How were drills?"

"Good. Helped us and helped the new recruits, so." He nods, then smiles. "Thor overdid it a little."

"I did not overdo it. I underdid it. Very much." Thor starts walking towards them, peering curiously at the contents of their food containers. "Are you done with that?" he asks Peter.

Peter blinks up at him for a moment. Thor is in a very tight shirt. "Uh, sure. You wanna join us? We ordered way too much."

"Splendid." Without further ado, he plops himself on a chair and sits next to Peter. "How was your flight, Peter? Did you take a plane or jet? By what means did you achieve airborne transport?"

"I flew him over. It was my jet," Mr Stark says. "I wanted Peter a bit more comfortable than being electrocuted by godly lightning."

"Excellent. Humans cannot fly with me with Stormbreaker without dying, you are correct."

Peter peers over at Sam and Steve, who are muttering quietly among themselves, perhaps temporarily forgetting that their new recruit has enhanced hearing.

"...that it's weird. And he's in a bad place right now and you know it," Sam mutters.

"It's not like he's eager to open up to me. Peter's the only thing that makes him crack a real smile, these days."

"I'll admit he lights up when the kid is around, but I've been talking to Rhodey and this shit with the insomnia is serious. You've gotta do something; start by having a damn conversation with the man."

"Uh hey, Sam? Steve?" It feels so weird to say 'Steve'. "Are you hungry?"

It's just like what happened when he invited Natasha, times ten. Everyone goes still, and Thor puts down his container to gravely wait on the outcome. Peter pretends he didn't notice and just keeps the guileless expression on his face.

Sam gives Steve a meaningful look. "Of course we are. Thanks, kid."
"Oh, Mr Stark paid for all of it." Peter glances at Mr Stark and finds him already looking in his direction. Mr Stark's dark eyes have an amused glint, as well as a hint of pride. "I'm just the messenger."

Sam pulls up a chair next to Natasha and, after the briefest moment of hesitation, so does Steve.

"Peter picked the cuisine."

"It was a joint effort," Peter amends.

"If you say so."

"So, tomorrow is Peter's big day, huh?" Rhodey says.

"You'll do great," Steve tells him. "It's a formality. And we'll be there for you, after."

"Thanks." He looks around at all of them. "It's really cool to be here."

"It is an honor to have you here," Thor says gravely. "Now, kindly pass me the satay."

Peter grins and does just that, and for the next few minutes he keeps mostly quiet as the others start to discuss potential missions, as well as an upcoming trip to the UN for yet another revision of the Sokovia Accords. He steals a few looks at Mr Stark during the conversation now that he has concerning context for what's been going on, but Mr Stark is acting like his usual self: sarcastic, sharp, charming. He even comments favorably on Steve's combat drills, and receives a pleased thank you in response. He manages to draw and hold the attention of the incredibly terrifying and powerful people sitting casually at this table; there's always been something magnetic about him.

Peter can't fathom what the hell Pepper Potts was thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Guys I am SO flattered with the response to this story! Thank you so much for the kudos, the bookmarks, and the BEAUTIFUL comments!! If you have a moment to share your thoughts please know they are CHERISHED <3 <3 <3

Also, when I tag something 'slow burn' I do tend to mean 'agonizingly slow'. But your patience will be rewarded, I promise.
It’s nothing like the last time Peter stood outside of the press room of the Avengers compound. Three years ago, he remembers Mr Stark making a very inappropriate metaphor about bestiality and being offered the Iron Spider suit. He remembers an arm around his shoulders. He remembers figuring out that Mr Stark hadn’t actually called in every major news outlet in the country when the only mature choice Peter could make was to wait to announce.

Unknowingly, he was waiting for today.

“Peter. Deep breaths, okay?”

Peter glances up at Mr Stark and nods. He isn’t actually having issues on the breathing front, but he appreciates the words regardless.

The press room itself he never saw, but the lounge area before it is much more crowded today than it was three years ago. Happy is standing a few feet away, and Maria Hill is here. Rhodey is around, too; he’s chatting with Steve, who looks out of character in his formal black suit. Peter feels out of character, too—his own suit seems to pull at his shoulders, even though Mr Stark had some guy come take his measurements last evening to custom-make it for him.

“I’m going to kick us off, so the pressure’s gonna be off you for a bit.” Mr Stark’s beard is trim and polished again today, and his blue glasses do a decent job of hiding the bruises under his eyes. “And remember, anyone gives you trouble, you can punt the questions to one of us.”

“Right. Got that.”

“Hey, kid,” someone calls. Peter turns to look at Rhodey, who gives him a smiling thumbs up.

“You’re gonna do great.”

Steve nods in agreement. “It’ll be over soon, Peter.”

“Oh, and Peter?”

He looks back at Mr Stark once more.

“The whole ‘picturing the crowd naked’ thing? Overrated. Just remember, this isn’t like that recurring dream you had as a kid about showing up to school and then realizing you had no pants on.” Peter opens his mouth to protest how untrue that is, but Mr Stark goes on. ”My point being, that you’re ready, and no one will be naked, but especially not you, and everything will be fine.”

And suddenly the door opens to a cacophony of noises, all of them slamming into Peter’s ears like a wall of sound.

Ms Potts sticks her head out and her gaze lands on him. “Are we ready? It’s time.”

Peter squares his shoulders and curls his hands into fists at his sides.

“Ready.”

They walk inside, and there’s a split second’s confused silence when he comes into view—and then
the shouting begins.

...if we could go back to your statement, Mr Stark—“

“We can’t, Jim,” Pepper cuts in. “And you have one question, so go ahead and then I’m moving on.”

The experience is over-saturating to his senses, despite the order Ms Potts has managed to impose for questions to be asked sequentially, and camera flashes to be kept to a minimum. To Peter’s attuned hearing, every whisper and mutter blends with the shuffle of feet, the tapping of keyboards, a couple of scratchy notepads. To top it all off, a side effect of the live press conference Peter hadn’t thought to anticipate is the off-the-hook vibrating his phone has been doing in his suit pocket since the moment he walked into frame and sat at the dais between Mr Stark and Steve Rogers. Apparently everyone he knows is calling or texting him at the same time, and the sensation is very distracting, tactile as he is.

The one thing he can’t do is see very well, since the focus of the lights is all on them and their over-bright shine makes it difficult to distinguish details beyond his fellow dais occupants.

“All right.” A man on the third row shifts in his seat. Peter has stopped keeping track of which news outlet people are from. “Peter, how long have you been unofficially working with the Avengers? And how much of that time was without an Accords signature in your name?”

Pepper extends her hand before he can answer. “Come on, Jim, that’s two—“

“I’ll ask the follow-up if I need to, Pepper,” a woman sitting on the front calls, frowning. “It’s a fair question.”

They talked about this yesterday during the meeting. Pepper told him what to say.

“Um, well, I helped out with the whole... Gauntlet thing, like Mr Stark said. I’d say that counts as working with them, so... six months? And I’m traveling to the UN next week to sign at the summit.” His antics during the Civil War as a fourteen-year-old were to be kept completely confidential, as per Maria Hill's horrified instructions.

Pepper calls on the woman who wanted to ask the follow-up.

“Thanks, Pep—so going back to your unofficial Avenging; for how much of it were you a minor? And by which states laws do you imagine were you being covered, at that time?”

“Well... we were in space.”

He gets a frisson of chuckles for that, but the journalist is obviously not amused.

“Are you going to answer the question?”

“I don’t know the answer. I think it’s part of what we’re talking about at the next UN thing.” He leans forward to look sideways at Rhodey, and Rhodey nods.

“That’s right.”

Pepper calls on another person.

“My question is for Tony Stark. Was the incident with the Staten Island ferry the first time you worked with Spider-Man?” Peter’s stomach swoops, but the man goes on: “There’s plenty of
cellphone footage of you both on the boat, and innumerable eyewitness accounts of how you two saved the passengers. Was that when you met?”

They didn’t go over this in much detail.

“That’s not when we met.” Mr Stark puts a hand on Peter’s shoulder, which prompts a mad flurry of camera flashes that leaves Peter winded. He feels the touch like a comforting pressure, even through all that fabric. “But one could argue it was the first time we worked together. I was trying to dissuade him from the work, at the time—hoping he’d focus on school.”

Peter ducks his head a little in case that will conceal the look on his face at all. He remembers the result of that misadventure with painful clarity, but he also remembers who stood where on the schoolwork versus superheroics when they actually met for the first time.

“Next question,” Pepper points somewhere to the left. “Andy.”

“All right; my question is for either Mr Stark or Captain Rogers—whoever wants to answer. With all the gifted individuals out there, and the qualified secret agents, one could argue there are plenty of potential Avengers candidates... why Peter Parker?”

The tone isn’t hostile. She’s prompting for something, and out of the corner of his eye Peter sees Steve lean forward to answer at the same time as Mr Stark does.

“I think—”

“To me—”

They both look at each other, and Mr Stark smiles beatifically and makes a ‘go ahead’ gesture to Steve.

“Thanks, Tony. I was just going to say that to me, Peter has demonstrated a quality that is rare in any superhero, let alone anyone his age. He has demonstrated responsibility.” He glances at Peter and nods solemnly. “This is not something any of us had when we started; I know I certainly had no sense of the impact my image came with, or the consequences of my powers. Not at the beginning.”

“He can also lift a car with his bare hands, so there’s that,” Rhodey cuts in, making a frisson of laughter travel the room.

“That, too,” Steve chuckles. “That, and he’s the most mature eighteen-year-old I’ve ever met. He has been single-handedly protecting his neighborhood from threats greater than you could imagine, and he went from that to space travel to saving the universe. He’s already demonstrated that he’s the guy for the job. That’s what I think.”

Peter presses his lips together and nods appreciatively at Steve for something to do. Steve nods back.

“Mr Stark? You were also going to comment?” the reporter prompts.

Mr Stark leans his elbows on the table to bring his lips closer to the microphone.

“Not much to add, other than Peter Parker has more integrity in one wavy lock of hair than I could ever dream of having.”

Peter’s ears flush hot, and he feels the squeeze in his belly tighten to a clamp. He draws his knees in and presses his thighs together, skin suddenly tingling.
“Oh, and he’s really fucking smart, too.”

The volume rises at the swear as people protest, or try to call out follow-ups, and for a moment there is chaos and it allows for Peter to exhale a puff of hot air, certain that some part of him is on fire.

“Yeah, it was.”

“Yeah, it was,” agrees Sam. “I saw the whole thing.”

“You did really good, kid,” Steve says again, patting Peter on the back in passing. “I’ll see you later. But you should be proud of yourself.”

Bucky and Sam flank him on their way to—Peter isn’t actually sure where they are going, but it’s away from the compound because they are walking towards the hangar. Maybe a minor mission, or a patrol, or a dinner date, for all Peter knows. He supposes he could ask, given that they are teammates, but the moment passed. He watches them go, and so do most of the people milling around after the press conference. It’s a sunny day and the lawn is so green and perfectly mowed it almost looks fake.

Then, as soon as they are a few paces away, Peter feels the attention swing back around to him.

They all know, now. The lingering reporters, the SHIELD staff randomly passing by, the techs, the boom guy, the caterers who brought in the tapas for the lobby luncheon Ms Potts planned to send the press back out in as good a mood as possible... everyone.

The whole world knows that Peter Parker is Spider-Man.

“Hey, kid. You okay?”

He looks up at someone he doesn’t recognize; he has a press credential around his neck.

“I’m great.” He quirks a smile. “And even if I wasn’t, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Touché,” the man says, grinning, and turns away.

In the background behind him, near the main doors of the compound lobby, Mr Stark is talking to Ms Potts, and Peter feels his smile freeze as Pepper puts a hand on Mr Stark’s elbow.

“Hey. Peter.”

He whips around, and it’s Happy. Peter’s so relieved to see him that he lets out a huge breath. “Hey. What did you think? Am I ready to be America’s Next Top Role-Model?”

Happy snorts. “You’re ready to be America’s Next Top somethin’ all right.” He nudges Peter in the shoulder, and Peter pretends the touch actually makes him stumble back. “Top pain in my ass, more like. ‘Cause I really needed another damaged snarky superhero to babysit.”

Peter rolls his eyes, but he can’t help smirking a little, too.

“You secretly care about Mr Stark so much.”

“Not about you, though.” Happy starts walking towards the compound’s entrance, and Peter follows him without looking ahead; maybe Mr Stark and Pepper aren’t over there anymore, maybe they went someplace to talk. And reconcile. “You, I’m just waiting for some supervillain to wipe off the map.”
“You would totally cry if that happened.”

“Happy, cry? Not unless he’s watching Downton Abbey.”

Peter finally lets himself look and finds Mr Stark and Pepper are still where he last saw them: standing close together, looking powerful and attractive and like they were meant to be.

“Good job today, Peter,” Pepper tells him. “I’ll keep you updated on how things trend, but I think we’ll be okay. We’ll talk about the social media stuff in a couple of days.”

"O-okay."

“He did great, didn’t he?” Mr Stark says, and puts a hand on Peter’s shoulder again. A hot rush of satisfaction that originates at the point of contact courses through him, leaving him winded. Mr Stark’s eyes are warm and kind, and Peter feels—he’s blushing again, for sure. He feels like his lungs are full; so full he can’t fit any more air into them.

“Just... don’t look yourself up, like we talked about,” Pepper ads.

“I won’t.”

“Good man,” Mr Stark says, and his hand drops away.

Peter bites the inside of his cheek with disappointment.

People keep coming up to him during the luncheon; offering congratulations, asking more questions, asking about the other Avengers. His phone keeps buzzing in his pocket, but he doesn’t even have time to make sure it’s not an emergency—not while an industry CEO tries to offer him a part-time job in his lab, a brand representative asks about his measurements to gift him with clothing to wear the next time he is ‘papped’ (that’s how he says it, ‘papped’, for paparazzi’d) and two reporters try to get him to discuss his relationship status—or lack thereof.

Finally, Rhodey saves him by grabbing his elbow and saying, with complete seriousness, that there’s a new lead on the ‘Infinity Sword’ and they have to go right away, official Avengers business, he’s so sorry to drag the kid to work but that’s how it goes.

"Thanks, man," Peter mutters as they make their way to the elevators, looking busy and official. "How do you deal with these people all the time?"

"I tend to make my escape by using my richer, slightly more famous friend as a distraction." Rhodey grins. "He's like a shiny bauble for the press and the powerful. Never fails." He clears his throat, becomes a bit more serious. "But actually, I hope he's gonna come up soon, too. Last thing he needs is to be photographed talking to Pepper and have to deal with another news-cycle focusing on their potential reconciliation."

"Hm?" Peter distinctly remembers Rhodey making a comment to Mr Stark about winning her back. "Why, isn't that... you don't think it's possible?"

"Not right now, state he's in. She's too smart for him; she can tell he's not... You may have noticed he's a bit off, our guy," Rhodey adds, nudging Peter on the shoulder. "If he tells you anything, or... if you notice anything, you can always come to me."

"I will. I mean, he hasn't told me anything, but. I want to help."
"I know." Rhodey sighs. "You already are, kid, trust me."

He spends the rest of the afternoon in the quarters living room, lying on the couch and studying the materials Pepper gave him to read up on so that he’ll be ready for actual interviews. He avoids the internet, like he promised.

Dr Banner and Thor show up a couple of hours in, each of them emerging from their respective rooms with suitcases, apparently with plans to fly out to visit some Swedish institute for a few days. They promise him they will all meet up at the UN summit next week, and after hand shakes and 'good luck's with his next couple of days of press, they leave.

Natasha returns from an unknown location in the evening and stops by the fridge for her yogurt. She ends up eating it at the counter, making idle, subtly probing conversation with him and somehow getting him to tell her what he remembers about navigating the Q-ship together with Mr Stark. She goes to her room after, making him feel like they just underwent a transaction and she came out the winner.

He eats dinner alone, re-watching Queer Eye on his tattered laptop; no sign of Mr Stark, or Vision or anyone else.

It also occurs to him, again, that he still hasn’t seen Wanda.

It’s not until he’s in bed that night that he finally starts to thumb his way through the myriad of messages on his phone. He’d given Aunt May a heads up about what would happen, so of course her words are purely supportive. Same with Ned and MJ, both of whom sent private ‘good luck dude’ and ‘you’ll be great’ texts just before it started. He has messages from a ton of his old high school classmates, including Flash, but before he can delve into them, one in particular catches his eye. It says simply hey peter, but the contact is what makes his breath catch.

Peter stares at a name he hasn’t heard from in three years.

Liz! hi

She answers immediately: just saw you on tv, and then means you saved my life. thank you

thats okay it was my pleasure

Idiot. That was idiotic. He starts typing something better, or less stupid, but she sends the next message too quickly and he deletes what he’d written.

peter

my dad called. he wants to talk to you

The bottom drops out of Peter’s stomach.

it seems rly important so im going to give him your cell so he can place a call

if thats okay

He stares at the screen, and for a moment he could swear that the white noise in his ears coalesces into an earsplitting whirr and shriek of metal, right inside his dark bedroom. Terror, the way he’d
barely felt it before, back then.

*that's ok*

*any idea what it's about?*

She replies *no, sorry*

He doesn’t know what else to say. She knows it was him that put her dad there in the first place; he can’t really apologize for doing the right thing, but it’s so much more complicated than that because he *is* sorry. Because it was his fault, that her idyllic family and comfortable lifestyle were destroyed overnight.

Neither of them ends up saying anything else.

Thoroughly rattled, Peter discards his cell and stares up at his bedroom ceiling, certain he won’t be falling asleep for some time.

He can’t call May. She needs to think everything is going perfectly, and he wouldn’t forgive himself if he added another layer of stress to her life. Ned knows the most about what happened back then with Liz’s dad, but he would probably flip out and might call May himself. MJ might try to understand, but she would also worry, and she’s dealing with enough stress of her own at MIT.

He feels like he’s back in 2015, taking it all on solo, longing for—except he’s not alone.

*Hey Mr Stark*

He stops typing. Deletes the unsent text.

He gets up off the bed and steps out of his room, looking sideways down the hall for any of his teammates. He more or less knows where everyone’s bedrooms and workstations are, but Mr Stark didn’t show him his bedroom during the quarters tour, just pointed up some stairs and said: “And up there is little old me.”

Peter makes his way down the corridor as silently as he can manage, which is actually whisper-quiet, and walks up the steps at the end. No one shows up to marvel at his agility; there’s background noise that reaches him even through the insulation, but that’s coming from the ever-active compound, not the partially vacated quarters.

He is greeted by a closed door at the top, which makes him pause.

It’s not particularly late, which was why he’d gone ahead with the impulsive idea of talking to Mr Stark, but now, standing outside his door, it’s hard not to second-guess himself a little. It’s so dark, and so freaking quiet. What if Mr Stark is asleep?

“*Hello, Peter.*”

Peter jumps, every hair on his body standing on end as F.R.I.D.A.Y’s voice murmurs from a speaker near his ear. “Oh my God, F.R.I.D.A.Y you scared the crap out of me—“

The door opens, and Mr Stark appears at the other side of it.

“Peter.” He blinks. “What’s up, kid?”
“H-hi, sir.” The 'sir' just sort of happens. Mr Stark in black pajama pants and a white sleeveless tee, otherwise barefoot. After seeing him in his suit, Peter startles into the thought that Mr Stark looks naked like this. “Um. Sorry to bother you...”

“Nope, never a bother.” He motions for Peter to follow him into his room, and Peter wonders how many people would kill to be him right now, and does so. “Everything okay?”

Mr Stark’s room is the same size as Peter’s (so, enormous) and outfitted with a similar style of furniture. All that’s different about it is, well... the state of it. Namely that it’s kind of a mess, and that includes the bed, which is not only unmade but full of tech paraphernalia that is surely preventing Mr Stark from even lying down on it, let alone sleeping.

A glowing projection of the Gauntlet rotates on an invisible axis by a workstation, one Infinity Stone (reality) still in place, and several lines of code scrolling next to it. Schematics for what looks like some sort of defensive gear are laid out on a screen mounted against the far wall; Peter can't quite make out the to-scale measurements of those but they look to be full-body. An empty glass of scotch is sitting next to a full bottle at the desk. The headpiece of an Iron Man suit is half-open on the table, micro-tools half-buried in the back of its faceplate.

“Peter? You all right, bud?”

Peter swings his attention back to Mr Stark, but for some reason his thoughts still take some time to unscramble.

“Uh...”

He knew Mr Stark had muscles, he supposes, but he hadn’t really—he hasn’t seen them in person, quite so well lit before. He’s seen the magazine covers, of course, but... this is... his biceps alone, one would think Mr Stark got bitten by his own radioactive spider.

“What’s wrong?”

The concern in his dark eyes makes Peter finally remember the purpose of his visit. The fear. The screech of metal like some sort of nightmare echo his ears haven’t quite tuned out. *my dad called. he wants to talk to you*

“I’m... what if it was a mistake?”

Comprehension dawns in Mr Stark’s features, and they soften in sympathy.

“Introducing Peter Parker to the world?”

“Yeah.” The fear. It’s not for him. “Someone could hurt May.”

To his credit, Mr Stark doesn’t try to placate him. “I understand.”

“They could find Ned, or MJ. They could find everyone I’ve ever cared about. I’ve put away people—I’ve made some people really angry, Mr Stark, what if they...? How do I protect everyone?”

Mr Stark snorts, faintly, and without humor. He’s not mocking Peter, which is why Peter isn’t hurt by it.

“How, indeed.” He drops down onto his mattress and sighs, leaning his elbows onto his knees. “I’m sorry, kid. That’s part of the job, too.”
Peter already knew that. He’s dealt with it before. But the scale of it, now...

“Enough to make you scared to care about anyone ever again, huh?” Mr Stark remarks, and yes, that’s it. That is the absolute core of it; the terrifying, awful, worst part.

“How do you do it?”

Another snort, this one self-deprecating.

“I don’t.”

He looks up at Peter and it’s all there; the exhaustion Peter’s been reading in his features, it’s all in his eyes.

“How haven’t you figured that part out, yet?”

Peter steps towards him, stomach a knot. “I don’t think that’s true, Mr Stark.”

“Oh, but it is.” He points to the ring finger where a ring is pointedly absent. “Got close, but managed to fix that. And then...” his jaw ticks. “I left you hanging for six goddamn months, didn’t I?” But a small smile curves the corner of his mouth. “Good thing you’re too stubborn.”

The approval bathes Peter like a warm light.

“It’s been said.”

“Yes. Well. I’ll tell you this: there’s nothing you can do to be sure. You’ll never be sure that everyone you know and love is safe, just as you’ll never know for certain that anyone new that comes into your life is going to fit into it the way you want. But you can be sure of one thing.” He stands back up, and walks all the way to Peter until he’s right in front of him. Up close, something about his shirt makes Peter pause; something is off about—

“And that is; you have an obscenely rich guy on your team.”

It startles a small laugh out of Peter, which in turn makes Mr Stark smile.

“I can have a 24-hour security detail posted wherever you want, whenever you want it, and one push of your Aunt’s panic button will send SHIELD’s best and most powerful rushing to her aid, in addition to myself, of course.”

It’s like a balm; Peter feels buoyed, and a bit breathless, and like he really, really wants to hug Mr Stark, but with him looking like this there’s a risk of that turning into an embarrassing situation, so he doesn’t.

“Thank you, Mr Stark.”

“Anytime.” His arm reaches up and Peter stills, anticipating—but then the arm drops again. “You did really good out there, today.”

The warmth trickles into his bones, and makes him blush, starting at his ears, as usual.

“Um, thanks.”

“I’m serious. There should be something you’re bad at, right?” Peter chuckles, cheeks on fire. “Are you sure you’re only eighteen?”
“Going on nineteen.”

Mr Stark huffs. “Right.”

“Hadn’t you already gotten your doctorate at my age?” Peter adds, remembering reading that somewhere, or possibly learning about it in class.

“I’d done a lot of things you haven’t done yet at your age, and that’s a credit to you, not to me.”

“You don’t know all the things I’ve done.”

It’s an automatic rib, a comeback. It sounded way too much like a come on. Peter hears it, and from the way Mr Stark blinks silently for several seconds he can tell Mr Stark heard it, too. Christ, he’s embarrassed.

“I—"

“Regardless, you are overqualified to be an Avenger, if that’s even possible.” Mr Stark smiles wanly. “And as for the other stuff... if you’re half as good at dealing with it as you are with everything else, then you’re going to be okay. It’ll just take some time.”

Back in his room, Peter collapses onto his bed face-first and feels his back arch of its own accord, hips rubbing into the mattress. He feels tired and embarrassed, but above all else he feels better. He feels way better. He’s glad he went up there, even if he made a fool of himself at the end, there.

You are overqualified to be an Avenger, if that’s even possible.

Mr Stark looked like the sex-God every trashy magazine proclaims him to be, but his tone had been parental as always. You did really good out there, today. There should be something you’re bad at, right? Are you sure you’re only eighteen? Peter arches his back again, the expensive fabric of his sheets rubbing over his sensitive skin. It feels good, so he does it again, and again, building to a rocking rhythm that has him panting.

You did really good... Peter shudders. His dick nudges into the plush give of the bed, hardening. He clutches a fistful of sheets for purchase and bends his right knee to give himself leverage, dick digging into the mattress, sweating. Are you sure you’re only eighteen? He feels dizzy. I’d done a lot of things you haven’t done yet at your age. He feels a wet trickle of precome blurt from his cock. I’d done a lot of things... Blurred, crazed, the images appear non-sequentially; the possibilities. The things he hasn’t done... the things he wants to do, so bad—

The heat builds to a climax and he comes with a muffled series of whimpers, hips rutting into the mattress.

He’s thought about it before. Of course he’s thought about it; he thought about Thor, and Sam, and Natasha, too, before he met them, but this feels wrong, or at the very least worse. Mr Stark would be so horrified if he ever found out. He would probably find a way to feel guilty—and that immediately makes Peter feel guilty, too. No way he can let himself do that every again.

He lies there, panting, his own hot breath blowing back at him as he comes down. The memory of Mr Stark’s bare arms flexing makes his dick twitch one last time. His shirt was thin; Peter could make out the definition of his pecs, and he had--

And then it hits him; what was strange about Mr Stark’s white shirt.
In the place where Mr Stark used to have the arc reactor, and where there shouldn’t be more than scar tissue—there had been a faint glow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all again for the love that has been shared!!! I’ve re-read every comment MULTIPLE times and I appreciate every kudos as well!

If you have a moment to drop a line it will be deeply, almost creepily appreciated <3
The Threat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“All the Avengers have to be present for an Accords amendment summit,” says Natasha. “It’s mandatory.”

“They are becoming... quite routine,” Vision tells Peter. Peter suspects that’s polite talk for the UN summits being annoyingly frequent.

They are seated at the kitchen counter, having run into each other at various stages of breakfast. Morning sunlight bathes the living room through the glass wall, and Peter still feels like he’s squinting. He stayed up for ever the night before.

“It was a hastily-written law.” Natasha shrugs, and takes another sip of her coffee. “Needs lots of revisions. Especially since Thanos.”

“Makes sense.” Peter sighs. “At least I’ll finally get to hang out with Wanda. We keep missing each other, I guess.”

Natasha puts down her cup, and Vision’s features remain as they are, but. Something changes.

“Wanda was sick, recently,” Vision says. “Regrettably, she’s had to keep to her room. I should have mentioned it sooner.”

“Oh, no way. That sucks.”

Vision nods. The obvious care in his gaze softens him, and makes him look as human as Peter has ever seen, despite the mega-powerful object gently glowing in the middle of his forehead. “Yes. I look forward to her recovery.”

“Hey, is that the spider-guy from TV yesterday?”

All three of them turn to look at Mr Stark as he strolls into the room, dressed in sporting gear and appearing ever-so-slightly unshaven. Peter immediately glances at the point between Mr Stark’s pecs where he’d (belatedly) realized something had been going on yesterday, but his grey shirt and black hoodie reveal nothing. Certainly no glow.

“Millenials don’t watch TV, Mr Stark,” he quips, grabbing another slice of toast.

“Oh I know, but don’t try to pass yourself off as one, either.” Mr Stark walks up to his coffee maker and turns it on. He throws Peter a smirk over his shoulder. “You’re Gen Z. Or next thing you’ll be telling me Vision’s a baby boomer.”

Natasha snorts unexpectedly, and slides off her stool.

“I need to go work; see you later, Peter. Let me know if you need anything.” And with that, she’s off.

“I need to go as well. I’ll give Wanda your regards, Peter. She looks forward to meeting you.”

Peter watches him float away and wonders whether they all think he’s an idiot, or are just hoping he won’t call them out on hiding something right under his nose. Still, he decides to let it go for the
moment, and just hopes Wanda is actually okay.

“Guess it’s you and me, kid.”

“Guess so.”

Mr Stark’s gaze dips to read Peter’s shirt. He really should have changed out of his pajamas, if only to avoid his childhood hero seeing him in a white, way-too-tight tee that says ‘It’s Britney, bitch’ in pink cursive.

Peter considers asking about the arc reactor he thought he saw last night, but discards the idea quickly. Best case scenario Mr Stark will be weirded out by the admission that Peter was totally checking him out, and worst case he will get mad at Peter for bringing up what might be a national security issue for all he knows.

“First patrol today?” Mr Stark comments after looking away, grabbing an apple and biting into it.

“Mhmm. Yeah. With Nat.”

“Know your target?”

Peter’s phone buzzes and he immediately grabs it to see if it’s a call from an unknown number—but it’s May, saying: surprise surprise Im the most popular waitress at the diner today ;)

“Uh—F.R.I.D.A.Y downloaded the info packet into my laptop this morning; we’re going to Boston because there have been a couple of sightings of the Shocker.”

“The Shocker. Might be interesting.” Mr Stark turns away to grab his now-full coffee up. “Nat is very experienced at recon; I’m sure she’ll have a lot to teach you.”

Peter’s phone buzzes again. This time it’s Rita; Mr Delmar’s daughter. peter this means you saved my dads life 3 years ago, god bless u thank u so much for what you’ve been doing. pls call me if you have the time

“You late for something?”

Peter glances up, caught, and smiles apologetically. “Just... expecting a call.”

Mr Stark looks thoughtful. “Everything okay?”

He decides in that moment that he will tell Mr Stark the truth when he knows what truth he is telling. “I don’t know, yet.”

“Okay. Well, you can come to me with anything; you know that.”

“I do.”

“Good.” Mr Stark watches him for a moment with what might almost be called hesitation, but he regains his usual composure quickly. “I have some stuff to take care of this morning, so I actually need to leave soon, too.”

“Avengers stuff? Can I help?”

He smiles, shaking his head. “It is Avengers stuff, but not stuff you need to worry about yet. Cap and I alternate taking point on some things; big picture things, policy and bureaucracy things. He’s in Wakanda helping with the restoration efforts for the week, so I’m it.”
“Oh.” Of course Mr Stark is busy and won’t be hanging out with him all day, sitting in on his meetings. He has meetings of his own to attend. “Okay.”

“You wouldn’t want to be there, trust me.” Mr Stark winks. “What you should do in the meantime is give your aunt a call. She’ll appreciate it, and I think it’ll make you feel better about that stuff we discussed last night.”

“I actually have a meeting with Pepper Potts, and then a bunch of debriefs with SHIELD.” She sent him an email to meet her in one of the conference rooms at the main building in less than an hour. He probably didn’t need to say her full name like that to Mr Stark, though; as if they weren’t just engaged to be married. "But you're right, I'll call May later."

“Oh. More PR stuff with Pepper, huh?”

“Yeah.” He finishes his toast, glancing at his phone one last time, but the couple of additional texts that rolled in are memes MJ sent to make him laugh. “She wants to talk to me about social media.”

“All right. Well, do me a favor and meet me at the lab before you leave for patrol, okay?”

“Sure. Okay.”

Peter slides off the stool and heads to his room to change for his meeting.

“Peter.”

He turns around, hand outstretched towards the glass door to the bedrooms section. Across the span of the overly serious, modern space, Mr Stark has one hip cocked against the kitchen counter, and looks handsome in spite of everything.

“I should’ve said this before, but...”

He holds up his coffee cup like he’s toasting him.

“It’s good to have you here.”

Peter feels, at the center of his chest, a warm glow of his own.

*

His walk to the main building’s conference room is pretty eventful. He goes alone, but has amassed an escort of about a dozen people by the time he makes it to the door. He’s approached by random passers-by; technicians, a nurse from the medical wing, agents, a few of the science division researchers, and everyone has a relevant question that’s specific to their department, and everyone has a family member who lives in New York, or the world, since he’s now saved both a few times. It delays him to the point where he’s afraid of being late.

Luckily Pepper sees him coming through the glass walls, and quickly opens the door for him, and only for him.

"Uh, thanks! Bye, guys!"

A chorus of goodbyes is returned to him.

“Peter.” Pepper shakes his hand, businesslike. "It’s good to see you.”

“Hey. You too, uh, thanks.”
The room is something of a fishbowl, since it’s in the middle of an area that’s staffed by several SHIELD agents hard at work at their respective stations. She motions for him to sit across the table from her and he does, looking around them curiously. So many stimuli—so many distractions, in a room like this.

"Did you get a good night's sleep?"

No. "It was all right."

It feels awkward to be here with her by himself, but he’s pretty sure it’s entirely on him, if not at all sure why he feels so weird around her. She’s wearing a crisp white skirt suit and her hair is in a perfectly neat ponytail. She’s the person Mr Stark loves, and she doesn’t want him back anymore for some reason. What reason could there be?

“And...” Pepper pulls out a computer tablet and what looks to be her personal Stark Phone. “Were you able to stay off the internet?"

He nods. It was easier than he’d thought. He’s had other stuff on his mind.

“Good. I just wanted to quickly go over a couple of things about your social media presence from now on, simple stuff. And then you can get back to your real job, getting into as many fights with as many aliens you want.”

Peter chuckles nervously. “Yeah. Um, thanks for helping me with all this stuff, I know you must be busy.” And suddenly, the question that’s been on his mind since he saw her at the first PR meeting just comes out: “Are you sure you have the time for this, with your job?” Your actual job as the CEO of one of the largest corporations in the world?

She takes it in stride. “Rest assured I’m flying back out this afternoon, but I am in a position where I dictate my own time. The fact that I’m... arguably overqualified doesn’t matter; it was important to Tony.” She smiles. Her eyes are so blue. “You’re important to him.”

The scope of it is flattering to the point of being overwhelming. The things Mr Stark is not only capable of, but willing to do for his team are insane.

“So, let’s start with Twitter. You already have an account, right?”

He nods. She types into her tablet, presumably looking him up. “I only post stuff when I remember to; I mostly use it to follow other people. Some pictures, sometimes, but I mostly post those on Instagram. A couple of vids.”

Pepper nods, and seems to have found what she was looking for.

“This is you?” she pushes the tablet towards him, tilting the screen in his direction.

“Yup.”

The first thing he sees is that his latest tweet (from a few days ago, because he’s been busy) is an artsy picture of his empty bedroom in Queens at an angle, taken at dusk the day he moved out. The second thing he sees is the blue tick next to his name, which wasn’t there before yesterday. The third is—

“I have... sixty million followers?”

He stares at the number for a long beat.
“I. Sixty million?”

Sixty-four million, in fact.

“It’s a bit more than I expected, but not by much,” Pepper says, shrugging faintly. “That’s going to go up in the next couple of days, too.”

“Holy—"

“For now,” she interrupts. “You can continue to post whatever you want, but you will be approached by lots of powerful people who will try to use this kind of exposure for their own agenda.”

Fleetingly, Peter thinks that others can try, but no one is more powerful than the man who’s already on his team.

“Just keep in mind that you can come to me or the PR team if you have questions about whether something is or isn’t a good idea.”

"Um, okay."

She moves on to his Facebook account, where he has been inundated by thousands of friend requests, and then to his Instagram where the ‘like’ counts on his pictures are suddenly in the hundreds of thousands.

“Oh."

Typing his name into Google now yields two-hundred million results, the first several pages of which are news articles about his identity reveal. There are videos from the press conference, tons of variations of the picture with Mr Stark’s hand on his shoulder...

“Oh my—“

There are videos of celebrities commenting on his outfit from security cam footage during the New York Q-ship battle. There are ads with marketing companies already offering merchandise based off of Mr Stark’s design of his flexicloth suit. There’s a New York Times article titled ‘Peter Parker is Spider-Man: Generation Z picks up the world-saving mantle’.

“Oh my God.”

Pepper takes him through it all with calm composure, giving him pauses, providing several moments to process and watching him carefully for signs of a freak out.

He doesn’t freak out, but it’s a lot to digest. Even during his walk to meet her; the compound personnel who stopped him represented a tiny fraction of the people on the planet. Being here, in this mini-city surrounded by forests and the river in upstate New York, it feels removed from civilian society--and until seeing all this, it had felt secluded.

“I guess...” he takes a deep breath. “I guess I knew this would happen.” And he did. He did.

Pepper’s eyes rove his face.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” He nods. “Yeah, it’s... I’m fine. I guess it’ll sink in later. One day. Maybe.” He smiles at her apologetically. “Was there... anything else you wanted to talk to me about?”
After a pause, she nods. “Yes, actually.” She takes back her tablet, and puts it on hold. “I want you to tell me if there’s anyone who might want to use their past closeness to you. Anyone you can think of who may want to seek attention.”

“By closeness, you mean...”

“A romantic connection. It’s one of the first things people focus on, and I’m sorry but we have to get ahead of it.”

Peter doesn’t have to think very hard; it’s not like he’s had anyone real. “I’ve made out with a couple of people at parties. That’s what the pictures are from, but that’s it.”

Pepper watches him. “Okay. I need to know the number.”

He lets out a breath. “Um, four.” Three girls, one guy.

“No one who might have... more to tell? More than a make-out?” she looks somewhat pained to have to ask him, but she waits out his answer.

“No.”

“Okay.” She makes a quick note in her phone. “Well, good. We’ll address the question of your sexuality if you want to. But only if you want to.” She sighs. “I’m sorry it’s even a talking point, Peter. But you understand why Tony can’t help by—“

“I understand.” He feels his face burn at the mere notion. Mr Stark, who’s been rumored to also like men for years and has gone out of his way to gleefully stoke said rumors any chance he gets. And that thing Pepper said... that it would ‘prompt speculation’. His gut clenches at the mere thought. “It’s okay.”

“...Okay. Well, for now we can hold off on the one-on-one interviews, so you won’t have to answer any questions about it.”

“Great.” His voice betrays him, coming out all squeaky. He clears his throat. “Uh, I mean good. Guess I’ll deal with it later. Later is good.”

They go over the kinds of things he can and can’t talk about on social media, and she finally lets him go about an hour later, just in time for his briefing with a group of SHIELD agents led by Maria Hill, who wants to get him up to speed on the current enhanced individuals on their watch-list.

After Maria, he meets with other SHIELD division heads, including the newly appointed director of intra-agency security who asks him a bunch of invasive personal questions about his moral and political beliefs. He talks to the team researching outer space travel and tells them what he remembers about the Q-ship as best as he can. He meets with the bioengineers, who ask him about his web fluid over lunch, and then talks to a group of doctors at the medical wing who attempt to establish his healthy baseline and plan for what to do in case he's injured.

By the time he's done with his meetings for the day it's late afternoon, he is overstimulated, and he decides to revisit the pool.

There had been a stack of clothes roughly his size in his closet when he moved in, and they included two bathing trunks with the team ‘A’ on one of the thighs. Dipping his head under water makes things muffled, and Peter feels an oppressive calm steal over him. He swims without holding back...
any of his abilities, moving fluidly in the empty enclosure, not thinking at all the first several minutes, just exerting himself to capacity. It feels good to tire himself out, to focus only on being faster, better, stronger. To focus only on the splash and resistance of the water. Each lap is just a prologue for the next, and the next, and the next...

An indeterminate amount of time later he is breathing hard and feeling the strain in every single one of his muscles, and he slows to float in the middle of the pool, blinking wetly and looking up at the low ceiling, ears submerged still to make the world quiet a little while longer. He had to use the passcode to get in, and remembers Agent Phung telling him the SHIELD personnel had their own rec center; that this was for Avenger use only. It seems likely no one else will bother him.

He wonders if Mr Stark comes here. After seeing him in his room, he can’t deny feeling a gnawing curiosity for what that would look like. Does the arc reactor get wet? When Mr Stark’s muscular torso is submerged, does the arc reactor’s casing provide a good enough seal? When Mr Stark sinks into the water, is he wearing the tight black swimsuit—

The far door opens, and Peter whips his head around to see who it is, flailing and coughing up a splutter of water.

“Rhodey!”

Rhodey chuckles and shuts the door behind him. He has a towel over his shoulder and is wearing a bathing suit similar to Peter's.

“Hey, Peter. How are you doing?”

Peter swims up to the edge of the pool to greet him, propping himself up against the concrete lip with one elbow.

“I’m good,” he pants, smiling. “You come down here often?”

Rhodey shrugs. “S’part of my rehab.” As though to illustrate this, he sits down a couple of feet away and starts to take off his mechanics, collapsing them into two boots. In the eerie light from the water, his skin glows beautifully. “Gotta get my cardio in, and work these some.” He flicks his own thigh, a trace of resignation ghosting over his features for a second.

Peter remembers seeing it all happen from a distance; he’d been wiped out, lying panting on the airport floor, and in the air the three flying figures of Mr Stark, Rhodey and Sam... and that awful, endless fall.

“That’s awesome. You do this every day?”

Rhodey shrugs, not meeting his eyes as he smiles to himself, with just a hint of bitterness. “I should,” he says. His usually genial tone sounds... dampened.

Peter nods in acknowledgement of the admission. “Well, spiders drown in water, so I need to practice my swimming because my powers didn’t make it any better. We should make this a standing meet up, right?”

That gets Rhodey to look up at him.

“Cause I definitely need to incentive to come here, otherwise I’ll just put it off until one day when we’re fighting an aquatic-themed villain, and then I’ll be screwed.”

There’s a long, considering pause as Rhodey’s long-lashed eyes take Peter in with what seems to be
newfound respect. Maybe even admiration.

It’s obvious that he’s not buying what Peter’s selling, but he doesn’t call him out, and Peter keeps smiling eagerly, innocently, and waits him out. And waits, until finally Rhodey grins and hangs his head, scooting himself forward so that his legs slide into the water and he’s sitting next to Peter.

“Aquatic-themed villain, huh?”

“There could be a Shark-Woman,” Peter offers, pushing away from the edge of the pool. “Or a Dr Oceano.”

Rhodey snorts. “All right, what about Fish-Boy?”

“Lady Medusa?”

”The Hurricaner?”

“Aquaman?”

“Hey, that one sounds legit...!”

*lab room 377, use your code to get in*, says the text.

Peter was just here for his compound tour, so he says: “Itsy bitsy,” into the vague direction of what must be a wall microphone and the lab door slides open swiftly.

The lone figure of Mr Stark is instantly identifiable in the middle of the large room, as he is surrounded by glowing screens and 3D projections just as Dr Banner was the last time Peter visited. The dim light of dusk doesn’t do much to illuminate the rest of the space, despite the wall of windows. In fact, there are mostly shadows because Mr Stark seems to have forgotten to turn on the overhead lights—or he specifically asked F.R.I.D.A.Y to keep them off.

“Peter.”

One of the screens noticeably shuts off. Peter decides not to comment on it and walks down the steps to meet Mr Stark at his desk.

“Hey Mr Stark.”

“Thanks for coming. This won’t take long.” He motions for Peter to follow him and starts walking towards one of the corners of the room, where a shelf-like structure contains several pieces of weaponry. Peter looks around as he’s trailing after him, and notices an opening in the opposite wall that he might have missed if he wasn’t using his spidey-vision—the double-doors are so exquisitely mounted that one could have confused them for paneling. But Peter recognizes reinforced steel when he sees it.

“What’s in there?”

“Hm? Oh, um, some of my Mark 32s,” Mr Stark says dismissively. “By the way that desk on that side could be your workstation, if you want it. Tell me what you think.”

He’s pointing at what’s arguably the best station in the room; certainly the better-stocked one, with the best lighting, but Peter glances back at the doors with suspicion. Security is already so heightened at the rest of the compound—why an extra layer for some of Mr Stark’s old suits?
“Anyway, here we are.” There’s a hiss of decompressed air escaping a valve. “I wanted you to have this back.”

He turns to meet Mr Stark’s gaze, just in time for him to say, smiling:

“Catch.”

A heavy item the size of a small backpack is tossed into his arms, and all Peter has time to read are the characters ‘17A’ on the top before it deploys, latching onto his chest and unfurling, a series of mechanical whirrs and clicks and the whisper of millions of minuscule nanobots activating.

The suit flows over him like trickles of cold paint, coating him from head to toe, encasing him as snugly as the crevices of his clothing allow.

Peter smiles inside the mask, the smell of new car flooding his nostrils. “K.A.R.E.N?” He whispers, and immediately hears a familiar voice through the head-speakers.

“Hello, Peter.”

“Aw, Mr Stark this is great.” He turns towards him. The visor screen identifies him, drawing a small oval around his face and with tiny letters appearing at the corner of Peter’s field of vision that say ‘Tony Stark, age 48, a.k.a Iron Man’. “Thanks.”

“Only the best, and all that.” Mr Stark motions with his hand.

Peter thinks about the faceplate peeling away and it does seconds later, dissolving to reveal his head once more.

“Thank you.”

Mr Stark shrugs. “It was made for you.”

“Yeah, by you.”

“Yes, well.” He lets out a pleased huff of breath, and the crinkles around his eyes come back as he smiles, and Peter is assaulted by an urge to throw his arms around him so strong that he has to physically will the suit not to follow through with the notion. “Now I’ll sleep a little more soundly, knowing you’re patrolling in that.”

“Will you?” Peter blurts. “Sleep?”

There’s a pause, and Peter is a bit surprised at his own daring. But he doesn’t take it back.

Mr Stark doesn’t look angry; just tired. Fittingly.

“Rhodey been talking to you?”

“No. I just...” he steps towards him, helpless. He’s just himself, just Peter, but if he could help... if only there was something he could do. “You seem... tired. You said...” I’d gotten pretty good at being in touch with my emotions and all that crap, before Titan, was what he said. And Peter had made a mental note of his use of the past tense. And last night, when Peter asked him How do you do it? I don’t.

“It’s not your problem, Peter. Not something for you to worry about.”

“I’m your teammate though, right?”
“Yes.” Mr Stark nods. “Yes, but that’s... that doesn’t mean you’re my therapist.”

“Aunt May says there’s a difference between a therapist and a friend.” He’s overstepping. He can feel it, he knows he is, but he can’t stop himself. “I could be your friend. I could—“

Mr Stark shakes his head, dismissive. “I don’t want you to worry about me, Peter.”

“But I—“ do. He doesn’t say it. “I want to help.”

“You can’t.”

“But—“

“Parker,” Mr Stark cuts in, voice tight. “You can’t, all right? I’m a little fucked up, but I’m not— there’s nothing you can do, other than not dying, which you’re doing a great job of so far. So focus on that, and forget about the rest. These are adult problems.”

Peter feels like his face is on fire.

“I’m an adult,” he says quietly.

“In some ways. Not in this.”

He’s talking about Ms Potts. He has to be.

The urge to ask about the arc reactor hits Peter again, but he doesn’t. Instead he takes another step towards Mr Stark. The only light source in the room is the distant glow of Mr Stark’s workstation screens and the floodlights from the landing pad outside, which are far away and barely contribute. He wants, more than anything, to give Mr Stark a hug, but he can’t. Mr Stark said they ‘weren’t there yet’ once, but Peter is starting to think they’ll never get there. Somewhere along the way they took a turn and missed it, and now they can’t go back.

“You should go back to the quarters; you’ll be late for patrol.”

Patrol isn’t for another hour. But he hears Mr Stark loud and clear.

“All right. See you tomorrow, Mr Stark.”

He turns and starts to walk away, heart heavy.

“Thanks again for the suit.”

He’s at the door by the time he hears Mr Stark say, quiet: “You’re welcome, kid.”

He waits for Natasha in the living room. He’s early, but it’s his first patrol and he is not going to fuck it up. Not just that—he will impress her, and maybe she’ll mention it to Mr Stark, and Mr Stark will start understanding that Peter isn’t just strong and brave; he’s mature, too.

While he waits, he works on texting back some of his classmates. It passes the time for almost half an hour, until the phone starts ringing in his hands.

He picks up the unknown number and a pre-recorded voice immediately starts saying: “You are being contacted by the Rikers Island detention center—“
His heart skips. He listens to the menu options with white noise ringing in his ears, and looks around to make sure he’s still alone before choosing ‘yes’ to accept the call. The news is playing in the background on the large living room TV, muted, but no one else is in here.

Peter waits for the operator to connect them as a Breaking News banner rolls out on the screen out of the corner of his eye. He ignores it; even after all the craziness the Earth has seen this year, they still roll that out for everything these days.

And then:

“Hello, Mr Parker.”

His voice has a slightly scrambled quality, likely due to the poor connection. “Hey, Mr Toomes.” He swallows; tries to affect an irritatingly jolly tone because he hasn’t forgiven the man for what he did to Liz’s happiness. “How’s prison going for you?”

There’s a pause at the other end of the line. “I don’t have a lot of time, so consider this the debt repaid, twofold.”

“Debt...?”

“Listen. There’s been a lot of unrest in here, since your little revelation yesterday.” A sigh. “One of the guys you put away has taken a hit out on you.”

It’s probably unhealthy, that his initial reaction is relief. But he is: he’s relieved, because the hit is on him. Not May, not Ned, not MJ, not anyone who was unlucky enough to wander into his life while being ordinarily human and defenseless.

“He calls himself the Scorpion.”

On the television, a camera is zooming in on something at the base of the Washington monument, where there’s been a little Spider-Man tribute of flowers and candles since 2015. Peter turns to watch as he listens to Mr Toomes go on.

“Stupid name aside, this guy has a lot of connections. And I mean a lot. These are bad guys, Peter. Real bad ones.”

As Peter watches and the camera gets closer, he realizes someone has vandalized the monument. There are large spray-painted letters directly onto the pale stone, and the flowers and candles of the tribute have been kicked aside and destroyed; the ‘Thank you Spider-Man’ cards and pictures torn.

“Peter. You hear what I’m saying?”

And then he reads it.

The letters say ‘PETER PARKER IS A DEAD SPIDER WALKING.’

“Peter?” someone is calling his name.

“Listen,” Mr Toomes goes on. “You need to get your billionaire Stark to get you some real protection. You fight good, but your web gimmicks and gymnastics won’t be enough against the Scorpion’s guys, okay? Lots of them got their hands on my tech.”

“Peter!” The distant voice of Mr Stark gets closer, but all Peter can do for a moment is stare at the screen. “Where are you?”
“The shit they were saying while you were on screen made me sick. These guys are vermin; got no other goal than chaos for the sake of it. Death for the sake of it. Don’t let them get you.”

“Peter.” Mr Stark bursts into the living room, and Peter turns to look at him, phone still in hand, Toomes’ voice still in his ear. “Hey.” He’s panting, and pale. “You’re here.”

“My hands are tied from in here, but... now you know. So do something about it, all right? Need you in fighting shape for when I get out of here and we have it out again.”

He hangs up, and Peter puts the phone down even as Mr Stark strides up to him.

“You’re here,” Mr Stark says again, and Peter nods. It’s unlike him to state the obvious.

“Yeah. I saw... I.”

Mr Stark’s hand lurches forward to grip his upper arm, squeezing the muscle there through the nanotech armor. Peter feels it.

“I was on my way back to—and I saw it on one of F.R.I.D.A.Y’s screens. You’re okay?”

Peter shrugs. “Y-yeah, ’course.”

“I.” His eyes dart across Peter’s face, gaze dark, roving. “They won’t get you, okay? You’re safe here. I won’t let them get you.”

Peter smiles faintly up at him. "I won't let them get me either, sir."

The hand is still gripping his arm, and Mr Stark is breathing hard, like he ran here. He probably did--but he had to have been more than halfway back, if he arrived so quickly.

Is this it? Peter wonders. Is this when he takes a step forward and lets those arms enfold him? He wants it so much. He wants it more than anything, right now. The anticipation is making his skin burn, all over.

Is this...?

"Peter?"

Mr Stark's fingers spasm, and then let go. They spring apart, even though nothing was--Peter takes two steps back, feeling winded, and it's Natasha, coming from the bedrooms, looking worried.

"What the hell, Tony?" she says, walking up to them, gesturing towards the television.

"I'm going to get SHIELD on it. Someone had to have seen--there's security footage around the base of the freaking Washington monument. It could be a prank, but..." Mr Stark goes on, but Peter temporarily tunes him out. Tunes both of them out.

He feels deprived, and he's had this feeling before, but not quite as sharply as he does now. It hurts; like an ache.

He isn't sure what this is, but it feels dangerous. Maybe more dangerous than the hit out on his life.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you thank you THANK YOU FOR THE WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT they make my fingers so light across the keyboard, no matter how tired I am. Thank you to everyone who is following along!!! <3
The Scarlet Witch

They cancel his patrol.

Mr Stark wants to start working on finding out who wrote the threat and sends Natasha out alone. Then he makes three phone calls, and half an hour later has managed to gather Rhodey, Vision, Maria Hill and a couple of senior SHIELD agents to a conference room together with the holograms of Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson, Nick Fury and the Secretary of State.

“Every Avenger gets death threats; it’s part of the job,” Rhodey is saying. “The part I’m more worried about is this ‘hit’ out on Peter’s life. That Vulture guy had some nasty shit in his arsenal, and it got sold to a lot of nasty people.”

Peter has finished telling them all about Toomes, including what he remembers of the man who calls himself the Scorpion.

“Perhaps, but we know this won’t be an organized force,” Secretary Ross counters. He seems annoyed to have been emergently called for this meeting. “And the boy has dealt with threats of their caliber in the past. Frankly, a graffiti on a national monument is not an unheard of concept.”

“All due respect, but no motley assortment of villains is competing to kill you with modified weapons for a price,” Steve says. “Organized or no, I think Tony made the right choice, diverting tonight’s patrol, and we should take the Scorpion’s hit seriously.”

“I agree,” Director Fury says. He lets the pronouncement sit with the room for a moment, and then points at Peter. “This ‘boy’ is the reason most of us are still standing here to argue about how seriously to take his safety. Remember that, Thaddeus?”

Secretary Ross looks irritated, but doesn’t protest.

“I don’t think this calls for us to pull Peter from the roster; we need his abilities too much,” Fury goes on, and Peter feels an enormous weight lift. “But we have to be vigilant. And get more boots on the ground tracking down those counterfeit alien weapons.”

Maria nods. “We will. And we’ll get more aggressive with compound clearances; make sure this is the safest place for Peter to live.”

“The God of Thunder lives here,” Ross says, clipped. “This is the safest place on Earth.”

“The safest place on Earth is Wakanda, and an alien invasion landed on it a few months ago,” Sam counters. “I was there. And by the way, so was Thor.” He scoffs. “Upping security here is completely reasonable.”

"And is someone going to interrogate this Scorpion guy?" Fury adds, looking around the table. "We should send an agent to the prison. Get as much intel as we can."

"I could--" Peter starts.

"Nope," Mr Stark cuts him off. "No way. Peter isn't going anywhere near that place."

Steve is nodding in firm agreement of that sentiment. Peter isn't stupid; he's seen enough movies, been propositioned enough times, and MJ has fondly referred to him as a twink enough times that he gets what sort of reaction his presence might cause. But.
"Then who?"

"Let me worry about that," says Maria. "And report back."

The meeting wraps soon after, and Maria leaves immediately, as well as Mr Stark who nods a curt goodbye to Peter and takes off with her, presumably to start working on updating security already.

Rhodey must see something in the look on Peter’s face because he puts an arm around his shoulders and steers him towards the kitchen, and motions for Vision to come with them, and makes him eat dinner.

* 

“And they won’t send you out alone, right?”

Peter sighs, smiling tiredly. “No. Even the Avengers have a buddy system, May.”

On his tattered computer screen, May’s worry transcends the miles between them. She pushes the glasses up her nose and heaves a sigh of her own.

“I’m so glad you’re up there. The only place other than by my side I’d accept is a house where Thor is your roommate.”

Peter huffs out a small laugh. He’s leaning against the bedroom wall he shares with a biomechanical man with an Infinity Stone in his forehead, but everyone keeps bringing up Thor as an example.

“So. Other than the creepy death threats... How is life up there?”

She asks him every time they talk. “It’s... good. Everyone continues to be awesome, and really nice. And there’s this giant pool in the basement, did I tell you about that?”

“You did.” May smiles. “You’re traveling to Europe soon, aren’t you? I saw it on the news; they are preparing a whole shindig for the Accords revision, and your signature, right?”

“Yeah. Mr Stark is flying us in his private jet.”

“Fancy! You must be eating caviar and drinking champagne every day, huh?”

Peter snorts, but he hears the hint of regret in her voice that she could never provide either of those things at home. “Oh sure. And I have gold slippers to walk around in, too.”

“Funny.” There’s a pause. “Seriously though... is Mr Stark taking good care of you?”

Peter’s hairs stand on end, spidey-senses going haywire even though he’s alone in his bed. The ache he’d felt in the instant before he thought he was about to step into Mr Stark’s arms comes back, the words 'taking care' a confusing suggestion that his body misinterprets.

May squints at him, leaning towards the camera. “There’s nobody your age around, right?”

“No, but... he is. Taking good care of me, I mean.” Even with all that Mr Stark is going through; even though he isn’t sleeping, he has made it clear that Peter is to have whatever he wants, whenever he wants it. Even though there are things Peter knows he is being kept from; he doesn’t doubt for one second that Mr Stark is always looking out for him.

“Good.”
“Yeah. May, he’s so...” But down that path lies danger. He can’t afford to travel it. He can’t. “He’s been great.”

“That’s great, Peter. He knows he has me to answer to otherwise, right?”

Peter chuckles. “Right.”

They hang up shortly after, and he goes back to his Twitter page, where the follower count is up to seventy-one million since yesterday. He’s been trying to come up with a new bio.

He doesn’t think about touching Mr Stark again. Not even later, when his hand finds its way into his boxers—especially not then.

*

In an unsurprising turn of events, he doesn’t end up sleeping very well, or much at all. He hears Natasha return from patrol around two in the morning, then weaves in and out of consciousness, dreaming about being back on Titan except this time it’s just him and Mr Stark, none of the others are there.

He finally gets up off the bed after a half hour of tentative Googling, which informs him that the ‘local deli in Queens where Peter Parker used to work’ has been flooded with visitors trying to learn more about Spider-Man’s past. So business for Mr Delmar will be good, at least.

He opens the door to the living room in the middle of a yawn, rubbing his cheek tiredly.

And freezes when he sees who is in the kitchen.

“...Hi.”

Scarlet Witch is sitting at the counter eating cornflakes.

“Peter.” Vision is next to her, and he is in his human skin for the first time since Peter met him; looking like a middle-aged white guy instead of a metallic purple one. “Good morning.”

“How’s it going?” Wanda’s voice is scratchy and attractive, and Peter remembers in that moment that he inadvertently lied to Aunt May when he said there was nobody his age on the team, since Wanda is in her very early twenties, according to Wikipedia.

She smiles tiredly at him, getting up from her chair with a particular sort of delicacy in her movements. It doesn’t escape Peter’s notice that Vision half-stands to help her, and then doesn’t.

“It’s nice to finally meet you. We were on opposite sides the last time we saw each other.”

“Ehm, yeah. I’m glad we’re not anymore.”

He walks up to her, and she surprises him by chuckling at his outstretched hand.

“Americans,” she mutters, but takes the offered limb and shakes it in both of hers. She’s piled her long hair into a messy bun atop her head, but a couple of red tendrils have escaped to frame her face.

“Did you know that you share the name of my brother?” she adds, a touch of wistfulness creeping into her voice.

“I did, yeah. I’m sorry.” He doesn’t know the specifics of what happened, but he remembers reading about the Sokovia incident in detail after Ultron was defeated. Pietro Maximoff died saving people, in the end.
“Thank you.” She lets go of his hand and seems to shake off the melancholy. “But I have heard much about your abilities. And Stark showed us all your YouTube videos; very impressive.”

“Um, thanks.”

She turns to sit back to her stool, and Peter walks behind the counter, to grab himself something from the ever-stocked fridge. He notices that she has to hold onto Vision’s hand to climb onto her seat, and decides that he can’t ignore the elephant in the room anymore.

“So, Wanda... how are you feeling? Vision mentioned you were sick.”

“I am well. Better.” She looks at Vision and ‘tsks’ her tongue. “Are you telling tales about me? I am still stronger than you.”

“That was never in question, dear,” Vision replies, grinning.

Peter hadn’t seen Vision grin until today. He decides he likes Wanda already.

“Well, I am certainly ready to fly to Europe. The summit can be boring, but we will see some of our friends.”

“Friends?”

“Okoye,” Wanda says with another smile. “And of course T’Challa and Nakia. You will be meeting Wakandan royalty, Peter.”

“Shuri will remain in Wakanda, I believe,” Vision says. “She will be missed.”

“Indeed.”

They chit chat about the Wakandan restoration and how quickly it’s progressing, and tell Peter about how the UN summits work, and no one brings up Wanda’s mysterious illness again, so Peter doesn’t push it.

Watching them, though, and seeing them interact with each other, he has to deliberately ignore any thoughts that crop up about the feasibility of relationships within the team. He doesn’t think about why.

* *

He has more SHIELD meetings to attend; he’s playing catch-up with the rest of the Avengers, after all. One of the presentations is a PowerPoint on terrorist cells that have adopted alien tech, a majority of which are American. Another is a briefing on weaponry that is largely helpful to learn about terminology rather than mechanics, since he picks those up just fine. During a break, one of the agents shows him a short news clip on his phone about the newly-clean stone of the Washington Monument, and double the amount of Spider-Man tributes and flowers at the foot of it.

He decides to grab lunch back at the quarters before his third meeting, but as he’s walking up to the doors his ears pick up a conversation that’s happening inside, and he slows his steps.

It’s Mr Stark and Rhodey, and Rhodey sounds angry.

“—just glad you’re not fucking off to New York for your stupid long weekends, anymore.”

“Don’t start with—“
“Avoiding the compound by hanging out alone in that huge penthouse... AWOL for days, probably drinking yourself into a coma? Yeah. That was fun for me to go through. Oh, and Bruce loved it, too.”

Peter’s breath catches. He shouldn’t be hearing this. He starts to turn away, fighting his monstrous curiosity with all that he has.

“The day Peter Parker agreed to join this team was the best thing that’s happened to you this year.”

A beat. “All right, Rhodes; tell me how you really feel.”

Peter’s feet become glued to the floor. Maybe he accidentally deployed his web shooters and stuck himself in place, because suddenly he can’t move. That would be one possible explanation.

“How I really feel? I feel that you’re doing a bit better, but that’s not saying much, Tony.”

“I’ll tell you what won’t help me; putting that kid in more danger.”

“It’s not—“

“Telling him about the Gauntlet puts him in more danger, Rhodey; you can’t say it doesn’t. Thanos had a fuck-ton of so-called children, and Nebula and Gamora were the exception, not the rule.”

“The kid can handle it—“

“Yeah well I can’t.”

There’s a pause. “This isn’t about you, man. Peter is an Avenger now. And he’s smarter than you’re giving him credit for; you think he doesn’t suspect something? You think he won’t feel left out if you keep him in the dark? Wanda is well enough now, we need to tell him—“

“Hello, Spider-Man. A passcode is needed.”

Peter jumps. Heartbeat thundering in his chest, he has to remind himself that the men inside can’t hear through the doors the way he can. But if he can’t will himself to walk away, he needs to do the other thing.

He presses his hand to the panel and mumbles his passcode. The doors open, and the conversation stops immediately. Mr Stark is sitting in one of the couches, and Rhodey is standing a few feet away from him.

When Peter walks in, Mr Stark stands up in an abrupt motion.

“Peter.”

“Hey, Mr Stark. Hi Rhodey.”

There’s a long silence, and Peter’s attempt at sounding casual falls flatter the longer no one else says anything.

Finally: “...How good is your hearing, again?” Rhodey asks, and Peter feels his own face fall in dismay. Cat’s out of the bag.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts, tripping forward towards them. “Look, I’m so sorry, I just—I can’t help it sometimes, and you were being loud and I was—I know I shouldn’t have, I know that, but I—“
“Peter, it’s okay,” Rhodey says, but Peter is looking at Mr Stark, whose jaw is clenched and ticking.

“Mr Stark, I—it’s okay, if there’s stuff I can’t know about yet.” He wants to know so bad, he wants to be in on everything the rest of the team is, but apparently not at the cost of that look on Mr Stark’s face. “I’ll wait, until it’s safer if that’s what you—I’ll be patient, I promise—“

“No.”

Mr Stark swipes a hand over his mouth, sighing as he does so.

“No, it’s... Rhodey is right. You deserve to know, and it’s not about me.” His gaze flickers over Peter from head to toe and then wanders away. “We should have told you from the start; it was my call to hold off for a bit. Steve wanted you briefed first thing, upon arrival. I was the one who pushed it back... and I was wrong. As usual.”

Rhodey’s shoulders slump in relief.

“Oh.”

“Come to the lab after your afternoon meetings. Room 377. We’ll talk there, ’kay?”

“Okay.”

Mr Stark nods, and walks around the couch towards the exit, but he pauses when he’s level with Peter.

“...Peter I’m sorry.”

Peter looks up at him, and bunches his hands into fists to fight the now-familiar urge. He won’t get closer. He can’t afford to be stupid.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” And he puts a hand on Peter’s shoulder, and in spite of Peter's best efforts he makes Peter’s whole body bloom for a few seconds, everything sparking electric, everything lit up. “But thank you for saying that.”

The hand slides away, and Mr Stark walks away, Rhodey going after him, leaving Peter alone.

He should be feeling happy that they are finally going to give him the last piece of the puzzle, but instead he stumbles to the couch and sits there for several minutes, hugging his knees to his chest and willing himself to stop it. This ache—he needs to stop feeling this way.

Seriously, he needs to stop it.

★

He runs to the lab the second his last meeting is done, not stopping to talk or acknowledge someone’s thanks for his service, not stopping for anything. An elevator, several busy corridors, a set of steps. Another corridor, two sets of glass doors. Another elevator. And then he’s there.

“Itsy bitsy,” he pants into the wall panel, and “Welcome, Bravest Avenger,” and the doors open to reveal the room he’s visited twice before.

This time, everyone on the team who isn’t currently in Sweden or Wakanda is in there. Mr Stark, Rhodey, Natasha, Vision and Wanda are all sitting or standing around, talking quietly amongst
themselves, waiting for him. The overhead fluorescents are all lit up, casting bright clinical light over everything. They make a rather formidable group, even in their casual clothing; Peter has seen them all fight in person, after all.

They all look up at him when he enters.

“Peter. Good,” says Rhodey, standing up.

Natasha points at a spot on one of the walls. “It's this way.”

She is, of course, pointing to the door panels that had caught Peter’s eye last time.

Mr Stark looks up at the ceiling and says: “F.R.I.D.A.Y? Do your thing.”

“Yes, sir.”

The reinforced steel slides open slowly, with a series of rattling metal noises and a loud hiss that tells Peter enough about the level of hydraulics involved in keeping it shut. He walks forward, feeling everyone’s expectant gazes tracking him as he crosses the room and walks all the way up to the opening.

Inch by inch, another room is revealed.

It’s dimly lit, and almost reminds Peter of a museum in how it's set up; the main light source is the focus on the object at its center.

Thanos’ Gauntlet is lying on a podium.

The room is otherwise bare, though the walls appear to have been burned, with streaks of ash that have corroded the steel as if it went through a weirdly contained fire. As for the Gauntlet, three charred holes mark the places where the Power, Soul and Space Stones had been. The gleam of the red Reality Stone remains.

“The stones must be destroyed before the Gauntlet can be,” Wanda says softly.

Peter takes a step forward, staring. He thought—along with the rest of the world, he had been under the impression that the Gauntlet had already been destroyed. He hadn't thought to question how it had been done; he’s seen what Mr Stark can do, what Thor can do, he had assumed... but Wanda keeps talking.

“It takes a lot of my powers... I have only been able to destroy them one by one.”

Peter turns to look at her.

She gives him a conspiratorial look. “It was not exactly a head-cold, my illness,” she says. “It requires... time to get my strength back.”

“Oh.”

“T’Challa knows about it, too. And a couple of people within SHIELD; Nick Fury, and Maria,” Rhodey says. “But the decision was made to tell the general public that the Gauntlet had been destroyed immediately, to prevent the obvious interest in seeking out whatever remained by people who might want to use it.”

“Right. I get it.” He feels a little sick even being in the same room as that thing. There is a powerful draw to it; as well as that terror that comes from remembering what it had been like, to be
crushed against the dry earth of that planet, the strength of Thanos’ massive hand around his throat.

“The Mind and Time Stones will be the only two that remain on Earth,” Wanda says. “As they are both guarded by powerful beings at all times.”

“And Reality...?”

She smirks faintly. “My next project.” Her fingers clench and unclench, and a faint red spark erupts from the palm of her hand, and quickly fizzles. “Give me a few more weeks. I will take care of it.”

“The idea of trying to use the Gauntlet before we destroyed it caused some... discussions, initially,” Natasha says, glancing at Mr Stark. “But ultimately the safest course was to get rid of it. Retrieving lost loved ones from the Soul realm was—it wasn't feasible. And we have enough energy and resources; redistribution is the answer, and we all agreed on that.”

“Okay. Makes sense.”

“Plus, the inability of a human to withstand wielding such power and ultimately exploding into a million little pieces was a factor,” Mr Stark says conversationally. “So there was that, too.”

Peter wonders what Thor’s thoughts were on the matter, but doesn’t ask in the moment.

“So... this is it. The last big revelation.” Natasha walks up to him. “You’re all caught up, now, Parker.”

Peter meets her eyes and watches her look for something in his own. She seems to find it, because she smiles.

“Knew you could take it.”

“You’re the fourteenth person in the world with this knowledge,” Vision says. “I am sorry if we have added another burden for you to deal with.”

“I’m... glad you told me.” He looks at all of them, standing in a haphazard half-circle around him. “Thanks for trusting me with this.”

Mr Stark smiles distantly. “We’ve always trusted you, Peter.”

*

He suspects it’s out of protectiveness, even guilt, that the others all readily agree to his suggestion that they eat together, but he doesn’t care. Wanda and Vision cook for everyone instead of ordering food, this time, and Natasha watches them with a look in her eye that reminds Peter of his thoughts from earlier in the day, about intra-team romance.

*

Pathetically, the reason he can’t sleep that night has nothing to do with his newfound knowledge that a universe-ending object resides in the same compound as he does. And it’s not the revelation that one of his teammates is powerful enough to destroy an Infinity Stone or three, either.

No; the reason Peter can’t sleep is the snippet of an overheard conversation from earlier in the day.

*Avoiding the compound by hanging out alone in that huge penthouse... AWOL for days, probably drinking yourself into a coma?*
Mr Stark is still unwell; he's as good as told Peter that several times now. And Rhodey said Peter's presence was helping--maybe he'd get better faster if he let Peter actively do something to make him better. Because Peter would do anything, but he doesn't think Mr Stark would ever ask him. So... maybe he needs to take the initiative. And maybe... maybe he'll be able to sleep if he knows Mr Stark is sleeping, too.

He throws back his bedcovers and gets up off the bed, comfortable in the knowledge that he won’t be waking Mr Stark up from so much as a doze.

He knocks, this time, and holds his breath waiting for the door of Mr Stark's room to open.

And waits.

F.R.I.D.A.Y whispers: "He's working on it," gently at one point. It takes long enough that Peter has time to feel a prickle of regret, until—Mr Stark appears on the other side. He’s in sweatpants and a tight tank top, and the shirt is grey, tonight, but it looks as unfairly good on him as the previous number did. His muscular arms slow Peter’s racing thoughts to a pause for a moment.

“Peter?” he rasps, and that’s when Peter notices that his eyes are glassy.

Then he smells the scotch.

“H-hey Mr Stark.” That doesn’t necessarily alter his mission to help, though. “Can I come in?”

For several moments, Mr Stark just stares at him and doesn’t step aside to allow it. He isn’t swaying where he stands or anything, but there’s something open about his expressions that is new. Usually Peter gets the impression there are at least two layers of confidence and sarcasm to dig through, and that one needs to use Mr Stark’s eyes to get there. But not now.

“Probably not the best idea,” Mr Stark says finally, and lets him in.

Peter spots the bottle on the desk (empty by more than two-thirds) immediately. Otherwise, the room looks as it had the last time, with one other exception: the rotating hologram of the Gauntlet is now a 3D reconstruction of Peter’s Iron Spider armor.

“What is it, Pete? You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Peter watches him walk to the bed and sit at the foot of it, shoulders slumped with exhaustion. They are attractive, broad, mostly bare shoulders, and maybe this was a mistake—

“You know, having breakdowns was a lot easier when no one cared,” Mr Stark says casually.

“...Are you having a breakdown, sir?”

He shakes his head. “No. No, I’m just... I’m so fucking tired, Peter.”

Peter walks up to him, and after a moment’s hesitation makes a small space for himself among the clutter on the bed and sits down next to him. His shorts ride up to reveal a good portion of his thighs with the motion, but he ignores the urge to tug them back down; as if Mr Stark cares.

“What’s wrong?”

“I asked you first,” Mr Stark says, wagging his finger like he caught Peter out. He slants a look at him sideways, expecting an answer. “What brings you here at this hour, hm?”
They are sitting close enough together that Peter can smell the warm waft of liquor on his breath.

“I. I came here because...” I want to help you. Something tells him Mr Stark won't respond well to a direct approach. “I was... thinking about the Scorpion’s threat.”

Mr Stark frowns. "It's okay to be scared, but I'm not gonna let any of those men touch you. You understand?" he leans in a bit closer, fixing Peter with an intense look. "I won't let them fucking touch you, Peter."

Peter's heart climbs up to his throat. Maybe that's why his voice comes out an octave higher than he wishes it did when he speaks next. "I'm not scared." He coughs. "I'm just--I don't want to be a burden. For the team."

"Oh." Stark's features relax. "You're not," he says simply. "You're the opposite. You're a goddamn breath of air for the team, is what you are. Fresh air, not stale air that just so happens to wander into the... room with air where the team was before." He makes a dismissive gesture. "You know what I mean."

Peter lets out a little snort of laughter. "Okay." He nudges his chin at Mr Stark. “Your turn.”

Stark sighs, rubbing his forehead with his fingers and then sliding them into his hair, dropping his head to stare fixedly down at the floor between his feet. He has a few attractive greys in there, but it's still thick and luscious-looking.

"Can't say no to that face, now can I?"

"...You’re not looking at me."

He laughs softly, and then does turn to look at Peter again. Peter wishes he hadn't said anything, because Mr Stark's eyes are pitch-black, soft-lidded, and they make his heartbeat irregular. “That’s what I figured.”

Peter doesn’t know what face he’s making, but he can only look back, defenseless.

“And?"

“And... I’m worried about you. I’m worried about you all the time, and now that there’s a goddamn hit out on your life I’m more worried. I’m worried that knowing about the Gauntlet will put you in the path of Thanos’ orphans. I dragged you into this world, and then I dragged you into the limelight, and I’ve fucked up your life in as many was as its possible to do things wrong.”

After that little speech, Peter surprises himself by feeling something he can only call fond annoyance.

“You’re saying all that like I had no say.”

Mr Stark shrugs. “I default to assuming responsibility for everything.”

“Yeah well, that’s my thing, too,” Peter mutters, smiling a little. Mr Stark snorts and then smiles back, looking surprised. The crows-feet around his eyes come back, and Peter’s heart trembles.

“Well, if you must know... I’ve gotten as far into my analysis as to figure this is all down to my fear of being alone, which is what it usually comes down to, so no points for originality there.”

Peter swallows, and focuses on keeping his expression just as it is. It’s finally happening. Mr Stark is confiding in him. Finally. He can't mess this up.
“But I’ll never give it up. Never.” He makes a vague gesture that seems to encompass the whole room. “Being Iron Man; I’ll never be able to stop. I kept telling her that I would, and then I didn’t. A million times, and I... I just didn’t. And it’s because I can’t. And the reason I can’t is that it’s who I am.”

He sighs again, rubs his forehead again.

“And if Pepper couldn’t put up with it... then who? Who will understand that this...” He taps his chest, in the place where the arc reactor should no longer be. It produces a dull sound that makes no sense. “This is who I am.”

And that's when, unbidden, a thought takes over Peter's brain.

The thought is: me. I understand.

But that's nonsensical, and it's not--appropriate, and he can't think that. He shouldn't be thinking crazy stuff like that.

“Can you think of anyone, Peter?”

Peter looks up at him and his belly tightens. His skin aches for a touch; from head to palms to exposed thighs to bare feet.

Mr Stark looks back at him, waiting, or... Peter isn't sure what else other than waiting that look could mean. Meanwhile his mind is begging: me, I can do it, please sir, if you'd just let me show you, I understand, if you would just let me... The smell of scotch is hot and thick, fanning over Peter's face when Mr Stark exhales. He doesn't really like the taste of alcohol but suddenly he's wishing it was sliding over his tongue; wet, burning.

“That's what I figured.”

Mr Stark is watching him so intently that when his expectant gaze dips down to Peter’s silent mouth Peter almost feels it, like a pressure. Like a touch.

Mr Stark adds, low: "Can't think about anyone else."

Surely, he meant 'of'. Can't think of anyone else.

“I." Peter's voice breaks on the syllable.

He sways forward, just an inch.

Just...

Mr Stark inhales sharply and stands up. He wasn't unsteady before, but he staggers now, in moving away from him. Away from Peter, and his own bed.

"All right, I need to--I should get back to work," he rasps. "How was that for a pep talk? That work?" He gets all the way to his desk and leans against it, inadvertently offering an ideal view of his broad back and tapered waist. After a moment of silence, he prompts: "Peter?"

"Y-yeah."

"You good? You ready to tuck yourself in?” But before Peter can answer that Mr Stark shakes his head, muttering something incoherent under his breath that includes the word 'fuck', but is too jumbled even for Peter's hearing to parse out. "Just... go get some rest, 'kay? We'll talk tomorrow."
Peter gets up on legs that are awfully unsteady. "O-okay. Talk tomorrow, Mr Stark."

"Goodnight."

He pauses at the door, looking back at the arch of Mr Stark's body bent over the desk, biceps straining. "Goodnight, sir."

And he hears, immediately after shutting the door behind him, a distinct: "Fuck."

Peter stumbles to his room in a drunken daze of his own, and collapses onto his soft mattress with a groan.

His stupid, stupid brain doesn't get that Mr Stark would never even consider it, would be horrified at the mere idea of it--and is still stuck on an endless loop of me, let me, I understand, I could be the one, if you'd let me show you, if you'd let me...
The UN

Chapters Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He posts his first tweet since the press conference the morning they leave for Geneva.

Hello all! Thanks for the messages—am off to UN for Accords signature

The replies add to the constant buzzing and lighting up his phone seems to be doing these days, and they keep up all through the morning and into the flight, because Mr Stark’s plane has high-speed internet access.

“Someone’s popular,” Natasha says quietly, nodding at Peter’s buzzing hip. She’s sitting in front of him for the flight; Wanda and Vision are sitting together and Mr Stark is sitting with Rhodey, talking team business by the sound of it. They’ve dimmed the lights of the cabin and they are high up enough that the sky outside is pitch black, but it’s such a smooth, comfortable ride that the days-long journey back to Earth in Starlord’s ship remains no more than a memory.

“Doesn’t it happen to you?”

“I’m not on social media.” She smiles. “I had my moment.”

Peter smiles back.

“...think you should discuss it with Steve, first.”

“Stop playing matchmaker, Rhodes.”

He’s usually pretty good about tuning other conversations out, but Mr Stark’s voice proves harder to ignore than others. He hasn’t stopped thinking about their meeting last night, and about how he acted—and reacted. He hasn’t stopped thinking about Mr Stark, period; he’s starting to fear he just doesn’t know how.

“Something on your mind?” Natasha asks.

“Hm? Uh, no, nothing on my mind.” Except for Mr Stark’s jawline, and his arms. And how they sat so close that night, and the absurd urge to volunteer himself as the person who truly understands him. “Just thinking about all this UN stuff.”

“You’re both stubborn as shit. All I’m saying is it’s been three years, and you both need to get over it.” Rhodey sounds like he’s said that before. “But... speaking of matchmaking; how was it to have Pepper at the compound last week?”

Peter stills.

“Local law enforcement was made aware of the threat, Peter; and of course they’ve upped their perimeter checks since what happened a few years back, with King T’Chaka.” Natasha’s eyes narrow slightly. “But that’s not what’s concerning you.”

Mr Stark lowers his voice, but not enough. “What do you want me to say.”

“I want you to say you’re trying to get her back.” Rhodey sighs. “Cause if you’re too depressed to even—you are trying, right?”
There's a horrible silence.

“Tony. You do want her back, right?”

“Peter?”

Peter’s gaze focuses on Natasha again. He tries to keep his expression void of everything that’s bubbling up within. “Nah, I’m pretty confident I can defend myself; that doesn’t worry me.”

She reminds him of MJ in some ways, in that his attempts at subterfuge never seem to work.

She says, in that soft, scratchy voice of hers: “There are more direct ways to obtain information than eavesdropping, though you’ll never hear me call it rude.”

“I’m not—“

“It’s all right.” A shrug. “I’m curious, too, and he’s hardly my favorite person.” Her eyes are alight with amusement. “Which isn’t even your case.”

“I—“

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell on you.” She grabs a book from her bag and starts flipping through it, presumably to find the place she left off. “But your face is...” She gestures with the open book in her hands without looking up from the page, smirking slightly. “We should talk about intel gathering sometime.”

“Um. Sure.”

She seems to be done with the conversation, and so is Peter. He grabs his headphones and jams them in his ears, blasting music until he can feel the bass rather than hear it.

They land in the late afternoon Swiss time, and navigating the private area of the airport means they don’t use the parts of the building that would involve interaction with the general public. Two government SUVs with black-tinted windows are waiting to drive them to the hotel, along with a police escort. One of the security men greets Mr Stark and Rhodey like he knows them, and assures Mr Stark that the route is secure, and the hotel underwent extensive clearance the past week as requested.

After being exclusively at the compound the past few days, Peter spends the entire drive staring out of the tinted window, taking in the city of Geneva with growing wonder. It’s dinnertime, and outdoor seating abounds, with restaurants that look entirely unlike one another but with multiple cozy canopies that extend into the sidewalks. The streets are narrow and many are cobblestoned, and as they get closer to the hotel they pass the city’s main river, a wide stretch of water that reflects the streetlights and is traversed by ancient bridges at intervals. There is a sense of history, of things being centuries old, and also a sense of solemnity, or power—or diplomacy.

“What do you think, Peter?” Wanda asks at one point. “Is it what you thought it would be?”

Peter looks over his shoulder at her, smiling. “Nothing has been what I thought it would be.”

The Ritz-Carlton luxury hotel in Geneva is known as the ‘Hotel de la Paix’ or Hotel of Peace.

Peter gapes at the building as they draw closer to it, and then gapes some more when the grand set of
double doors opens into a busy lobby that is dramatically tiled in black and white marble diamonds, like a chessboard. A ridiculously expensive chessboard. Marble columns with golden finishes and elegant arches dot the large space, and the ceiling seems sky high.

Mr Stark is immediately escorted to the main desk, past the line of people checking in, all of whom immediately start talking amongst themselves when they see him even though he's dressed casually in jeans and a blazer—then people start pointing out the others; Rhodey, Wanda, Vision in his human skin, Natasha... and Peter. Most of them aren’t speaking English, so although Peter picks up the occasional Spanish and French he can’t really be certain of what is being said, but the tone is excited, even gleeful.

“Hey kid, why don’t you go with Tony; he’ll help you check in.”

Peter nods at Rhodey and proceeds as ordered, relinquishing his luggage to the uniformed men with some disbelief and not without reluctance, since his Iron Spider armor is in one of his bags and all he has on right now are his web shooters.

He makes his way to the counter where Mr Stark is chatting with a hotel clerk who seems to be handling dealing with a celebrity guest with impressive aplomb.

“...including breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“Great.”

“And should you wish to sample some of the local cuisine, any of our bellboys would be happy to deliver it to your room.”

Something in her tone alarms Peter’s spidey-senses—it’s not explicit, but it sounds as though the bellboys are being offered up as part of that delivery as well. A flare of desperate emotion chokes him for a moment at the thought, and he has to fight the insane urge to verbally protest the non-verbal suggestion.

“Please tell the bellboys I am familiar with the legal definition of full service,” Mr Stark says, removing his sunglasses. He sounds casual, but also a touch reproving, and the clerk seems to pick up on her mistake.

“Right. Of course.”

She finally spots Peter hovering behind Mr Stark. She doesn’t seem to recognize him.

“Can I help you...?”

“Oh hey, Peter. Yeah, he’s with me.” Mr Stark looks down to grab a cloth from his pocket to clean his glasses with, which is why he misses the look on the clerk’s face but Peter doesn’t.

It’s a look of comprehension. It’s a look that makes Peter blush crimson, an ‘oh, that’s why’ sort of look that implies there is a universe in which Peter is the object of Mr Stark’s desire; his to purchase for the night... or as many nights as Mr Stark could afford, and therefore as many nights as he wanted. It’s a look that sets off an implosion in Peter's mind, as parts of him react with a violent sort of thrill at the demeaning, ugly notion, and the concomitant horror he feels isn't enough to drown out the tight clench of want in his gut.

“Welcome, Peter.” She says his name like she thinks it’s a fake but is being polite about it. Her accent is rich; possibly Dutch, or German. “May I see some identification, please?”
Peter pulls out his passport and hands it over. She seems surprised at first, then relieved—probably because she read his date of birth, Peter realizes with mild hysteria. She strikes him as a practical sort of person, who might not care about the morals of his and Mr Stark’s imaginary arrangement but does care about illegal activity going on in her place of business.

“Very well. I can confirm that your party has the suites on the penthouse floor—is Mr Parker going to be roomed in a... particular one?”

Mr Stark stops cleaning his glasses.

“Excuse me?”

For the first time, she falters. “Is. Does Mr Parker have a—“

“Mr Parker is to have the biggest room you have up there,” he says curtly. And adds: “For himself. Alone.”

“...Of course, Mr Stark.”

They speed through the rest of the check-in process, and she informs them that two of their party are already roomed as of this morning, and are upstairs waiting for them.

* *

Turns out Mr Stark booked the entire penthouse floor for the team and, with the exception of Wanda and Vision who are sharing, each Avenger has their own room.

Mr Stark doesn’t bring up the clerk’s misunderstanding during the elevator ride, not even as a humorous anecdote to share with the others, so Peter doesn’t either. Instead, Rhodey waxes poetic about the local coffee while Wanda asks Natasha about a restaurant they ate in last month.

Thor and Bruce are waiting for them when they arrive, having come out of their respective rooms to greet them. Both are in civilian clothing (a staple for Bruce, but not always the case with Thor) but Thor is holding a plain-looking walking cane that raises the hairs on the back of Peter’s neck.

As soon as he spots Peter, Thor quickly strides over to him.

“Idle threats, Parker,” he says without preamble, putting a large hand on Peter’s shoulder—engulfing it. “Those petty criminals will not come near you.”

Peter shrugs, with difficulty. “They might, but I’ll be ready.”

Thor seems pleased with his attitude. “Yes, very well. As long as you know that you may call on me always, to protect you.”

“Thanks, man. I—“

“Pretty sure the Mark 42 can deal with those ‘petty criminals’ just fine, young Swayze.”

Peter startles a bit; he hadn’t noticed that Mr Stark made his way to their end of the corridor, apparently having just finished catching up with Dr Banner.

At Thor’s look of confusion, Mr Stark rolls his eyes. “That’s the actor in Point B—anyway, if Peter needs to call on anyone, at least he knows I reliably have a cellphone.” He nudges Thor, dislodging the grip he had on Peter’s shoulder. “You keep frying yours into crisp with all that electrical storm action.”
Thor chuckles, motioning to the ceiling with his cane. “Yes; I intend to request more durable technology from our Wakandan friends.” He shoots Peter a wink. “However, if the time comes, I suspect he will not be needing either of us.”

Peter huffs and pulls out his phone from his pocket, thumbing it open to set it to mute because the buzzing suddenly increased to an annoying frequency.

Which is why he sees the tweet reply then, and not later. It was sent just moments ago, and comes from an account without a profile picture.

Someone tweeted a picture of him. Him and Mr Stark, Wanda, Vision, Rhodey and Natasha, all in various stages of getting out of the SUVs or walking into the hotel, ten minutes ago.

It’s captioned ‘Peter Parker better watch his back. Have fun in Geneva, Spidey’.

“Peter?”

Mr Stark can tell something’s wrong.

“Hey. What’s up. What is it.” He steps forward, and ends up grabbing the phone from Peter’s hands to look. “…Fuck.” He raises his voice. “Someone call Fury.”

“What?”

Thor frowns, taking the phone from Mr Stark. “Is this…?”

“Tony, what’s going on?” Bruce asks.

“Someone call Fury now,” Mr Stark repeats, and grabs Peter’s arm by the elbow and marches him down the corridor towards one of the rooms, practically shoving him inside which, in his surprised and pliable state, Peter lets him do. “And get Maria to triple the security detail at the hotel, and search every single person within a two-mile radius.”

“Tony, what—“

“I’m on it,” Natasha says, handing Peter’s phone to Dr Banner and pulling out her own to make the call, walking back to the elevator. Wanda rushes after her.

The others follow him and Mr Stark into the grandest hotel room Peter has ever been in, and not had time to appreciate.

“What the fuck,” Rhodey says. “Tony, can you trace who owns the account? This… @39zfxt03pq person?”

Mr Stark nods and speaks into a metallic wrist-band he’s wearing on his right arm. “F.R.I.D.A.Y, you heard the man. Get on it.” He looks back at Peter. “Hey. You okay?”

“I-I’m fine.” Peter holds up his hands like he’s under arrest. “I’m okay. It’s just… weird.”

“Perhaps we should cancel the summit,” Vision says. “Fly back to the compound tonight.”

“We can’t prevent them from knowing where he is all the time; and he’ll be with us, he’ll be okay,” Rhodey argues. “But this shit is fucked up. We need to find whoever took this picture.”

“It looks pretty grainy,” Bruce comments, frowning down at the screen of Peter’s phone. “With zoom technology these days, I wouldn’t be surprised if the person who took it was ten miles away,
or on an airplane, or is currently in Tampa, Florida and simply sent a drone.”

“Then I will go help with the search,” Vision says, and instead of turning back towards the bedroom door, he shimmers into his true form and walks to the tall window, then flies out into the night.

Peter watches him go and his shoulders slump. He wishes he could follow him, but knows better than to even suggest to Mr Stark that he should go out there after what just happened.

“Peter, I’m sorry your identity revelation has come with all these problems,” Bruce adds sadly. “There are so many people out there excited and grateful for who you are, what you’ve done. This is... not something that should have happened.”

Peter sighs. “I kind of knew it would. Something like this, anyway.” He glances at Thor, Mr Stark. “Sorry for the trouble, guys.”

“No trouble,” Mr Stark says firmly. “None. And not your fault, so nothing you should apologize for.”

They wait with him. Mr Stark pulls out a laptop and sits on the desk to work alongside F.R.I.D.A.Y’s algorithms and track the person who sent the tweet, calling the Twitter CIO when he runs into VPN issues attempting to bypass the pinging signal; because that’s just the kind of thing Mr Stark can do. Thor and Dr Banner do their best to keep Peter distracted, but as time passes and no immediate answers arrive, Peter starts to accept that he will have to get used to this weird feeling of having a target painted on his back. It's strangely easy, and still echoes with relief; that it's his back. Just his, and no one else's.

Eventually, Bruce points out to Mr Stark that it’s getting late, especially given the time-difference, and that they need to leave so Peter can sleep.

“But I.” Mr Stark looks up from his computer; under-eye circles lit up by the screen. “Peter. Are—do you feel—you be all right, here by yourself?”

Peter blinks at him. “Uh, sure.” He looks around the room. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“Mine is the room next to this one,” Thor says to Mr Stark. “I slept the week before; I won’t require sleep for another fortnight or so. I will be on alert.”

“N-no, you don’t have to—“

“Thanks, Thor.” Mr Stark ignores Peter’s protest. “And I’m on his other side, so... I’ll be on alert, too.” He nods, finally standing up and taking his laptop with him. “Get some rest, Peter.”

“But I—“

“Goodnight, young Parker,” Thor says firmly.

Peter lies awake for hours.

The windows are very tall, and offer a spectacular view of the river outside, and the city beyond it. He texts Ned and MJ some pictures, and sends a reassuring update to Aunt May, and catches up on a few more messages for a while, decidedly not opening his Twitter app. Then he slides under the covers and gives in, and... as it inevitably does these days, his mind wanders back to Mr Stark.
They haven’t really talked since that night a couple of days ago—not one on one, anyway. Maybe Mr Stark regrets opening up to Peter, or is embarrassed by the fact that he was obviously drunk; neither of which Peter minded. He hopes Mr Stark didn’t pick up on his crazy impulse to get closer to him, that night. He hopes he didn’t pick up on the dark, twisted thrill that overtook Peter today in the lobby, at the messed up thought of being something Mr Stark had purchased to entertain himself with in his lavish hotel room. He hopes this desperate urge to give Mr Stark everything he can goes away, because he will never be what Mr Stark needs and it’s pathetic to want to offer himself up for a position he isn’t wanted for.

He would, though. Offer himself up.

For... any position.

He groans quietly into his pillow. He ends up gripping himself through his underwear, pumping his fist and rocking his hips, haunted by thoughts of being chosen by Mr Stark, being wanted by the man who can have anything. He comes with hitching gasps, aching to be touched by someone else, telling himself this is the last time he lets himself do this because he absolutely needs to cut it out. He can’t afford this crush on Mr Stark. He just can’t.

The Sokovia Accords summit is held in a massive room at the Palais des Nations, in the heart of the city.

It’s there that they are reunited with the final missing trio; Sam, Steve and Bucky are hanging out with a group of beautifully dressed envoys from Wakanda which includes their King, T’Challa. Peter remembers seeing T’Challa fight and how terrifying that had been, but here he appears calm, composed, and at peace in a way that his grief and anger hadn’t allowed all those years ago.

The two groups meet on the conference room floor while people are still mingling, and less than half the room is seated. Peter notices many of the politicians and dignitaries turn to watch them with varying degrees of discretion.

“Your highness,” Mr Stark says respectfully. Then, with a trace of humor: “Steve. Sam. Bucky.”

“Tony,” Sam says, echoing his tone. When he sees Peter, he loses the sarcasm. “Hey, kid. Feels like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Hey, Sam.” Peter waves at him, then smiles at Steve and Bucky. He turns to King T’Challa next, and clears his throat, unsure as to whether he should bow or not.

“Please do not bow,” T’Challa anticipates, looking over Peter’s shoulder at Rhodey and smirking. “It is a real pleasure to meet you, Mr Parker.” He takes Peter’s half-extended hand in both of his own. Then he leans forward. “Thank you,” he adds, soft and intense. “For what you did. You and Stark, and the others who stopped him. We had thought that all was lost, and then... you saved many, many lives that day.”

Peter feels as though there is helium trying to expand in his chest. “Thank you. I... it was... we did what we had to do.”

A woman standing next to T’Challa steps forward and Peter realizes with a shock that it’s Nakia, the wardog who saved her kingdom in the weeks preceding Wakanda's global revelation.

“I want to thank you also, Peter.” She is so utterly breathtaking in person that Peter feels unsteady on his feet for a moment. Then she smiles, and his heart melts. “A truly amazing feat.”
One by one, they all take his hand and shake it, and one of T’Challa’s stoic security guardswomen even shoots him a wink. By the time it’s time for the summit to begin, Peter’s head is spinning with compliments from so many important, beautiful people, and he sits down in his designated seat (with a card that says P. Parker, Spider-Man, USA) with weak knees. Bruce, who is sitting to his right, leans sideways towards him and whispers: "I made a total fool of myself the first time I met him; you did great."

Secretary Ross is there in person, and he leads most of the comments that represent the Avengers along with Mr Stark and Steve Rogers, and there ensues a diplomatic discussion about the specifics of the new article about emergent mission deployment, and what penalizations for Accords violations will look like.

When it’s over, they call every Avenger up to the floor for a signature. T’Challa is also called upon to sign, and so are the rest of world leaders. Peter will be signing this article, among with the rest of the Accords, tomorrow during his own signing ceremony, so he stays put and watches it all unfold. It feels momentous. It's something he might have tuned in to see live on May's living room TV, in another life.

After he’s signed, Mr Stark walks back to his seat and shoots Peter a wink that makes his belly swoop, and Peter finds himself thinking that, despite the death threats, and the crazy scope of all this, he is exactly where he needs to be.

* * *

Instead of tourism, the rest of the afternoon is dedicated to briefs with SHIELD headquarters over holo. Mr Stark buys out the Ritz-Carlton conference room and sets them up to discuss updates with Maria Hill, including the results of the Toomes and Scorpion interrogation.

“*Toomes was cooperative enough; negotiated a nice cut-down of his sentence, and told us everything he’s gathered from within the prison—which is quite a bit.*” Maria’s holo taps her tablet and some faces appear projected on the screen behind her, including the mugshot of Marc Gargan, aka the Scorpion.

“*It’s actually unclear at this time that this gentleman is the lead instigator of the hit out on Spider-Man.*” Another image appears—a blank headshot, with a generic male outline with a question mark at its center. Peter briefly thinks MJ would cry sexism at the assumption, and she would be right.

“*Our intelligence indicates that the security breach at the base of the Washington Monument would take a bit more star power than Mr Gargan’s possesses. At the very least there has to be someone else with the financial means to orchestrate the vandalism.*”

Mr Stark shifts in his seat, jaw ticking. Steve leans forward with a frown. “And did Mr Gargan point us towards any suspects?”

Maria sighs. “*Not quite yet. He likes to brag but he hasn't given us anything concrete. We are working on tracing the account holder of the tweet that was sent to Peter last night, but no luck so far.*”

If F.R.I.D.A.Y couldn’t do it, Peter isn’t surprised SHIELD couldn’t either.

“If they are organized and funded this threat level is higher than we thought,” Sam says. "You're suggesting this isn't a scattered bunch of bounty hunters anymore."

"*Indeed, but at least no one has actually been able to harm Peter—we haven’t even had a failed attempt yet, just threats.*"
“Just threats’?”

Mr Stark’s voice is sharp as a knife. Everyone turns to look at him, Peter included.

“Seems a bit careless to call these messages ‘just’ anything.” He’s smiling, which makes the ice in his tone scarier. “I’m sure it won’t happen again, right Maria? Wouldn't want to offend every single Avenger by making light of their newest, youngest member’s safety.” He spreads his hands. "Wouldn't want to imply you're not doing everything in your power to ensure that safety. Last time I counted..." he pretends to do a headcount of everyone in the room. "...yup, I was right; there are eleven of us. And only one of you."

Maria is silent for a moment, and her see-through projection flickers for a second. “Of course not.” She looks at Peter. “Sorry, Peter. I imagine this must be stressful.”

Peter shrugs, which makes a couple of the others chuckle in disbelief.

“All right, well, this was a moderate waste of time but we have a dinner engagement,” Mr Stark says, leaning forward to disconnect the conference call. “So maybe tomorrow there’ll be some actual intelligence to this intel gathering.”

Maria rolls her eyes just as the image cuts off.

There’s a dinner with the UN dignitaries that they are supposed to attend in two hours. Peter covertly looks around the room as the others get up from their seats and leave, but no one seems inclined to discuss timing or car-pooling. Sam catches his eye.

“Hey, Pete—they send cars over to the hotel to pick us up a half hour before these shindigs, al’right? We’ll meet at the lobby.”

“Okay. Thanks.” He nods gratefully. “See you in a bit.”

He goes back to his room to call May in the meantime, but notices something is different the second he steps inside; someone's been in here, and they left something behind.

It’s not sinister: there’s a suit laid out on his bed. It’s not a Spider-Man suit, either, but an amazing midnight-blue two-piece with a meringue-white undershirt, clearly intended to be worn for the dinner.

Peter brushes his fingers against the lapel, carefully, and the softness of the fabric rolls against his fingertips so smoothly that he blinks slowly, marveling at the feel. It looks like it will fit him exactly. He had brought along his black suit from the press conference, the one Mr Stark had paid to have tailor-made for him, fully intending to wear that tonight. This one is somehow more festive while still being elegant and understated.

He doesn’t doubt for a second that it’s Mr Stark who left it there, but there’s no note.

Still, he puts it on.

* *

The dinner is at another of the UN buildings in Geneva, and is arranged very formally; assigned seating, three courses, no press. If it wasn't for the modern couture and technology on display one might forget this isn't technically a palace, or a dining hall owned by a Jane Austen character.

Peter is sandwiched between Steve and Natasha, with Mr Stark and Rhodey across from him. He is
grateful to have people to talk to; especially Natasha who murmurs gossip about the various foreign leaders into his ear, including a couple of items that she must have learned first-hand judging by the intimacy of some of the details she tells him. She makes him laugh, and it seems to amuse her to discuss the sordid aspects of her past in this way, so Peter keeps pointing out different political figures for her to tell him about throughout the meal.

They draw Mr Stark's curious gaze a few times, but Peter pretends not to see; Mr Stark didn't say anything about him in the suit, didn't even react beyond a cursory glance and an approving nod that had made Peter shudder embarrassingly.

Eventually, people stand up from their tables and mingle, and at one point Nat takes off with Steve to talk to T'Challa, leaving Peter one empty seat away from Bucky, to his left.

"...Hey."

Bucky smiles faintly at him. "Hey. How are you holding up?" His suit conceals most of his metal arm, black sleeves down to the wrists, and he's wearing a single glove, but Peter can still pick up the faint whirr when he moves one of the vibranium joints.

"I'm okay. This is pretty crazy." Peter hesitates for a moment, then slides across the seat to take Steve's place, so they are sitting side by side. He can't help blurtling out: "Do you hate it?"

Bucky lets out a surprised chuckle. "Yeah." His smile widens, hair falling into his face. "So much." He shoots Peter a considering look. "I think I would have been good at these sorts of things, before. Used to be I would need to drag Steve out to events and such."

It's the most Peter has ever heard him speak. "Really?"

"Yeah. I was the more outgoing one, between the two of us."

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter can tell Mr Stark is watching them. Maybe this is the most Mr Stark has heard Bucky speak, too.

"Not that Steve has become a social butterfly with time," Bucky adds. Peter snorts, and Bucky looks pleased with himself. "But he has Sam to help with that." He pauses. Reluctantly adds: "Sam has helped us both with that, I guess."

"Cool." Sam is talking to Bruce and Thor a few feet away, clearly has no idea he is being referenced. "He seems pretty awesome."

Bucky rolls his eyes, though he's still smiling. "Never tell him I said that." He stands up, and pauses before walking over to join Steve and Natasha to hesitantly pat Peter's shoulder with his ungloved hand. "You're a good kid, Peter."

Peter grins up at him and watches him go.

As the night wears on and the dishes are put away by the serving staff, the availability of alcohol loosens the atmosphere, and makes things louder. It becomes harder to focus his hearing over the noise and multiple overlapping conversations, and Peter starts to wish he had his headphones.

He's approached by politicians he's read about, or has seen on TV; powerful, corrupt, righteous... they all have questions, and most of them treat him like a celebrity actor, or a party gimmick. They all offer him champagne, and wine, and it just so happens that Peter is of legal drinking age in Europe, so he ends up accepting more offers than he probably should.
When Nakia comes up to him a while later, she does so with a glass of water. The way her skin gleams in the golden lights is so distracting that it takes him several long moments to understand that it's for him.

"Oh! Um, thanks." He drinks, and accidentally spills some water on his fancy suit.

She chuckles. "I would suggest you pace yourself, young man."

Peter wipes his mouth and puts the glass down on the table. "My metabolism is really fast." His mouth feels a bit clumsy but the words come out one after the other. He feels fine, just buzzing. Buzzed. "It--the alcohol doesn't last very long."

"I see." She sits next to him, still smiling. "Your suit is very elegant, by the way. At least there is some color; the tone of this room is quite boring to my eye."

She's wearing a beautiful lime green dress and a patterned headpiece, and Peter thinks she is being very kind. "Thanks. You are so pretty." Oops, no, he didn't mean to say--"I mean, you look... sorry! I mean you look pretty. You--sorry."

That makes her laugh. "Drink some more water, Peter."

She sits with him a while, answering his questions about Wakanda with patience, but eventually she is called to speak with someone else and Peter casts a look around the room for his teammates. Bucky and Sam appear to be amicably arguing about something while Natasha and Steve watch. Bruce, Rhodey and Thor are talking to a faction of the Wakandans that includes T'Challa. Vision and Wanda are talking to each other at a far table.

And then he finds the person he was really looking for.

Mr Stark is talking to one of the waitresses, and he has a hand on her hip.

From his seat at the table Peter has the perfect angle to see it; Mr Stark stood up a while ago and was holding court to a group of people near one of the columns across the room. He must have gotten rid of them at some point and now is talking to a beautiful server in a corner, and she is leaning into his shoulder and lifting her phone to take a selfie with him. She's tall; taller than Mr Stark in her black stilettos, and isn't she uncomfortable, working on her feet with those shoes on? She's leaning her whole weight into Mr Stark's side and he's just... just letting her.

Her phone flashes and she arranges it sideways for a different angle, nudging her head together with Mr Stark's. Another flash, and Mr Stark chuckles at something she says, and it's so loud in the room that Peter can't tell what it was. What did she say that made him laugh, eye crinkles and all?

When Mr Stark kisses her cheek for the next photo, a lurch of nausea propels Peter to his feet.

"Mr Parker?" Another server just approached him. "Do you need anything?"

He needs him to stop; they need to stop laughing together, they need to stop flirting so... so blatantly, so obviously, and he needs to--he needs--

"N-no thanks," he stutters, and strides towards one of the bathrooms, hot, bitter tears inexplicably flooding his eyes. Oh, God. Oh God, he's so dizzy, and so nauseous, and this is--this is so horrible, why?

He ends up sitting on the closed toilet lid, breathing hard and wiping at his cheeks with the sleeves of his beautiful suit. He can't--he can't, this is so stupid, he can't feel this way; he has an important job
and a responsibility to protect humanity, he can't afford this. He just can't.

He fumbles his phone out of his suit pocket and calls May. It's mid-afternoon in Queens.

"I saw you on the news!" she yells in lieu of a greeting. She's at work, and distracted, but picks up on the fact that something's wrong just minutes into the conversation, even though she guesses wrong as to the cause.

"You homesick, baby?"

No. "...Yeah, I guess."

"Missing your friends, too I bet." In the background, someone calls her name. "Coming! Listen, you should ask for a weekend off when you come back. Superheroes need vacations, too."

Peter laughs softly. "I've been at the compound for less than a month, May."

"I don't care. Tell that Mr Stark of yours to cut you some slack." They call her name again. "Yes, I know! Honey, are you okay? Do you want me to call out sick? 'Cause I will; business has exploded since your revelation--"

"No, May I'm fine. I'm fine, I'll talk to you soon."

"Love you, Peter."

"Love you too."

He hangs up. He still feels sick, but he's not crying anymore. He stands up.

When he opens the door, he nearly walks right into the person on the other side of it.

"Peter!" It's Wanda. She looks surprised, taking in his face for a moment--then her features smoothen, and even though she has no idea why he looks the way he does, she doesn't ask. All she says is: "I am feeling quite weak; I will be going back to the hotel early. Do you want to come with me?"

Peter bites the inside of his cheek and nods.

* *

They wake him up.

He'd managed to fall into a tragic, shallow sleep, but she must have dropped her purse with a thump, or one of those tall stilettos bumped the corner of a cabinet, because the next thing Peter knows he's wide awake, and the worst possible thing that could be happening is happening in the adjacent room.

The insulation at the hotel is good, but it's not good enough to contend with his focused hearing. Even Peter's willpower isn't good enough to contend with his focused hearing; he can't make out words but he can hear the timbre of Mr Stark's voice and it's excruciatingly easy to imagine what's going on in there. Mr Stark with his experience, his confidence, his assuredness... Peter read that Danielle Lopez expose about her night with the American billionaire just like everyone else. Twice.

He starts shuffling around in the dark for his headphones, vision sharpening, trying to heighten all of his senses to find them. The woman starts to moan and Peter rips a section of his suitcase apart in his frantic scrambling, desperate for anything to muffle the sounds his ears are picking up, because between the intermittent breathy moaning he thinks he can hear... he can just make out...
Finally, he finds them and jams them in his ears. He brings up his phone, hands shaking--

Just as there's a lull, and he hears it. A soft grunt that's all Mr Stark.

He hits play a second later, and it's one second too late. That sound is his now. He won't be able to forget it, and bitter tears gather in his eyes for a second time as he turns up the volume to maximum, curling up in a ball and hugging his knees.

It's only then that he finally accepts that it's too late. In the dark, with music blasting in his ears and his eyes squeezed shut, he admits the truth to himself.

His feelings are here to stay. He can't fight this and he can't stop it.

He just can't.

*

He hears her leave, eventually, and wonders why on Earth she passed up the opportunity to lie in Mr Stark's bed for the night. The clack-clack of her stilettos on the marble fades down the corridor outside, puzzling, and Peter finally discards his headphones and cell, feeling exhausted.

Which is when he hears a knock on his door.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter makes me want to add the tag/warning 'extreme pining: European edition'

GUYYYYS I CAN'T EVEN TELL YOU HOW MUCH YOUR FEEDBACK FUELED THIS WEEK'S UPDATE!! The liveblog comments?? GOLD. Your thoughts and feelings? MY DRUG. The apologies for rambling 'too long'?? UNWARRANTED. I love you all so much thanks for following along! I am so psyched to share what's coming up... let's say we are slowly but surely entering the 'simmer' stage of this burn...
Heart rabbiting away in his ribcage, Peter opens the door in his pajamas; red eyes and rumpled hair and *It’s Britney, bitch* and all.

“H-hey Mr Stark,” he croaks, trying to appear sleepier and less miserable than he is.

Mr Stark is in sweatpants and an MIT sweater that must have been hastily thrown on. His eyes are dark and bright; his hair is sticking out a bit in the back. He’s breathing shallowly.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts. Peter blinks up at him. “If I woke you up, I mean. Just now, or—“ he runs a hand through his hair. “Were you asleep? Just now?”

Peter hesitates. “Um.” But apparently in deciding whether to lie or not he gives himself away, because Mr Stark’s face falls.

“Fuck. Fuck, I—“ he huffs out a bitter, embarrassed sort of laugh, not looking Peter in the eye. His breath smells faintly of alcohol; something sweeter than scotch, this time. “I forgot. I mean, I didn’t forget but I—I didn’t think about—“ He scratches his cheek. “How good is your hearing, again?”

Peter bites his lower lip, and Mr Stark’s gaze flickers there for a second. “S’not bad. But... I have headphones.”

“...Great.” He looks disgusted with himself. “That’s... fucking great.” He sighs. “I’m really sorry, Peter. It won’t happen again.”

Peter half-nods, half-shrugs, wondering what exactly Mr Stark is doing here. Why he’s still standing there, and prolonging this already really strange moment. He is trying not to think about what Mr Stark was just doing. He’s trying not to remember that sound he heard earlier—not now, with Mr Stark in front of him. He is *trying*.

“Was... did you have something you wanted to talk about?” he asks eventually.

Mr Stark is still for a moment. It’s almost as if he himself doesn’t know the answer to Peter’s question.

“I. Yes.” He clears his throat. “I wanted to. You left early, and I wanted to check in. And it just occurred to me maybe you were awake, and turns out I was right, in which case I wanted to apologize.”

“Oh.” Of course. All that, and Mr Stark is just being nice, making sure his mentee is all right. “Uh, yeah. I’m fine.”

“‘Cause I saw you get handed a few drinks.” Mr Stark raises his palms. “No judgment, obviously—but I sent Nakia over with some water and I wanted to make sure you were feeling okay.”

Peter shifts his weight to his left foot and places the other one on top of it. “Oh. Well, it helped.”

“Good. Good.”

He’s still not leaving. Peter waits, uncertain as to what else to say.

Then: “Did you like the suit?”
Peter nods, making himself smile. “It was awesome. You really didn’t have to—“

“I never have to, Peter.” Mr Stark snorts, to himself. “The list of things I don’t have to do is very short. When you’re as privileged as I am, it’s mostly about doing what I want.” Something dark passes over his eyes, and he mutters: “And even then, I find myself wanting things I shouldn’t.”

He’s looking down at the floor, and the lighting in the corridor casts the shadows of his eyelashes onto his cheekbones.

Peter doesn’t have an answer for him. He wants things he shouldn’t, too. Wants them so, so bad. Especially right now.

He hugs himself to conceal a small shiver even though he’s not cold.

Mr Stark notices. “Hey.” He reaches out and puts a hand on Peter’s upper arm, rubbing at it and unwittingly causing a cataclysmic reaction. The warm calluses of his hand on Peter’s bare skin make Peter sway where he stands, suddenly existing only for that touch which he feels like a current, a shock. He has to shift his weight back to both feet, and when Mr Stark lets go a moment later he nearly stumbles after him.

“I should let you get back to your bed.”

Don’t. “Right.”

“Signing’s tomorrow; there’ll be lots of pictures. Better get your beauty sleep.” Something in the word ‘beauty’ sounds wistful, but Peter can’t pinpoint why he thinks that. “I hope you get some rest.”

Peter nods. “Me too, sir.”

Mr Stark had started turning away, but he pauses. “How come Cap got you calling him Steve in two days, but you still do that with me?”

“I.” Peter swallows. His ears feel hot. “I’m not sure.”

They look at each other. Peter waits for Mr Stark to ask to be called ‘Tony’, or some other impossible thing, but the moment goes on and then Mr Stark just... doesn’t. His gaze drops to Peter’s mouth and Peter closes it, realizing his jaw had been hanging open.

“Okay. I’m going to.” He nods to himself. “I’ll let you sleep. Goodnight, Peter.”

“Goodnight, Mr Stark.”

He closes the door between them.

He hears Mr Stark’s bedroom door open and shut, and as he walks over to his bed he pictures Mr Stark doing the same on the other side of the wall. He slides under the covers, still seeing a parallel scene in his mind’s eye, with Mr Stark shedding the MIT sweatshirt to reveal his muscular upper chest.

When he grips himself and pumps his fist, he imagines Mr Stark doing the same—in Peter’s head that woman wasn’t right for him, she wasn’t enough and he wasn’t really satisfied, and now he needs real relief. If he only knew what Peter was willing to do to provide him with that... anything Mr Stark wanted, any crazed, depraved thing, Peter would do for him, and call him ‘sir’ while he was at it.
A warm blurt of precome makes him shiver, and he squeezes his eyes shut, legs sliding restlessly along the bed. He imagines Mr Stark letting him kiss him—no, Mr Stark wanting to kiss him, hard, grabbing Peter’s face in both his hands like he did to Sylvie Devaulle in that dark-lit video Peter watched a couple or twenty times in his early teens, before he met him. He imagines Mr Stark, who is just a few feet away, bursting into his room, hauling Peter up into the air and wrapping Peter’s thighs around his waist, devouring his mouth, his way of admitting that he’s wanted Peter all along. Hell, he imagines Mr Stark actually saying the words; “Wanted you all along, Peter; I want you, you’re so good, I want you…”

Peter whimpers quietly at the thought of Mr Stark thrusting against him on this very bed, thrusting into him, and panting hotly into his neck as Peter took all of him, because he would; he would make Mr Stark feel amazing, make him groan and make that noise he heard earlier. He can almost hear it...

“Unh.”

Peter’s eyes fly open and he freezes, one knee bent and his free hand fisted in the bedsheets.

And then he hears it, unmistakable—Mr Stark grunts softly, and suddenly Peter’s dick pulses and he comes, just like that, shooting all the way up to his chest, some of it hitting his neck. He shudders at the unexpected punch of pleasure in his stomach, arching his back, gasping for breath. He pumps his fist, hips rutting into it, riding his own hand through the waves, heartbeat fluttering, and every cell in his body is focused in on the faint sounds in the other room, something so quiet and perfect he will probably manage to convince himself he dreamt it up in the morning.

He feels empty when he’s done; all his tension funneled out, only warmth and fluidity left behind. For the first time in weeks he falls asleep quickly, sinking straight into unconsciousness.

* *

There are five pens on the wooden surface. He was briefed on the protocols and knows he’s not supposed to use all of them, they are just there for backup, but the urge to uncap them all or keep one to himself strikes him, childish, as he picks the first one up. It’s beautiful; black and silver, with a tiny filigree globe on the top; probably worth a ridiculous amount of money.

He uncaps it and starts to sign.

The camera flashes crowd his vision, make everything happen in screenshots, in slow motion.

There are lots of places to sign; articles and amendments, agreements. A man in a sombre grey suit turns the pages for him so he knows where to go next. His ink is the exact same shade of black as everyone else’s, and adding his mark to all those names feels unreal.

It goes on for several silent minutes; the scratch of the pen, the swoosh of the turning page, the next signature... but when he’s done, the room explodes in applause.

Peter turns to look at the cameras and smiles directly into the blinding flashes, because he knows May will be watching and she is probably going to print one of these pictures to pin to the fridge. He wants to make her proud; she always teases him that he makes silly faces in photos.

After a while, the others all join him at the podium, arranging themselves around him so he’s at the center, surrounded. Wanda is next to him, and Bruce on his other side; Mr Stark and Steve place Sam between them, and Rhodey nudges Thor behind him so he doesn’t block him completely. Natasha is near the back, away from the spotlight along with Bucky and Vision. The wall of photographers click away madly.
Peter looks around him and then back at the cameras.

“Is it just me, or does it look like I just signed the adoption papers and you’re all my co-parents?”

A mix of laughter, snorts and chuckles rises around him in response.

He ends up pocketing the pen he used; he figures if he’s going to get in trouble they can come find him at the hotel.

The picture becomes a meme within a couple of hours.

Someone captured the second after he made his little quip and made it their article header, and it spreads like wildfire. Almost all the Avengers are looking at Peter with a variation of fondness while Peter looks into the camera, and apparently the internet finds this hilarious. They tag the Avengers as a group of people and tag Peter as the object of affection. MJ sends him several iterations throughout the day; captions include every Avenger tagged as ‘me’ and Peter tagged as ‘pasta’, or Peter tagged as ‘dogs’, the Avengers tagged as ‘lesbians’ and Peter as ‘Cate Blanchett’, and on and on. MJ seems to think this is hilarious, while Peter feels a mix of flattered and faintly embarrassed.

Mr Stark is the only one who isn’t looking at him, in the picture. His gaze is slanted in Peter’s direction but he’s smiling down at the floor.

“We’re almost there,” Wanda says through the comm system.

“Copy that,” Rhodey replies sarcastically. “I’m hungry.”

They are traveling to the restaurant in twos and threes, undercover for Peter’s safety, but also to avoid a mob scene if they are recognized. Peter had initially asked Wanda for a lunch recommendation with the full intention of venturing out by himself and sneaking into a local eatery alone, but this quickly led to the others sternly telling him he was only allowed to leave the hotel with team backup and a security escort present. Wanda, Rhodey, Natasha and Mr Stark volunteered themselves to go with him.

Which is why he’s wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses, jeans and a bulky ARMY sweater Rhodey lent him, and walking in step with Natasha in a hilariously conservative getup that really does make it look like she’s his mother.

“It’s around the corner,” she mutters, pointing and smiling at something across the street.

Peter nods and tries to hide his laughter. They pass a cozy-looking café, then a bakery, then another café with an adjacent delicatesse chocolaterie that has him stopping to gape at the intricate pastry designs.

Natasha chuckles, patting his shoulder. “We’re gonna have to come back if you want some of those; I’m not carrying enough cash.” There are no price tags, but judging by the window display and the look of the customers inside, it appears one would need a very significant amount of cash for so much as a bite.

“What is it?” sounds through the comms. Peter stills at the sound of Mr Stark’s voice in his ear. “I’ll get it for him.”

“No, it’s okay,” he mumbles, pretending to scratch his ear to speak into the system. “Thanks, Mr Stark.”
“But—“

“Tony, there is a three-course meal with my name on it, let’s go, c’mon,” Rhodey interjects.

Peter and Natasha move on, and finally reach the newsstand on the corner of the street where their restaurant awaits.

If Peter had managed to keep his gaze straight ahead, he wouldn’t have seen it until much later—possibly when Ned or MJ texted him about it, or May called. But his eyes wander to the splashy tabloids lined up on the front of stand for a moment, and he recognizes himself on several covers with a jolt.

There’s the picture from his signature ceremony this morning, and one of the magazines has a pixelated shot of him straining his arms to grab onto a lamppost as well as the body of Dr Strange as it’s being beamed up onto the Q-ship... but it’s the third picture that makes him flush.

It’s the picture. The one where you can see most of his face—one of the ones he’d warned Pepper and the PR team about.

Ned’s roommate Dev is gay, and Peter had been drunk and totally into it; they made out on the couch with a side of heavy petting at a frat party that Ned had initially wanted them to attend ironically. One can clearly see Peter’s lips locked with Dev’s, aided by the lighting and the difference in their skin tones; Peter is half-lying under him but there’s more than enough of him visible.

“Hey.”

Natasha puts a hand on his shoulder.

“You okay?”

Peter nods. “I should probably talk to Pepper.”

“I’m sure she already knows.”

“Everything okay?” comes Mr Stark’s voice again.

Peter tells them once the five of them are seated at the kitchen table, projecting his voice to be heard over the yelling of the cooks and staff, clanks of pots and pans. Mr Stark somehow got the owner of the restaurant to let them eat there instead of the main room, and in any other circumstance Peter would have loved to fully enjoy the immersive setting and the never-ending stream of sampling dishes the cooks keep bringing them, but he feels pretty exposed right now.

“Does that kid know?” Rhodey asks delicately. “I know you can’t see him as clearly as you can see you, but there’s a good chance they’ll identify him.”

Peter winces at the stab of guilt, not having thought to give Dev a heads up.

“Is this someone you can trust?” Mr Stark asks, cutting up his spiced meat with somewhat brusque movements. “Because these things can get ugly, trust me.”

“...I trust Dev. He’s a good guy.” Peter winces at the shriek when Mr Stark’s knife grinds the porcelain of his plate.

“Good,” says Rhodey.
“What did Pepper’s email say, again?” Natasha asks, tucking a strand of blonde behind her ear.

“She’s given me a few options on how to respond, if I want to. I think I’m going to pick the Twitter one.”

“Which is...?” Wanda prompts, smiling encouragingly.

“I acknowledge it in some way, without getting into a statement or a formal press release.” Peter glances at Mr Stark again, but he’s looking down at his plate with an indecipherable expression. “I was thinking of just posting ‘So what?’. Like, just that.”

“I love it,” Wanda says.

Natasha smirks. “Me too.”

Thankfully, Rhodey changes the topic to their upcoming missions soon after, and winks at Peter’s grateful look without acknowledging it otherwise.

Mr Stark jumps back into the conversation with his usual casual charisma, leaving Peter to wonder if he imagined sensing a slight tension in him earlier.

He gets back to his room with an afternoon free of briefings ahead, thinking he might get some web formula work done so that it’s ready to try out when he gets back to the Lab Room 377—and maybe even post the planned tweet as soon as Pepper replies to his email with her approval.

He wriggles out of his ARMY sweatshirt and is about to toss it onto the bed when he notices that there is something else on it.

It’s a box of chocolates; the expensive-looking ones he stopped and stared at earlier.

He drops onto the mattress and feels his heart lighten at the thought of Mr Stark getting them for him after that slightly stilted lunch interaction. The packaging is intricate and beautiful, and almost looks like a jewelry box rather than one containing high-end patisserie. Each chocolate is a different flavor, some are bonbons, and they all look delicious.

He pops a piece into his mouth, moaning appreciatively at the burst of flavor; it’s white chocolate with raspberry ganache, sweet and just a touch acidic, sharp and delicate. He savors it until the last second until there’s barely anything left to swallow.

And in the instant after he’s done, something terrible occurs to him.

What if it wasn’t Mr Stark?

There are a bunch of people out there trying to kill him—what if poisoned chocolates are one of their attempts?

He leaps to his feet, heart thundering, and curses himself as he rushes out of the room, box in hand. He slams his fist against Mr Stark’s door urgently, breathing hard, feeling like the world’s most gullible, killable idiot.

The door swings open.

“Peter.” Mr Stark’s eyes widen. “What’s wrong? What is it?”
Peter lifts up the box. “Did you get me these?” he blurts without preamble.

Mr Stark looks confused as he takes in the proffered candy.

“Yes,” he replies, gaze returning to Peter’s face. “What’s... are you okay?”

Peter’s shoulders slump with relief, and he laughs faintly. “I’m fine.” Well, now he’s embarrassed. “I... I ate one, and I thought—I thought it might be poisoned. I wasn’t sure it was you that sent them.”

Comprehension dawns on Mr Stark. “I see.” He steps aside to allow Peter into his room, which is a slightly smaller mirror image of Peter’s own. “Well, you’re in the clear. Are you feeling all right?”

Peter nods. “Yeah, yeah I was just—being paranoid, I guess.”

“I’m glad you are, Peter; I need you to stay safe.”

Mr Stark walks over to sit at the desk chair, and without another nearby surface to sit on, Peter ends up tentatively wandering over to the foot of Stark’s neatly made bed. The room itself smells very faintly of Mr Stark’s aftershave; the smell of him is more perceptible on the bed.

“In fact, I would urge you to keep being paranoid, and to come to me with any questions. Or with anything.” He fixes Peter with a stern look. “Anything at all.”

“Um. Thanks.”

Peter sets the box next to him, and feels the warm return of his earlier gratitude; something near flattery.

“And thanks for getting me these.”

Mr Stark shrugs. “It’s nothing.”

It’s *patisserie* from a luxury boutique. “They taste amazing.”

“I’m glad.”

There’s a beat during which they both look at each other, and Peter supposes he should just leave—but he so doesn’t want to.

Finally, Mr Stark says: “You’re welcome to stay here, if you want. Until the shindig tonight. I have some work to do, but...”

“Oh, me too.”

“Oh. Okay, good. Well then, stay.”

Peter smiles, pretends to salute him. “Yes, sir.”

Mr Stark rolls his eyes and mock-salutes him back. Then he swivels his chair back around to the desk and resumes his work.

Peter takes out his phone and refreshes his email; Pepper replied with her approval, so he posts the tweet and then immediately closes the app, determined to stay away from the replies for a while. Instead, he starts typing out his formula alterations, munching on the delicious chocolate while he does so.
In the background, the sounds of Mr Stark’s fingers on his keyboard are a steady rattle, and create soothing background noise. When he starts to develop a back muscle cramp from his bent position, Peter moves to lie onto his stomach. He keeps eating, letting the gooey sweetness melt in his mouth, savoring everything to the last.

His concentration begins to wander about an hour into their companionable working silence, and he starts to feel overly full and drowsy. He rubs his eyes, trying to focus his gaze on the screen of his phone. His mouth tastes like caramel and milk; the flavors of his last bonbon. He ate way past the point of satiety and his stomach is heavy, but pleasantly so. All that sugar makes him feel flushed.

His head lolls forward a moment and he has to lift it up again, blinking with difficulty, trying to stay awake.

Eventually he gets a crick in his neck from holding his head up, and he decides to lie down on his side, head pillowed by the mattress and phone tilted accordingly. He’s facing Mr Stark’s back like this; sideways across the foot of his bed. The smell of Mr Stark on the sheets gently wafts into his nose as he takes slow, deep breaths. He has the stray thought that if the hotel clerk who checked them in could see them now, she would think her suspicions confirmed.

His eyelids are heavy, mouth slack. A number of minutes pass and he realizes he’s stopped typing. If a supervillain decided they wanted to kill him right now, he probably wouldn’t put up much of a fight, but he can both see and hear Mr Stark right here. He knows he’s safe. He’s so full, and tired, and it’s nice and warm in Mr Stark’s room, and it smells good and Mr Stark is here, and that’s the best possible thing.

He dips briefly into unconsciousness and opens his eyes again at the sound of a low creak, gaze focusing with difficulty. Mr Stark turned around in his chair, and is looking at him.

“You’re pretty tired, hm?” he says quietly.

“Y-yeah,” he mumbles. “S-sorry, I can—” He starts to get up despite wanting to cling to the sense of deep comfort he’d sunk into.

“No, hey, no.” Mr Stark stands up and quickly walks over to him. “No no, shh—you can stay. Stay, sleep. I’ll wake you before dinner.”

Peter watches him blearily, struggling against the overwhelming temptation. Mr Stark crouches down to his knees so they are at eye-level. His eyes are kind, understanding.

“It’s okay, Peter. Sleep. It’s all right.”

He can’t resist; not when Mr Stark’s voice sounds deep and raspy like that.

“You sure?” he mumbles, a little slurred. His eyelids drooped shut already. Oops.

“I’m sure.” And then distantly, he thinks he hears Mr Stark say: “God help me, I’m sure.”

Peter struggles to open his eyes again. “Mh?”

“Nothing. Nothing, get some sleep.”

Peter gratefully stops trying to open them.

Sugar crash, he thinks happily, and falls deeply, utterly asleep.
At one point he could swear he wakes up and sees Mr Stark asleep at his desk, head pillowed in his arms, breathing deeply and peacefully.

He wakes up sometime later, with the sun setting outside.

His shirt rode up in his sleep and he’s lying on his stomach, and Mr Stark’s hand is on his shoulder, gently rocking him awake.

“Hey, kid.”

The hand falls away, and Peter makes a faint noise that he instantly regrets and pushes himself up on his elbows.

“H-hey Mr Stark,” he croaks.

“You okay? You with me?”

Peter nods. He feels refreshed, which is something he hasn’t felt for ages after a nap. He’s also half-hard against his thigh, so he doesn’t turn over quite yet; he’s pretty sure he had a dream that involved Mr Stark and the chocolates.

“You still up for this thing tonight?”

It’s their last night in Geneva and they are meant to attend a rooftop party.

“Yeah. Yeah, definitely.”

“You don’t have to go. Wanda and Vision are sitting this one out; if you’d rather stay and sleep...” Mr Stark motions to his bed. “You can even stay here. I could go somewhere else. Or.” He coughs. “Or I could sleep on the couch over there. It wouldn’t be an issue.”

Peter gives him a grateful look. “Thanks. But I wanna see the others. Nakia, and T’Challa... I want to go.”

“Okay. Sure.” Mr Stark smiles. “You’d definitely be missed if you didn’t attend.”

The idea of Mr Stark missing him, wanting him to be someplace does nothing to improve the situation in Peter’s pants.

“I’m going to hop into the shower, but take your time. When you’re an Avenger, there’s no really being late for a party.” He winks, and makes his way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

Peter watches him go with some disbelief. He hears the shower turn on and his dick throbs at the thought of Mr Stark undressing just a few feet away. He’s probably undressing right now. An unlocked door away.

He needs to calm down.

Except, that he’s in Mr Stark’s bed.

He shifts his hips, fully hard now, and feels like a pathetic little pervert, but he can’t help it. The sound of a glass panel sliding open and shut tells Peter that Mr Stark just entered the walk-in shower,
and confirms that he’s naked. Right now. This very second.

He slides towards the head of the bed, feeling a little crazy. The drag of fabric provides some relief to his aching dick, but it’s not quite enough. He makes it all the way up to the pillow—and pauses with his head hovering above it, trying to decide if he’s really that far gone.

This is crazy.

He slowly lowers his face to the pillow, and inhales the faint smell there. The shower keeps streaming in the background. There’s sweat building in his neck, armpits, groin, and he’s overheating from a molten mix of shame and arousal, and he really, really needs to stop. He needs to... he needs...

The sound of a soap-bottle being uncapped makes him snap out of it. He tears himself away and rolls off the bed, leaping to the door in a single backflip. He stumbles to his room and slams his back against his door as soon as it’s shut, shoving a hand inside his pants and coming with a low cry in just a few unforgiving strokes.

He sits on the floor for several minutes, legs askew, gasping to catch his breath.

Maybe he’s losing his mind. Maybe that’s what’s happening.

“Do you want to try the shrimp cocktail?” asks Nakia.

Peter politely refuses.

“It’s okay to drink, Peter. Moderation is key.” She smiles. “It is also okay not to drink, though.” She sips the cocktail herself, and the offers him the shrimp with a grin, which Peter accepts.

The rooftop event is less formal than the dinner reception they attended the night before, and though there are finger-foods and chairs to sit on if one wishes, most of the event is spent standing around chatting and mingling. Some people are in suits but others are dressed more casually; like Thor, who is in a bottle-green shirt with a deep V-neck that is drawing lots of attention. Peter himself decided on dark jeans and a collared white shirt which he has closed up to one button away from decency. He’s pretty sure one of the older French politicians was hitting on him because of it, but thankfully Rhodey rescued him with a stern, disgusted look at the man.

Other than that incident, it’s actually been kind of fun. Mr Stark hasn’t said more than two words to a single waiter or waitress, and Peter objectively knows it has nothing to do with him, but he doesn’t quite care. He got to exchange a couple of coherent sentences with T’Challa earlier, and Bucky talked to him for a little while, too, as though their last interaction opened up to possibility of communication between them. He’s glad he came.

“I do hope you are able to visit us. You and the princess would become friends, I am sure.”

Peter nods. “She sounds so awesome. I hope I can visit, too.”

Nakia’s natural hair sways in the soft breeze as she looks thoughtfully down the ledge towards the river below. “We are very lucky, Peter,” she says. “To be alive in a beautiful time such as this. I had a feeling... for days after that monster’s death, I felt as though I had almost lost my love. I almost could not believe he was alive, and still with me.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter notices Mr Stark talking to Bruce just a few feet away under the string lights.
“Yeah. I felt kind of weird, too.”

She slants her gaze to meet his again. “Do you have a love?” she asks with a gentle look. “Your face says ‘yes’.”

Peter snorts, trying to cover up the lurch of horrible emotion her question brings on. “N-no, no I...” And he figures he might as well come out to her, too, if she hasn’t seen the picture already. “The media just got ahold of this picture of me with a guy, but he was just a temporary hookup.”

Ned sent him the link to a Teen Vogue article titled ‘Why Peter Parker’s response to the pictures of him with another man is pitch perfect’, so he hopes it’s going to be all right. Apparently Dev is enjoying his newfound notoriety on campus, but has kept quiet about salacious details.

“I see.” She squints. “Not even someone who doesn’t know it?”

Peter can feel the panic rise, and Nakia must see it because she shakes her head before he can actually try to stutter out an answer.

“Forgive my prying. Please do not worry—here, let us get you more food.”

They walk to the canapé table together and T’Challa joins them, wrapping an arm around her waist, their obvious affection for each other making Peter’s heart swell. There’s music playing in the background, and when Natasha and Thor walk up to them Nakia grabs T’Challa and takes him to the corner where a few people have started dancing, waving bye to Peter over her shoulder.

“Do you dance, Peter?” Nat asks him with a raised eyebrow.

“Uh, sometimes.”

Mr Stark is still talking to Bruce over by the ledge that overlooks the river. His black blazer is worn over an AC/DC shirt, and probably shouldn’t look as good as it does.

“I imagine you must dance, Natasha,” Thor says. “I can always tell these things.”

Natasha shrugs. “It was part of my training.”

Bruce reaches out a hand and puts it on Mr Stark’s shoulder, staggering a little. Maybe he’s drunk, like Peter was last time.

“I dance,” Thor declares. “Of course, in Asgard dancing is quite different than it is on Earth...”

“Okay, okay, steady, buddy...”

Peter looks over at the pair again just as Bruce groans, and people around him and Mr Stark start to back away from them.

“Bruce? Bruce, stay with me...”

Mr Stark’s voice has an edge of worry, and it carries to the canapé table loud and clear. Natasha puts down her glass and immediately rushes over to them, and after exchanging a concerned look, Peter and Thor follow her.

“Bruce,” Mr Stark is saying firmly. “What’s wrong?”

Bruce is clutching the lapels of Mr Stark’s blazer with white knuckles—no, actually, his knuckles are turning green. Swelling.
“Bruce,” Natasha calls, brazenly walking up to him so she’s right by his side. “Hey, big guy. It’s me. Hey.”

“I can’t control it,” Bruce wheezes, bent nearly in half, eyes wide with fear. “I don’t—something’s wrong, I can’t—he’s angry, and he’s not... me, I can’t control—“ He yells, and Mr Stark staggers backward, still firmly in his grip.

“Banner.” Steve has arrived, and Sam and Bucky are just behind him, all of them standing in a half-circle around them. “What is it?”

Rhodey runs up to them, too. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Bruce, come on...” Natasha is saying, voice strained. “It’s okay, it’s all right...”

“We need to clear this area,” Thor says. “We must get these people out of here.”

Steve is nodding, already turning away and motioning to the watching party members to step back. “Everybody step away! We’re evacuating the roof, come on—step calmly towards the stairs and elevators...”

A sense of rising panic starts to stir the crowd, murmurs and scared voices escalating in volume, and thankfully T’Challa joins Steve in shouting out authoritative, calming commands, directing people to the exits, helping evacuate.

“Bruce—“

Bruce grunts, and it doesn’t sound anywhere near human. People start rushing to the bottleneck exits, and the crowd thins quickly thanks to Steve, Sam, Bucky and T’Challa’s efforts. Nakia appears to be staying behind also, making sure she sees everyone else leave.

“You guys get out, too,” Mr Stark says curtly, motioning with his head to Peter, Rhodey and Thor. “Come on, everybody out. Nat and I got this.”

“Stark, the Hulk and I are friends—“ Thor starts to say, but Bruce is shaking his head and this doesn’t seem normal; Peter thought he could become the Hulk at will these days, but this forceful transformation is something else.

“I don’t think the Hulk is feeling very buddy-buddy right now,” Mr Stark pants, even as Natasha continues to try to talk to Dr Banner. “You’ll only be putting yourselves in danger, come on.”

“Bruce, remember me...?” Natasha is saying.

Peter activates his web shooters and doesn’t budge. Rhodey and Thor don’t either.

Bruce screams.

“Out!” Mr Stark snaps, even as Bruce suddenly grows by two feet, and he stops looking like just Bruce anymore; tearing the fabric of his jacket. “Peter, please—“

Bruce grows another two feet, shoulders hunching, expanding, becoming massive, fabric ripping loudly. He screams again and one of his arms lets go of Mr Stark to sweep Natasha aside, sending her skidding across the floor.

“Nat!”

Peter catches her with a web before she hits the far wall and breaks her neck, heart thundering. And
then the Hulk roars behind him, and he knows Bruce Banner is no more.

He whirs around just in time to see the Hulk grip Mr Stark by the waist and lift him in the air, looking furious, growling.

His heart seizes, and he thinks fast; shooting a battery of spider-webs at the Hulk’s feet to glue him in place. He’s so much larger than Peter had even imagined; towering over them all as Thor whips out his cane and it shimmers and becomes his beloved axe, Stormbreaker.

“Banner!” he bellow, making the Hulk turn towards them before he can crush Mr Stark in his grip. “I thought we’d gotten past this!”

“We need to evacuate the building,” Rhodey says, horrified. “People are going to die.”

“He could level the whole block in this state!” Natasha calls, running back to them favoring one of her legs, web fluid sticking to her clothes. “Thor!”

“I am one of the few who can fight him!” Thor replies. “Join the others! Help with the evacuation!”

She gives Mr Stark and the Hulk one last, anxious look and then her expression shutters, and she runs to the others near the elevators. “Peter, Rhodes, come with me!” The last of the terrified crowd is shuffling into the door to the stairwell. Nakia kisses T’Challa goodbye and goes with them.

“Peter!”

Peter hesitates, looking at Mr Stark’s kicking feet high in the air… and in that moment the Hulk tries to walk again, finds that he can’t, and in his fury throws Mr Stark to the floor.

“No!”

He hits his head on the concrete before Peter can do anything to stop it, landing with a horrible, dull thud.

“Mr Stark!”

He ignores Thor’s warning shout and the Hulk’s earsplitting roar of anger as he sprints towards them, zig-zagging away from the Hulk’s reach while it’s impeded by his trapped feet.

“Mr Stark,” Peter gasps, crouching over him. “Mr Stark, please—“

There’s a trickle of blood down Mr Stark’s nose, and he’s out cold. Peter mashes a hand to his neck and puts a palm over his mouth, and trembles until he feels a strong, steady pulse and the warmth of Mr Stark’s breath on his skin.

“Peter!” Rhodey shouts. “Get out of—“

There’s a ripping, crumbling sound and Peter has a split-second to make his decision—which is no decision at all. He uses his instant of time to shoot a web at Mr Stark’s unconscious body and swings his arm to propel him away, towards Thor, and he doesn’t have time to get himself away before a horrible, squeezing pressure wraps around him and he’s lifted up into the air. The Hulk tore himself free of the webs around his feet, and now he has Peter in his grip.

He charges at Thor with a roar, holding on to Peter like a doll.

Thor hits him with the blunt end of his axe, careful to avoid Peter as he’s swung around in the fight, but even with only one arm free the Hulk is relentless; pummeling the floor when he misses, tossing
Thor several feet in the air when he doesn’t.

T’Challa, Bucky and Steve join the fight and Peter sees Natasha open the elevator door for Rhodey and Sam, who are carrying Mr Stark between them. Amidst the dizzy swinging in the air he’s doing, he manages to feel relieved that Mr Stark is out of danger, but soon he has to worry about his remaining teammates.

It becomes a mad melee as the three superpowered Avengers and T’Challa seem to be no match for a Hulk that is completely out of control; destroying the canapé table, the sound equipment, one of the walls... At one point Steve is thrown to the floor with so much force he leaves a man-shaped indent in the concrete, and when the Hulk catches Bucky’s arm in his right hand and squeezes there’s a moment where it sounds like the vibranium limb is buckling, which is impossible.

T’Challa kicks him free and leaps onto the Hulk’s shoulder, nearly ending it all by sticking a kimoyo bead onto the Hulk’s neck, but Hulk is too fast and manages to shake him off. Thor tries to distract the Hulk while T’Challa tries again, but that makes him even angrier, and he gives out another wordless scream that rattles the left-over champagne glasses.

He runs over to the edge of the building, heavy steps thudding and seeming to shake its very foundations, Peter swinging in his grip still.

“No...!” Bucky cries, but it’s too late.

The Hulk extends his arm so Peter is suspended above the river and everyone freezes, effectively stopping the momentum of the fight.

“Stop!” yells Steve. “Bruce, don’t!”

The crush of the Hulk’s grip around his waist is making it hard for Peter to breathe, and squeezing his trapped arms against his sides. The river flows on below; the water appears black at night.

“You will regret this, Dr Banner!” T’Challa calls.

“Banner! It’s Peter!” Thor thunders.

The Hulk grunts, and looks at Peter. Their eyes meet. There’s something crazed there; a wounded-animal look about him that Peter suspects is being caused by the same thing that made his pupils pinpoint: he was poisoned. Peter feels a surge of pity and sympathy for the creature, and for the man trapped within it.

The Hulk doesn’t look away from Peter, and he doesn’t drop him. Not yet.

A flare of hope alights in Peter’s chest.

“H-hey,” he croaks, panting. “Hey, Mr Hulk...”

The Hulk grunts and Peter flinches, but perseveres. He can probably catch himself against the side of the building on the way down. Probably.

“The... the sun’s getting real low.”

The Hulk huffs, glaring. Angry.

But he also loosens his grip enough that Peter can wriggle an arm free.

Instead of shooting a taser-web at his face, Peter reaches out with his hand against all his better
instincts. His spidey-senses are going haywire, screaming at him that this is the opposite of safe.

“It’s okay,” he whispers. He can see his own fingers trembling, but he puts his palm up. “It’s okay.”

The Hulk frowns, grunting.

“It’s okay,” Peter says again. He waits, hand in the air.

And, finally, the Hulk’s massive shoulders droop slightly.

He turns around and brings Peter back to the roof, setting him down on the floor with care.

“Pain,” the Hulk says. His voice is guttural, and he sounds confused. Scared.

Peter pats his gigantic forearm, legs weak. “I’m sorry, buddy. This is gonna sting a little bit, too.”

Which is when T’Challa leaps onto his neck again and shove the *kimoyo* bead against his throat, causing some sort of current that effectively paralyzes him. He collapses with a loud, reverberating thud, and Peter lets out a shuddering breath.

“Damn,” Bucky comments. “That was close.”
The Toxin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They have to fly Dr Banner in a separate aircraft, with weight-distribution capability and a containment cage, because he still hasn’t turned back into himself by the following morning.

Mr Stark is not flown at all; instead Thor calls Dr Strange and arranges a portal to send him through to the compound, specifically the medical wing, despite his protests. Apparently he woke up on the elevator halfway down and had to be restrained by Sam, Rhodey and Nat to be prevented from going back upstairs to help the others. Peter and the rest of the team follows him through shortly after, obviously.

It’s strange, being back at the compound so suddenly. The time difference means it’s 6 a.m. in upstate New York, and it’s strange that Peter is expected to go sleep in his room again with Mr Stark in the medical wing for telemetry monitoring and Dr Banner locked away in a sublevel where he can’t hurt anyone. No one got any rest in Geneva overnight, what with the manpower it took to move the Hulk’s limp body (Peter, Steve, Thor and T’Challa ended up helping the crane operators) and the search for the possible perpetrators. The abrupt return to their clean quarters features lots of purple bruises under their eyes and not a lot more answers, and now they are sat at the living room conference table as Steve leads the report to Fury and Maria.

“The Scorpion isn’t giving us anything,” Maria’s hologram says. Peter’s pretty sure she’s at her desk elsewhere in the compound and just couldn’t be bothered to walk up to the quarters “His lifetime sentence seems to have given him a nice sense of invulnerability; he told my agent that he has ‘powerful friends’, and that was the most we got out of him.”

“Setting an out-of-control Hulk loose at an event Peter was attending can’t be a coincidence,” Steve says.

Thor nods. “We must find these hitmen of Mr Gargan’s before they strike again. I believe some clue may be hidden in the nature of the poison that made the Hulk want to kill Peter.”

“He didn’t want to hurt me,” Peter reiterates, for what feels like the hundredth time. He is well and truly jet-lagged, and his brain is yelling that the morning sunshine makes no sense at this late hour. His heart is yelling that Mr Stark is all alone in his hospital bed, forbidden from joining this briefing even via screen by the doctors. “He was just scared, and in pain.”

“What about the toxin they used?” Fury asks him.

There’s an expectant silence, and it occurs to Peter that he’s this group’s biochemistry and bioengineering expert in the absence of Bruce and Mr Stark. Everyone is waiting for his opinion.

Luckily, he has one. “I’m not sure about the chemical compound, but I’m pretty sure they under-dosed him, and that was how he broke through. I’m going to need a sample of the Hulk’s blood, to test it.”

Sam snorts tiredly. “Good luck.”

“I can help you with that, Peter,” Thor says. “Stormbreaker can draw blood even from the Hulk.”

Peter gives him a nod, grateful.
“Perhaps later, once everyone’s gotten some rest,” Vision suggests, eyeing Wanda carefully, then transferring that same worried look to Peter. “We mustn’t forget how much humans need to sleep.”

“Of course,” Steve agrees. “Fury, Maria, until next time.”

The holograms flicker out of view, and everyone scatters pretty quickly; Peter gets exhausted back pats from Thor, Steve, and Natasha, and he slowly makes his way to his room.

“Welcome back, Peter. Would you like me to convert the windows to Night Mode?” F.R.I.D.A.Y asks, and something happens in the middle of the window panes, like an ink stain expanding that blots out the sunlight as it goes, until the outside looks like the dead of night, stars in the sky and all.

Peter feels dead on his feet; dizzy and close to collapse. His bed looks inviting, the sheets crisp, and it was obviously recently made by one of the household staff.

“No thanks, F.R.I.D.A.Y.”

He checks the quarters corridor left and right to make sure no one is around to see him sneak out, and then rushes towards the exit.

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Medical has lots of windows, like most structures at the compound, and the patient units are located among a series of wide corridors, with large sliding glass doors. Luckily, most of them seem to be empty, and as Peter makes his way among them he passes several nurses and techs calmly going about their day, a couple of whom he remembers to greet by name because they were involved in his physical.

As he turns towards the corridor that leads to Mr Stark, the door to the room slides open and someone exits out of it—but it’s a more rotund figure than Mr Stark’s. One Peter recognizes.


“Hey, kid.” Happy shoots him a smile and walks up to him. “Mr Sunshine in there is awake and trying to bribe people to let him leave his room. I was offered Malta and, I’ll be honest, it was tempting.”

Peter nods, but he isn’t really in the mood to hover outside and chat right now.

“Great, well it definitely won’t work on me, so…”

“You got checked out, right? You’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” He smiles, trying to step forward. “I’ll see you later?”

“Probably not; I’m flying back.” He must see something in Peter’s face because he chuckles. “He’s just concussed, Peter. There’s nothing wrong with him.”

Peter nods and tries to walk around Happy again, but a hand on his arm stops him.

“I’m told you saved his life, yesterday.”

He looks up at him, and tries to feel pleased by the gratitude he sees there, but all he can muster is a sense of impatience. “He was in danger because of me in the first place.” And Peter last saw him passed out, with blood trickling out of his nose, being carried by two of their teammates. He needs—he has to make sure—
“I don’t think that’s true.” But it finally seems to hit Happy that Peter is eager to move on from this conversation. “Anyway, just wanted to thank you. There’s quite a few of us who would be pretty upset if anything happened to that maladjusted asshole.”

Peter nods, and at long last is able to make his way to Mr Stark’s door.

“And get some sleep, please!” Happy calls.

“Will do!”

He almost slides the door open with too much force, feeling clumsy and desperate.

“...Peter.”

Mr Stark is in his AC/DC shirt from the party, and only then does Peter realize that he himself is still wearing his stupid white button-down. But it doesn’t matter—nothing really matters, except that it’s so good to see Mr Stark again that he almost feels like crying.

Mr Stark looks perfectly healthy and put-together, and he’s wearing glasses; regular, black framed ones. The bed he’s in is like all the other beds in the medical wing, which is larger than the standard hospital fare—approaching queen-size, in fact. He isn’t hooked up to the medical monitoring by any physical cables, but the screen above his head shows an EKG rhythm and numbers about the percentage of oxygen in Mr Stark’s blood. He was reading something on his pad, or working already, probably. He seems pleasantly surprised to see Peter, judging by his expression, but as the moment extends that expression becomes a touch curious, until Peter jerks himself out of his frozen state and responds.

“H-hey M-Mr Stark. How are you?”

“You first,” Mr Stark says firmly, pointing to the armchair someone pulled up next to the bed. “Why aren’t you in bed?”

Peter sits on it and looks up at him, almost leaning his elbows on the mattress and then not. He’d look like he was praying, and he probably shouldn’t illustrate his thoughts with gestures. “We just got done debriefing.”

“Right. The Hulk is still in containment, according to my sensors.” Peter nods. “Poor Bruce. This is going to hurt when he comes back.” He sighs, and shoots Peter a sympathetic look. “He’s going to feel especially horrible about attacking you; be prepared for some intense apologizing.”

“He has nothing to be sorry for. It was my fault he was poisoned.”

“And you’re sure you’re okay.”

“Yeah.” Peter smiles. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Mr Stark’s eyes do a quick once-over of Peter’s frame, as if to verify this. “...You should take a nice warm shower. Go to bed.”

Peter shakes his head. “I’m okay, sir, I promise.”

At his use of ‘sir’, Mr Stark stills. Peter does too, because it just came out that way, he didn’t do it deliberately, but he’s confused as to why he keeps doing it; Mr Stark was right to call him out that night at the hotel. He just. It feels...
“You’re not tired?” Mr Stark says, casually moving on and tapping at his tablet a couple more times. “Ten shower jets not enough for you?”

“No. Well, yes, but I.” Peter swallows. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay. It looked like you hit your head pretty hard, and—”

But something seems to dawn on Mr Stark. He looks back up at Peter, all kindness and understanding.

“Listen, Peter... if you don’t feel like being alone, that’s normal.”

Peter’s gut clenches. That’s not it, he wants to tell him. I just don’t feel like not being with you.

God, he’s pathetic.

“After what just happened to you, I’d probably be pretty shaken up. I think I’d want to feel like there’s someone else around before I could get some shut-eye.” Mr Stark slides over to his right so that he’s closer to the edge of the mattress, and thus closer to Peter. He leans forward, full of compassion. “I told you, you can come to me with anything. No matter what’s going on with me, you can come to me, kid.”

You’re misinterpreting this, Peter thinks. But obviously that is for the best.

“It just happened so fast,” he rasps. He feels like a dirty little liar, but if it’ll buy him more time with Mr Stark he’s willing to deal with the guilt.

Mr Stark nods. “And you still managed to save my life.” He clicks his fingers, as though the thought just occurred to him. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

Peter huffs. “You’re welcome.” He bites his lower lip. “And if you don’t mind... I’m okay to hang out for a bit. If that’s okay.”

“Of course I don’t mind. I just wish there was a couch in here or something.”

Peter looks around, but other than a cabinet, the medical monitoring equipment, and his armchair the room is pretty bare. There’s a split second where Mr Stark’s gaze flickers to the empty space to his left, where his unusually large patient bed has more than enough room to fit a second body. Peter’s heart wrenches at the idea, but Mr Stark doesn’t say it—why would he? That would be insanely inappropriate.

The armchair is comfortable, though.

“I’m good, here,” he says. He pulls out his phone and slides around so his back is to an armrest, and then swings his legs up so the backs of his knees are resting on top of the other armrest, to illustrate his point. It scrunches him up in a little pretzel shape, but his loose ligaments allow the move without issue.

Mr Stark doesn’t say anything for a second, then looks away from him. “I think you just put a bunch of YouTube yoga instructors out of business with that move.”

Peter snorts.

They settle into a comfortable silence, working next to each other.

The exhaustion of the day(s) he’s been awake does start to creep in eventually. Peter leans his side
more comfortably against the back of the armchair, curling into it a little. The temperature in the medical wing is a degree colder than he would have preferred, but as soon as he hunches his shoulders in a small shiver Mr Stark’s eagle-eye notices.

“Cold?” he asks, already getting up from his bed.

“N-no, I'm fine—“

But Mr Stark is already tugging his blanket from the corner of the bed. He drapes it over Peter and carefully tucks it around his shoulders, and for an instant the backs of his fingers graze the nape of Peter’s neck, causing a violent jolt of electricity to shoot down his spine. Thankfully the blanket makes him feel instantly warm, because it’s not made of cheap static-y fabric; it feels rich and heavy draped around him. Of course Mr Stark would only give him the best.

He blinks up at him gratefully, smiling. The smell of Mr Stark is thick in his nostrils. “Thanks.”

Mr Stark nods, sitting back in the bed. He resumes his work, but the weight and warmth of the blanket mean Peter soon starts to lose his fight against consciousness, and this time it happens at a precipitous rate. His bent head tips into the back pillow of the armchair, and he lets his eyes slide shut. His bones are heavy, and his limbs leaden.

Mr Stark is here. Mr Stark is safe, and here.

Everything else can melt away.

He wakes up in the bed.

He startles to a sitting position, confused, and it takes several seconds to remember where he is, and piece together how he got here. Mr Stark is sitting in the armchair Peter had curled up in, but he’s fallen asleep resting on the mattress, with his head pillowed in his arms near Peter’s waist.

It brings his face close, and Peter is able to appreciate how his glasses are slightly askew, and how he’s breathing deeply, forehead clear of wrinkles, features relaxed. His back is slumped forward to achieve his position, and it can’t be comfortable, but he looks completely at peace.

The thought of missing the moment when Mr Stark moved him makes Peter want to yell in frustration (did Mr Stark carry his dead weight in his arms?) but he’s almost more alarmed by the fact that is razor-sharp spidey-senses failed to wake him during transport. As if they were completely inactivated by the safety of Mr Stark’s embrace, if that’s even what happened.

Peter slowly lowers himself back down and keeps watching Mr Stark’s sleeping form, trying to sort out how he feels. It smells intensely of Mr Stark on the pillow. He remembers that argument they had in the lab the other week; Mr Stark getting all defensive about not sleeping, right before the Scorpion’s first warning was painted on the Washington Monument. I could be your friend, he’d said to him, then. That had been before Mr Stark had admitted to Peter that he was afraid to be alone.

It had also been before Peter stumbled into his want for something that isn’t friendship.

I could be your...

Mr Stark starts to wake up.

Even as Peter watches, he opens his eyes and squints, immediately fixing his gaze on Peter’s. He
doesn’t sit up, or move, he just looks at Peter and blinks.

“Hi,” Peter says quietly.

“Hey.”

They watch each other for a moment, and then Mr Stark rubs his eyes and leans back, scratching his beard and sitting up with a heavy sigh.

“What time is it?”

Peter sits up, too, and shows him his watch. It’s noon. “You’re the one who’s sick,” Peter says, accusing.

Mr Stark shrugs. “Not according to my CT scans. They just wanted me to hang out because I have a concussion.” He stands up from the armchair, stretching his arms above his head and elongating his back. Peter’s gaze snags on the belt of flesh revealed by the move, right at his eye-level; twin indents of his hipbones, a curve that makes his mouth water. “It’s not like it’s my first one.”

A bolt of lust strikes him; a desire to be crushed under his weight, to be pressed into the mattress of this bed—this bed which is barely concealed by the opaque white curtains of the room, with people walking around outside, and yet he wants nothing more in the world than for Mr Stark to slide on top of him and kiss him and pin him in place and—

“But apparently that’s a bad thing, or so I’m...” Mr Stark trails off.

Peter looks up at him, and all he can do is hope his fervent desperation isn’t eating up his features.

“...told.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“You should probably go to your room,” Mr Stark says, looking down at him.

Peter nods. “Yeah.”

“You feel okay being alone? Feel like you can handle it?” Mr Stark lowers his voice. “It’s okay if you don’t.”

“I can handle it, sir.”

The air thickens, and an unhealthy thrill rocks Peter’s frame. If Mr Stark knew what he was thinking...

“You gonna go to bed?” Mr Stark asks him. His tone is casual, but not. “Try to get some more sleep? You obviously need it.”

Peter nods. “Yeah, okay.”

“Shower first though, right?”

Peter nods again, slower.

“It’s been over a day... might wanna use all those jets.”

Something in Peter is resonating like an ancient gong; something deep that’s sending vibrations to the
I will.”

“Good. That’s good, Peter.”

His foot skids on the mattress, dick twitching in his underwear. He can either leave now or never.

“I.” He swallows. “I’m gonna.” Go. He’s going to go.

He looks down at his lap, away from those eyes, ready to wrench himself from this room. The blanket is rumpled around his hips; nothing is technically amiss. He can still get away with the last few shreds of his dignity.

But then.

He senses it first, and then he sees it out of his peripheral vision: Mr Stark’s hand reaches towards him.

Peter stays frozen in place, except that he’s not freezing; he’s on fire. His face is burning, his skin electric, the seconds spent anticipating the touch a breathless buildup that seems to drag on for eternity.

And then Mr Stark's hand lands in his hair, and the shocked breath Peter lets out sounds loud as a gunshot. The skin-to-skin contact feels like a current, and it’s so good he squeezes his thighs together even as those thick, calloused fingers card through his sleep-mussed locks, gentle but purposeful. Trickles of heat travel from his scalp and down his back, pooling at the base of spine. Everything Mr Stark's fingertips touch comes to life, preens for him.

“Might wanna soap this up, too.” Mr Stark’s voice is a rasp.

Peter’s dick releases a warm blurt of precome, right in his boxers.

“Y-yeah,” he says, which is an answer to Mr Stark’s comment by sheer coincidence. He’s panting quietly, about to humiliate himself to a degree he will never recover from.

“Good.”

Peter curls his lower lip into his mouth to swallow a whimper.

The hand falls away.

Peter stays in place for a beat and then stumbles out of the bed before it's too late, half-dragging the blanket with him until he is able to untangle his legs from it. He makes it out of the room without saying another word, and by the time he’s nearing the exit from the medical wing he’s running at a speed no human being should be able to run at, ignoring the shocked looks from the staff who are but a blur out of the corner of his eye, knowing he will appear as a blur to them as well.

He leans his forearm against the shower wall and fingers himself with clumsy, desperate movements, coughing as he chokes on the spray of the water, aching for it to be Mr Stark, unable to pretend he’s thinking about anyone or anything else.

He isn’t able to fall asleep again, so he tracks the myriad of notifications overnight as they happen into the morning—on Twitter, on Instagram, via texts, even news articles. Somehow the people who
took up the Scorpion’s hit hacked into one of the Times Square screens, and posted a picture smack dab in the middle of New York. It stayed up for forty-five minutes before the owners of the billboard were able to take it down, and that’s forever in internet-time, so everyone has it.

It’s a dramatic shot of Peter dangling from the edge of the rooftop, trapped in the Hulk’s meaty fist.

Peter stares at it for some time, trying to figure out where it was taken from; possibly a building across the river with a very powerful zoom function, though he supposes it could still have been a drone, like Dr Banner had suggested initially.

Poor Dr Banner. He still hasn’t turned back according to F.R.I.D.A.Y, and Peter is actually supposed to meet Mr Stark and Thor to gather the blood sample in an hour.

He’s about to get out of bed when Vision walks into his room through the wall.

“Vision!”

Thor bangs the door open almost simultaneously, Sam behind him.

“Have you seen this?” Thor says, brandishing Sam’s phone.

Peter, who had wrench the bedcovers over his chest like some sort of Victorian damsel, huffs out a breath. “Yeah. And so has my Aunt; we just had a really fun conversation about it.”

In the end, the four of them eat breakfast together and discuss the attack, describing the events to Vision who wasn’t there. He’s turned back into his more robotic-looking self since they returned to the compound, but still seems appropriately concerned and aghast at the retelling.

“I suppose we must take comfort in the fact that the Scorpion's men don’t seem to know Peter very well.”

“Hm?” Peter swallows a mouthful of oatmeal. “Why’d you say that?”

“Well, surely if they wanted to be efficient they would simply try to hurt those you love.”

Sam shoots Vision an approving look. “That’s a really fucked up thing to say, dude.” He turns back to Peter. “But I’m getting the sense that efficiency is the last thing on these fuckers’ minds. They seem to be all about the showmanship.”

Peter nods in agreement but stays silent, feeling exposed by Vision’s incisive comment.

“Your next patrol is tomorrow, yes?” Thor asks him.

“Yup.”

“Take care, Peter. Unlike our recent travel, the roster is not open to the public, but any time outside of the compound is time spent in less secure locations.”

“Agreed,” says Sam.

Peter turns back to his bowl. He can take care of himself, that doesn’t worry him.

“Good morning, gang.”

Peter’s head snaps back up. It’s Mr Stark.
He heard him return to the quarters yesterday but was too much of a coward to come out of his room to greet him. Now, he watches him stroll over to the other side of the counter and pat Thor’s arm, Sam’s head, and Vision’s shoulder.

“Swayze, Birdie, C3PO.” He pauses for a split second before declaring Peter: “Baby Spice.”

Peter frowns, the nickname overriding his embarrassment over how their last interaction ended. “Why am I Baby Spice?”

Mr Stark pretends to consider the question while he sets up his coffee, and hasn’t looked in Peter’s direction yet. “Young. Occasionally wears pink.” Peter looks down at his damned Britney shirt. “Spice, spider. Kind of sound the same. Start with the same three letters.”

Sam gives Mr Stark a deadpan look. “That is literally the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, Tony.”

Luckily Rhodey joins them then and prevents the conversation from devolving. Peter can’t help noticing that Rhodey winces a bit when he walks, and that he’s usually sore and in more pain in the mornings. He resolves to text him about swimming later.

Natasha shows up after a while, too, and assures Peter that some of her contacts are looking into this major hacking job at the billboard, which starts up the topic of the picture again. In the background, Mr Stark’s coffee cup lands so forcefully on the counter that a lot of it spills around the side, but he doesn’t say anything.

“...Hey.”

They all turn to the door of the rooms, where Steve is awkwardly hovering, having paused as soon as he came out.

Peter looks around at the little group that has formed; more people than usually spend time together in the kitchen, especially in the mornings when everyone is busy rushing off to their daily meetings, assignments, trips.

Steve’s eyes drift over to where Mr Stark is standing, mopping up coffee from the counter.

“Hey, Steve.” Sam makes an unsubtle ‘come over’ motion at him. “Want some coffee?”

Mr Stark stops mopping, or he’s finished. He turns to the slowly approaching Steve and smiles with a tense jaw, which causes Steve to stop in the middle of the room. Everyone seems, for a moment, to be holding their breath.

“I’ll make it,” Mr Stark says.

The tension descends by several notches.

“Thanks, Tony.” Steve sits next to Sam and grabs an apricot from the fruit bowl. Natasha smiles into her tea, and Vision makes an omelet for Thor.

They get through the rest of it with minimal distress. At several points, Peter looks from Steve to Mr Stark and feels nothing but hope.

Peter, Thor and Mr Stark make their way to the containment sublevel where the Hulk is being watched after breakfast.
There are SHIELD agents posted at multiple checkpoints prior to them being allowed inside, and the further into the bowels of the compound they go, the more the oppressive feeling of being underground makes Peter's skin crawl. They pass the sublevel where the pool is, travel further down than the garages are, and when they finally make it to the enclosure itself there are still a group of ten heavily armed personnel inside it.

It's a dark room with a low ceiling, and a massive reinforced glass structure that looks like a fish tank without water at its center. The tank itself is lit a sickly green that makes the Hulk's skin glow neon.

"We'll be right outside if you need us," an agent tells Mr Stark after they are dismissed.

"If we need you, run," Mr Stark replies.

Inside the cage, the Hulk roars.

Once they are alone, Mr Stark walks over to the tank's control panel and points to Peter, still not technically looking at him. He hasn't yet; not all morning. "In and out, okay Parker? No heroics. No trying to bring Bruce back. You secure the sample and scram."

Peter nods, squaring his shoulders from where hangs a small red-and-blue backpack. "Yeah. No, yeah, I get it."

He activates the Iron Spider armor and cracks his neck as it flows over him, enveloping him from head to toe. His visor screen flickers to life, identifying Mr Stark, Thor. Then the screen turns red when it identifies the Hulk.


"Yeah, I got that part when he tried to drop me into the Rhone."

"Leave him to me, Peter," Thor says.

Peter nods. They both brace themselves, taking up half-crouched stances as the Hulk hits one of the walls of his cage with a fist.

Mr Stark presses something that causes a valve to decompress in a hiss and the top of the structure shifts, making the Hulk stop and look up, frowning.

Peter takes a running leap at it and what follows is the hardest test of his agility he has ever endured; he has to duck and weave around the small cage and around the Hulk's body as Thor tries to hurt him without actually hurting him, clearly a task he despises. It's chaos, because the space is limited but just large enough for the Hulk to build up some momentum when he charges, and things are made worse by the fact that Hulk is clumsy; possibly tired, or just less mindlessly angry than he was at first. He slams against the walls and the floor, looking confused when the reinforced glass takes his weight, then looking angry again.

"Hulk," Thor pants, side-stepping a punch. "We are trying to--stop, we are trying to help you."

"No!" the Hulk grunts. "No help! Just pain."

Peter's heart clenches from where he's stuck to the ceiling. "I'm sorry, Mr Hulk," he calls.

The Hulk looks up, momentarily slowing when he sees him. Peter wonders whether he knows who he is with the armor on--wonders how much of Dr Banner is in there, still.
"...Spider," the Hulk grunts. There's conflict in his eyes. Peter hesitates for a second, but then lets the face-mask peel off.

"Peter, what did I say about heroics?" Mr Stark says over the loudspeaker.

"Mr Hulk?" he says. Thor is advancing on the Hulk from behind. "It'll be over soon, okay?"

"Peter, cut it out."

"Shut up, Stark," Thor grits out of the corner of his mouth. "It is working."

"I know you didn't mean to hurt me," Peter tells the Hulk. The Hulk frowns, huffing. "It's okay, you didn't."


Peter smiles in spite of himself. "Yeah. Yeah, dude. We're friends." He reaches down with a hand, keeping himself stuck to the ceiling with the other and his feet. "Just remember: the sun's getting real--"

Thor strikes; raking Stormbreaker down the Hulk's arm, and in the second before all hell breaks loose, the Hulk's eyes flash with a look of pained confusion that rends Peter's heart apart.

They get it; Thor's blow drew blood and Peter is able to secure the sample of before scrambling away and shooting a web up at the top of the cage, scuttling out and shutting the trapdoor behind him.

Inside the cage, the Hulk and Thor keep fighting it out, and Peter feels horrible. He lies there for a moment, looking down. It was his fault; the Scorpion engineered all of this because of him.

"Fuck, that was close," comes Mr Stark's voice, resonating in the room. There's a click, and he disconnects his voice from the speakers. "Pete, you okay?" he calls.

"I'm okay," Peter confirms, jumping down to the ground again. He walks up to Mr Stark at the panel, and gives him the vial of blood. Mr Stark nods, securing it and putting it in a biohazard container.

"Good job, kid."

Peter flushes, not from the exertion. But Mr Stark doesn't look up at him.

In the background, the Hulk roars again.

* Lab Room 377 is well lit by the midday sun, and Peter wonders if Mr Stark will have no choice but to look at him at some point throughout the various PCR sequences they run, with lighting this good. He gets that Mr Stark is trying to be nice about what almost happened to Peter when he touched him; gets that he's just trying to give him space, but it still hurts.

Thor took a rare trip to Medical to get checked out by Dr Cho, who is sure to check him out in a couple of ways (not that Peter can blame her), and it's just them again.

"That looks like bacteria, to me," says Mr Stark, passing him the microscope.
Peter looks at it; he sees the strange blood cells of the Hulk, and among them another organism. It does look like a black-stained bacteria, but not any bacteria he's ever seen. "I guess? We can culture it, too."

"Agreed. What do you think we'll find?"

"I don't know." Peter goes back to pipetting the centrifuged plasma into an Erlenmeyer to test its reactivity. "But we won't have results until tomorrow morning. The culture needs to grow."

"In modern microbiology terms, definitive culture results in a day is light-speed, Peter," Mr Stark says. "Your advanced petri medium is a wonder."

Peter looks up at him, smiling, but Mr Stark already turned back to his computer. "...Thanks."

It turns out Mr Stark manages not to look at him just fine.

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There's a small box on his bed when he gets back to it, and a note drawn with a scrap of Peter's notebook paper hastily stuck to it.

The note says: 'Not poisoned – TS'.

It's more chocolates from Switzerland, and if Peter remembers correctly they were made at the patisserie daily, so they couldn't have crossed over via portal with the team. Mr Stark was in no state to pick anything up after the fight, so he must have arranged for them to be flown in, at an astronomical cost.

He puts them on his desk and drops back into bed face-first, groaning into his pillow.

---

Rhodey meets him at the pool for another of their swim sessions, and it tires Peter out enough to relax him temporarily, but then Mr Stark doesn't come down for dinner. Peter ends up eating with Wanda and Natasha, which is perfectly pleasant, but Stark's pointed absence after the slightly off day they've had leaves Peter with a sour taste in his mouth that no delicate pastry for dessert can eradicate.

He only manages to stay in his bed for about an hour before getting up.

He needs to fix this. It's his fault; his stupid reactions. He needs to apologize. Surely Mr Stark will forgive him, and hopefully they can move on.

He walks up to Mr Stark's room and knows better than to knock, now. "F.R.I.D.A.Y, can you tell him I'm here?"

"Sure, Peter."

There's a long pause as Peter waits; he purposefully doesn't listen in on F.R.I.D.A.Y talking to Mr Stark. He's in his well-worn AT-AT shirt and shorts, which is embarrassing but less embarrassing than his Britney shirt. He waits. And keeps waiting. Waiting, until--

"Listen, Peter... perhaps another time would be best," F.R.I.D.A.Y murmurs.

And that... stings.
Peter feels rejected, and hurt. He's been feeling a lot of stupid feelings lately. He wants to cry, but instead he chokes out: "Okay. Tell him sorry," and starts to turn away, determined not to break out in sobs until he's back in his own room.

"Peter, wait."

He whirs around.

Mr Stark is in the doorway.

He's wearing another MIT sweater, a different one, and jeans, but he's barefoot. He immediately meets Peter's gaze when Peter looks at him, and it feels so good to be seen again that Peter momentarily forgets why he came.

"I'm sorry, I just--I thought it was best to..." Mr Stark runs a hand through his hair, and he blows out a breath. "I don't know what's best anymore," he mutters. "I'm... so sorry. Please come in."

He steps aside for Peter to do so and shuts the door behind him.

"Are you okay?" Mr Stark asks, frowning. "Everything okay?"

Peter stares at him. He's acting like his usual self, and now Peter is confused. "...You're not mad at me?"

"Mad at you?" Mr Stark's shoulders slump. "No. Peter I'm... so sorry for making you think that. I was just dealing with some personal stuff; nothing to do with you." He looks up at the ceiling. "Jesus, I'm such a piece of shit."

Peter shakes his head, automatic. "You're not."

Mr Stark huffs. "Trust me, kid." His gaze dips to Peter's unsmiling mouth. "I am."

Peter feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, but before the sensation can spread to the rest of his body Mr Stark turns away from him, walking over to his desk.

"Is it like the other day? Want for company?" Mr Stark asks. "'Cause I might not be the right kind of company for you tonight."

"You are," Peter blurts. The thought of seeing less of him is horrible. "Always. And--" he casts his mind around for a better excuse, but he doesn't really have one. Maybe he can take the coward's way out, and save his apology for a time when Mr Stark isn't going through something. "--and yeah, this is, like the other day. If. Can I stay here a bit?"

Mr Stark is nodding before Peter has even finished his sentence.

"Of course you can. I have to do some work, but." Mr Stark motions to the tools in front of him, and then to the rest of the room. "Make yourself comfortable. Wherever you want, whatever you... anything you want."

There's a designer couch, but Peter makes his way to the bed. He has to clear some of the tech and Iron Man parts, but finally he can lie horizontally at the foot of the mattress, on his stomach so he can be on his phone.

Mr Stark watches him do it.

"Are you sure you're comfortable?" he asks.
Peter looks sideways at him from where he's prone. He smiles. "Yeah."

Mr Stark's gaze softens infinitesimally, and the crinkles at his eyes reappear. "Good."

He turns around and goes back to his work.

Peter is too nervous to sleep; too aware of the apology he owes Mr Stark but never actually delivered. How to say it, though? *Sorry I'm so attracted to you I can barely handle you touching me? Sorry I want you to touch me so much more?*

He texts Liz back in the meantime; she reached out after the photo, asking if he was all right. *Live and kicking, promise*

Kicking himself, more like.

He texts Ned and MJ, too, and more time passes and he's still hyperaware of Mr Stark just a few feet away.

He watches another episode of Queer Eye with the volume too low for human ears to pick up so as not to bother Mr Stark. He emails Ms Potts back to thank her for her help with the latest spike in media coverage about him, and then gets into some more web fluid tinkering.

After an hour has passed he hears a soft thump, and looks up, startled, to find Mr Stark with his head in his arms again.

Peter slides out of the bed immediately, feeling a sudden crush of guilt. If he hadn't showed up to bother the man Mr Stark could be sleeping on his own bed, instead of playing babysitter to his young mentee. He was so selfish.

He walks over to Mr Stark and puts a hand on his shoulder, gently nudging him awake. "Hey, Mr--"

Mr Stark *jerks.*

Peter stumbles back as Mr Stark leaps to his feet, propelling his thousand-dollar ergonomic chair backwards, panting.

"Sorry!" Peter gasps, raising his hands in surrender. "Mr Stark, I--it's me! I'm sorry."

"Peter." Mr Stark's hand grasps the front of Peter's shirt, bunching up the fabric in his fist and making him stumble forward, towards him. "Peter, you're..." He shakes his head. "Sorry. I."

"I was just... I'm so sorry." Peter swallows. "I wanted to tell you... you can have your bed back. I'm going to go."

"No, don't."

Peter goes still.

He looks at Mr Stark, notes the tightly controlled breathing, the rapid blinking he's doing; how tense his shoulders are.

They stare at each other, shaky, and Mr Stark slowly seems to come back to himself. Peter can't help wondering what he was dreaming about.

They are standing pretty close.
"Sorry, kid," Mr Stark says, low. He unclenches his hand, releasing Peter's shirt from his grip. "Told you I had issues."

Peter nods. "We all do." He smirks at him. "You're not that special."

Mr Stark snorts bitterly. "That, I agree with you on."

"...Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Mr Stark sighs, running a hand through his hair. He looks at Peter. "You. Want to stay?"

Peter nods again. "Yes, sir."

The air becomes heavy again. Peter wishes he could help himself, but he can't. They are standing closer than they ever have for this much time, and he's so helpless.

"...All right."

Mr Stark moves away, righting the chair he upended, and Peter unthinkingly walks back to the foot of the bed and lies horizontally down on it; the span of the mattress so large that he could spread-Eagle there and make a snow angel with his arms and legs without touching Mr Stark's feet if he were vertical.

Except he'd be lying at Mr Stark's feet, and that's...

Mr Stark is looking at him.

Peter sits up, cheeks on fire at his own presumption. "I." He can't think of anything to say. Another apology?

"Will you be comfortable there?" Mr Stark rasps.

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Mr Stark moves closer to the bed.

"Peter." He's looking down at him with a pained expression. Peter wonders whether he should tug down his shorts. "I can take the couch."

It's designer, which means it's shaped in a half-curve, and horribly uncomfortable-looking.

"Don't," Peter says, trying to shrug casually. "There's space."

"I can sleep on the floor."

Peter shakes his head. "Don't. There's space, seriously."

Mr Stark takes another step, and Peter lies back down to illustrate his point, except he doesn't break eye-contact and that. That is a mistake.

"Look," he says quietly.

Mr Stark does.
His eyes travel from Peter's own down to his lips, chin, neck, his chest, down to where his shirt rumpled near the narrowing of his waist when he lied down, revealing his right flank. Then they keep going; to his hip, his bare legs, his ankles.

Peter feels liquid heat coat his skin wherever Mr Stark's gaze lands, which is everywhere. He feels... There's something here that is vibrating with tension; something that, for the first time, isn't coming solely from him.

The realization crashes into him at a high-speed impact.

He's been looked at like this before. This isn't new to him, except for the one crucial way in which it is. Because he never thought Mr Stark might see him like that; not for one second. He's an adult and he has the body of one; a particularly fit one at that, and Mr Stark is attracted to men, but--he never thought those pieces might fit together. It is violently flattering, and feels like a form of praise so intense it hurts his stomach. His cheeks must be splotchy with blush; his ears and neck burn.

He says, breathless: "See?"

Mr Stark's jaw clenches tight.

"Yeah." His voice is guttural. His stare is dark.

He breaks away.

Peter swallows a plaintive noise and watches him circle the bed and drop most of the debris on the rest of the mattress to the floor, movements brusque. Mr Stark ends up lying down in his jeans and sweater, barely under the covers, and breathing harshly to Peter's sensitive ears.

"Lights, F.R.I.D.A.Y." Everything goes black, and then Peter's vision adjusts. "Goodnight, Peter."

"'Night."

He knows it doesn't mean anything beyond an appreciation for his body, but every cell in him is thrumming with the knowledge, reeling at the revelation.

Peter turns his face into the mattress and breathes into the sheets, muscles trembling with the thrill of it.

Sleep may be hard to come by for some time.

Chapter End Notes

Can't tell you all what your support means!!! I am LIVING for the generous feedback you've been giving me. After putting all that effort into writing these chapters it just means so much, thank you!!!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The rustle of bedsheets filters into Peter’s subconscious first.

It fits into his dream—there is an ocean, and there are waves, and the sounds merge together to form something soothing; a place where he is supposed to be. Next thing he knows, he's awake.

He opens his eyes and finds himself curled on his side, facing the head of the bed where Mr Stark is sitting up and yawning. His hair is messy in the back and he looks so good that Peter angles his hips down into the mattress before the moment becomes more awkward.

He is noticed.

“Hey.” Mr Stark swallows and looks away, squinting like there’s a glare even though the light is gentle. “You can sleep in if you want.” Peter watches him slide to the edge and stand up. “F.R.I.D.A.Y can wake you later.”

“S’okay. I’m up.” He lifts his upper body onto his forearms, internally wincing at his own pun. “I wanna get to the lab and check on the culture.”

Mr Stark nods absently. “Okay. I’m going to go shower, but you are free to do whatever you want.” He stretches his back and walks down to the foot of the bed where Peter lies. “The world is your oyster, and all that.” And then, then he reaches down and ruffles Peter’s hair, casual and brief, and pulls away before Peter can contain the spasm that rocks his spine at the sudden touch. “I’ll meet you in the lab.”

“M-hm.”

The bathroom door shuts and Peter flops onto his back, fistng both hands in his hair, breathing hard, giving himself a moment before he is forced to stand up and stealthily run back to his quarters.

He is in Tony Stark’s bedroom.

He’s in Tony Stark’s bed.

He slept in Tony Stark’s bed, and that’s insane.

He can’t help but let his thoughts drift back to the night before; the way it had felt to lie down like that, almost debasing, like he was on display. The idea of himself as some sort of tempting figure for a man like Tony Stark is so preposterous that it still feels unreal, but he’s pretty sure he didn't imagine the look on Mr Stark’s face.

See?

Yeah.

Peter shivers at the memory. If only Mr Stark knew that Peter’s body is just another thing he can have whenever, wherever and however he wants it. And he can have it for cheap.

$
Nothing grows from the culture.

Peter swallows a frustrated groan and gets to work, trying to figure out what the hell is hurting the Hulk and Mr Banner. He runs another set of reactivity tests with increasingly improbable mediums, conscious of the fact that he’s going to run out of sample soon, and still can’t get the strange little black-stained organisms to do anything meaningful, or informative.

He wonders if he can ask Mr Stark about access to a mass spectrometer, and figures the answer will probably be ‘yes’ because Mr Stark can make anything happen, but that should be a last resort. He should be able to figure this out without commandeering an important piece of equipment from a government agency.

He tries a slightly more acidic medium next, and watches through the microscope as... a whole bunch of nothing else happens.

Frustrated with himself, Peter stands up from his workstation and—pauses.

The sample in the vial closest to his ill-closed bottle of cleaning peroxide has turned a different shade of red. Almost rusted. He frowns and pipettes some of it onto a new slide, pulling the microscope back towards him.

In the background, he hears the swish of the lab door and a set of characteristic steps.

“Hey Mr Stark,” he calls, not turning around. This sample looks different than all the other ones; there are way more of the organisms than the Hulk’s cells.

“Find anything?”

Peter squints. “I don’t know.” He reaches over to the peroxide and mixes a drop of it with his current sample.

The reaction is immediate; the black cells start to subdivide further, taking over the Hulk’s blood cells like an expanding stain.

“What’s going on?”

Peter frowns as a realization starts to dawn. “I don’t know what it is, but I don’t think this organism can survive in our atmosphere. It thrives in a medium nothing should be able to live in. This is the opposite of anything that happens naturally on our planet.”

He finally looks up, finding Mr Stark watching him intently from across the table.

“Okay,” Mr Stark says. He looks proud, expectant. “So what do you think?”

“I think it’s not from Earth.”

Mr Stark nods. "I think you're right."

“Tony, Peter,” F.R.I.D.A.Y’s voice comes through the speakers. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but Dr Banner is back.”

Bruce keeps telling everyone he feels fine, but he is transported to the medical wing almost immediately after waking.
SHIELD wants him in isolation, which Peter tries to explain is stupid because the bacteria in his bloodstream is definitely dead by now, but no one listens to him. They won’t let him visit the quarantine room, either, and when he argues with the agents posted at the door they call Maria Hill.

“Only Thor is safe to go in there,” she says through the phone screen. “We need to be sure Dr Banner doesn’t pose a risk anymore.”

“I have healing abilities—“

“Parker,” Hill cuts in, looking stern. “It’s an order. For your own safety, as well as everyone else’s.”

He knows he could push it; get Mr Stark to make her let him, but at least Thor is in there with Bruce, so he won’t be alone. He decides to let this one go, and checks his watch. He’s due for patrol in a half hour.

He rushes to his room and suits up. He arrives to the hangar early, which is why he is surprised to find Steve already there, standing next to the Quinjet and chatting with a woman from environmental services. The stares of the SHIELD agents milling around follow Peter as he walks up to the Captain, but he’s getting good at pretending not to notice.

“Hey, Cap.”

Steve smiles. “Peter. Good of you to be on time. This is Patty; she’s the reason our jets take off the runway safely.”

Peter grins at Patty, who rolled her eyes at Steve’s comment. “I’ll leave you to do the world saving.” She checks Peter out. “This one looks younger than the others.”

“I’m Spider-Man,” Peter says, which still feels a bit strange to admit aloud in a public space. But the Iron Spider armor is kind of a gleaming giveaway, anyway.

“Oh, from YouTube.” She starts walking away, pushing her cleaning cart with her. “Okay, then. I’ve seen you lift a bus; I’m sure you’ll be all right.”

Peter smiles, and turns to Steve in time to see an approving look on his face. He’s in his Captain America gear, white star at the center of his chest and all, and for a brief moment the image of the Captain Peter grew up watching on TV is superimposed against the man who quietly laughs at Sam’s quips, and he’s so intimidating and alien that Peter can’t quiet believe he’s standing in front of him.

“You ready to go?”

Peter shakes himself out of it, and looks into those blue eyes again.

“Yeah.”

The side-door of the Quinjet hisses open like it was waiting for his express permission. Steve clambers up and Peter follows him, sitting at the copilot’s seat. His palm-print gel identifies him as Spider-Man, and as soon as he says his code phrase it greets him as the bravest Avenger.

Steve pauses when he hears the code phrase, smiling faintly. “Tony does enjoy his little jokes.”

Peter looks at him. There was a wistfulness to that.

Steve gives a small shrug. “He doesn’t joke around me so much, anymore.”
“Oh.” Peter feels torn between his loyalty to Mr Stark and his desire to help. Unless there’s a way to serve both. “Maybe if you started it?”

The suggestion makes Steve snort. “Funny. You know, you remind me of him sometimes.” He puts up a hand. “And I do mean that as a compliment.”

“That’s how I take it,” Peter says firmly.

“Good. Good.” Steve eyes him for a moment. “He’s lucky to have earned your loyalty.”

The first hint of defensiveness stirs in Peter’s stomach. “...It wasn’t luck.”

Immediately, Steve nods. “I’m sure it wasn’t. Tony has a way of—Tony is a good person. He deserves good things. He has many of them—“ A thoughtless hand-gesture in his direction seems to imply Peter is one of the good things Mr Stark has, and it makes him feel warm. “—but he’s been through the ringer, too. I didn’t acknowledge that, back when it all...” Steve sighs again. “It’s hard to lose your parents.”

Peter nods. “I know.”

They sit silently for another beat, as a jet lands a few slots away, and a handful of technicians work on repairs for another one parked near the hangar main doors.

Finally, Steve breaks into movement, snapping the seatbelt across his broad chest. He hits the comm button. “All right, control, we’re about ready for takeoff.”

“Roger Quinjet. Have a safe patrol, Captain.”

Steve smiles over at Peter. “Thanks, control, but I have the man who defeated Thanos here to keep me safe.”

Peter lets out a surprised laugh. The patrol brief wasn’t particularly detailed; local law enforcement in San Francisco recently found themselves confiscating a series of guns and artifacts that they had no idea what to do with, and had called SHIELD to help with the investigation. Preliminary recon revealed modified alien tech, meaning either Toomes’ operation had made it across the country or a second entrepreneur had set up shop in the city.

“This is your first patrol, right?”

“Yeah. Technically.” Peter makes his preflight checks the way he was taught to do, making sure everything works the way the sim videos showed it did.

“Well, it’s going to be mostly investigative,” Steve comments, making his own series of checks. “Tracking alien tech should be right up your alley. I don’t expect a ton of action.”

“Peter! On your six!”

Peter ducks and spins, just in time for a blast of plasma to burst through the space where his head had been. It blows a hole open in the ceiling instead; charred mortar and brick dust raining down on the police station hall.

“Peter, I don’t think the suit will be able to absorb a direct hit,” K.A.R.E.N says in his ear, and Peter gasps out a laugh.
“Yeah, I don’t either!”

He shoots a web at the ceiling and yanks himself up in the air before a second blast can pulverize him, casting his gaze around to locate Steve.

The Captain is on the ground, fighting two of the four men attacking them. His vibranium shield can divert the blasts, but he has to take care where he aims so as not to send shots ricocheting outside where they could hurt civilians—there’s a police line a crowd of people are standing outside of, and sirens blaring in the not-far-enough distance. Peter can hear a camera crew or ten, as well.

One of the men Steve is fighting pulls out another weapon; a horrifying spear-like thing with crackling purple energy at the tips.

“Steve, left!”

Steve follows the command instantly, apparently knowing just from Peter’s tone that he meant ‘something’s coming to you from your left’ instead of ‘go left’, and he manages to disarm his attacker, and gets into a more close-contact type brawl-like fight with him.

Peter doesn’t have time to watch because he has two guys on his own trail, trying to blast him out of the ceiling. He shoots a taser-web at one of them but it’s ineffective for some reason, and then he shoots a battery of regular webs at the other, managing to glue him in place for a split second before the man shoots himself free.

“No way you still have all your toes after that!” Peter calls, gaping.

“Get down here and find out!” the man grunts. He’s definitely human, but they are all wearing black armor that looks weirdly futuristic.

“Ew! No thanks!”

But unfortunately three gun blasts courtesy of his partner collapse a part of the ceiling Peter was clinging to, and he is forced to leap onto a column, and then the empty front desk. He faces the two men again, panting.

“Squirrely little fucker,” the man says, glaring at Peter.

“It’s Spider-Man, dude. Not Squirrel. Try to remember who’s kicking your ass.”

“Mark said you had a mouth on you, too. Big talk from a kid.”

His partner comes up next to him and braces his gun against his shoulder. "That's not a kid, and I'm here to cash in my prize." And he takes another shot at Peter, which Peter dodges by jumping to the floor. Unfortunately the desk explodes behind him, wooden chunks hitting his back like debris and making him stumble forward.

The man fires again, growling in frustration when Peter flits out of the way, again.

"You're dead, Spider-Man!"

Peter shoots a web at his gun and wrenches back with his arm, enhanced strength too much for the guy when he tugs and, Peter suspects, breaks his trigger finger judging by his scream of pain.

“Guess again, asshole!” he crows, catching the weapon and swinging himself upwards again before he becomes the target of more gunfire.
He clambers up a column and steals another glance at Steve, who has disposed of one of his attackers and is dealing with the other one. Finally taking a moment to breathe, Peter looks down at the gun he ripped out of the guy's grip, and frowns.

“K.A.R.E.N? What kind of gun is this?”

He remembers Toomes’ modified guns: the Chitauri purple core, the damage a single blaster had caused to Mr Delmar’s block. These don’t look anything like those, and they have none of the bulky, Frankenstein-ed Chitauri design; instead the metal is polished slick with a near-black sheen and sharp edges like spikes. He never got to see the ones in police storage that they were originally called in about; the second him and Steve walked into the lobby, the four men posing as random people in the station’s waiting room had opened fire, scattering everyone. But if the guns the cops confiscated look like these, then they aren't repurposed. This has nothing to do with the Toomes operation.

“I... don’t know, Peter.”

These guns look new.

"Running analysis. I'll get back to you if I find something."

So who is supplying these mercenaries with brand new alien technology?

The question distracts him enough that Steve’s warning yell of “Peter, down!” comes too late.

A blast explodes the column at his back and suddenly everything goes dark.

“I did this to him.”

“...You didn’t, Tony.”

“He was doing fine on his own. He was returning stolen bikes and accepting churros from strangers. The biggest thing he was at risk for was indigestion.”

“He was stopping trucks with his bare hands. Running up at criminals at fourteen years old, even before you found him.”

A grunting noise. “Exactly; fourteen years old. A fucking kid.”

“A kid who went up against Sam and Bucky at once, and did just fine despite his age. An age he isn’t anymore, by the way.”

“...I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking back then, bringing him into our fight.” A pause.

“Actually I do; ’cause I wasn’t fucking thinking. Not about anything but myself. The usual.”

“Neither of us did a particularly great job of thinking things through, back then.”

“I’m sorry, did you kidnap an underage kid and throw him into a situation most adult men wouldn’t have left alive?”

“That’s the point, though, Tony. Peter isn’t like most adult men. I know I wasn’t the first one to jump on board with his new appointment to the team, but I get it now, and I know you do too. You saw that in him from the beginning. And I know you still see it, despite what happened tonight.” A throat being cleared. “I know how much you care for him. We all do. In such a short time, he’s become... he’s really something special.”
“I know.”

“But thinking of him as a kid isn’t going to do him any favors. He was incredible out there.”

“He is—I know. And I don’t think of him as a kid anymore.” Another pause. “Thank you for bringing him back to—the compound.”

“You’re welcome. Now stop beating yourself up about stuff you can’t change.”

“Yeah, well—guess I’ll give it a shot. Let you know how that works out.”

“Great. I’m gonna go check on Bruce.”

Peter fades away again before he can tell Mr Stark that he’s fine, and that he is sorry for making him worry.

* *

The next time he wakes up, Mr Stark is asleep in the armchair.

* *

The time after that, he wakes because a nurse is checking his vital signs, and Mr Stark is awake as well.

He stands up as soon as he notices Peter’s eyes are open. “Hey.”

“Hey Mr Stark.”

“Hi there, Mr Parker,” the nurse says, pleased, but Peter can’t look away from Mr Stark’s eyes. There is a panic there, under the smile of relief he is trying to force, that makes Peter wish the nurse would leave so that he could finally hug Mr Stark tightly. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m... okay, I think.” His left side hurts, a throbbing pain that he recognizes as multiple rib fractures, again, and he has to take shallow breaths, again. He has a slight headache but the light from the window is mercifully pale, suggesting dawn or dusk. Peter suspects dawn, the day after San Francisco.

“How is your breathing?”

“Fine.” She gives him a stern look, which she pulls off despite the fact that she’s in her mid-twenties and feels more like a peer than an authority figure to Peter. “...Hurts a bit. But it’s fine. I’ve—“ He decides not to say he’s had worse in front of Mr Stark. “I’ve got a great metabolism, I’m sure I’ll be all healed up in a couple of days. How’s Dr Banner?”

“Back at the main quarters as of an hour ago,” Mr Stark tells him.

“Oh. Good.”

“Peter, mind me taking a look?” the nurse asks, motioning to his side.

Peter shrugs (a mistake, ow) and pulls up his white medical gown, glad that his injury is on the opposite side of Mr Stark so he won’t see the full extent of it. The head of the bed is elevated so that he’s half-sitting up, and the bedsheets are up to his hips.

It’s not pretty. The bruise is large; purple, blue and green, and there are some reddish abrasions, too,
spanning all along his flank down to his hipbone.

The nurse gently presses on a couple of the spots and Peter does his best not to flinch away, choosing to watch Mr Stark instead. Mr Stark is still standing over him, and the panic in his eyes remains, but it’s been dulled by an intent look that makes Peter feel scrutinized.

“All right, things are heading in the right direction here,” the nurse says. The gown drops back down and pools at his waist.

“What about this one?” Mr Stark asks, and before Peter has time to brace himself he feels the touch of Mr Stark’s fingers on the corner of his jaw, and then a firm hand is angling his head up to display an injury presumably in his neck, under his ear.

“Oh, right. Good eye Mr Stark, thank you for pointing that out.” The nurse smiles meekly at him, managing to draw a streak of bitterness through the waves of overwhelming sensation coursing through Peter from the points of contact. Then she moves Mr Stark’s hands away to examine the injury herself, and the petty bitterness worsens, making Peter feel like a horrible person. “It looks like a regular abrasion, not something we’ll need to stitch up, but I’ll put some ointment on it. Let me go get Dr Cho and tell her you’re awake, Peter.”

“Okay.”

She walks out, throwing Mr Stark one last covert look that Mr Stark doesn’t notice.

"Those guys were waiting for you at the police station," he says. "Steve said they mentioned the Scorpion by name, right?"

"Yeah."

Mr Stark's jaw ticks. "All right. Hope it interests you to know that all four are in prison, and will be facing life sentences, if I have a say."

Peter wonders just how much of 'a say' money can buy. Probably a lot. Perversely, he finds himself weirdly flattered by the sentiment. "Did we figure out how they tricked the SHIELD agents who did the first recon?"

"Not a lot to it. They planted those weapons on some poor shmucks who barely knew what they were handling so the San Francisco police would find them. Then all they had to do was wait around for you to show up."

"No way they could know it would be me though, right?"

"Either they got their hands on our patrol roster or this isn't the first time the Scorpion's men have been behind one of the missions the rest of the team has chased after." Mr Stark crosses his arms over his chest. "I'd bet on the latter."

Peter takes that in. So much time invested on the remote chance to kill him. The reward must be astronomical.

"And that other person behind all of this...? The one Maria said was the real agent behind the hit, with the proper resources?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," Mr Stark answers, sounding frustrated. "But I'm going to find them, Peter."
"I know. It's just... those guns were new. They didn't look like any of the Chitauri stuff I've seen."

"Yeah." Mr Stark sighs. "I took one to examine; I let SHIELD keep the others." His eyes go to Peter's jaw again, relenting. "But we'll talk more when you're all healed up; don't worry about that stuff right now."

“Oh. Sorry.”

Mr Stark frowns. “Sorry?” And then he gets it. He laughs, hanging his head. “Did you just apologize for getting hurt? Is that what just happened?”

Peter smiles guiltily, liking this exasperated version of Mr Stark better than the scared one. “Maybe.”

Mr Stark shakes his head. “Unbelievable.”

His gaze returns to Peter’s jaw as though he can’t help it, and next thing Peter knows he’s reaching out and callused fingertips are landing on Peter’s skin (two on his cheek, a thumb at his temple) to tip his head to the side once more. Peter tries to keep breathing, a Herculean feat, as his sensitive neck tingles and his body keeps wanting to shudder. He can’t help thinking that his bounding carotid pulse must be bared and obvious.

“Anything else hurt?”

“Not really,” Peter mumbles.

Mr Stark’s hands fall away from his face. “What about this?” He taps Peter’s shoulder where, oh yeah, he has another pretty gnarly bruise. If the medical gown were anywhere near his size the gaping collar may not have given him away.

“S’fine.”

Mr Stark doesn’t look impressed. His eyes rove critically over as much of Peter’s exposed body as they can track, no hint of lust, just an analytical gaze taking in Peter’s injuries. He motions for Peter to lean forward, and Peter does, conscious of his lack of underwear as the open part of the gown reveals his back all the way down to his tailbone. Mr Stark may be thinking purely clinically, but something about this inspection is making Peter blush.

"Sit back."

Peter does, ears burning. He glances up at Mr Stark through his fringe, waiting for another instruction.

Mr Stark steps towards Peter’s legs. “Show me.”

Peter hesitates a moment and then pulls up the sheet to reveal his feet, calves, knees, thighs. He has some bruising, especially on the left leg, and his right thigh has a cut that someone must have sutured while he was unconscious.

Mr Stark stares at him for a moment, tense, clearly upset.

He doesn’t know why he does it; he doesn’t even think about it consciously, it just happens. He wants to distract Mr Stark, maybe. He wants to be looked at like he was the other night, probably. He wants to erase the frown lines on that forehead, definitely.
Mr Stark’s eyes dart up, and then back down to Peter’s ankles.

A fluttering thrill alights in Peter’s chest. It’s obviously a bad idea, and horribly inappropriate. Mr Stark’s appreciation for Peter’s physique is no more than an involuntary physical reaction; pulling a move like this is nothing short of desperate.

And yet, there’s a scene in an old Harrison Ford movie...

“Kinda hurts up here,” he mumbles, pointing at the cut on his thigh.

“Let me see,” Mr Stark says.

Peter bends his leg slightly to bring his knee up and Mr Stark reaches down with his hand, pausing right before he touches the skin. His eyes are distant.

Peter waits.

“Here,” he says helpfully, quietly. He pulls up the sheet an inch more—and Mr Stark grabs his hand by the wrist.

Peter freezes. His wrist is engulfed in Mr Stark's grip, and his hand is subsequently locked in place and being prevented from moving the sheet up any further. Mr Stark is still looking down at the cut, blinking, and Peter stares at him and stares at him and wants his beard to rub the insides of his thighs raw.

“I see it,” Mr Stark grunts. "Could be an issue with the suit. Might need to reinforce it." He’s breathing harshly. But then so is Peter, and nothing hurts; not even a little.

"Maybe," Peter says. His leg tips open to the side, just a little, helplessly.

Mr Stark's other hand reaches out, a slight tremor to it as it approaches.

"Might need--"

"Hello, Peter!"

Peter jumps and Dr Cho walks in, looking down at a computer tablet with his electronic chart.

Mr Stark steps away from the bed in an instant, casual, and by the time Dr Cho looks up nothing is amiss other than the slightly rumpled bed sheets around Peter's knees.

"So glad you're awake," she says, smiling kindly. "I'll be honest, it's very unusual for the human body to be unconscious for nine hours without a major intracranial or metabolic process going on, but I think that was your healing abilities shutting down your brain so they could work overtime to repair all that internal bleeding and the pulmonary contusions you sustained. You're so fascinating; be sure to let me scan you again so we can learn from you..."

The visit proceeds without incident. Mr Stark stands far away and only makes his presence known to ask Dr Cho a series of complex medical questions, using terminology he must have mastered overnight because Peter is pretty sure an MD isn't among his many titles. Dr Cho gives Peter the okay to be discharged in a few hours with promises about close follow-up, and then she asks Mr Stark to leave so Peter can get some more rest.

"And don't you want to get some sleep, too?"

Mr Stark smiles, but in a way that suggests he's in on a joke she doesn't get. "...Sure. You're right,
"Good. I'll send him back to you in no time."

"I'll hold you to that. We need this kid."

Peter watches Mr Stark walk out, then tugs the sheets back down to his feet.

The picture dominating headlines this time is of Peter in Steve’s arms; he’s being carried bridal style, with an arm around his back and one under his knees, head lolling back unconscious. A few articles bizarrely emphasize his sexuality, such as ‘First openly gay superhero injured in SFPD attack’, and most of the others are clickbait-type titles including ‘Peter Parker dealt fatal shot—Captain America carries a body out of SFPD HQ’, ‘Spider-Man in critical condition after San Francisco attack’ and ‘Twenty-four times Peter Parker was adorable and 1 time he broke our hearts’. The latter being a Buzzfeed list Ned sends him with a string of crying emojis.

May is crying when he calls her, features strained with worry.

“Oh, Peter.” She sighs wetly, wiping at her cheeks. “Oh honey, that was... oh God. My heart stopped, kiddo. It freaking stopped.”

Peter winces. “I’m sorry.” He’s just glad the lighting disguises the bruise on his jaw. “May, I’m fine.”

“Yeah, you’d better be,” she threatens. “God, if it wasn’t for Tony freaking Stark I’d be on my way there right now. Probably about to walk into some sniper’s sights at the perimeter of your facility.”

“Mr Stark talked to you?”

“He called me as soon as you were stabilized.” There’s a grudging gratitude in her tone. “He sent me updates through the whole thing; even offered to fly me over there, which I think is technically illegal by a bunch of international laws?”

Peter is stunned. “Uh... yeah. Definitely illegal.”

She snorts. “I figured. But I was going to take him up on it anyway. If you hadn’t pulled through so quickly, I would have.” She sniffs. “But I thought you probably wouldn’t want me there messing things up for you.”

“You’d never mess things up.” Peter leans forward. “But... if you were here, I might find it harder to focus on just working. Might worry about you.” He smirks, teasing. “You being so human and slow at throwing stuff, you know.”

“I almost got you, that one time with the pillow.”

“Yeah sure, if you say so.” He grins and gets her to smile back. “But I was thinking that maybe you were right; I could take a little break soon? Visit Queens again?”

The way her expression lights up tells him it’s the right choice; no matter what he has to do to make it happen.

They hang up after she updates him on the local news for a bit, and things get less intense. He texts MJ to ask if she will be able to get down to Queens for a weekend, and then he calls Ned to arrange
some sort of obnoxious welcome back surprise for her that will annoy her the most. It helps pass the
time, and the day goes by before he knows it.

"...Hey guys."

When he returns to the quarters living room that night, Peter encounters a sight so unexpected it takes
him several moments to take it all in: Bucky and Sam are watching TV, Natasha is with Wanda and
Vision at the kitchen counter, Steve and Thor are standing around the conference table, Rhodey is
cooking, and Bruce is with Mr Stark on a couch. He's pretty sure they've never been all in this one
room before, and the last time they came close was when he first came over for his brief overnight
introduction. The atmosphere had been a few degrees more tense, then.

"Peter."

Bruce stands up and walks up to him, the move somewhat dramatized by the fact that everyone else
is watching, and no one says anything. Out of everyone, he is the one who Peter knows he needs to
talk to first.

"Hey, doc." He steps forward, focusing on him. "How are you feeling?"

"I-I'm fine, how...? I heard you were attacked, on patrol. You and Steve. It was all over the news,
kid."

"Uh, yeah. But we made it out." He shoots Steve a grateful look. "Steve saved me."

In the background, Mr Stark looks over at Steve, too.

"I'm glad. That's good." Bruce's gaze is weary. He takes a deep breath. "Peter, when I--"

"The Hulk never hurt me," Peter interrupts. "Even though he was drugged, and all that craziness was
going on, he didn't want to hurt anyone. I promise." He smiles. "I think we're gonna be buddies,
actually."

Bruce looks tortured. "I haven't felt that out of control in so long. It was... horrible to find out what
he did."

"It made for a good picture, but he didn't actually do anything." Peter shrugs. "We think that it was
thanks to his indestructible metabolism that he was able to fight off that poison. Whoever wanted to
kill me did a shitty job."

"They set off a bomb near you. It could have worked."

"It didn't, though."

Bruce sighs. He looks exhausted. "Guess not. Well... I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm glad you're okay, too."

He smiles and pats Peter's shoulder, nodding. "You're a good kid, Peter."

Peter glances at the others, who are blatantly staring.

"Hey, everyone."
A chorus of attempts at casual "Hey"s and "Hey Peter"s spring up in response, ending with Sam's 
"'Sup?".

"Are you hungry?" Wanda asks. "Rhodes is cooking for us."

"I am making chilli, but it's not for everyone." There's a beat of tension, and then he goes on. "'Cause I know some of you guys will not be able to handle the spice. So find your own food."

"Smells good," Peter offers, walking over to the kitchen.

"It is good," Wanda says.

"It's inedible," Sam calls, turning back to the TV. The news is on mute. "Lord knows I've tried."

"Hater," Rhodey mutters.

Steve and Thor make their way to the kitchen also, and Natasha flits over to Bruce in the interim (their interactions seem a bit stilted, and it's not the first time Peter has spared a thought for what the history is there). Mr Stark remains on the couch; presumably he's working, but at least he is doing so near Sam and Bucky.

Peter leans in to peer at the chilli and when he turns back, he finds Steve standing right beside him.

"You good?" Steve asks him, quiet.

"Yeah." Peter smiles, glancing around them. Eleven superheroes, if he includes himself, and they've never seemed more ordinary. "Yeah, I am."

* 

"F.R.I.D.A.Y?"

"Yes, Peter."

"Can you tell him I’m here?"

"He's not in."

Peter's heart sinks. "He's... what?" He feels... he doesn't even know. Stood up? Betrayed? Neither of those things are true; Mr Stark has a whole life that exists outside of Peter's, and he makes most of his decisions without sparing a thought for his mentee's wishes. Why should he? "Where is he?"

"Lab Room 377. He didn't specify that I shouldn't share this information with you, and the general privacy protocol does not preclude me from disclosing his location to you."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You're welcome. It's 2 a.m."

"...I know."

"I am not so sure Tony does."

Peter nods, and takes off for the lab.

He ends up walking all the way there barefoot and in his pajamas (a grey NASA shirt and red
shorts), which was a mistake because, though nighttime staff is reduced, the compound is certainly not asleep. On more than one occasion Peter has to use the web shooters to clamber up to a ceiling, or hide behind a shadow, so as to move unobserved.

He finally makes it to the lab a few minutes and an awkward elevator ride with a member of the janitorial staff later. It's pitch-dark but for an area at the center, none of the overhead fluorescents have been turned on.

Mr Stark looks up from his workstation almost immediately, and Peter gives him a nervous little wave he instantly wishes he could take back. He's so lame.

“Hey, Mr Stark.”

“Peter. Are you okay?”

Peter nods, walking up to him. He passes the semi-occult steel panels that conceal the Gauntlet and imagines he feels the powerful draw of the Reality Stone behind them; but no draw is more powerful than that of the man in the middle of the room. Outside, the wall of windows reveals a night sky full of stars.

“How’s your pain? How are you feeling?”

“M’fine. Pain’s fine.”

Mr Stark puts down his tools just as Peter reaches him, and it's then that Peter realizes what he was working on. He recognizes the gun; spiky black and alien-looking. A series of instruments are scattered around it; something that looks like a welding gun, a laser cutter, a small series of modified wrenches and, curving up from the floor, a Stark robot with the letters DUM-E on the side arches into view over Mr Stark's shoulder. A rotating hologram of the gun is floating in mid-air between them; projected specs written next to it.

"What are you doing here? It's late."

Peter looks up, meeting his eyes through the holo light. Mr Stark is wearing his plain glasses again.

"Looking for you."

"...And why's that?" His expression is impossible to decipher. He seems intent on Peter's answer, regardless.

"I." Peter pauses. He knows why; it's because of the aching, weird feeling in his gut that had him tossing and turning in bed until 2 a.m. when he couldn't take it anymore and he got up desperate to see Mr Stark again, fully intending to sleep at the foot of his bed, or the floor, or the small space outside his door if necessary. It hasn't exactly escaped his notice that the best, soundest sleep he's had has been in Mr Stark's company. But he doesn't want to say that; doesn't want to lay that particular burden at Mr Stark's feet.

He also doesn't want to lie.

“I don’t sleep so good when I’m... alone.” Not with you would be the truth.

Mr Stark watches him for a long, awful moment. In the blue-tinged lighting, his white shirt looks turquoise.

"I'm sorry."
Peter blinks. "Why?"

"For..." A bitter smile. "A multitude of reasons, none of which I will bore you with now. But of course you can crash in my room if that's what you want."

Relief, light and airy, fills him up. "Thanks, Mr Stark." He leans into the desk. "You're the best."

Mr Stark winces. "Hardly."

Peter looks down at the weapon between them. "How's it going?"

"Oh, not great. I'm going to have to ask the Wakandan princess for some vibranium tools to dissect this casing; my laser knives aren't doing much to break it open." He leans down onto his elbows, too, pushing the glasses up his nose. "But I definitely agree with you; these aren't Chitauri."

Peter reaches for the gun and turns it in his hands, digging his nails into a small junction near the trigger to try to pry them apart. It feels rock-solid at first, but he pulls harder--and harder, biceps straining, feeling something give for a moment... and then there's a crack.

Mr Stark startles, and suddenly the casing is open.

They both stare down at Peter's hands.

"...Okay. There go my last four hours of work." He looks impressed, and Peter grins, flushing happily. Mr Stark motions for him to continue.

They get started on the dissection, breaking the weapon apart and trying to reconstruct its mechanism. There's a power-core that is stabilized by a series of dampening mechanisms that are completely incomprehensible at the start, and figuring out how they work takes the both of them theorizing and trying out different materials for some time, while the moon outside casts its white light in competition with all the glowing neon between them.

While he waits for F.R.I.D.A.Y to finish a preliminary run of calculations, Peter finally brings up something he should have said when he first walked in. "May told me... you called her, while I was out?"

Mr Stark nods, not looking up from where he's collecting samples from the surface of the weapon for analysis. "$That picture was everywhere, kid."

"She also told me you offered to fly her here." Peter doesn't bring up the legality; the blatant disregard for some of the strictest clauses in the Accords that offer signified. He tries to keep the vulnerable reverence out of his voice as much as he can: "Thank you."

Mr Stark smiles with the corner of his mouth. "$Least I could do."

Peter knows Mr Stark would have done that for anyone, but he still feels a flood of gratitude warm him inside.

Unthinkingly, he yawns.

Mr Stark straightens immediately.

"Hey." He takes off his glasses with one hand and points them at Peter, accusing. "$You need rest, it's way past your bedtime."

"I-I'm fine!"
"You're recovering from a major injury." Mr Stark shuts off the holo, plunging them into near total darkness. He drops his glasses onto the table and circles it to stand right in front of Peter. He looks stern, and it's wrong, it's wrong that Peter feels a little thrill at that despite everything. "We can finish this tomorrow, Pete. Go to bed."

"Are you sending me to my room?" Peter asks. He meant to sound teasing, or challenging, but his voice gets caught in--something else.

Mr Stark's quickly built momentum seems to stall.

"Technically, I'm sending you to mine."

Oh no.

Peter's stomach lurches at the implication, ears burning even though it's nothing. It's not actually a suggestion, it's just--an accidental double entendre, those happen all the time, Mr Stark didn't mean to.

They are standing pretty close.

"I'm not tired," Peter says honestly. "And I'm all healed up."

Mr Stark's jaw ticks. His gaze goes to Peter's neck, where there's barely a blemish anymore; Peter checked the mirror before walking over here.

The memory of his stupid, desperate move earlier in medical makes him lose his mind a little.

"Look," Peter says, and before processing the idea at all he lifts up his shirt on the injured side, showing him the faded bruising on his ribs, the lack of swelling, the smooth skin. Also showing him his chest, his stomach, all the way down to the beginning of his hipbones.

Mr Stark steps forward and tugs the shirt back down.

He wraps a hand around Peter's wrist again, keeping it there by his waist. Keeping it in place.

Peter looks up at him, panting. They are inches apart. He's fully in Mr Stark's personal space; he can feel the fan of his hot breath on his face, can smell him all around. Their chests are almost touching. The grip of Mr Stark's hand on his wrist is punishing, but registers as perfect in some part of Peter's wiring.

"S-sorry," he whispers. It's so dark, but something between them is glowing. He feels--hurt, or something in him hurts, he's not really sure. Is it the sting of rejection? Or just a want so pathetic and huge that the lack of reciprocation registers as pain?

Mr Stark looks down at him. His nostrils flare with his breathing.

"I can't look." He swallows. "Understand?"

Peter freezes.

He looks into Mr Stark's eyes. It's impossible to read them; there is a distance there that shuts down any attempt at contact. But he said--he just said--he admitted it. The thing Peter thought he saw the other night, he just--it was true.

The hurt fades, and with it so does Peter's strength, all that is keeping him upright. A wave of feeling rises like a tsunami; more than flattery, more than gratitude. His bones feel fluid; dissolving in
heat. "Sorry," he says again, cheeks on fire.

Mr Stark's free hand reaches up to pat the top of his head. "Not on you, kid."

It's intended as paternal, probably. Peter shudders at the touch. Two places where Mr Stark's hands are on him, and he feels so overheated, so tremulous. Maybe Mr Stark's hands are magic. Maybe that's how he was able to build the Iron Man out of nothing, and why everything he creates is infused with a brilliance that seems superhuman.

"S-sorry, sir."

The grip around his wrist tightens and Peter makes a small noise, lost to what he's feeling. His knees are weak.

The hand in his hair slides down to the junction of his neck and shoulder. "Don't. Nothing to apologize for."

"I." He can't help it. He can't help it, he's either going to collapse or cry. There are too many emotions for him to contain; too many sensations. "I'm."

"It's on me. You're perfect." Peter trembles, swaying slightly. He's going to. "You're perfect." The hand at his neck rubs a thumb into the barely-there bruise at his jaw.

Peter shivers, violently, and tips forward.

It feels like crashing into home. A solid weight stops him from falling and Mr Stark immediately puts his arms around him, like it's instinct: one around his shoulders with a large hand on the back of his head, one at his waist, and when Peter muffles a whimper into Mr Stark's chest all he does is tighten his hold. His disparate emotions all coalesce into one. It feels perfect, just perfect, and soothes a deep, gaping ache that had been living inside Peter's chest for weeks, months, maybe even years.

He shudders with relief, burrowing into the embrace, wrapping his own arms around Mr Stark's neck. He had built up this moment in his head for ages, and nothing could have prepared him for how satisfying it is, how well it fits—to be encased in Mr Stark, surrounded by him. It feeds directly into something that was desperate for exactly this; something that was starving.

"You okay?" Mr Stark mutters, partly into his hair.

Peter makes a noise of agreement, catching his breath against Mr Stark's shirt, trembling still. He feels as though everything that has happened the past few weeks has been leading to this moment, and it was all worth it; the near death experiences, telling the world the truth about himself, getting to know his teammates, the pressure, the focus. He feels so good that it takes him a long time to register that—something is pressing against his collarbone.

"What is that?" Peter whispers. He touches it with his palm, trailing his fingers around its outline.

It's an angular structure that feels too solid and metallic to be flesh.

Mr Stark is still for a moment, and then he gently pushes Peter's hand away and steps back. Air rushes to feel the spaces where they had been touching, and Peter immediately wants to take it back; pretend he didn't feel anything amiss.
"It's a nanoparticle housing unit," Mr Stark says. At Peter's expectant look, he goes on. "My suit."

"Oh."

Right. He remembers.

"Had... a bit of a hard time taking it off, after Titan."

Oh.

He's watching Peter for a reaction, but Peter steps towards him again, looking intently at the glowing triangle. He wishes he could take off Mr Stark's shirt and examine it properly; push at the muscle around it, inspect the mechanism by which it's attached to the skin. Surely the scar from the arc reactor remains, under it; Peter would trace it, kiss it--

"I sleep with the web shooters," he says softly, in lieu of what he would want to do.

"I noticed."

Peter meets his gaze. "You've been wearing it all the time?"

"Told you I was messed up." Mr Stark holds his stare for another beat, and then looks away, smirking at the floor. I'd gotten pretty good at being in touch with my emotions and all that crap, before Titan. "Anyway, it's late. You should get some sleep."

Peter waits for the take-back; the firm instruction that he go to his own room after all.

"You go ahead; I'll wrap up down here." He motions to their abruptly terminated work. "I'll just be a couple of minutes."

And so, Peter goes without protest, relief fueling his steps, eager to leave before Mr Stark changes his mind. He doesn't turn back; not the whole way to the entrance of the lab. Not even when the door hasn't quite finished sliding shut and he hears Mr Stark say, softly to himself:

"Tony, what the fuck are you doing?"

Chapter End Notes

Before we go, I would just like to confirm that when Steve and Tony are talking at Peter's bedside and Tony says: "Thank you for bringing him back to—the compound." he was 100% about to say "Thank you for bringing him back to me." because he is a MESS

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE UPDATE and can't wait to hear your thoughts!!! Thank you so much for following along this story with me I am having such a blast writing it--and much as I love to drag out the simmer, it can't last for ever...
Peter watches his phone screen without seeing it while he waits.

He keeps replaying the hug in his head. Then, replaying what Mr Stark said earlier. *I can’t look.* Stern. Firm. Holding Peter’s wrist in place. *I can’t look. Understand?*

He crosses his ankles in the air. He’s lying at the foot of the bed again, facing the door so as to brace himself when Mr Stark walks in, or something. He alternated between lying on his back and his stomach a couple of times but decided he feels less vulnerable on his stomach. He also considered tugging his shirt up to show off his lower back dimples, but ultimately doesn’t, because apparently he’s retained some scraps of sanity.

There must have been dozens of people who tried stuff like this with Tony Stark. Hundreds, even. Some probably succeeded in becoming subjects of his attention for a little while, but Peter’s kidding himself if he thinks he’s going to be one of them.

*I can’t look. Understand?*

‘Can’t’ is an implication—an admission. But it's also Mr Stark making himself crystal clear.

“*Peter. Tony’s here.*”

F.R.I.D.A.Y’s voice is soft, and Peter ends up freezing in place until he sees him; a deer in the headlights. Useless.

Mr Stark shoots him a distant smile and shuts the door behind him. His bare, muscular arms are an even worse source of distress now that Peter knows how strong and good they feel around him.

“So, listen.” Mr Stark walks over to his desk, and pauses. “I want to show you something.”

Peter’s breath catches. “Okay.”

He watches Mr Stark lean forward, one hand braced against the back of the chair, and touch a seemingly random spot on the wall. A square panel about a foot in size lifts up, then slides to the side to reveal an empty display case. Peter sees the triangular indent, and instantly knows what was meant to sit there when Mr Stark isn’t in a combat situation.

“The housing unit?” he murmurs, sitting up. His thoughts crawl out of the gutter as the gravity of Mr Stark’s earlier revelation sets in.

“Yeah.” Mr Stark is facing away from him, but the set of his shoulders is tense. “I was planning on taking it off for the night, now that the cat’s out of the bag. What’d you think? Should I adopt the stray kitten and try to provide it with a stable home life?”

Peter smiles, shocked and proud of being included in this moment. Mr Stark has slowly but surely opened up to him about all the stuff he’s been dealing with since Titan; in fits and starts and sometimes accidentally or drunkenly, but he’s told Peter all of it, and Peter wants to do his best to be worthy of that trust.
He nods, even though Mr Stark won’t see. “I think that’s awesome. Yeah.”

Mr Stark nods. “All right, then.” He glances at Peter over his shoulder. “And you’ll defend me if anyone attacks us, right?”

Peter grins. “You bet.”

“Knew I could count on you.”

Peter can’t quite see how he does it, but he thinks Mr Stark taps the center of his chest once, and then there’s a soft hiss and a click, and next thing he’s reaching in and holding the glowing triangular unit in his hand.

Peter slides out of the bed, hesitant to walk all the way up to him but wanting to be closer. Mr Stark deposits the housing unit into its casing with steady fingers, and then the panel retracts and shuts, as though it was never there.

They both stand, silently watching the nondescript portion of wall for a few seconds.

“...Well, now I feel naked.”

Peter blushes. Mr Stark turns around and seems oblivious to the reaction he has caused, as he walks over to the bed and, once again, doesn’t change out of his clothes other than to kick his shoes off before lying down.

Peter waits for a couple of beats, then kneels onto the foot of the bed and curls up on it.

There’s a beat of silence, and then Mr Stark says: “Hey. Peter.”

“Hm?”

“This feels... wrong.”

Peter’s heart stops.

“The bed is big. Almost comically big, actually.”

His heart starts to beat again. Much faster than normal.

“I wanted a large bed and that’s what I got. I’m rich, remember?” Mr Stark shrugs. He’s looking at the ceiling. “I’m rich, and I wanted a big bed and so I bought one. Massive, huge bed. And so, if you’re going to be sleeping in it, you might as well... use a pillow, and the thousand thread-count sheets I paid all those dollars for.”

Peter remains where he is for a few more moments, frozen in place, afraid of wanting it so much that he is misinterpreting the suggestion.

Mr Stark finally leans up onto his elbows and looks at him.

“You wanna come up here?”


He slowly makes his way up to the head of the bed, the smell of Mr Stark getting stronger with every inch he moves forward, permeating the air around him. When he reaches the top he ducks under the covers and doesn’t miss Mr Stark moving sideways to put some additional space between them.
Eventually, they both settle out, and go still, and quiet.

There are still several feet of space between them. It truly is a massive bed.

* 

The sunlight wakes him.

A streak of it was warming his face, and making the world beyond his eyelids red and hot, and way too bright. Peter rolls over and rubs his eyes, breathing deeply before summoning the willpower to sit up.

Immediately, he sees that Mr Stark is gone.

Before panic can set in (or worse, loneliness) he hears the shower running in the bathroom, and he relaxes again. He sighs and forbids himself from jerking off to thoughts of what exactly is going on just a locked door away—firmly forbids it, and instead he reaches for his cellphone. Sifting through notifications passes the time, and he finds a text from MJ that makes him smile. In response to his ask about Queens, she says: *was actually planning a visit soon anyway. This weekend works out perf*

He replies with the Kermit the frog flailing .gif and texts Ned to tentatively clear his Saturday. He’s going to have to ask Mr Stark if it’s acceptable to take a break from dissecting alien guns and weird space bacteria to visit his family and friends, not to mention he’s going to have to hope the world remains free of large-scale threats and psychopathic supervillains for a weekend. Somehow he thinks Mr Stark is going to be able to make that happen for him.

“Hey.”

Mr Stark emerged from the bathroom. Peter puts his phone away and gulps—Mr Stark is fully dressed, but his hair is still moist, and a scent wave of soap and aftershave entered the room with him. His beard is newly trimmed, perfectly styled. He looks well-rested and sharp, in a grey blazer and slacks. In short, he looks painfully good.

“Something’s come up,” Mr Stark tells him, walking over to the wall panel. He presses it, and retrieves the housing unit. “Vision and I have to leave for patrol.”

“Oh.”

“But I wanted to ask you something, before I go.”

Peter pulls back the covers, sitting up attentively. “What is it?”

“Well, I was thinking—with what happened the other day, you and Steve, and that picture... I don’t want your Aunt to hate me.”

Peter smiles. “She doesn’t. She was so grateful that you called her—”

“She’s playing nice for your sake, and I don’t blame her. But as your unofficially official Avenger mentor, I want more than for her to tolerate me. I want her to be on Team Iron Man, like those hashtags that were going around during—well, you remember. Anyway, I was thinking I could arrange to fly you out to the city for a couple of days; maybe this coming weekend?”

Peter stares at him.

“What’d you think?”
Mr Stark puts sunglasses on and putters around for a few moments, picking out a Rolex from one of his drawers after trying two different watches against the color of his sleeve. He turns around when Peter still hasn’t responded.

“You don’t have to, obviously. I just thought—“

“I. No, I... that’d be awesome.” Peter slides off of the bed, half-tripping on some of the sheets wrapped around his foot. He rights himself, blushing, happy beyond what he’ll be able to convey.

“Thank you. So much,” he blurts. “She’d love that. I would love that. Thanks.”

Mr Stark smiles. “You’re welcome, kid.” He nods to himself, and makes for the door. “I’ll see you later.”

“See you later.”

When Peter gets back to his room, there’s a new box of Swiss chocolates waiting for him. The note says ‘Eat me – TS’.

* *

With Mr Stark and Vision away on patrol, Peter decides to get back to work at the lab. Not only is he due for another batch of web fluid, but he wants to figure out a way to compare the origins of the bacteria and the gun—both weapons used for the attempts on his life, both alien. Possibly, both the same type of alien. All he knows for now is ‘not Chitauri’, and that leaves a lot of outer space left to consider.

Before making his way to Room 377, however, Peter wants to recruit some help.

Communicating with most of the other Avengers is theoretically as easy as calling or texting them—something Peter hasn’t yet done with anyone other than Mr Stark and Rhodey, but knows is an option available to him. He has all of their numbers saved on his old, tattered phone.

With Thor, things get a bit more complicated.

After breakfast, Peter knocks on the door to what he’s pretty sure is Thor’s bedroom, only to find it empty, and with a well-made bed that suggests the God of Thunder did not require sleep the night before. So Peter leaves the quarters to look for him.

He goes to the pool, to medical, and to the SHIELD offices, causing quite a commotion when he pokes his head into the mess hall full of techs at their computers. He goes to the gym and the hangar, and still doesn’t find him. At the hangar, he runs into Natasha and asks her if she knows where he might be, but she’s about to board a Quinjet by herself, and all she says is “Try outside,” before taking off.

He ends up going outside and taking a light jog around the grounds, waving hello to the SHIELD agents training there but not seeing any signs of Thor.

Frustrated, he’s about to give up—and then it hits him.

Instead of going back inside and taking multiple elevators, he activates his web shooters and takes a shortcut—climbing the compound from the outside, jumping from antenna to balcony to strut, until he finally makes it to the roof.

Thor is sitting on the landing pad at the top of the building, legs crossed, hands on his knees, in a meditative pose. He’s completely alone; his red cape is billowing in the breeze, and he’s in his armor.
Peter walks up to him, slowing his steps.

“...Thor?” he calls softly. He feels like he’s intruding.

Thor turns to look at him. For a split second, it looks like his left eye is glowing, but then he blinks and the illusion is gone. “Hello, Peter.”

“Do you have a second? Sorry to bother you—“

“You are not a bother. Please, join me.”

Peter sinks to the ground next to him, legs crossed at the ankles, trying to affect a similar pose. When he looks up at the sky, he sees a swirl of white clouds circling miles above Thor’s head, as though drawn to him.

Thor looks at Peter and smiles, a distant sadness in his mismatched eyes.

“After many trials, I have finally learned the value of calm contemplation,” he says. “Meditation is an excellent human trait. Restorative. Like Odinsleep, but not.”

“I could probably use some meditation,” Peter admits. He doesn’t ask what Odinsleep is, in case Thor thinks it’s rude.

Thor nods. “Yes, I would imagine you could.” He looks to the horizon. “I find it helps me when I am missing my people. My friends.” He blinks, still looking but no longer seeing anything in the distance. “My family.”

Peter feels a sudden chill pass over him, despite the temperate day. A mere glimpse at the vast sadness in Thor’s heart seems insurmountably awful.

“I know it’s not... it’s not the same, but I felt like I’d lost everybody, once.”

Thor looks back at him. “Loss is loss. There is no need for comparison.”

“My parents died when I was young. It felt like everything ended.”

Thor nods. “A terrible thing.”

Peter’s throat constricts. The next part—if he’s going to continue the story, he has to tell Thor what comes next. What he lost next.

Uncle Ben.

But... he can’t. He can’t say his name, not even all these years later. His voice won’t work.

A heavy hand lands on his shoulder, making him sway to the side with the force of impact, and not making him say it at all.

“Thank you for sharing this with me, Peter. Obviously your life is full of family, and friendship, and love, now.” Thor nods. “I know this is in store for me. Indeed, I count the Avengers as my friends. And some of the off-ship Asgardians survived... we will rebuild. Adapt. Love, again.”

Peter smiles shakily, patting the back of Thor’s hand. “I'm sure you will.”

Thor nods gravely again, and then stands up, offering Peter a hand to lift him up also. Even as Peter watches, his armor and cape vanish into thin air and become jeans and a jacket.
“Now, you came here with a purpose. Tell me how I might help you.”

Peter’s smile turns sheepish.

“Well... I’m working on some stuff about outer space, and you’re the only alien I know.”

They enter the lab to find Dr Banner already hard at work on the poison that caused him to transform.

Peter ends up grabbing one of the tablets Mr Stark left lying around and taking a ton of notes after an exhilarating three-way discussion in which him and Bruce try to figure out how Thor’s metaphorical speech and mythological stories translate into hard science, which turns out to be fascinatingly close. Even at the molecular level, there are things that make sense, and the analysis of the gun’s matter and the bacteria’s reactivity slowly but surely coalesce into a region of deep space that they can narrow down, thanks entirely to Thor’s knowledge of the geography of the universe.

The day flies by, and before Peter knows it F.R.I.D.A.Y is announcing the safe return of Iron Man and Vision over the lab speakers.

“...and the hostages weren’t hurt?”

“No more than emotionally.” Mr Stark sighs, walking around his room, shedding articles of clothing. His blazer goes first; then his shoes, then the housing unit. Peter watches him from the foot of the bed. “But those bastards had supernatural help. Some asshole calling himself Electro had rigged a trap using my own tech as a power-source.” He starts to undo his watch, and tosses it onto the desk with a clatter. “I’d have fallen for it, too, if it weren’t for Vision. Almost zapped myself right out of existence.”

Peter frowns. “You didn’t get electrocuted, did you?”

Mr Stark stops moving around, and smiles. “No.” He shoots Peter a reassuring look. “The Mark 42 had to pull out all the stops, but everyone made it out all right. That’s me included.”

He walks over to where Peter lies and sits next to his head, so Peter is looking up at him upside down.

“And how was your day, honey?” Mr Stark says sarcastically.

Peter flushes, and makes himself laugh at the joke. “It was good. I got to work with Dr Banner--has he told you what he thinks about the Higgs Boson? We had a whole discussion about it--anyway, we narrowed down the alien tech to a quadrant in the Far Galaxy, thanks to Thor.”

Mr Stark looks impressed. “Good job.” Peter flushes harder, and looks away from him, wishing he weren’t lying on his back. “Did you tell your Aunt about your upcoming visit?”

“Yeah. She was so happy—she said to tell you you’re her second-favorite Avenger now, after Thor.”

Mr Stark snorts. “And where do you fall in this ranking?”

“Oh, I’m third.”
That makes him laugh, and Peter’s heart swells. The happy lines around Mr Stark’s eyes are probably going to be responsible for some inevitable future cardiac condition.

“MJ was able to find a bus ticket, so I’ll get to hang out with her and Ned, too.”

“Great. Then I’ll arrange everything.” His expression becomes thoughtful. “Not sure how we’ll fare without you, but I guess we’ll have to make do.”

Peter draws his lower lip into his mouth, sneaking another glance up at Mr Stark to see if he’s joking again.

Mr Stark notices. "Oh, I’m dead serious. It’s hard to believe the team functioned without you a couple of months ago."

Oh.

"I know I definitely didn’t." He takes a breath as if to say something else, then seems to change his mind. "I told you... I already told you I trusted you. And you are a great Avenger, Peter. Little Jimmy's mom can rest easy."

His hand lifts from the mattress, and Peter stops breathing—until it lands in his hair, at which point he lets out sharp, shallow gust of air, skin tingling everywhere.

Mr Stark gives him an approving pat, but softer; almost a caress. Heat funnels into Peter’s stomach, below his belly-button, building pressure there.

"I want you to hear these things because... I think you went a long time without them. And the public support you’ve already gotten is great, but the support you’ve gotten from me has been... kind of rocky from the start. Kind of all over the place. And that's on me, not you." He rubs a small circle into Peter’s temple with his thumb, hand almost cupping his head, making Peter’s toes curl. "What I'm trying to say is thank you, and that I’m going to try to do better."

*My dad never really gave me a lot of support and I'm trying just trying to, uh, break the cycle of shame.* Kind, uplifting words, and a comforting gesture that is meant to be supportive. Instead, Peter feels unsteady, shaken, and hot under the collar.

“Oh, thanks, sir,” he manages, voice thin.

The fingers in his hair tighten, just for an instant. Peter twitches, but then Mr Stark’s hand slides away altogether, and he gets up and goes to the bathroom.

By the time he comes back, Peter is under the covers, and though uncomfortably half-hard still, he thinks he is able to mumble a “Goodnight, Mr Stark,” with convincing sleepiness.

“’Night. F.R.I.D.A.Y, lights.”

They are plunged into darkness, and Peter turns onto his side, facing away from him.

* He wakes up to a noise—something intrusive. A tap, hollow and unwelcome, that breaks into the warm little world Peter had been inhabiting. He opens his eyes, reluctant and annoyed.

It takes another few seconds for him to realize what the noise means. He was so content, so deeply asleep that his disoriented brain is catching up, but then the tap happens again—and it’s a knock.
Someone is knocking on Mr Stark’s door.

Mr Stark’s bedroom door.


Peter whips his head to the side to look at Mr Stark, who is much closer to him than he started out last night. They aren’t touching, but they ended up less than a foot away from each other, with Peter on his back and Mr Stark curved towards him, near enough that Peter can feel the warmth of his body leeching into the air.

He gets to see Mr Stark wake up with a small wince, and watches him register what’s happening from up close. First, his eyes go to Peter’s face. Then, they flicker down his body, and its position relative to his own. Then, he looks to the door.

He lurches away from Peter immediately, and sits up, breathing hard. “Fuck.”

“Tony. Hey, Tony!”

“He appears insistent,” F.R.I.D.A.Y points out.

A rattle. “Is this locked?” comes Rhodey’s voice. “Since when?”

Peter leaps out of the bed, and after a quick survey of the room, he decides on the only possible option. He goes to the window, unlatching it and noting that there is enough space for him to squeeze through. He activates his web shooters.

“Peter,” Mr Stark says from behind him. “It’s—you don’t have to do that. There’s... nothing’s wrong.”

Peter pauses, but only for a moment. The situation is too complicated for Rhodey to understand. He would think—he’d come to the wrong conclusion, too quickly. He’d think ill of Mr Stark, and Peter can’t have that.

He swings one leg, then the other onto the ledge, and can’t resist turning around. Mr Stark is standing in the middle of the room, watching Peter, panting. His shirt and hair are askew. His pants are riding lower than they are meant to.

Oh, how Peter wishes there had been something for Rhodey to misunderstand.

“See you at breakfast,” Peter quips, and jumps.

He hopes whoever is on security for SHIELD doesn’t happen to look at the screen and see him, and if they do, that they ignore the window math and simply chalk it up to eccentric superheroes doing superhero things.

* *

He doesn’t go back to Mr Stark’s room the next night.

Wanda gently chides him about the bags under his eyes over breakfast, but he can’t tell her why he didn’t get a wink of sleep.

* *

They leave for New York on Friday evening, Happy in tow, and after landing on the roof of
Avengers Tower, Happy drives Peter straight to Queens. Mr Stark is settling some business with his company and staying at the penthouse over the weekend, as is apparently his usual. Him and Peter haven’t really spoken much since the other morning—and they haven’t been alone in a room together since, either.

Of course it just so happens that Ramon is hanging out on the steps of the apartment building when Happy slows to a stop in front of it. Him, his brother and a small group of friends immediately start shouting when Peter steps out of the car.

“Holy shit, Parker!”

“Dude! Dude!”

They crowd around him, excitedly asking questions, asking about the car (the Jaguar, this time), asking about the Winter Soldier and Black Widow and about whether Captain America is really getting along with Iron Man or if it’s all a publicity stunt.

“I thought you were turning tricks for sure, man,” Ramon says, throwing his hands up in the air. David is nodding next to him. “I mean for sure.”

“All right, step away from my celebrity kid, please!”

Peter looks up and sees May at the top of the steps, grinning hugely.

In an impulsive fit, he jumps across the entire flight of stairs and lands right in front of her, causing a chorus of yells and screams at the bottom, and one distinct: "Shit, do that again!". May hugs him so tightly that Peter worries briefly about his air supply, but it’s completely worth it.

They say goodbye to their neighbors and go up to eat take out on the couch. Peter packed a small backpack with clothes and his flexicloth suit, foregoing the armor for the short trip, but the itchy need to go out on patrol that used to live under his skin is dormant.

“So... second dinner?” May asks him after the movie, grinning. “I got a bunch of flavors... including Captain Cone and Stark Raving Hazelnuts.”

Peter snorts. “I’ll have the Hulk-a-Hulk-a Burning Fudge, thanks.”

He’s the only Avenger without a Ben&Jerry’s flavor, but he got an email from their PR department last week about them developing the ‘Berry Cutie S-Pie-dey’.

While May sings an off-tune mash-up of early Spice Girls material from the kitchen, Peter distractedly checks his phone and catches up on his texts. Ned wants to know at what time he should expect him tomorrow... Rita Delmar heard a rumor he’s coming down to the City for the weekend and demands he visit her in Philadelphia since it’s only a couple of hours away, and... he has a text from ‘TS’, from an hour ago.

Thinking of redecorating the living room

Help me choose

He’s sent Peter a link to what looks to be a high-end furniture site, where presumably Peter is supposed to check out what he thinks is best.

A wave of relief washes over him. Maybe this text means they are fine—maybe the incident that almost-happened-but-didn’t with Rhodey is behind them already.
“what am I picking? Peter texts back. a sofa?

Anything you like, comes the near-instant reply.

Peter dips his toes into the couch cushion and starts to browse.

“What’s got you looking like that?” May asks, smiling, when she returns. “Is there someone I need to know about?”

Peter feels himself turn splotchy red. “No.” He stuffs his phone back in his sweatpants pocket and grabs the pint of ice-cream. “It’s nothing.”

“Aww, come on! Is it a girl? A boy? Something serious?” At the look on his face, she raises a hand. “Or casual, no judgment!”

“There’s nothing, May.” He deliberately takes a spoonful and eats it, trying to look innocent. Unfortunately, May keeps watching him and her eyes say ‘Cut the bullshit’ without words, while Peter feels the desire to talk about it well up in spite of himself. “…They don’t feel that way about me,” he mumbles.

“Impossible.” May shifts forward on the couch, enough to pat his shoulder. “I’m sorry, kiddo, but you’re not just a famous superhero, you’re you. You’re amazing; no one could resist you.”

Peter pretends to roll his eyes while tipping sideways to lean his head against her shoulder. The tub of ice cream starts to numb his fingertips as he holds it in a one-handed grip.

“They probably don’t deserve you, anyway,” May says gently. “For a person to deserve you they’d have to be... I don’t know. Incredible. They’d have to be able to give you anything you wanted. And they’d have to have at least saved the world, like you did.”

Peter laughs shakily. “Yeah. Guess that’s a pretty high bar.”

* * *

He webs his way over to Ned’s house on Saturday morning to paint a bright, obnoxious, glittery ‘Welcome Back MJ’ sign to meet her with at the bus station, and answers all of Ned’s many (many, many) questions about life at the compound while they do it. At one point Ned’s sister Maia does interrupt them and asks to take a snap with him to raise her middle-school social media profile, which Peter happily does, but in most other ways it feels like they are picking up where they left off.

MJ’s family is there to greet her at the bus station, too. Mr and Mrs Jones work hard, but even with MJ’s full ride to MIT they can’t afford plane tickets, and this is her first visit since she moved to Boston. Ned is in a similar financial spot, but at least his family is a subway ride away.

“Assholes!” MJ calls when she sees the sign, but she allows the three-way group hug. She catches up with her parents for a while, and then Ned and Peter invite her to walk around the neighborhood and grab coffees, which she accepts—after promising Mr and Mrs Jones that she will be back home in time for dinner.

“So, Peter,” MJ says, with businesslike finality, latte in hand. “What’s the deal with Black Widow and the Hulk?”

“I don’t know,” Peter says honestly, tipping his Knicks cap further down to cover his face as a group of girls across the street start whispering and pointing. Ned notices, and speeds up his pace to block him from view, grinning. “Anyway, I’m way too scared of her to ask.”
MJ snorts.

“What about Mr Stark and Pepper Potts?” Ned asks. "I read something about them getting back together recently, I think."

Peter’s stomach twists at the thought, but he tries to cover it up with a thoughtful expression. “Uh... haven’t really thought about it, to be honest.” He shrugs, hoping he sounds detached from the situation. “She helps with PR stuff for the Avengers, but. Yeah. I don’t know.” There’s a pause. “And I don’t... care, obviously.” He winces. That was too detached. “I mean, he’s my friend, so I do care, but not... too much. I just...”

“Oh, boy,” MJ says.

Peter’s shoulders slump.

Ned looks confused for a second, and then he gasps. “Oh my God, you’re totally into him!” he accuses.

“...It’s complicated.”

“Peter! What the hell!”

“I didn’t make a decision to do it!”

“I mean, I get it,” MJ says. “We’re talking about Tony freaking Stark. Hot-ass billionaire, so damn charming I’ve almost forgiven him for all that war profiteering his dad did. But still, that’s so... so dumb, Peter.” She shakes her head and takes a sip of her coffee. “I always knew you were too pretty to be smart, and I was right.”

Peter groans and tugs his cap far down enough to cover his entire face and obscure his view. His spidey-senses will probably stop him from walking into a pole.

Ned pats his shoulder. “Man, I’m sorry. It must be kind of painful, living with him all the time.” Peter hears him slurp on his cold brew. “Oh, oh! Have you had that scene yet where he’s coming out of the shower and you see him with just a towel on, like in the movies?”

“We each have our own suite,” Peter mumbles, trying not to picture the scenario Ned is describing. He also neglects to mention that him and Mr Stark have shared one suite the last few nights. “Ugh.”

“Hey.” MJ knocks his cap back into position, suddenly appearing in front of him, having planted herself there so she can look him in the eye. Peter comes to an abrupt halt. “Are you okay?”

Peter stares up into her big, worried brown eyes, and feels the corner of his mouth tug into a fond smile. “...Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine. Trust me, no one knows how crazy sad it is more than me. I know I have to get over it soon. I-I will. Promise.”

“Good,” says Ned. “Because you’re a hot twink with a great body, and you’re famous now. You’ll find someone—uh, I guess maybe not better than Tony Stark, but like...” MJ elbows him. “Someone equally cool, who is, like, twenty years younger, and into you.” He grins.

MJ nods. “Exactly. So let’s move on.” She starts walking again. “Do you know anything about the bomb threat at the Cuban parliament?”

Just that Bucky and Sam are on it as they speak. “I... can’t really talk about it. But it should turn out all right.”
Both her and Ned seem impressed with that answer, and the conversation does indeed move on as they wordlessly agree to walk to their favorite donut place, next. They are stopped a few times along the way; first by a man who comes up to Peter on the way to ask for an autograph for his daughter, then two guys around his age ask for selfies, and then a group of younger teens ask to film him pretending to web them, so that by the time they make it to *Go-(Do)nuts* Ned and MJ are making plans for how best to stage the next set of fan pictures.

Peter stops by Mr Delmar’s before going home, but before he can say or do anything, a lady in line points at him and shouts: “It’s Spider-Man!”, causing a scene that includes Mr Delmar rushing out from behind the cash register and wrapping him a solemn, tight hug.

Aunt May is the one to suggest that they watch *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* for his last night in Queens. Uncle Ben was the one who used to watch the Harry Potter movies with him—May has never really been into that stuff, but she’s always put that kind of thoughtfulness and effort into Peter’s happiness, and he finds himself getting all teary-eyed over dumb stuff because of it, like his fortune cookie saying ‘You are so loved, open your eyes’.

His phone buzzes during the Yule Ball scene and he peeks at it, feeling his belly swoop when he sees it’s ‘TS’ again. Mr Stark has been sending him random luxury catalogue pictures all day like threats.

*I’m growing older by the minute, kid*

Peter snorts, and sends him a screenshot of the couches he liked, and then the ‘shrug’ emoji.

*idk never picked out furniture before*

*I can always donate it if you don’t like it when it arrives*

*oh. ok :)*

*Having fun with your friends?*

*yeah. it was rly good to see them again after everything*

*hanging out w aunt may now, eating dessert*

He hesitates a moment, then sends a picture of the tub of ice cream in his hand. He ended up eating the Stark Raving Hazelnuts after all.

*tastes good*

Mr Stark takes a couple of minutes to reply. Then: *Always flattering to hear*

Peter feels himself go crimson. But before he can even try to think of a response, he gets another message.

*Also, your Aunt needs a new TV*

Right. The picture he sent had the movie playing in the background. The suspicion that May is going to wake up to a new television set in a couple of days sneaks into Peter’s brain, but he doesn’t say anything in case Mr Stark was just making an observation.
Dreading your return to the compound tomorrow? Being around those boring old folks again?

They’re not so bad. Some are older, but no one’s boring.

Fair enough. I’ve been accused of putting the oil industry out of business, but never of that.

May looks over at him just then, and pokes his cheek with a finger. “You’ve got it bad, kiddo.”

Peter pokes her back. “Shut up.”

He doesn’t text back: ‘you’re the least boring person I know’. Instead he sends: *I thought people magazine accused you of crimes against fashion in the 90s?*

Touche again.

In my defense I was in my 20s, and way dumber than you are now.

Peter grins.

★

Ned and MJ show up at his apartment on Sunday morning for a farewell pajama brunch; something they haven’t done since before graduation, almost a year ago now. May left for work, so it’s just the three of them around Peter’s small kitchen table, spiking their orange juice with champagne Ned snuck out of his house.

“...and there’s no way I can make it home for Thanksgiving and Christmas without mom selling one of her kidneys on the black market,” MJ says casually. “But she’s acting like she’s going to do it if that’s what it takes, so. That’s not great.”

A notification on her phone diverts her attention for a moment.

“I get it, dude,” Ned says, taking a bite of toast. “I’ve already given up on interning anywhere and am trying to find summer jobs, just for the pay. Stupid loans are—”

“Wait.”

MJ sits up straight in her chair, staring at her screen.

“MJ?” Peter leans forward. “What’s going—”

“What the...” She looks up at him, breathing hard. “Peter. Did you tell Tony Stark that I took the bus here from Boston?”

“...What?”

“Did you?” she insists, voice rising.

“I—I might have. I.” He thinks back to his last few conversations with Mr Stark; he probably mentioned the bus station at one point. “Yeah, I think I did. What’s...?”

“I just got an email from someone at Stark Industries, and it’s plane tickets.”

Peter’s stomach drops.

“I think he got me—wait, it’s not just plane tickets.” She keeps staring at her screen. “I think he
bought me a standing flight every other weekend...” She starts to scroll down, eyes widening more and more as she keeps going. “This goes on... this is for a year. Oh my God.” Her face is ecstatic—open emotion in a way Peter isn’t used to seeing on reserved, sarcastic MJ. “Peter, oh my God. My parents are going to... oh my God.”

“Holy shit, Peter!” Ned says, eyes round as saucers. “This is amazing! No wonder you’re in love with him.”

And then his phone dings.

The three of them stare at it, and Ned picks it up gingerly, almost fearfully.

“It’s not a bomb,” MJ says. “Come on, what is it?”

Ned reads for a moment, and then his jaw drops.

“What is it, Ned?” Peter asks, a hint of panic creeping into his voice.

“Holy shit. He got me an internship at Apple. A paid one.”

“But... that’s his competition,” Peter says, stupidly.

“That’s what you’re focusing on?” Ned yelps. “Peter! It pays three thousand dollars a month! With benefits!”

Peter stares at him, ears burning.

“What did you do?” Ned asks.

“Me? Nothing!”

“Nothing?” MJ echoes. “He went to all this trouble just ‘cause?” She keeps scrolling up and down and up and down her phone. She still looks explosively happy; eyes lit up, lips pressed together to hide what wants to be a huge smile. “I know the money is probably spare change to him, but this took work to set up, man. At the very least he had to pay someone to get it done.”

Peter gives her a helpless look. “I-I don’t know, dude. He’s really nice. He does this kind of thing for everyone.”

“Really?” Ned says, already typing a reply email to accept the position.

“Y-yeah.” Mr Stark pays for everything every Avenger does pretty much all the time; whether it’s upgrading their suits, travel, or weaponry. This is... sort of the same, Peter thinks. “Yeah, for sure.”

“Damn. Can you imagine having that much money that you can just... do that?” Ned turns to gape at MJ, looking awed, delighted.

“It’s pretty crazy,” she acknowledges. Then she looks at Peter, and he can tell that she’s not completely satisfied with his explanation, but at the moment is too happy to put energy into contesting it. “He must really, really like you as a coworker, Peter.”

The brunch descends into chaos soon after, as both Ned and MJ call their families to impart the news, with partially edited versions to omit Mr Stark’s specific involvement on the developments. Peter, meanwhile, stares blankly at an empty text box and tries to come up with something to say, or ask.
Finally, he settles on: *I can’t believe you did that*

Mr Stark texts back immediately. *Everything okay? Are you upset?*

*upset??

????

no

i just

*this is amazing*

*thank u*

*thanks so much thank you*

‘But *why* did you do it?’ he wants to ask.

He doesn’t, though.

*\

Happy picks him up that evening to drive him back to the penthouse, where the jet is waiting to fly him and Mr Stark back to the Avengers compound. Ramon and his friends come check out the car, and Peter makes Happy let them while he says goodbye to May. It’s hard to leave her again so soon, but it’s a lot easier than it was last time, especially now that they know they can do this every once in a while.

Once they get to the Tower, Peter is jittery and off-kilter the whole ride up the elevator, and Happy seems to sense something’s off.

“So. You have a good weekend?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was awesome.”

Happy nudges him on the shoulder. “Hey. You know it’s just Tony, right? Not a dragon that’s about to eat you?”

“I know.” Peter squares his shoulders, and stands straighter. He needs to stop acting nervous.

They enter the vast penthouse and find Mr Stark on the long L-shaped couch, only half-sitting in it, working on engineering the three-dimensional hologram of an aircraft.

“Hey, Tony,” Happy says casually. “Your charge is here, so I’m gonna...” he makes a motion to leave.

“Hey. Yeah, yeah, go do whatever it is you do when you’re not working for me.”

Happy snorts. “Have a safe flight, asshole.”

“Miss you already.”

Happy leaves, and it’s just them again. The penthouse is a bi-level structure, the top floor of which overlooks the landing pad Peter climbed all the way up to just a couple of months ago. It’s all open
plan, a large space lit up by the sunset flooding in.

“I’m almost done and we can go, okay?” Mr Stark says over his shoulder. He’s dressed formally, but disheveled; as though he came back from some important meeting and forgot to change out of his suit and tie, and that’s why the collar of his shirt is slightly askew.

“Okay.”

Peter hugs himself, even though the space is perfectly climate-controlled.

Mr Stark turns around.

“Peter? You okay?”

Peter nods. “Yeah. Yeah, I just...” It looks like they are as high as the clouds, up here. He loves this space. He should feel more at ease. “I wanted to thank you, again. For what you did, for Ned and MJ.”

Mr Stark smiles. “You’re welcome.” He steps forward, towards Peter, making his designs vanish in the air behind him with a simple flicker of his hand. “I suppose I didn’t run it by you first,” he prompts, somewhat cautious.

“Yeah. No, that’s...” Peter steps towards him, too. “That’s fine. I mean, you. It was amazing. You made them so happy.”

Mr Stark nods. “Oh, well good. That’s good.” He puts his hands in the pockets of his suit, and looks down at the floor between them. “Listen, Pete, I actually wanted to talk to you about something. Before we board.”

Peter nods, even as his nerves spike. He had worried—it didn’t occur to him immediately, but on the way here, when he started thinking of reasons why Mr Stark would have showered him with gifts as precious as his friends’ happiness, he could only come up with one thing.

It’s not quite a dragon, but...

“What happened with. When Rhodey almost—saw you, the other day.”

Peter clenches his jaw, waiting for the words. *You should sleep in your own room from now on.*

“I wanted to apologize.”

“...Huh?”

“If I made you feel uncomfortable, or like you had to hide. You haven’t done anything wrong, whereas I feel like I keep apologizing to you every other week.” He chuckles darkly, hanging his head. “Anyway, I wanted to say that if you want to keep crashing in my room, you can.”

“Really?”

The reprieve is so unexpected that Peter physically stumble forward. He stares at Mr Stark, feeling winded, and suddenly is standing a lot closer to him than he was.

“I. If you feel like... if you want to, you can always come to me. I thought I’d made that clear.”

The sudden absence of all his tension is disorienting, and so the impulse assaults Peter before he can involve rationality into the decision. They are so close. That makes it so easy.
He steps forward and throws his arms around Mr Stark’s neck, hugging him close.

“Thank you,” he mumbles into Mr Stark’s throat. “Thank you.”

Mr Stark took his weight with a low grunt, and automatically puts his arms around Peter’s waist, pulling him in, bodies snugly fitting together. “You’re welcome, kid,” he says into Peter’s hair. The press of his chest against Peter’s is grounding, a squeeze that keeps Peter’s thundering heart in place. The metal ridges of the housing unit are crushed between them, and Peter arches into the hug, pressing himself as close as physics will allow, overwhelmed. He’s on his tiptoes, but feels perfectly safe, perfectly balanced. Perfectly good.

They stand like that for a perfect amount of time, a sunset of windows shining down on them, and Peter sighs happily into it.

One of Mr Stark’s hands gently slides up his back, to the nape of his neck, and then into his hair, sending warmth all over Peter’s body; warmth pulsing in his chest, his wrists, his groin. Peter shudders, swallowing down a whimper as it tries to climb out of his mouth. He can feel the soft scratch of Mr Stark’s beard against his temple, and he’s going to unravel into all the sensations unless he pulls away soon, but it’s too good to give up just yet.

Mr Stark’s fingers trace gentle, nonsense figures into his scalp, sapping whatever energy was left in Peter’s muscles. Peter slowly sags against him, loosening his grip around Mr Stark’s neck in favor of experiencing the bubbling, boiling heat in his gut. Mr Stark doesn’t say anything, just keeps holding him, keeps providing soothing, comforting touches. His fingers trail down to brush the bare skin of Peter’s neck and then trail back up, making goosebumps erupt all over Peter’s skin. His thumb digs into the back of Peter’s ear and Peter’s head lolls, a deep, resonating tremble starting at the center of him and vibrating outwards. He’s so weak that he drops his weight back on his heels, causing a spark of friction all along their fronts that sets the heat at his pulse points on fire.

Which is when he realizes that he’s hard against Mr Stark’s thigh.

His body is burning, his skin is flushed all over, and the sudden shock of horror at what he’s let happen isn’t cold enough to dampen what’s going on inside of him. The only reason he doesn’t immediately rip away from the embrace is the prospect of facing Mr Stark with what’s sure to be a dazed look on his face and a noticeable bulge in his pants. Oh God. The humiliation is—it’s going to be unbearable. It already is. No way Mr Stark isn’t feeling this.

Peter squeezes his eyes shut, mortified. His cheeks are flaming red, his ears must be, too, and his dick is aching for more of that friction they gave it.

Seconds tick by and Mr Stark remains silent, as well as still. As more time passes, Peter regains a tendril of hope that he might be able to wait this out. Maybe they can just pretend it never happened. If he could just calm down enough not to sweat through his shirt—he’ll be able to jerk off later, he’s been doing plenty of that and it’s mostly kept a disaster like this at bay; he’ll have time to picture Mr Stark in the shower with him later.

At that thought, Peter’s dick twitches, right against Mr Stark’s thigh. He tightens his grip around Mr Stark’s neck, embarrassed to his core and somehow still hard enough to cut glass. He won’t be able to wait this out. He can’t believe he’s going to be forced to look Mr Stark in the eye any second--this is Hell. He has to say something.

"Sorry," he whispers, high-pitched and ashamed.

“You okay?” Mr Stark asks. His voice is scratchy, guttural, as though he hasn't spoken in days,
instead of minutes.

Peter still doesn’t move, but his eyes sting with the threat of tears. He’s so turned on that he’s moments away from a fatal, catastrophic outcome, and he doesn’t know what to do.

“Y-yeah, I just...” He has to tell him, or this will keep happening. "Uh. The hair... thing."

Mr Stark tugs at it very, very lightly, and Peter whimpers, *audibly*.

“Th-that,” he gasps. "It's... that, yeah."

“You like that?”

"I-I...” Peter’s knees are barely holding him up. It’s all he can do not to twitch his pelvis forward, rub himself against Mr Stark like a cat in heat. “Y-yeah. S-sorry.”

“You like this?” It happens again—Mr Stark tugs a bit harder, and Peter can’t contain his reaction; a choked noise of distress.

“M-Mr Stark—“

Mr Stark curses softly under his breath. “I should stop.” His hand stills again. "Fuck, Peter, I'll stop, I swear--"

“No, please...” He doesn’t know if he’s asking for forgiveness or for some sort of permission, but he knows he’s not asking him to stop. Something huge is building inside him, and it doesn’t want Mr Stark to ever stop. “Please, sir, I—“

Mr Stark’s grip tightens like a reflex and Peter muffles a cry into his shoulder, shuddering, about to—so close to—

“Please, please, please—“

"It's okay..." Mr Stark ducks his head to whisper directly into Peter’s ear. “It's okay. It's okay, you're so fucking amazing, it's okay..."

And suddenly the dam just *breaks*, and it was holding back lava the entire time. Peter comes with a sob, body convulsing in Mr Stark’s arms, dick shooting messily in his underwear as his legs collapse under him, forcing Mr Stark to catch him and keep him pressed close.

“Thank you, th-thank you—“ he slurs, probably unintelligibly, shuddering. “Oh G-God th-thank... you...” He feels like passing out with pleasure as he hiccoughs into Mr Stark’s shoulder, throat tight with how good it is. He comes until he can’t see; a boneless, useless thing.

“Shh, shh...”

Mr Stark holds him through all of it, and when it’s finally over he does, at long last, step away.

Peter knows he must look a mess, and he feels it. He’s simply too high on what he just experienced to fully process the shame, yet.

He blinks up at Mr Stark, panting for breath still, swaying in place. “...I.” He gulps. “I'm.”

“Don’t say sorry for what just happened,” Mr Stark says. His eyes are wide, and his breathing sounds labored to Peter’s ears. He’s clearly taking on all the blame.
Peter looks at him.

“Sorry for what’s about to happen, then.”

And he grabs the collar of Mr Stark’s shirt in both hands and tugs him forward, and kisses him.

Chapter End Notes

guys guys gUYS GUYS I REALLY HOPE YOU LIKED THIS CHAPTER AND ALL THE FIRE/BURNING METAPHORS BECAUSE HOO BOY WERE THERE LOTS OF THEM

Anyway I am always HONORED when you stop by and tell me your thoughts!!! And I appreciate you following along VERY much and THANK YOU!! I am so freaking psyched to share the next chapter <3 <3 <3
Mr Stark grunts like it hurts, and then kisses back—for a glorious, wet, heated handful of seconds he kisses back so hard that he makes Peter stumble. He thrusts his tongue inside Peter’s mouth and fists his other hand in Peter’s hair, too, inhaling through his nose, taking possession of the pace and precipitating it off a cliff, turning it into unbridled, fervent, voracious kissing—

But then he pushes away.

“Fuck.” Peter hasn’t let his collar go yet, so he doesn’t get far. “Fuck, okay, fuck.” His chest is heaving, and he’s blinking as if to clear his vision. “Fuck.”

Peter is breathing hard, too.

He just. He just kissed Mr Stark.

“Okay. Okay, we need to... I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Mr Stark shakes his head as if to clear that, too. “I. I shouldn’t have... That was...” He swallows. “I’m sorry. Peter I’m sorry, that wasn’t—I’m sorry.”

Peter tugs at his collar again without thinking, but Mr Stark grabs his wrist immediately.

“Don’t,” he pants. “Don’t, I can’t—I can’t do this to you.”

“You can do whatever you want to me,” Peter says.

Mr Stark makes an inhuman sound. “Jesus fucking Christ.” He drops Peter’s wrist like it burns him, and this time Peter lets go of his collar and lets him step backwards.

Mr Stark walks all the way to the couch and drops down onto it.

“Jesus.” He’s rubbing at his temples like he has a headache. “Not enough cold showers in the goddamn world,” he mutters.

Peter’s throat clicks. His pulse is still thundering, fast. What did he just do. What did he just—

"Mr Stark?”

“Okay.” He nods to himself. “Okay. This is... it’s gonna be okay.” He looks up at Peter. “Are you all right?”

Peter tries to introspect, but only gets as far as feeling like his boxers are a sticky mess and wanting to ask Mr Stark to make it worse. God. Oh God, he has lost his entire mind, hasn’t he?
“I’m fine,” he says, throat tight.

Mr Stark keeps looking at him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He’s not. He’s really not.

“I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry, Peter. I... gave into something that...” His gaze drops from Peter’s eyes down to his fluttering chest, stomach, and then to the front of his jeans. “Something I shouldn’t...” He trails off.

Peter waits, lips still tingling from what just happened.

Mr Stark seems to have lost his train of thought.

“...Sir?”

Mr Stark’s hips twitch forward. He looks down at the floor.

“I know I have no right to ask you anything,” he grunts. “But please, for the love of God, stop calling me that.”

“Why?”

Mr Stark clenches his jaw. “Let’s just say, I’m not particularly proud of how it makes me feel.”

Oh. “Um. Sorry.”

“And please stop apologizing.” He softens his tone, but it gets weighed down with guilt. “You have nothing to apologize for. Nothing.”

Peter steps forward, and is faintly surprised that his legs still work. But he wants to wipe that guilt off of Mr Stark’s face more than he wants to hold on to his pride—and there’s nothing left to salvage, anyway. He gave himself away from every possible angle.

“I didn’t mean to.” *Lose it. He can't bring himself to say it. “It’s just that when you.” Touch me. “It’s...”*

Mr Stark nods, filling in the blank spaces. “I know your senses work overtime.” He sighs, deeply. The guilt is still there. “All the more reason why I shouldn’t have. Can’t.”

Peter can fill in the spaces, too.

“We should... probably go,” Mr Stark adds.

“Right.”

He can feel the press of his mouth, still. The ghost tug of the hand in his hair.

Mr Stark adjusts his seat on the couch. “Should also... get you some new clothes,” he croaks. He makes as if to stand, then seems to decide against it. “You remember where my room is? From last time?”

Peter does. He also remembers his choice of shirt last time, and feels like more of a transparent fool—even back then, when he wasn’t fully conscious of it.

“Be right back.”
He walks up the steps on shaky legs and makes it to the bedroom.

It’s much neater, clearly less frequently inhabited than his room at the compound, but there are still signs of life all around; half-open books, tech on the desk, tools lying around, a mini-bar that carries worrisome connotations but proves to be reassuringly unstocked. The bed is as enormous as the one at the compound, but the view here is of the sprawl of the city instead of the green trees.

Peter walks up to the window, and presses his forehead against it, breath fogging up the glass in intermittent bursts. He imagines the many, many people who have been in this room before, and looked out at this same view. People Mr Stark slept with and never saw again. People he cared about, for a time. People he almost married—well, one person.

And then there’s Peter; the youngest Avenger, who is pleasing enough to look at that Mr Stark admitted to being attracted to him against his better judgment. Peter, who fell apart in a couple of minutes just from skin-to-skin contact and some hair-pulling. Peter, who threw himself at his mentor like some sort of desperate fan willing to do anything for Tony Stark’s attention.

He can’t believe he kissed him.

He can’t believe he kissed Mr Stark.

After a long moment of blinking back his suddenly blurry vision, Peter finally makes himself turn around and looks up at the ceiling. “F.R.I.D.A.Y?” he whispers tentatively.

“Hello, Peter.”

“Where can I find some underwear?”

“My video capabilities have been temporarily disabled, but unless a change occurred within the past thirty minutes you should find a selection on the second drawer.”

The dresser whirs and slides smoothly open, and Peter walks over to it. On top of it are some of Mr Stark’s watches, at least two of which have nanoparticle compartments and are ready for deployment, probably able to produce a partial armor. Peter admires them and then takes a pair of Mr Stark’s gray brand-name boxer briefs and slides them on. Then he tugs a pair of Mr Stark’s brand-name jeans over those.

“All good?” Mr Stark asks when he gets back. He was standing in wait with his hands loosely clasped in front of him. He straightened his collar and fixed his tie while Peter was gone, and he’s wearing see-through sunglasses. He appears composed, attentive; back in control. “Find everything you needed?”

“Yeah.” Peter forces a smile. “I’ll give these back as soon as we get there.”

Mr Stark makes a dismissive gesture and starts making his way towards the terrace to the jet. Peter follows him, reflecting on the fact that the Iron Maiden shirt is, in fact, still in his closet at the quarters, so maybe he should have started by giving that back first.

They emerge out into the buffeting wind where the jet awaits, sleek and powerful, on the landing pad. Mr Stark lifts his arm up and pushes a button on his watch, and the jet’s side door opens with a delicate swoosh, motor rumbling to life.

Peter can’t help but comment: “Your watches are so cool.”

Mr Stark stops walking.
He turns to look at Peter, hair swaying in the breeze. The night sky is dotted with stars behind him, and Peter wonders what he could have said wrong.

“You like my watches?”

Peter blinks. “Um. Yeah.”

“Take them.” Mr Stark points him back towards the penthouse. “Take whichever ones you want.”

“...What?”

“Take all of them, if you.” Mr Stark clears his throat. “You can have... whatever you want, Peter. You should have said something earlier.”

“I’m okay, s—Mr Stark.” He coughs. “I just meant... they’re awesome.”

“Yeah, so.” Mr Stark nods towards the penthouse again. “Take them. I can buy more. Or—“ An idea seems to bloom. “Or I can make you one. Design it specifically.”

“I don’t need a watch.” He tries to half-smile. “Millennials don’t use watches anymore, we have phones.”

Amazingly, it works. Mr Stark snorts helplessly, losing some of his seriousness. “That’s true. You’re still definitely not a millennial, but that’s true.” He finally seems to let go of the watch idea. “All right. Well, if you see one you like, just tell me. Anything,” he amends, before Peter can answer. “If you see anything you like, just let me know.”

Peter nods, looking at the thing he likes the most. “Uh, sure.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

The sun has set, and the floodlights of the landing pad come on as they board.

Peter puts his headphones on after takeoff, but even the loud music can’t drown out his thoughts; his hyperawareness of Mr Stark sitting one row over, the endless replay, the exhilaration, the shame, the gut-wrenching want all looping over and over and over again.

They don’t talk during the flight.

He ends up curled up in a tight little ball on his luxurious couch-like plane seat, clueless as to how the hell he’s going to deal with what just happened, and the fact that he is fully aware of why it can never, ever happen again.

* 

They get to the quarters near midnight, but Wanda, Vision, Bruce and Rhodey are sitting around the kitchen, apparently sharing some drinks and chatting. They have no idea that Peter knows what Mr Stark tastes like, now. In the background, the enormous television no one ever seems to watch is playing some sort of nature documentary.

“Peter!”

“Hey, you’re back!”

Bruce and Wanda both come up to him to greet him, Bruce with a clap of his shoulders and Wanda with a kiss to his cheek. Vision walks through the kitchen bar and takes Peter’s hands in both of his
own, smiling in that gentle way of his.

“It’s good to see you, Peter.”

“You too.” Peter grins and walks over sit on one of the stools, high-fiving Rhodey when he passes him.

“I’m back too, in case you all missed me,” Mr Stark says, pretending to speak into thin air. “Clearly, I left a hole behind with my absence.”

Rhodey smirks and quickly hugs him. “You seemed to be doing all right for yourself,” he says, with a pointed eyebrow raise.

Peter stills.

Mr Stark looks politely confused. “...Excuse me?”

“Tony, we saw the pictures.” Bruce smiles, encouraging. “It’s okay.”

There’s a beat of perplexed silence.

Panic starts up in Peter’s stomach, and then Wanda takes out her phone. “Come on, Stark, when were you going to tell us?”

She shows Mr Stark something on the screen, and Peter watches his face go blank.

“No.” He shakes his head. “No, this is a misunderstanding—“

“Can I see it?” Peter hears himself say.

“N—“

“Of course.” Wanda turns her phone towards him, and then, because they are sitting rather far from each other, she floats it over to him on a current of red energy.

It’s an article—the picture is immediately below the header, but Peter still reads the words first.

NYC’s power couple reunites: Tony Stark and Pepper Potts back together!

It feels like someone dumped a bucket of ice-water over Peter’s shoulders. Him and Ned did the ice-bucket challenge the summer after freshman year of high-school; it feels exactly like that.

They are in the lobby of an apartment building; a place that screams Upper East side, regardless of where it’s actually located. It’s certainly not the repurposed Avengers Tower. Neither of the ‘power couple’ members seem to be aware that they are being photographed; Mr Stark is kissing her on the cheek, or maybe the mouth depending on how you look at it, and his face is obscured from view but her russet-lashed eyes are closed. Mr Stark is wearing the suit he’s in right now; this had to have happened earlier today.

“We’re not back together,” Mr Stark is saying.

“Tony, come on.”

“Stark, this is good news, you can tell us.”

“We’re not; this was taken after a business meeting.”
“Who has business meetings on a Sunday?”

“Rhodey—“

“Am I late to the party?”

Everyone looks around.

Natasha walked into the living area in a thick bathrobe, blonde hair pinned into a bun. She seems quietly amused by the tableau she interrupted; Peter with Wanda’s floating phone, Mr Stark glaring at Bruce and Rhodey, Vision frowning in confusion at the tension in the room.

“Hey, Nat,” Bruce says.

“Hey.” She gives him a small smile, then something seems to catch her eye. Specifically, Peter does.

“Parker. What are you looking at?”

“Hm? Oh, nothing.” Peter snags the phone from mid air and tosses it back to Wanda, who catches it in both her hands. “Some article about Mr Stark,” he forces out, biting the inside of his cheek. He is not going to cry in front of all these superheroes.

“I’m not back with Pepper,” Mr Stark says again, firm. “We had a business meeting at Industries HQ. I drove her home. I kissed her on the cheek, and someone caught it at an angle.” He was looking at Natasha when he said it, but his gaze flickers to Peter for a moment. “So everyone take back their congratulations, please.”

Nat takes this in with a subtle nod, then surveys the scene once more.

Her eyes return to Peter when she’s done.

“You must be tired, Peter,” she points out, somewhat randomly.

Peter hesitates a moment. “I guess, yeah.”

“Come over; I think I have sound-muffling headphones in my room. You can borrow them tonight, if you want.”

“I can buy him—“

“I’m not using them.” She interrupts Mr Stark without looking at him. “Come on, Parker.”

“O-okay. Goodnight, everyone.”

Peter follows her into the bedrooms, not looking at Mr Stark on his way out. They walk past Sam’s, Steve’s, and Wanda’s doors until Natasha gets to hers, and she leads him inside.

“Here they are.” She walks over to a neatly organized chest of drawers and pulls out the headphones. “Don’t feel like you need to give them back in a rush.”

Peter takes them, grateful for more than one thing. “Thanks, Nat.”

Her stare is so layered. Hypnotic—Peter’s had the thought before. Being looked at like that makes him feel like she sees into what’s at the very back of his mind, even if he himself isn’t sure what’s in there.

“You had a good weekend? Took a real break?” she asks, eyes intent.
“Yeah. Yeah, it was really good.” He tries to smile, but it falls flat. “Sorry, I’m—tired, like you said.”

Natasha nods slowly. “I’m sure you are. You should get some sleep.”

“I will. Try.”

“Good.” She steps towards him. “Word of advice? Don’t go on social media before bed. Gets you thinking about all that bullshit people say about us. For me it’s usually that I’m secretly married to Clint, or articles pitting me and Wanda against each other just because we’re the only two women on the team... or that I’m in love with Steve.” She snorts delicately. “It’s all lies, kid. A picture gets taken from a certain angle and blown out of proportion.” She reaches out, and puts a hand on his arm. They are more of less of a height. Her eyes are telling him something; something Peter desperately wants to believe. “So try not to think about that, okay?”

His heart is pounding. “...I will.”

“Good.”

Once in his room, he toes his shoes off and falls onto his bed.

He’s not going to see Mr Stark tonight. He gets that their renewed deal fell through immediately after Peter sobbed ‘Please,’ in Mr Stark’s arms. He gets that the kiss was the nail on the coffin; an impulse that destroyed everything.

His phone buzzes with a text from Ned.

*dude im sorry abt that thing with your man & ppotts*

MJ also messages him shortly after, making Peter suspect there’s a third text chain between the two of them about this exact topic happening right now.

*p sure shes dating an NBA player so i dont think that pic means anything?*

Peter doesn’t respond to either message, for now. His eyes are stinging and he closes them; the glare from his poorly calibrated, thoroughly cracked phone screen is surely the cause.

It buzzes again in his palm.

He lies there for a little while before checking it, until the guilty voice in the back of his head suggests it might be Aunt May.

It’s not.

*I’m not back together with her*

Peter stops breathing. He wishes his heart hadn’t suddenly untwisted, but it does, and in the absence of that tension he is flooded by a barrage of emotions he’s powerless to stop.

He doesn’t answer that text, either, but he finally starts to cry.

*“Peter.”*

Ow. Head hurts.
“Peter, wake up.”

Ugh.

“I do apologize Peter, but the debrief begins in ten minutes.”

Peter opens his eyes.

Vision is standing over him, in his human skin once more. He looks rather concerned.

“Are you feeling all right?” Vision asks.

Peter sits up and rubs at his temple, wincing. It’s 7:50 a.m. and he fell asleep about two hours ago; he has a throbbing headache and he feels worn down.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Uh... probably. Yeah.” He nods, gingerly getting out of bed. “I should—I’ll be there in a sec.”

Vision seems hesitant to leave. “Are you... sure you’re all right?”

Peter shoots him a smile that, if anything, makes Vision look more worried. “I’m good, Viz. Thanks. Let me clean up a bit, I’ll be right out.”

“Very well.”

He leaves, and Peter rushes through a clumsy shower and throws on a plain red shirt and jeans before stumbling out to the living room.

The rest of the team is already at the conference table, and every single person looks up when he walks in. Not only that, but there are a couple of SHIELD representatives there, too.


The Director is there in person; sitting next to Maria Hill on the conference room table.

“Parker. Thank you for gracing us with your presence.” Secretary Ross is the only hologram at the table.

“It’s a minute past the time,” Fury says, looking unimpressed with the Secretary already.

Peter sits down next to Bucky, across the table from Mr Stark. Vision has set a cup of coffee in front of his empty seat and he takes a grateful sip.

“Anyway, we should get started,” Maria says. “We’ve gotten a hold of a couple more hitmen working to get to Peter.”

Peter blinks in surprise. “Really?”

Maria nods, typing into her tablet and making several new faces appear on the large holographic board behind her—except Peter recognizes one of them.

He sets his cup back down, staring. He saw that man in Queens, just two days ago. He claimed he wanted Peter’s autograph for his daughter.

“Is that...?”
A video clip gets projected up as well, and it’s of a bird’s eye view of Peter, Ned and MJ on the street, and the man walking away from them with the piece of paper Peter signed.

“The man’s name is Roderick Kingsley, and he had plans to poison and mind-control one of your friends to kill you. He was intercepted before he could come close to either of them, but he had already engineered the formula for a sedative-hypnotic substance that was found where he was staying.”

A million questions come up in Peter’s mind, but as he watches the clip of himself replay he has to ask the first, most obvious one. “Who was filming me?”

There’s a pause, and then Peter notices Rhodey nudging Mr Stark.

“I... set up a security escort.”

Peter’s jaw drops.

“An unofficial security escort,” Secretary Ross adds sharply.

“I’m sorry, do you wish we didn’t have all this information? You think your agents would have caught this guy before he made his attempt?”

“Kingsley followed you for four hours before one of this guy’s sentinels took him out,” Fury tells Peter, gesturing towards Mr Stark when he says ‘this guy’. “No one was hurt, other than Mr Kingsley when he resisted arrest.”

“Bumps and bruises,” Mr Stark says dismissively.

"And no one came close to Ned or MJ?"

"No."

Peter finally lets himself look at Mr Stark. Given what happened during their last interaction, he doesn’t have to ask why Mr Stark didn’t tell him all of this last night. Blush creeps up his neck as a now-familiar feeling of deep, inappropriate flattery takes him over, but he tries to keep his cool.

“...Thanks, Mr Stark.”

Mr Stark adjusts his cufflinks and shrugs. “Wasn’t about to let anything happen to you.”

Was a sentinel following him the whole time, then?

“Tony’s methods may have been unconventional, but I think we’re all in agreement that they were necessary, and they prevented loss of life,” Steve says firmly.

“Can we also say creepy?” Sam adds, raising his hand. “Cause his methods were a little creepy. But I’m glad he did it anyway.” He grins, and reaches over to clap Mr Stark’s shoulder.

Mr Stark smiles tightly. “Thanks, Sam.”

Bucky taps his metal fingers against the table. “Have we made any headway into figuring out what the reward is?”

“Not yet,” Maria says. “We can’t seem to get those guys to cough it up, but we’re throwing our best people at it.”

“If you were throwing your best people at it, you’d have let Natasha interrogate them,” Steve says.
Natasha shoots him a look.

“...You have?”

“I wasn’t visiting Clint the past few days,” she says with a small smirk.

Sam gives her an impressed nod. “Every time I think I’ve figured you out, man.”

“The reason those idiots are hard to crack is that they don’t have much information,” she goes on. “But so far the reward sounds like something only someone in Stark’s league could offer; maybe more.”

Mr Stark’s eyebrows raise, politely skeptical at the thought of someone more powerful than him. “More?”

“The bioweapons and alien guns came from someone with an unprecedented amount of access,” says Fury. “They hint at space travel, Stark. How many people do you know capable of that, who aren’t sitting at this table?”

Thor sits forward.

“We’ve narrowed it down to the quadrant,” Dr Banner says. “Thor is going to travel there to investigate. He can try to get us information.”

Peter turns to Thor, and finds him already looking at him. At his questioning look, Thor nods reassuringly. “I will find where these weapons came from, Peter. And how they got in the hands of your would-be killers.”

“Thank you.”

“Well then, sounds like we have a plan,” Fury says.

“We do,” Steve replies.

“Good. Then Secretary Ross, I believe, had another engagement.”

The hologram flickers out without so much as a goodbye from the Secretary.

Fury leans forward at the table. “Now, moving on... Wanda.”

Everyone turns to look at her, and Peter enjoys a brief respite from feeling like the center of attention. He looks down at his hands while Fury and Hill question Wanda about her recovery and try to set a date for the destruction of the Reality Stone, and exhales slowly.

In his mind’s eye, he sees the image of a large metal guardian keeping silent vigil near him day and night while Peter walks around Queens, unaware of the fact that the sentinel was sending Mr Stark constant updates and information on his whereabouts, his safety. Sam is right, it should feel creepy. But it doesn't. It makes him shiver with something good.

The meeting goes on for another two hours, after the next few missions are discussed and Steve and Mr Stark agree on a patrol schedule. Eventually Fury declares the debrief over, and everyone stands and starts to shuffle away.

“And please show up at the fundraiser tomorrow,” Maria calls. “Our PR depends on the actual schmoozing as much as the publicity your pictures will bring.”
Natasha rolls her eyes, and Bucky groans just loud enough for Peter to hear and shoot him a complicit smile.

Mr Stark leaves towards the compound with Steve, Fury and Maria.

Peter didn’t expect him to stop by to talk to him or anything.

* 

He spends the day at the lab with Bruce, finishing the new batch of web fluid. Bruce is largely silent, even when they order lunch and eat it there, but for once Peter also doesn't feel like talking. He has too much to think about.

By the time evening rolls around, he is staring to feel antsy and he's eager to meet Rhodey at the pool, having sat around for hours. Thinking. Uselessly wishing. Remembering.

What he’s not expecting is for Mr Stark to be there.

Peter freezes immediately after opening the door, finding Rhodey already doing his exercises on the far end of the pool and Mr Stark sitting in one of the chairs, fully dressed in a suit, typing away at a laptop.

“Peter.”

Mr Stark seems surprised to see him, too. Peter wishes he was wearing at least fifty-percent more clothing, or that his towel were draped around his body instead of slung over a shoulder.

“Um. Hi Mr Stark.”

“What are you doing here?”

Peter looks down at himself. “...Thought it was obvious.”

Then Mr Stark looks at him, and looks over at Rhodey, and something seems to click.

“This is you?” he demands, standing up and leaving his laptop on the chair.

“I...”

Mr Stark walks up to him and stops at a respectable distance, crossing his arms over his chest. “It was you who got Rhodey to agree to daily swimming sessions?”

“N-not exactly. I mean—“

“Rhodey is great about helping others get better, but he tends to forget to take care of himself while he’s at it. I’ve known him for decades and I couldn’t get him to do it.” Mr Stark keeps looking at him with a helpless intensity that Peter can't help but reciprocate. "But of course it would be you,” he adds. In the flickering blue light, his eyes shine with a dark amusement that seems to be at his own expense. "I should have known.”

Peter fights the urge to squirm with pleasure where he stands as Mr Stark’s gaze flicks down his body and back up to his face.

“You’re pretty fucking amazing. You know that, right?” he says, and it sounds like he’s legitimately asking.
It's okay, you're so fucking amazing, it's okay... Peter shifts his weight to his other foot, trying to keep his cool while warmth coats him from his scalp to his tip-toes.

“Thanks, Mr Stark.”

Mr Stark steps towards him, making Peter tip his chin up to maintain eye-contact. He's not that much taller than Peter, but right now, with Peter near-naked in front of him while he's suited up and wearing a nice pair of shoes, he feels larger than life.

“You're very welcome.”

“Hey! Peter!”

Peter jumps and Mr Stark startles, too. They both turn to look at Rhodey.

“Is that creepy old man bothering you?”

Mr Stark pales, and Peter can't bring himself to fake-laugh so he makes a weird choking noise instead.

"Uh--nah, I'm good!" he calls.

"You just let me know!" Rhodey grins.

"Will do!"

Mr Stark takes a step back again.

Peter almost reaches out with his hand, but he curls it into a fist instead. "You're not bothering me," he mumbles, sliding the towel off his shoulder in a rustle and tossing it to a nearby chair.

Mr Stark tracks the motion, the bare span of Peter's shoulders, and his jaw ticks. He’s silent, but his eyes seem to suggest—the word ‘bother’ comes to mind.

“I should go,” he says eventually.

“Why?”

“I have work to do. I'll see you at dinner, all right?”

He starts to leave, and Peter follows him out into the corridor.

Mr Stark is already inside the elevator by the time Peter blurts: “Are you building more sentinels?”

It works, in that Mr Stark freezes in place.

He doesn’t look guilty. He seems to be considering what to say, and he puts his hand on the doors to stop them from closing while he does so, giving Peter enough time to catch up to him.

“Peter, in New York... you understand I did that to protect you.”

“You could have told me,” Peter says. But he’s not angry.

“I could have.” Mr Stark inclines his head. He seems to have caught on to the fact that Peter isn’t exactly upset. “But I didn’t. I wanted you to have a good weekend.”

“I did.”
He nods. “Good. I told you I wouldn’t let them get you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know, but I wanted to—help with that.”

Peter draws his lower lip into his mouth, unthinking, and Mr Stark’s hand slips from the side of the door in an uncharacteristically graceless movement. It tips his upper body forward so that his shoulders are activating the sensor instead.

He hasn’t looked away from Peter’s mouth, and the moment hangs there, suspended.

“I really wanted to help, Peter,” he says, low.

Peter’s chest feels too small to contain his lungs.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Mr Stark’s gaze is distant, and it finally leaves Peter’s mouth only to keep going down his body. The black bathing suit feels like no clothing at all. “Yes. You have no idea how much I wanted to.”

“...Yeah?”

Mr Stark nods, jaw ticking.

Peter sways forward, heart in his throat, and Mr Stark’s nostrils flare. Every inch of exposed skin Mr Stark isn’t touching hurts, and the skin that isn’t exposed aches for touch most of all.

“I—“

There’s a distant splash, and Mr Stark wrenches back.

The sounds of Rhodey getting out of the pool filter into the corridor and echo, and Mr Stark steps backwards until his back hits the elevator wall. A small noise catches between Peter’s collarbones, but he stays right where he is.

Mr Stark draws in a breath to say—something, but the doors shut before he can get it out.

Peter hears him blow out an exhale on the other side, and then the whirr as the elevator activates to take him up.

Then, faintly and fading, he hears: “Get it the fuck together.”

*

There’s a brand new phone waiting for Peter on his bed that night, next to the imported box of chocolates.

The note says ‘So you can tell time – TS’.

When he eventually manages to sleep, hours spent tinkering and exploring the phone’s capacity later, it’s to dream of lying at the foot of Mr Stark’s bed again.

*
The fundraiser is in Washington DC.

Mr Stark flies the team in for the night and they check into the Ritz-Carlton where the event is being held, settling in sans Thor, who summoned the Bifrost that morning and left, and sans Rhodey and Bruce, who were needed somewhere in Mozambique last minute.

They pass the Washington Monument on the SUV drive from the landing pad, and Peter posts a picture of it on Twitter, captioning it: ‘who knows, may climb again’. It’s not a secret that the Avengers are in Washington, after all, and his new phone’s incredible resolution isn’t commercially available, because it’s a Stark Industries prototype.

Unlike the Hotel de la Paix, this building is styled in white and gold, modern where the one in Geneva felt historical. It’s still utterly breathtaking, and huge.

“Whoa.”

Peter’s room is enormous; L-shaped and stocked with a ludicrous amount of amenities he won't need, or have time for, during their short stay. It’s not adjacent to Mr Stark’s this time—they are facing each other across the hall, instead, and that’s a good thing. The distance will aid in the soundproofing, and the fact that Ms Potts is going to meet them at the ballroom shouldn’t be making Peter sick to his stomach, anyway.

He brought along the blue suit Mr Stark gave him in Switzerland, so he unpacks that first and lays it out on the bed to straighten any creases it may have obtained, running his palms along the supple fabric as he does. He wonders if Mr Stark considered what it would feel like on his skin when he made the purchase. He wonders if Mr Stark likes him in blue, or if he doesn’t care what color Peter is wearing. Probably not.

“Mr Parker?”

There’s a knock on his door.

Peter hesitates before opening it—this could be the next attempt to kill him, he gets that. But he’s surrounded by his teammates and his web shooters are active, so he figures this may be as safe as he’ll be.

He encounters a hotel staff member carrying a large, flat rectangular box.

“Hi.”

“Good evening, Mr Parker.” She smiles, offering the box to him. “This is for you.”

Now fully weary, Peter takes a half-step back.

“From who?”

“It arrived this morning. It’s Dolce&Gabanna.” She shows him the logo on the box. “I was meant to put it in your room, but we had to up security for your arrival at Mr Stark’s instructions... anyway, here you go.”

Peter ends up taking it, still a little thrown, and opening it after a careful sweep from K.A.R.E.N that identifies no immediate dangers.

It’s another suit.
It’s grey this time—with a midnight-blue silk tie and a crisp white shirt. There’s a note.

_Wear me – TS_

“Mr Parker; it’s such an honor to meet you.”

Alarmed, Peter shakes the congresswoman’s hand. “Uh, thanks. You too.”

”A good cause, hm? There were so many families affected by the Chitauri attack, I'm sure they are feeling the strain even all these years after.”

Peter thinks of Mr Toomes, and has to agree. Mr Stark donated to goal immediately after the event began, so all the other donations are in excess of the fundraiser's objective--Peter wonders what the Vulture would have thought about that. He probably would have taken the money; he's a practical guy.

“So, no TV interview? I heard Ellen had a whole hashtag to promote you being on her show.” She smirks. “You’re such a mysterious figure; all those sporadic Tweets and artsy pictures... my daughter is obsessed. She’s eleven, but still. Her and her classmates just love you.”

Peter laughs shakily, looking around for an out. He lost his teammates amongst the crowd within minutes of arriving at the event, and he’s stranded in the corner of the ballroom; he drifted to the sideline because the way voices carry in this grand room was giving him a headache, and it was being exacerbated by the powerful smells of food with a bitter undercurrent of alcohol and perfume. “Uh, yeah, well, we’re pretty busy, usually.”

“Oh, no doubt, no doubt—“

“Peter, there you are!”

Peter turns to find none other than Pepper Potts coming towards him, a confident smile on her face. She looks breathtaking; her hair is down to her shoulders in waves, and she’s wearing an elegant red dress.

“Tony and Sam are looking for you. Sorry, congresswoman...” She puts her arm around Peter’s shoulders and starts to steer him away. “Something’s come up; Avengers business, I think. Very secretive.”

“Bye!” Peter calls, and lets her walk him back towards the throng of dinner guests and millionaires, where he suspects neither Mr Stark nor Sam actually await his presence.

Sure enough, he soon spots Sam and Steve, but they look busy and anyway Pepper keeps walking. The pair are talking to a blonde woman near one of the tables—she’s in a black suit and, judging by the little frisson his spidey-senses send him, Peter’s pretty sure she’s armed. Her stance reminds him of the SHIELD agents at the compound.

“You’d have been standing there for hours, trust me,” Pepper says under her breath, smiling at people they walk by, politely declining champagne from a waiter with the shake of her head.

Peter wishes she were easier to dislike. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She winks at him. “Plus, the longer you make people wait on that TV interview the more interest you garner. And although I’m upset that there’s a price on your head, the sympathy
vote carries a lot of weight. You gained a throng of distraught fans when that picture with Steve came out.”

“Huh.” He’s not sure how he feels about that.

“I know, it’s pretty messed up, right?” She scrunches up her nose in sympathy. They pass Natasha and Bucky holding court to a group of government workers and their secret service agents, but Pepper keeps going and it feels impolite to ask to stop. “That’s how a lot of this works, sadly.”

They are coming up to the middle of the room, where a crowd is huddled under the massive chandelier, near a voice that is intimately familiar.

“Hey, Tony,” Pepper calls, and people suddenly stop talking.

The crowd parts and reveals Mr Stark at the center. “Pep—Peter.” He smiles tightly. His gaze goes to Peter’s suit, then away. “If it isn’t two of my favorite people.”

At first, the only thought in Peter’s head is that Mr Stark has kissed both of them, but only two people in this group know this.

“Congresswoman Phillips was trying to book an exclusive interview with our little prodigy,” Pepper says. “I had to rescue him.”

And suddenly the onlookers that were surrounding Mr Stark are surrounding Peter and Pepper, too—flowing so that the circle at the middle shifts to include them.

He doesn’t like this.

“Peter’s too busy saving lives to sit down with the ladies from the View,” Mr Stark says, stepping towards Peter and patting his shoulder. Peter doesn’t lean into it for fear of what his body will do, but the swooping sensation in his stomach is like anti-gravity. “She can re-watch his press conference if she wants.”

The fan-club around them chuckles.

“I saw it,” an older man says. “Lots of questions about your age. I had some of them myself, I have to admit, before my grandson showed me all those videos of you doing those incredible things.”

Pepper leans sideways to whisper something in an undertone in Mr Stark’s ear. “Remember when you had me call in the press core for him three years ago? That would have been a disaster.”

Peter frowns. “Called the press for what?”

Mr Stark freezes, and Pepper looks mildly startled. Then her eyes widen. “Oh, your hearing! Wow, that’s impressive.” She smiles. “When you turned us down, remember?” Her smile becomes a touch melancholy as she beckons Peter forward, so as not to be overheard by anyone else. “It pushed Tony to make a different announcement.”

And suddenly Peter gets it.

He’d watched the engagement video—the timeline had seemed strange, but he hadn’t really questioned Mr Stark and Ms Potts getting engaged later in the same day of his first visit to the Avengers compound. It had been a massive press conference, and a heartfelt proposal.

“You called the press?”
That was a test, right? There’s nobody back there?

Yes, you passed.

“You actually...?” There are too many people around. He can’t—“Okay, I’m gonna... I need to take care of something. Uh, Director Fury wanted me to do something, so I’m gonna... go.”

He turns and leaves, not trusting himself to control his features.

“Peter?” Pepper calls after him.

“Peter.”

He keeps going, wading through the guests and tables, ducking and weaving and trying to go unnoticed.

“Peter.”

Mr Stark calling his name doesn’t really help with that last part.

“Peter, wait.” He hears him follow, and walks faster.

From a nearby area, Wanda spots him and starts to walk in his direction, but Peter throws her a strained smile and shakes his head.

“Peter, wait—“

He finally turns around near the big double doors at the entrance, because he doesn’t want this to become a scene and there are too many people who track Mr Stark’s every move within a room, himself pitifully included. At least no one is near this space, and those looking are too far away to hear what’s being said.

“I’m.” Angry. He’s flushed and short of breath and he feels lied to. He’s pretty sure he’s angry and hurt. “Why did you let me think that?”

Mr Stark comes to a halt in front of him.

“I’m sorry. It was... convenient.” He huffs. “You took us all by surprise.”

“And then you decided to propose to...?” his throat tightens and he cuts himself off. Anger. He’s holding on to that. “You could have told me. Later, you could have—“

“I know.” Mr Stark’s eyes travel down to the fit of Peter’s tie around his neck. He tied it himself, no help needed, and Mr Stark seems to approve of the knot. “I suppose I wanted you to think I had planned it that way, instead of...” He keeps looking down, at the cut of the suit narrowing into Peter’s waist. “Being...” He gets to the very bottom of the tie. “...caught off guard...”

“Sir,” Peter says, pointedly.

Mr Stark’s gaze snaps back up to his face, but his jaw is clenched tight.

“I told you not to do that, please.”

“Sorry.” His anger and hurt seem to be receding already, but the flush isn’t. Neither is the shortness of breath.
Mr Stark seems to shake himself. “No, I—I screwed the pooch, this time. That poor dog has been through a lot.” He scratches the back of his neck. “I should have told you when you joined the team, you’re right. Maybe even before that; while we were hanging out with the good doctor up in space. Probably could have told you then.”

They were admittedly pretty busy.

“I was really impressed by your choice, Peter.”

“Thanks.” Yeah. The flush is definitely getting worse. “Still wish you’d told me sooner, Mr Stark. I thought that—when you said all that stuff at the first press conference, the one that went viral before I made the decision about my big Spider-Man revelation... I wasn’t sure you meant it. I thought you’d only been testing me back then, so I wasn’t sure you actually... wanted me. On the team, now.”

Mr Stark doesn’t say anything for a long moment, but he looks saddened.

“I’m not sure how to make the fact that I want you now, on the team, any clearer.”

Peter’s ears are burning.

“If there is anything else I can do you should name it.”

Peter shakes his head. “No, I get it.”

“Do you? I thought I was being pretty liberal with my compliments. Maybe I need to step it up.”

“That’s.” Oh, he wants to ask for it—but it will just lead to that ache getting worse. “You don’t have to do that. Don’t do that.”

Mr Stark watches him. “As you wish.” He clears his throat. “Anyway, if it helps, the other reason I didn’t tell you about calling the press that time is that I didn’t want it to get out that proposing to Pepper had been a backup plan.”

Peter huffs. “Okay.” He searches for any vestiges of the anger or the hurt inside of himself, but they dissipated too quickly to find. “It’s... okay, Mr Stark. Really.”

Mr Stark considers his words. “I don’t think I deserved that.”

Peter shrugs. “And yet.” He gives him a small smirk and starts to walk away.

“Where are you going?”

Peter motions towards the lobby. “Oh, I’m going to sleep.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. M’tired.” He’s telling the truth. “Gotta rest up for patrol again tomorrow.”

Mr Stark nods, understanding. “Sleep well.”

Peter wonders if he has any idea how much better he’d sleep if he was with him.

Someone knocks on his bedroom door at midnight.
Peter slides off the king-size bed and activates his shooters out of habit, running through options in his head. His heart skips a beat at the thought of it being Mr Stark, and so it’s entirely likely that he appears visibly disappointed when he sees who is actually there.

“Hello Mr Parker.” It’s the same staff member who brought him the suit earlier. “I have another package for you.”

Peter frowns. “What?”

She hands him a small, square box. Her eyebrows lift suggestively. “Rolex, this time.” Her tone is admiring. “You’re making someone happy.”

Peter doesn’t bother correcting her, too busy opening the box incredulously. The door shuts just as he takes out a sharp, beautiful silver Rolex watch with a red and blue dial, and—sure enough, signs of nano-particle casing. There’s probably some version of a built-in Spider-suit in there.

“Holy crap,” he mutters.

The note this time simply says: From TS.

Peter opens his door again and steps out into the corridor in his white-and-pink Britney shirt and pajama shorts, barefoot. The hotel staff member is gone, and the whole length of it is empty. His room is adjacent to Wanda and Vision’s on the right and Sam’s on the left. Everyone is being quiet right now.

Mr Stark's door is in front of his.

He walks right up to it knocks.

There’s no reassuring F.R.I.D.A.Y to interact with this time, and Peter has enough time waiting to decide that he’d prefer Mr Stark not be in his room instead of for him to answer with someone else in there, but when the door does open it's to Mr Stark alone, and no one else.

"Peter."

He doesn’t look like he was asleep. He’s still in his suit from the event but without the tie, and his shirt unbuttoned at the top. He looks incredible, unfortunately for Peter.

"Are you okay?"

Peter holds up the Rolex.

Mr Stark blinks. "Is there a problem?"

"I. This is... a lot."

The elevator at the far end of the hall dings.

They both react immediately; Mr Stark steps aside and grabs Peter's wrist, tugging him into the room, and Peter kicks the door shut behind him and ends up slamming his back against it.

They stay silent for a while, Mr Stark still holding Peter's wrist, panting. His room is once more a mirror version of Peter's; spectacular view out of a wall of windows included—a view that faces the Washington Monument. Ironically, Peter feels similarly now, pressed up against this door and caged in by Mr Stark’s body, than he did when he leapt onto a helicopter without a guarantee that he would live to see another day.
He looks up at Mr Stark, who is mostly illuminated by the blue moonlight. He also imagines he can see the faint glow of the housing unit under his white shirt.

"What did you want to talk about?" Mr Stark asks quietly. Maybe he hasn't realized that he hasn't let Peter go.

"The watch," Peter answers, just as quiet. The pads of Mr Stark's fingers are rough, which makes sense given what Peter knows about Mr Stark's safety standards when it comes to himself, and his work. Maybe if he thinks about safety standards instead of how the scratch of those calluses on his tender skin feels good, he won't embarrass himself again.

"What about it?"

"You bought me a watch."

"Yes."

They are standing close enough that Peter could lean forward and rub his cheek against Mr Stark's beard—or hell, just kiss him. He won't, because he gets why it would be a terrible idea, but he could.

"You don't like it?"

"I like it," Peter says quickly. "I love it, but." It's hard to put into words. "I'm the only one on the team with a watch like this, right?"

Mr Stark stills.

"Mr Stark?"

He tightens his grip around Peter's wrist. "You can throw the watch in the trash for all I care, kid."

"Would you get me another one?"

"Yes." Spoken without hesitation. "Whatever you wanted."

Peter lets out a shaky breath. He wants to ask Mr Stark to squeeze tighter, and that's—wrong.

"The hotel staff is going to think you're paying me in expensive gifts."

"Paying you for what?"

Peter meets Mr Stark's dark eyes. He doesn't say it.

After a long silence, Mr Stark asks: "Are you ever going to call me Tony?"

It's Peter's turn to go still. He stops breathing, in fact.

Mr Stark lets go of his wrist, slowly, and Peter can't answer him, can't breathe and certainly can't speak, and when Mr Stark's hand comes up to gently pet his hair he also loses his ability to think. His body takes over; heat and shock, the reassuring touch anything but.

"It's okay. You don't have to."

The Rolex falls to the floor with a clink.

Peter feels suspended on the edge of gravity, weightless.
Is the gift the phone? The watch? The suit? The kiss? The... other stuff?? YOU DECIDE

I know that ending was a bit cruel but next chapter will definitely not take much longer to post, love you guys for your patience. I am having the BEST time writing this and reading your comments brings SO MUCH JOY INTO MY LIFE I can't even tell you (!!!!!!!)

If you have a moment to share some words I will be so incredibly grateful, but either way thank you for reading along!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Are you ever going to call me Tony?

Eventually, Peter musters up the courage to ask: "Do you want me to?"

Mr Stark’s hand is on his hair, not in it, but it feels like it’s slowly sinking.

“Sometimes.”

Peter locks his muscles to prevent a full-body shudder.

“Sometimes?” he echoes.

"Yeah. Other times... think I made it clear what I want.” He lets out a jagged breath. “I want stuff I shouldn’t, Peter. I’m selfish like that.”

He slowly amasses a clump of Peter’s locks between his fingers but doesn’t apply pressure; just holds onto them, turning Peter’s spine into a live wire.

“Told you you could have it,” Peter mutters.

The hand in his hair tightens and Peter leans more heavily against the door, strength leaking out of him. He can smell Mr Stark’s deodorant, a tinge of sweat, and the product that his dry-cleaner used for his suit.

“That’s a bad idea, kid.” Mr Stark uses the grip he has to tip Peter’s head back, just enough to stare him directly in the eyes again. “I want the best things for you. Always. And letting me do that wouldn’t be good for you.”

“I think it would be good—“

“Healthy,” he cuts in, mouth tugging into a reluctant smile. “Healthy for you.”

Peter nods, once, because of course he understands. But when he nods it does things to the grip Mr Stark has on him, and right now he wants to be touched more than he wants to be healthy, or good.

"If you want to sleep over I'm going to take the couch," Mr Stark adds.

Peter feels the need to gently point out that: "There's no couch in this room."

"Oh. Right. Fair point."

There’s a pause.

“So you’re gonna let me go?” Peter asks.

Mr Stark's shoulders slump in defeat at the question. “I’m working on it,” he mutters.

“...I meant right now.”

Mr Stark freezes, and then chuckles under his breath. “Fuck.” He looks away from Peter’s eyes. “In
my defense... not that I’m in a defensible position here, but—I can’t fucking think when you’re wearing that shirt.”

The compliment—because it is one, this verbal confirmation of Peter having an effect on him—goes right to Peter’s stomach, and he draws his lower lip into his mouth to help contain another embarrassing noise.

Mr Stark notices him do it, and his features lose all trace of humor. He tracks the motion, and the hunger in his expression makes Peter feel completely reckless. So much so that he slowly lets his lip unfurl from under his front teeth, watching Mr Stark watch him do it.

Mr Stark exhales like he was punched.

"You in this goddamned shirt, Peter, Christ,” he rasps.

Peter’s skin feels like it’s irradiating heat into the air. Maybe that’s why he’s shivering; because he’s losing all the warmth in his body to the outside.

“And those damned shorts, too.”

Peter’s face is on fire with blush.

“How am I supposed to...”

Peter waits, trembling.

Mr Stark hasn’t looked away from his mouth.

Peter takes in a half-breath. “Sir—“

The word is cut off by the press of Mr Stark’s lips.

Peter whimpers gratefully, opening up to let him in. His tongue tastes sweet and his beard scratches against Peter’s flushed cheeks, creating little currents of electricity—but Mr Stark pulls away almost immediately, shaking his head.

“Fuck, this is...” he glances at Peter’s mouth again, as if he can’t help it, and then wrenches his gaze to the side. “This can’t happen. I have to be better.”

He steps away, letting go of Peter’s hair, giving Peter an excessive, horrible amount of space as cold air hits his skin instead of the warm weight of Mr Stark’s body. Peter can’t take another round of self-flagellation and guilt; not after a kiss that was somehow ever shorter than the first one. Left so wanting.

"Dammit," Mr Stark swears. "I swear, I'm not trying to be a selfish asshole. It just comes natural.”

Peter lets out a shaky breath. "It's okay, Mr Stark."

"It's not. I'm trying to be good to you, and I'm messing it up, over and over." He sits down on the bed, heavy, and runs a hand through his hair. "Kid, I gotta be honest--I've been trying not to fuck this up for a while, and I am failing. I'm not used to constant failure; me. And now that I know what it... feels like, that." He's looking down at the floor at Peter's feet. "That's made it harder, if anything."

Peter winces at his poor choice of words, and Mr Stark snorts faintly, like he heard it too.

"Anyway, I'm trying. And I'll keep trying. That's all I can say."
"Please stop trying, Peter wants to tell him."

"...I meant it, about you crashing here, by the way," he adds, sighing. He gets up and motions to the slightly rumpled bed, deferential. "You are welcome to the bed."

"I'm not kicking you out of your own bed, Mr Stark."

"It's fine, I--"

“No,” Peter interrupts. "I don't want to do that."

Mr Stark clasps his hands in front of him. "Okay. What do you want?"

Peter thinks about it--really thinks about it, and knows Mr Stark is patiently waiting for his answer. There is a strange, heady sense in the air as the seconds pass; as though he could ask for anything he wanted right now, and it would be granted to him. It's something about Mr Stark's pose, maybe, or the look in his eye... a suggestion that Peter could ask for a kiss, a car, a foreign country, a plane, a fuck. Anything he wanted. Literally.

He takes a step forward, feeling, in this moment, like he's the most powerful man in the world, instead of the person standing near him.

"Guess I should get some sleep."

"...All right."

He walks over to the bed and kneels onto it, conscious after Mr Stark's comments of how tight is shirt is and how it rides up when he moves--conscious of just how short his shorts are, and how the fabric stretches over his ass.

"I can take the floor--"

"Don't.” He scoots to the side, making space. The beds here aren't quite as large as the ones at the compound but there is still plenty of room, and Peter doesn't move all the way to the edge for fear that he won't be able to smell Mr Stark as close anymore. "Please, Mr Stark."

Mr Stark immediately sits down at the edge of the bed again, which isn’t quite what Peter wanted but at least comes close.

“Please could have me start a war, if you said ‘please’ like that,” he murmurs. “You know that, right?”

Peter feels another flare of that heady feeling from before. It's like a high, almost. He wonders if Mr Stark knows what Peter would do for him if he said ‘do it’. No please needed.

“I had all these grand ideas about never touching you,” Mr Stark mutters. His breathing isn’t quite even, yet. “No matter how...” He clenches his jaw.

He looks down at Peter and Peter wishes he’d lie down, next to or preferably on top of him.

“I wanted you to,” Peter says. As if Mr Stark didn’t already know that.

Mr Stark’s eyes drift from his face down his body, intent to a degree that turns look into touch.

“It’s gonna kill me not to do it again,” he says. “But I can’t.”

Peter knew that was coming.
“I know.”

Silence.

And it turns out, they don’t actually speak any more after that. After a while, Mr Stark finally lays down next to him, fully clothed. They are closer than they used to be; brought together by the smaller mattress and the fact that they are no longer at opposite ends of the bed. In fact, they are almost touching, now.

Almost.

* *

He wakes up around four in the morning and slides out of Mr Stark’s bed, thinking of how it felt when Rhodey unexpectedly showed up at the compound. A hotel seems a much riskier place to get caught.

Having made sure to listen to the corridor outside, Peter grabs the watch off of the floor and opens the door. He makes it the couple of steps to his room without incident.

His own bed feels cold.

* *

They are supposed to fly back to the compound early the next day, and Peter will leave from there for patrol with Sam.

When he opens his hotel room door he finds himself face to face with Mr Stark on the other side of the corridor.

Mr Stark was clearly on his way out as well, since he has his suitcase in hand just like Peter does, but they both go still and stare at each other for a moment.

The door next to Peter’s opens. “Hey, Tony. Peter.” Sam is also coming out of his room, overnight bag slung over his shoulder. “You guys sleep okay?”

Mr Stark shrugs. “Sure.”

When Peter doesn’t answer (his pulse is still recovering), both Mr Stark and Sam turn to look at him.

“Pete?” Mr Stark prompts.

“Oh, I slept great. Awesome.” Overdid it. “I mean, it was fine. I’m all set for patrol today.”

Sam snorts and motions for them to head to the elevator. “Tony, I actually wanted to ask you for a favor.”

“Shoot,” says Mr Stark, walking in step with him. Peter trails after them.

“D’you think you could take patrol for me today?” Mr Stark’s rolling suitcase skids on the carpet. “Bucky had a flashback and I think he could use some counseling. Asshole won’t admit it, but...”

“Of course, Sam.”

“You sure? I know you and Steve have a bunch of big picture stuff going on...”
Mr Stark makes a dismissive gesture. “He’ll cover for me if he knows who the cause is for.”

Sam shakes his head. “I’m sure he’d cover for you anyhow, man.” He smiles. “Plus you get to work with our best recruit. It’s a great deal.”

Mr Stark chuckles, and it sounds completely natural. “I know it is. I recruited him in the first place.”

They reach the elevator, and Peter stops a couple of feet behind them, in time for both men to turn and look at him.

“You don’t mind, right Peter?” Mr Stark asks.

Peter makes himself grin. “Nah.”

Sam smiles, too. “Good. I mean it’s a huge loss for you, obviously, but we’ll hang out some other time. Promise.”

“Deal.”

The elevator arrives with a ding and they all step into it. Just as the doors are about to close, Wanda’s voice says: “Hold it!” and a red current of energy stops them. Sam laughs and Mr Stark steps aside to make room for her and Vision, thus stepping closer to Peter. Their arms brush, and Peter feels a pathetic thrill. He looks up, but Mr Stark is looking straight ahead—his characteristic is beard neatly trimmed and perfectly shaped this morning, and he smells incredible.

In the ensuing shuffle and overlapping conversation, Peter checks the time on his new watch and wonders what the hell is going to happen next.

What happens next is: they are in the middle of the ocean, and cut off from communication.

The pulse of energy wiped out K.A.R.E.N’s ability to access her online files, or send any type of signal, or link into the internet in any way. F.R.I.D.A.Y fared no better, because all they have is comms.

“Peter,” Mr Stark says in his ear. “My scans are done. There are no other life forms in the whole rig.”

“Copy,” Peter says, walking up the ramp back to the main control tower. The blue overalls scratch his sensitive skin and smell like seawater and must. “Guess we should figure out how we’re going to get out of here.”

The energy pulse had another major consequence.

“Yeah.”

Neither one of their suits is working.

“Meet me in the control room. Looks like a storm is brewing.”

The nanotech was stunned out of synchronization by the blast, and completely deactivated.

The comms are literally all they have.
Four hours earlier...

They fly over in their suits; all the better to save on fuel. The Iron Spider armor keeps Peter perfectly insulated so when Mr Stark shoots through the sky faster than airplane speed with him in his arms he barely feels the air resistance. K.A.R.E.N updates him on their progress as they make their way to the oil platform where the European faction of SHIELD had detected suspicious activity. It’s essentially in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and it's supposed to be abandoned.

Natasha offered to swap out for Sam as soon as she heard that Mr Stark would, but Maria Hill wanted her back in Gargan’s prison because there has been a development in the case. Gargan slipped up, and instead of ‘powerful friend’ he said ‘she’. So with Thor tracking the villain in outer space and Natasha worming the truth out of the Scorpion, they are finally incredibly close to figuring out who is orchestrating the very public murder of Peter Parker.

And so it’s them, shooting across the sky together.

“You doing okay, Pete?” Mr Stark says in his ear.

Peter is feeling very damsel-esque from his position in Mr Stark’s arms. His armor is lithe and form fitting where Mr Stark’s is plated and impressive—it makes him feel small, and not unpleasantly so.

“Doing great, Mr Stark,” he says, trying to sound professional as possible. He gives him a thumbs up, looking up at the Iron Man mask where it’s impossible to try to read any expression.

“Good. We’re almost there.”

White clouds pass them by in a blur, and as Mr Stark begins his descent Peter can distinguish the blue of the sea far below, and the structure of the oil rig.

There are four struts at each pole and a tower at the middle that must house the control room. Their brief warned about electromagnetic activity and unstable ions being detected by SHIELD scan tech, but on preliminary sweep neither F.R.I.D.A.Y nor K.A.R.E.N can tell that anything is wrong.

Mr Stark lands them in the helicopter pad at midlevel, and deposits Peter to the ground with care. The Iron Spider armor takes some concentration to be coaxed to walk away from the Iron Man, and Peter makes a mental note to go into the programming one of these days and make it a bit less instinctive, or the consequences are going to be embarrassing.

That's when everything goes wrong.

*

Present

Peter takes a running leap up another set of steps and shoots a web up at the top of the tower. The roar of the sea sounds like thunder, even it hasn’t actually started pouring yet. He hoists himself up and catches hold of a slippery railing; lifting himself with one arm and landing on the small metal balcony.

“I’m not going to lie, Peter; this one is embarrassing. I’m embarrassed.”

Mr Stark is waiting inside the control room. He left the door open for him.

Peter smirks and walks inside. “Don’t worry Mr Stark; it happens to every guy one time or another.”
Mr Stark snorts and the crinkle-lines around his eyes come back, making Peter’s heart stutter. “You’re funny. Funny little spiderling.” He’s wearing the sporting gear he had on under the nanotech suit. “But you can be sure that whatever Electro used to make that electromagnetic bomb, I’m creating a safety mechanism against it first damn thing tomorrow.”

Peter nods, certain that Mr Stark isn’t bluffing. If he was back at the compound he would probably get that done within the hour.

"I wish I'd brought my new watch," he says. "We'd have more to work with to build a signaling device."

"Don't worry about that. We'll boost the ear-comms to do it," Mr Stark says, nodding. "Lots of rust has had time to gather 'round here, but there's plenty of material."

"Right." A task. They have a task in front of them. "I can do a sweep of the structure, if--"

"Probably don't need to. Most of the stuff we need has to be in this room."

Peter has to concede that point, since the control panels alone must house thousands upon thousands of cables, and the technology is old but the microcircuitry should still conduct as designed, if sparked.

They get to work at stripping the boards, with Peter taking over the moments when brute force is needed and Mr Stark tinkering with his earpiece at the table where they have set up their primary construction.

“At least the seagulls left this room alone,” Mr Stark comments.

"Yeah." Peter wrenches another panel from the wall and presents it to him for inspection. "What do you think?"

* Two hours earlier...

"Why not tell us?" Peter gasps, fighting and flailing in a grey undershirt and underwear, with only his web shooters and no shoes on since the Iron Spider armor vanished minutes ago.

"That's not how this works, Parker," Electro snarls, shooting a beam of pure, crackling electricity at the space Peter was just occupying. "I shoot first, and then I don't ask questions."

"But it'd be..." he gasps, jumping from one rung up to the next, trying to get Electro to chase him up the north-east strut. "It'd only be fair, don't you think? If you're gonna kill me for a prize, don't I--ah!"

One of Electro's shots grazes his arm, and he swings himself over to the other side, hoping the metal crossbeams are dense enough to block the energy. It's not acting like real electricity; doesn't conduct the way it should. "Don't I deserve to know what I'm worth? Before I die for it?"

"It doesn't matter," Electro says, climbing after Peter slowly, as though he has all the time in the world. Peter feels a surge of relief that he is being followed; if Electro is chasing him, then he's not going after an armor-less Mr Stark down below.

"It does to me!" he shouts. The wind is picking up; Mr Stark was right, a storm seems to be coming.

Electro is wearing rubber gloves, which goes against everything the laws of physics say, but they help Peter in that the moisture on the metal struts isn't great for purchase, and he's having to fo slower
"Is it money? Because we have money—we can get you money."

"It's not money," Electro spits. The mask he's wearing is dirty-yellow and doesn't cover his eyes; maybe it belonged to part of a hazmat suit before, but it's faded since then. He looks disgusted at the suggestion. "I don't kill people for money."

Peter peeks his head around to look at him, then immediately retracts when a beam of energy is shot his way. "Okay, okay! What do you kill for, then?"

"There is only one thing on this planet powerful enough to give me the reality that I want."

Peter has no idea what Electro wants, but—

The reality that I want. What a strange way to phrase that answer.

He freezes. The wind whips at his exposed skin and his hair, vicious and salt-dense. The sea is getting angrier, more agitated, waves crashing against the sides of the abandoned rig.

The reality that I want.

Reality.

The Reality Stone.

"Oh my god."

All those desperate killers Gargan set on him... they have been promised the Reality Stone. The ability create anything they want; to alter the fabric of the universe.

"Who told you--"

"Hey! Sparky!"

Both Peter and Electro look down, at where Mr Stark is pointing a really, really big gun up in the air.

"Look what I found in your stash!"

He fires.

Electro jumps from his position and shoots a beam that looks a lot like a lightning bolt up into the sky, creating an earsplitting noise and somehow propelling himself upwards with it. Mr Stark fires after him but a bubble of raw energy has surrounded Electro's suit, either absorbing or deflecting the shots, Peter can't tell, and then Electro lands on a faraway boat, which powers up the second his feet touch its surface.

"Dammit," he breathes, watching him go.

"Dammit," Mr Stark grunts, tossing the gun to the ground and looking up at Peter. "You okay up there?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Don't think he's coming back."
"Me neither." He starts his descent. 

"Hey, Peter."

"Hm?"

"Should probably find you some clothes."

"...Yeah."

Present

Hunger combined with the smell of his musty overalls are starting to make Peter nauseous, but he keeps working through it, holding things for Mr Stark as directed and making suggestions of his own--most of which Mr Stark approves of.

"It'll be monophasic, though--"

"You're right, but that's fine, as long as they pick it up we don't need to hear confirmation. I think sacrificing biphasic signaling for distance's sake is probably our best bet right now."

Peter nods. "Okay. Should I bypass the compressor, then?"

Mr Stark narrows his eyes. "Is that a quote? I thought I'd made my opinions on your 80s references perfectly clear."

Peter blinks innocently. "It's The Force Awakens. I was totally alive when that came out."

That makes Mr Stark snort, with a bit of a wince in there. "And how old were you, twelve?"

"Thirteen."

"Fucking Christ." Mr Stark seems to lose steam for a moment, before leaning forward and going at it again. "Just hand me the wrench, please."

Peter does, and unzips the top half of his uniform when he can't take it anymore. It's cold in the cabin, but not cold enough to dampen the smell the way he wishes it would. He shrugs out of the sleeves and ties them around his waist, like actors did in 90s movies--but defers a comment about it that would probably drive Mr Stark over the edge.

Thunder rolls outside.

He looks up to find Mr Stark looking at him, once again having paused his work. He'd been staring at Peter's chest, and waist, and now-bared arms.

The distant groan of wood and metal is the only audible noise for a long moment.

"Think it's going to rain," Peter says quietly.

Mr Stark looks away from him and clears his throat. "Sounds like it."

Peter leans against the table. "How could Electro have found out about the Reality Stone?"

"I don't know." Mr Stark sighs. "Only fourteen people on Earth know about it, and I trust every
single one."

For the first time, Peter has a thought he should have probably had sooner. "Fourteen people on Earth. But the Guardians of the Galaxy knew too, right?"

Mr Stark frowns. "Yeah. But if they told someone, it would be someone up there--are you suggesting an alien wants you dead?" But he seems to realize something even as he asks the question. "Are you suggesting one of those crazy Guardians told the Children of Thanos?"

Peter shrugs. "I don't know... maybe? Quill was so sad about that lady Gamora dying... maybe he thought it might help bring her back. Or they tortured it out of him."

"If that's what happened I'm going to design a rocketship and fly up there to kill him myself," Mr Stark mutters. "He already almost ruined everything on Titan--"

"I mean, we don't actually know what happened."

"No." Mr Stark twists the wrench with a touch of unnecessary force. "But I've been worried about Thanos' orphans for a while, kid." His eyes flicker back up to Peter. "Told you I worry about you."

Peter drops one of the microcircuitry boards he was holding, and quickly flings his arm down to catch it before it hits the floor and shatters. Luckily, his reflexes kick in on time.

"S-sorry. Here." He attaches it to their amplifier and carefully positions the ear comm in place. "Should probably send the signal."

"Right."

Mr Stark surveys their work for a moment, then nods with satisfaction.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

He flicks on the switch and a zap of electricity travels the circuitry in an instant, leaving behind a smoking pile of parts. They kept it simple; sending an SOS with their coordinates.

Peter stares down at the ruined remains of their hard work, and then looks over at Mr Stark. "That worked, right?"

"Only one way to find out. We'll know in a couple of hours--one and a half, if Sam is piloting."

In the distance, the sea is becoming more restless. Thunder rumbles again.

Peter looks out of the glass panels; the sky is dark as nighttime, and their only light is coming from the single lightbulb Mr Stark managed to bring back to life, along with the glow from the housing unit, which his sporting gear is designed to frame instead of hide.

"Not afraid of the rain, are you?" His tone is gently teasing, but Peter has the absurd thought that Mr Stark would try to figure out how to change the weather if Peter said 'yes'.

"I mean, the saying goes 'Down came the rain and washed the spider out'..." he says, but turns to grin at him.

Mr Stark smiles; a fond, uncomplicated smile that lights up his eyes. "You're hilarious."
Peter shrugs.

"That's not why you sleep in my room, though."

Peter feels the humor leech from his face.

Mr Stark lost the smile, too; now he looks grave, and apologetic. "Hey, there's no shame in sleeping better with another warm body nearby. I told you that weeks ago." It only works with a specific warm body, but Peter's not about to correct him. "But you... left, last night. In D.C."

"Yeah."

"Was it." He swallows. "Did I make you uncomfortable, earlier? Is that why--"

"Oh, no." Did he forget that Peter kissed him, the first time? "No, I just--I didn't want you to get in trouble. If someone saw me there."

Mr Stark nods, taking that in. "You don't have to look out for me like that. There was... nothing was happening that anyone could say anything about." His features are painted with guilt. "What happened at my penthouse, on the other hand..."

Peter feels his ears burn, and his cheeks heat. "That was my fault."

"No, it wasn't. I knew about your heightened senses before, and I..." He looks disgusted with himself. "I feel like I took advantage of—"

"No."

The words send a jolt of anxious energy to Peter’s muscles, and he walks all the way up to Mr Stark until he’s standing right in front of him.

“Don’t. That’s not.” He’s not even sure what he’s worried about, but he knows that that horrible notion is untrue, and that it’s important for Mr Stark to stop thinking it. “That’s not what happened.” He wants to shake him by the shoulders. He wants to... "At all.” If Mr Stark keeps thinking that, then...

Mr Stark looks up at him, and Peter can track the conflict in his eyes. Outside, bigger and bigger waves crash against the metal structure.

“It’s not, okay?” Peter repeats, louder, needing to be heard more than anything.

They stare at each other for a long moment; Peter breathing harshly with his fists clenched by his sides, and Mr Stark with a tick in his jaw and a weary expression.

Until, finally, Mr Stark nods slowly. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Peter echoes.

The thunder crescendoes and the loud batter of raindrops finally hits the glass windows.

Peter leans forward and kisses him.

He pours all the fervor he's been using in his imagination for weeks, and especially the past three days—and within seconds Mr Stark groans into his mouth, a sound like giving up, and presses Peter up against the panel with his hips, causing an audible thump.
He kisses Peter deeply, gratefully, and his hands are merciless; one goes straight to Peter’s hair and tugs and tugs and his other hand runs up and down Peter’s side, waist to chest, over his shirt but already making Peter’s knees go weak. The haphazard sleeve knot around his hips unfolds and the overalls slide down Peter's legs, pooling at his ankles. Within seconds Peter finds himself clutching the folds of Mr Stark’s jacket to hold onto something, feeling the spiral of stimulation swirl higher at a rocketing pace, too fast for him to rein it in—

“M-Mr Stark—“

Their mouths break apart again but this time it’s for Mr Stark to kiss the side of Peter’s neck, using his grip on Peter’s hair to tilt his head the way he wants it, making Peter jolt, elbow knocking against the counter when he moves.

“Call me.” Mr Stark sounds out of breath. “Say.”

There are two options on how to fill those gaps, one of which is going to rend open the guarded thing that lives in Peter’s heart way too soon.

“Please...” he gasps. “Please sir, please—“

“Fuck.” Suddenly Mr Stark’s impatient palm is burrowing under Peter’s shirt, directly touching the skin at his waist, and Peter makes a sound like he’s in pain, thrusting forward blindly as the sensation raises goosebumps all over his body. His dick slots into the cut of Mr Stark’s hip, but he’s too gone to care that Mr Stark will notice that he’s rock-hard. “Fucking hell, Peter.”

Peter hiccoughs, whimpering, overwhelmed. The scratch of Mr Stark’s beard against his neck combined with the soft wetness of his mouth, the press of his front, the skin to skin contact at his waist—he can’t take it. It’s too much too suddenly, he can’t--

“M-Mr St...” he gets another hair pull and his dick throbs, hips riding the pressure. He can feel that Mr Stark is hard, too. He squeezes his eyes shut, everything too much. “S-sir... please, I...”

Mr Stark grunts approvingly. “Already, huh?”

Peter makes an embarrassed noise. “Y-yeah, I... m’sorry...” his voice is a whisp. “S-sorry, sir...”

“You’re incredible.” The palm of Mr Stark’s hand slides up Peter’s flank to his torso, pulling his shirt up with it. “Amazing.” His thumb nudges Peter’s nipple.

Peter opens his mouth to warn him but what comes out instead is a surprised cry of pleasure as he comes.

He ends up rutting into Mr Stark’s hip while Mr Stark’s thumb is joined by his forefinger to pinch him, painfully and perfectly, making Peter cry out again, high-pitched, overstimulated. His underwear soaks through in moments, but the humiliation of ruining Mr Stark’s pants takes a backseat to the pleasure rocking through him, and Mr Stark keeps kissing his neck and grunting words of praise and approval almost directly into his ear and Peter’s never felt this good, ever.

“S-sorry,” he gasps into Mr Stark’s chest, feeling the edge of the housing unit on his cheek. He’s slumped against him, almost collapsed. “Sorry...”

Mr Stark keeps holding him as he trembles with aftershocks, breathing harshly into his neck, whispering “Don’t be,” against his skin every few seconds.

Minutes pass in a flood of endorphins and heavy panting.
When Peter creeps back into his senses he realizes that Mr Stark’s full hard length is still pressed up against his belly. He feels huge and insistent despite the fact that Mr Stark isn’t doing anything about it; is still just holding Peter upright.

Peter shifts his stance, carefully, as if he didn’t mean to, to rub up against his erection.

Mr Stark’s breathing stutters. Peter shifts again, arching his back just a little and getting a nice long drag of fabric against fabric.

Mr Stark goes completely still, and Peter arches his back again and rocks his hips forward, less subtle now, and before Mr Stark can say something that will stop him he says: “Please.”

“Fuck.”

“Please, sir…”

Mr Stark’s muscles are tense as bowstrings, and Peter rubs against him again, his own dick twitching with renewed interest already.

“Please,” He kisses under Mr Stark’s jaw, and relishes the shudder that causes. “Please, sir, I want it so much…”

“Fuck.” Mr Stark thrusts his hips forward, once, hard enough to slam Peter’s lower back against the panel again, and Peter hops up onto the panel to sit on it, creating a small space between his thighs. "What are you..."

Peter slides his hand between them, tucking his fingers under Mr Stark's waistband to cup him in his palm. The rain is still loudly pummeling the glass panels but Peter hears the sound Mr Stark makes when he touches him, and he will never forget it.

“F-fuck...” He lets go of Peter’s hair to brace himself against the panel, next to Peter's waist. He drops his forehead onto Peter's shoulder. “Jesus Christ.”

Peter’s ears are ringing as he strokes Mr Stark and hyperventilates and can’t even think, he’s so turned on.

"Please," he breathes. "Please, for me--"

"Christ, you make me crazy." Mr Stark shudders, shoulders tensing. "S'all for you Peter. Every goddamn thing I got."

Peter makes a soft noise, feeling himself fully harden again.

He presses his other palm against his groin for some pressure, but Mr Stark notices; maybe he was already looking down. He grabs Peter's wrist and moves it away, pinning it against the counter.

For some reason, that makes Peter even harder, and he feels a frisson of something shimmer down his spine. "M-Mr Stark..." He wants to ask for permission to touch himself again, just for the pressure, please, but finds that the words don't quite come out. "N-nh..."

"Like this," Mr Stark says. Tells him.

Peter trembles, and makes a noise that is much louder than he intended. The grip he has on Mr Stark’s cock has slackened in his distraction, and he tries to tighten it again but his bones feel like jell-o.
"W-what..."

"You're being so good like this."

Peter's eyes squeeze shut as the sensation takes him over. "I... I don't..."

"Good job." He could move his trapped wrist, if he wanted to. He's ten times stronger than Mr Stark... he tenses his forearm, ready to do it. Just some pressure, that's all he wants. "Don't."

He doesn't, and his dick twitches, letting a thin stream of precome leak into the mess in his underwear.

"M-Mr... Stark..." He feels... muddled. He's not sure why he feels so good, but he's moments away from going off in his underwear again. He's going to explode.

"You're so amazing. So good, Peter."

"N-nh..." He curls his toes, thighs tensing. "Want... you to..."

"You first."

And just like that, Peter comes, flooding his underwear a second time.

He twitches soundlessly for long, ecstatic moments and the thought that's making his head spin is that Mr Stark told him to, and when he feels Mr Stark's hand grip himself by interlacing their fingers he can only make a grateful noise. Mr Stark comes just two strokes later, hot wet stripes on Peter's fingers that feel perfect, proof of what just happened, proof that Mr Stark felt this good, too.

It's several minutes before either of them moves; Peter still sitting on the counter, Mr Stark still standing between his legs, head on his shoulder, both of them panting for breath.

Peter opens his mouth to speak, but Mr Stark beats him to it.

"Peter, I--"

But he's cut off when, suddenly, the storm surges up above, the thunder becoming so loud that Peter covers his ears, and then feels Mr Stark's hands cupping them over his hands, too. Lightning strikes the rig, hitting the very center of the helipad, and creating a crackling conduit--and a current of energy so powerful Peter feels the control tower sway in the air.

A figure--a man lands at the far helipad in the midst of all the flashing lights, and his billowing red cape identifies him instantly.

"Thor," Peter gasps.

A second later Mr Stark drops to his knees and Peter makes a strangled noise, but then realizes Mr Stark was grabbing his overalls to tug them back up to his waist.

"Not the time to break this to the rest of the team, probably," he mutters, giving Peter a pat atop his head.

"R-right--"

He acted just in time, because Thor flies up to them in a single leap, Stormbreaker in hand, and lands with a thud that shakes the whole structure of the tower. A powerful gust of wind flings open the door and sends it clanging against the wall, a rush of wet cold air filling the space.
"You were right, Stark. It is one of Thanos' orphans," he rasps, without introduction. "Peter's would-be killer. It's Proxima Midnight."

Chapter End Notes

I must apologize again for the wait! But I must... also hope I made up for it somewhat ;) We are ramping up to a close, which is crazy!!! Still SO much left to happen, and I'm so excited to share it with you!!! :D

Thank you so much for following along! <3 <3 <3 Any words you choose to share will be LOVED, deeply and endlessly <3
“She’s alive?” Bruce asks.

“Yes.” Thor leans his elbows against the table, looking at T’Challa’s hologram with a weary set to his massive shoulders. They are in the fishbowl meeting room at the compound; surrounded by SHIELD agents hard at work behind thoroughly sound-proofed glass. “She escaped the battle of Wakanda. And she is plotting vengeance for her father’s death.”

“We almost had her,” Nat says. “Wanda, Okoye and me... but it was right when the battle changed. When they felt Thanos die—she switched tactics, went from offense to retreat. Got away from us.”

“She was the only one to escape,” says T’Challa. “My scouts chased after most of the other creatures. M’Baku killed Corvus Glaive. Cull Obsidian was defeated by my Dora Milaje, with help from Dr Banner. But we did not have the resources to launch a full complement that day; we had suffered too many losses.”

“No one blames you for that, T’Challa,” Steve tells him.

“We knew she’d made it, too,” Hill admits. She always means ‘SHIELD’ when she says ‘we’. “We just didn’t know where she was; we figured licking her wounds somewhere. Not... this.”

Thor looks faintly disapproving. “She was not licking herself; she was preparing for a strike.”

“A strike against the compound?” Steve asks.

Bucky shrugs, like it’s obvious. “She promised Gargan’s men a prize she doesn’t even have. The compound is where the Reality Stone is. Where the Gauntlet is.”

“And it’s where Peter is.”

It’s the first thing Mr Stark has said this entire meeting. Everyone turns to look at him, Peter included. He didn’t sit down when everyone else did; he’d been standing at a corner of the room, looking out at the SHIELD agents on their workstations. He’s still in his dirty clothes from the mission on the oil rig; but he holds himself like he’s wearing one of his designer suits.

“He’s the one she’s been after this whole time. Not me. Not Strange. Not Nebula, who actually killed him.”

“Why, though?” Steve asks, seemingly to himself, too. “Why Peter?”

“Why an eighteen-year-old with spider powers instead of the keeper of the Time Stone or Iron Man?” Sam asks. “The kid is way easier to underestimate. No offense, Peter, but the choice seems —“

“That’s not it,” Natasha cuts in. “Not quite, anyway.”

Sam raises his hands in surrender immediately, motioning for her to continue.

“I’m sure it made her choice easier, but she has to be spread pretty thin. Her army was defeated. Her father was killed. She’s had to use humans to do her bidding.” Natasha looks up at Mr Stark. “I suspect she’ll go after Nebula at some point, but she has to start somewhere. And she knows that killing Peter would kill Tony, too. She doesn’t have to be a genius to figure that out; she has contacts
on Earth. And that’s two birds with one stone, which is something any desperate, angry creature with minimal resources would want.”

Peter slants a look at Mr Stark, but he’s looking back at Natasha.

“...Glad to hear I’m so transparent.”

She smirks slightly, almost sympathetically. “You always were.”

There’s a pause, and then Steve leans forward again. “Well, I don’t think for a second that she’s going to give up the Reality Stone to one of her human minions.”

“I agree,” says Mr Stark. “Did we figure out how the hell she found out about the Stone?” he asks Thor.

“I met with my friend Rabbit,” Thor responds. “And he told me that Peter Quill has been hunting down the orphans of Thanos in a quest for revenge of his own. Quill did not willingly share the information, but it is possible he may have been coerced.”

“...I’m going to kill him.”

“Stark, please.” T’Challa sounds tired. “I do not need to tell you that we all become reckless with grief.”

The words seem to strike a chord, as the anger recedes from Mr Stark’s gaze as quickly as it built up. “Sorry. You’re right.” He eyes T’Challa’s holo. “How are you so wise? I’m, like, five years older than you.”

“You’re thirty years older than Peter and he’s wiser than you, too,” Rhodey points out helpfully.

“All right, let’s bring this back,” Hill cuts in. “Thor. Did anyone up there give you a sense for her timeline?”

“A difficult estimate,” Thor says. “I suspect it will not be long before she attempts to kill Peter herself. There have been so many failed attempts already.”

Hill takes a bracing breath. “So... this means...”

“I know what this means.”

Everyone turns to look at Wanda, whose expression is weary but resolute.

“I must destroy the Stone as soon as possible.” She’s looking down at her hands; she has a fingerless glove on the left. “Tomorrow.”

“You can do it safely by then?” Steve asks, frowning.

“I can do it by then.”

“You left out a word, dear,” says Vision, and he doesn’t sound condescending because instead he sounds scared. Peter feels scared too, suddenly—it took him days to meet her, and she seemed so strangely fragile when he eventually did. Just how much of a toll do these expenses of power take on her?

“We can’t risk it getting into the wrong hands. I will do it.”
“Wanda—“

“I can do it,” she snaps. “And no one here can stop me.”

No one has the heart to argue with her; they all know she is right.

The meeting ends on that tense note, and Peter gets up to leave with the others. He barely had time to discard his overalls and throw on a pair of sweatpants that no longer feel clean; they called the emergency meeting immediately after Sam landed the Quinjet on the roof. He is desperate for a shower, not to mentioned starving and exhausted after the adventure at the oil rig.

“Peter, stick around,” comes Steve’s voice.

Peter can’t help looking to Mr Stark first—it’s instinctive. Mr Stark nods and motions for him to stay put, so he does.

Natasha shoots Steve a questioning look but he shakes his head minutely, so she leaves with the others. By the time the room has emptied, it’s just the three of them: Peter, Steve and Mr Stark. Peter sat back down but the other two men are standing at nearly opposite ends of the long conference table.

One of the SHIELD agents in the bullpen is looking at them curiously, but immediately ducks back to her desk when she realizes Peter noticed.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asks him.

“I’m okay.” Peter shrugs. “Feel better knowing who’s after me.” And he’s telling the truth.

Mr Stark snorts. “Only you, kid.”

Steve smiles faintly, but it vanishes soon. “Listen. Tony and I discussed this before the brief... there’s no easy way to say it, but here goes. You shouldn’t leave the compound anymore.” He leans his elbows against the back of a chair. “Not for patrol, not for your first TV interview, not to visit New York. Not until the situation has been handled.”

Peter feels himself pale.

If he can’t patrol then he’s useless to the team—more than that; he becomes a burden, someone they have to protect. It’s a step before they send him back to Queens, take away his Spider-suits, and force him to try to relate to other teens. He did that already; it felt like an intermission in his life, it was... hollow, and boring, and—

“I’m sorry, but it’s just not safe. You understand.”

Does he? He looks at Mr Stark.

“He’s right, Peter.”

Peter swallows. “When our suits deactivated it was me fighting the bad guy, on the rig.”

Mr Stark nods, heavy. “I know. But we can’t risk you getting hurt. The number of times you’ve almost died is getting ridiculous.”

“The job is always dangerous. We all ‘almost die’ on patrol every day, I thought that was part of—”

“This is different, Peter. This is an increasing number of hitmen taking up the specific task of killing
you, armed by a superpowered alien who is looking for revenge.”

“So I’m under house arrest.”

“Just for a short time.” Steve looks severe, but also apologetic. “We’ve all come to depend on you. Can’t risk it. It’s not safe.”

Peter looks at Mr Stark again.

“It’s not like there aren’t a million other ways you can help us without being in the field,” Mr Stark says pointedly. “The team can use your genius in the lab, and Wanda is going to try to destroy the Reality Stone in twenty-four hours. There’ll be enough excitement here.”

“We just want you to be safe,” Steve says again. “We need you too much.”

Peter looks at them both, one earnest face to the other.

"...Please," says Mr Stark.

The request catches Peter off guard. And so, for Mr Stark, Peter forces himself to consider the situation the way they are framing it. Reluctantly, he tries to think of it not as him being a burden, but as something valuable. Maybe even essential to the team. Too valuable to risk.

Maybe... he should just believe them.

They’ve told him enough times; certainly Mr Stark has made it a point to try to make him understand it.

“...Okay.”

Steve blinks. “Okay?”

“Yes. I’ll stay put.” Peter smirks a little. “I mean, you definitely need my cooperation, right? No way you can keep me under house arrest if I don’t agree to it.”

Mr Stark grins, beaming with what Peter can only describe as pride.

“Thanks for doing us the favor, Parker.”

“You’re welcome.” And he gets up and walks away without being dismissed.

The door is still sliding shut when Steve chuckles. "He's really something."

"...Sure is."

And Peter has to keep walking before he can hear the rest.

He tells May about his upcoming confinement via text and hops into the shower. The hot water is like a blessing, and he activates every single jet at its highest pressure setting, not even thinking about soap yet; just letting the stream flow over him, loosening the knots in his back muscles, his shoulders.

He doesn’t think at first, just closes his eyes and stands there. He has too much to think about, is the problem, and no energy left at this point. The sound of the rushing water takes over, becomes white noise, fills up his head and quiets down everything. Static.
A buzz.

Peter opens his eyes and looks out of the foggy glass. The screen of his Stark Phone lit up, probably with May’s reply. The phone is completely waterproof, so Peter slides the door open a crack and reaches over to pick it up, bringing it into the shower so he can answer the text.

It’s not May, though.

_Do you want to talk?_

It’s Mr Stark.

Peter considers his options—he does want to talk, but he doesn’t want to hear Mr Stark say ‘this can’t happen’ yet again. He also doesn’t want another apology, as if he hadn’t played a very active role in what happened. He wants to see Mr Stark because he always wants to see him, but he wants to hug him, or be hugged by him, and not have to worry about when the next time he’ll be allowed to touch him will arrive.

The phone buzzes three more times in his hand.

_You should eat something, too_

_I can bring food to your room, if you want_

_Don’t have to, though. If you’d rather not_

_i can talk, Peter replies. just showering first_

It takes him a split second after hitting ‘send’ to realize what he just revealed. Three extra letters at the end of a word that just gave Mr Stark a whole lot of unnecessary information.

Mr Stark takes several moments to reply.

_Right now?_

Peter’s belly tightens.

_yup_

_stark phone’s waterproofing is awesome_

_thanks again for my present_

Having sent that, he leaves the phone on the soap holder for a moment and pours some body wash onto his hands, forcing himself to start lathering up in an effort to take a break and distract himself—but the lather feels good, and feeling good just brings his thoughts back to Mr Stark, and the memory of his hands, and of wishing he were here. He soaps up his hair, being rough with it even though it doesn’t feel the same as when Mr Stark pulls at it. If Mr Stark were here he would probably tell Peter what to do, like he did at the rig—and oh, Peter likes that. Maybe Mr Stark would tell him how amazing he is again. Maybe, if Peter asked, Mr Stark would tell him when he’s being good and—and—

Peter blinks his eyes open, having just realized they’d slid shut. He looks down and finds himself slowly jacking his hard-on with a soap-slick hand, and stops. Shit.

He checks the phone, where there are two new messages from ‘TS’.
You're always welcome

Hope you're enjoying the jets after all that seawater

His wet fingers leave smudges on the screen but the phone seems to know what letters he wants to type.

i am

it’s good to feel warm

& clean

Mr Stark starts composing a reply almost instantly, this time.

That’s very good

Peter lets out a soft sigh. He’s so hard it aches, even though he came twice earlier today—but then, that’s never really been an issue for him.

I’m sure you do as good a job of that as you do everything else

Peter’s hand slides back down to grip himself. He hits the ‘dictate’ button on the screen and props the phone against the soap holder again.

“S’easy,” he says, and watches the words it’s easy get sent to Mr Stark. “Just soap and water.”

Still; there was some work to be done

We made a bit of a mess of you

Peter lets out a quiet moan and leans his back against the wall for support. The tile feels cool, but isn’t too cold against his skin, and he can still see his phone screen.

“Yeah,” he says, pumping his fist faster. “I... was a mess.” He’d washed his hands of the traces of Mr Stark in the Quinjet; now he wishes they were still stuck between his fingers. “Made a mess.”

Not anymore, I bet

You’re probably clean enough to eat off of

Peter whimpers, feeling the pressure suddenly build. He starts rocking his hips into his hand, staring at the screen through half-lidded eyes.

Peter?

“I-I’m almost done,” he chokes.

Very good

“Thank you...” His face is on fire, and he’s probably not speaking loudly enough for the phone to pick up anymore. “Almost... there...”

If you ask me

There’s a pause, and Peter bites into his lower lip, waiting, turned on out of his mind.
If you want me to tell you when to finish, ask me

Peter stares, reading the sentence three times over, panting in the mist of the shower.

And then the implication hits him like a sledgehammer to the gut. He curls his toes and tightens his grip around his dick to a near-painful chokehold, blood hot with the possibility—with what Mr Stark meant—a scenario where he has to ask for permission to—

“Oh G-od,” he groans, and comes.

It rocks through him in spasms; his stomach clenches tight and he aches his back, hips pumping into the air. “Oh...” He grips his hair with his other hand, and his eyes finally close as the rush of sensation takes over everything, warm and wet and fluid.

He recuperates slowly, drowsily. The water keeps falling, sluicing away all evidence, and for several moments he just breathes. The oppressive misty heat of the vapor coats his skin. He feels as though he himself is about to dissolve into a puddle, but the need to check his phone overrides that feeling and finally prompts him to shut off the water.

There’s only one word of text waiting. Peter.

couldn’t wait, he sends, fingers clumsy. The humiliation burns, molten in his gut. sorry

And then he sees that he also sent the ‘oh god’ before that.

*

By the time Peter sits on his bed in fresh pajamas (his NASA shirt and red shorts again) his limbs feel leaden, and his bones have no shape. His exhaustion is only surpassed by his hunger, and if he wasn’t starving he might have actually fallen asleep waiting for Mr Stark, nervous as he is about this ‘talk’ they need to have.

But Mr Stark doesn’t make him wait long.

“It’s Tony,” F.R.I.D.A.Y says, when someone knocks on Peter's door just minutes later. “Can he come in?”

“Yeah.”

The door opens.

“...yep, just bringing the kid some calories,” Mr Stark is saying over his shoulder, and Peter hears Vision’s approving voice out in the corridor. “Figured he can always use them.”

“Excellent idea; I did wonder if he was skipping dinner—“

“Not anymore, thanks to me. The universe can add that to the list of things I’ve done for it.”

Vision chuckles. “Indeed.”

“Night, Viz.”

The door shuts behind him and Peter sits up straighter, trying to appear far more alert than he feels.

“Hey Mr Stark.”
Mr Stark has a pizza box and a cautious look with him. He clearly showered, too; he’s in jeans and his MIT sweater. He looks good.

“Hey, kid.” The smell of warm cheese wafts into the room and Peter’s stomach rumbles very loudly. Mr Stark smiles. “Guess this was the right choice.”

Peter smiles back at him. “Thanks.” He motions to the foot of the bed and Mr Stark sits down on it, then places the box between them and opens it facing Peter, presenting an impressively large pie.

Peter grabs at a slice without waiting for an invitation, and takes a large mouthful—then makes a deeply ecstatic noise and takes another one. It's truffle oil and goat's cheese, and the best thing he's ever tasted, almost. He’s downed three large slices before he even thinks to speak or consider Mr Stark’s appetite, and about halfway through the fourth with Mr Stark still not eating he just gives up on caring. Mr Stark starts telling him about a nanotech programming update that will make the suits resistant to Electro’s blast and Peter eats until he’s uncomfortably full and dizzy with the double whammy of carbs and sleep-deprivation, vision swimming with exhaustion.

But.

This is the first time they’ve really been alone, since the rig, and they are supposed to talk. Peter wants to talk. He totally gets that it's important.

_Not the time to break this to the rest of the team_, Mr Stark said. And earlier: _Call me. Say._

“Good?” Mr Stark asks.

Peter nods. He hopes he’s not actually swaying where he sits, and its just his vertigo making him feel that way.

“You look tired.”

Peter winces. “Uh, yeah. I am, a bit.”

Mr Stark nods. “Should get some sleep.”

“Yeah.”

“We don’t have to talk now.” The look in his eye becomes careful again. “Or ever, if you don’t want to.”

Peter bites his lower lip. “No, I. I want to.” He shuffles forward on the mattress, earnest in spite of how he feels. "Please."

Mr Stark's gaze roves over his face, a quality to it that reminds Peter that he didn't let him eat a single bite.

"I told you what happens when you say 'please' to me like that," he says quietly.

Peter feels a light tremor shiver through his muscles. After the shower his skin felt scraped raw and now, after the food, he himself feels raw. Vulnerable, ’cause Mr Stark knows all his weak spots; knows him in so many ways.

Mr Stark stands up from the bed and Peter wants to say 'no' or 'come back' immediately.

What he says is: "Will you stay?" And he pitches it as a question; an actual inquiry instead of a request. He's actually rather impressed with himself and how steady his voice sounds; one might
even call his tone 'casual'.

Mr Stark stills, empty pizza box in hand.

"Vision hasn't walked in on me in forever." That's not quite true. "Not since I forgot to set my alarm for a meeting, anyway. I think he's learned to knock, is my point."

"That wouldn't be." Mr Stark smiles slightly. "That wasn't my first concern, though I have to admit it is one. Of... a few." He scratches the back of his neck. "But I'll stay if it's what you want."

Peter keeps watching him, and doesn't give him a 'yes' or 'no' or another 'please'. Instead, he waits. The purple bags under Mr Stark's eyes have been gone for days, even weeks, and his beard always seems to look neat lately; he seems so much better rested, and Peter knows he can't credit himself fully for it, but maybe... partially?

"Okay then."

The pizza box goes in the garbage dispenser which swallows it up with a whirring sound and sends it to recycling. Mr Stark walks back to Peter's bed; unhurried and graceful and seemingly unaffected by any of it.

He lies down next to Peter, on top of the covers.

Peter's eyes start to slide shut as soon as the familiar weight and smell settle near him, but then he remembers.

"Talk?" he manages to say, blinking his eyes open.

Mr Stark looks sideways at him. "How about tomorrow," he says, conspiratorial. The crinkles at his eyes are back.

Peter slides forward an inch, aching to be closer. "M'fine," he mumbles. "M'not that..."

Unfortunately, he interrupts himself with a yawn. "...tired."


Peter feels too good to protest again. He's so full and warm and safe and... perfect.

"That's it. Good job."

Peter's dick twitches in his pants and he almost wants to protest; he's exhausted, he can't do this a fourth time today--

Mr Stark gently cards his fingers through his hair, and Peter sighs happily and feels himself start to fade.

Distantly, he hears: "Good boy," right before he falls straight down into a dreamless, deep sleep.

* *

Peter wakes up in Mr Stark's arms.

He knows it from the moment he creeps into consciousness; the weight of Mr Stark's bicep is on his side and the press of Mr Stark's chest is against his back. Mr Stark must have fallen asleep too because his deep, rhythmic breathing is fanning against the back of Peter's neck. His leg is hooked
over Peter's thigh, trapping him, and Peter can feel the scratch of Mr Stark's beard against his nape, and the warm weight of him half on top of him. The smell of him is everywhere; with Peter's every inhale, both a comforting and utterly devastating thing.

Peter is essentially being spooned by the most powerful man in the world.

Mr Stark's arm tightens around him, pushing them closer together, and Peter lets out a heavy breath. He doesn't know what time it is, but it's light out and they should probably break away soon. Mr Stark should probably go back to his room. Probably.

"Peter."

Peter blinks, staring out at nothing; his desk across the room, where his beautiful new watch gleams at him.

"You should sleep a bit longer," Mr Stark rumbles, and Peter feels the vibrations of it right against his back, the way he can sometimes feel the bass of a song playing three rooms over. The press of the Housing Unit is body-warm, too; an angular indent. "Shh, c'mon. Rest up."

Mr Stark slides the leg that had been over Peter's away, and readjusts his weight so he's not half on top of him anymore, but his arm stays around him. And so, Peter stays.

*I*

"I need more coffee," Bruce says. "I need... so much more coffee."

"I gotcha, Banner." Mr Stark is manning the kitchen counter and providing things as requested by the others. He was already there when Peter walked into the common area (after waking up alone in his bed), chatting with Sam and Rhodey. Bruce joined them shortly after, and then Thor came back from a jog and plopped himself on the stool next to Peter. "Anyone else? Pete?"

"No thanks." Peter motions to his still mostly-full mug and gives him a businesslike nod, which Mr Stark returns.

"I'll have some."

They look up at the arrival Natasha, who is dressed for patrol, and Wanda, who is practically dressed for battle.

"With the day I'm about to have, I think I need some strength," Wanda mutters, looking at Mr Stark. "Please, Tony."

"You bet."

Mr Stark does a little flip over his back with one of the empty mugs and Sam rolls his eyes. Next to Peter, Thor says; "I used to juggle Loroth's like that for breakfast. Drove Loki crazy."

They all look at him, and the varying degrees of forgiveness for Thor's late brother are painted on everyone's faces. Peter finds himself thinking of Toomes and Liz and the New York recovery efforts, for a moment.

Then Mr Stark says: "So that was what did it?" and Natasha snorts.

Wanda smiles, too, and Peter remembers that she likes pancakes and has the thought that she's going
to destroy an Infinity Stone for all of them today; she should eat some pancakes.

He puts a hand on the counter and twists his body up to jump over it, free to not hide what he can do.

"Whoa!"

Mr Stark had been turning to put something in the sink; Peter's lithe jump landed him right in front of him. Mr Stark puts an arm out to steady them both, and their eyes meet from up close for a split second.

"Give this old man a heart attack, will you?" Mr Stark says, chuckling, and pats Peter on the shoulder before moving away.

Peter makes himself laugh and starts working on the batter, hoping his ears aren't red. "Do you want chocolate chips, Wanda?"

She shakes her head, and then a new voice says: "She prefers blueberries."

Vision walked in.

Wanda gives him a weary look, but he gives her a supportive smile instead and sits next to her. "I'm sorry I was less than agreeable last night," he tells her. "I just worry about you."

"I know you do, but it is still my decision." She sighs. "But thank you for admitting you were wrong." She leans her head against his shoulder, and Vision closes his eyes for a moment, as though relishing the gesture.

"Blueberries it is," Peter says to no one in particular, and goes to the fridge to get some--except that Mr Stark is at the fridge getting milk for Bruce's cappuccino. It's a large kitchen; why do they keep running into each other?

"Here." Mr Stark grabs the box of fruit from a high shelf and hands it to Peter, smiling. "I'll get more for next week."

"Thanks, sir."

The smile vanishes, and is replaced by incredulity.

Peter honestly, sincerely hadn't meant to do that. "Uh, I mean--"

"You tryin' to cause an actual coronary, here?" Mr Stark mutters, lower than anyone who isn't Peter will hear.

Peter feels his face heat and the urge to smile wide enough that his cheeks hurt. He bites the inside of his cheek at Mr Stark and shrugs, grabbing one of the blueberries to eat. "Sorry," he says, and knows he doesn't sound it.

Mr Stark huffs, but he's starting to grin, too. "Why you little--"

"Hey Pete."

Peter whirls around; Natasha walked over to their side of the kitchen, too.

"Need an assist with those? You can pour, I can flip 'em," she says, and motions him over before Peter can agree.
Minutes pass companionably; Peter and Nat work at the pancakes and Mr Stark finishes coffees for everyone. Simultaneous chatter about the weather and the next Accords summit in Switzerland fills the space, and the meal is relaxed. Peaceful.

"Good morning."

Everyone looks up again, this time to Steve and Bucky coming down from the quarters.

Peter glances around to confirm and soon realizes his instinct was right: they are all here. All eleven of them; for only the second time ever, and in a far more casual setting this time. A frisson of recognition seems to travel the room, as every Avenger makes note of this and no one actually mentions it.

"Good morning, Cap. Bucky." Mr Stark gets up from his stool once more and makes his way to the coffee maker. "I have been charged with providing caffeine to my fellow Avengers today. And, well, most days, since I pay for the coffee. And the coffee maker. And I actually know how to operate the machine." He smirks. "Will you have some?"

Steve smiles. "I will, thanks Tony."

Mr Stark looks at Bucky pointedly.

Bucky hesitates for a moment, and while he does Peter tries to remember the last time he saw Mr Stark interact with him directly. Or speak to him, or address him at all. In Switzerland, maybe? The tension between Captain America and Iron Man has dominated headlines for years, but even when they were angry at each other Steve and Mr Stark never ignored each other. Bucky was at the heart of that tension, but Mr Stark seems to have been dealing with having the Winter Soldier on the team by only acknowledging his existence every so often.

So this is... different.

"I like tea," Bucky says. He clears his throat. "It was Shuri. She got me into it."

Mr Stark nods, taking it in stride. "I can make tea. Nat likes tea, too, don't you, Nat?" She nods. "Great. So what kind of tea will you have, Barnes?"

And they take it from there.

Peter smiles down at the near-empty bowl of batter, scraping along the edges to gather the last spoonful for one final, likely misshapen, blob of dough.

"So, Peter." Natasha coolly knifes butter onto the pan. "Remember that day I said we should talk about intel gathering? And stealth?"

Peter's heart lurches, and he whips his head up to meet her gaze.

"Exactly." She looks amused at his obvious reaction, but also a touch concerned. "We should talk, okay?"

He has a SHIELD debrief in half an hour. He's supposed to tell them all he remembers about Electro separately from Mr Stark; a classic tactic to both corroborate the details of the story and ensure maximum detail in the discussion. And there's the small matter of the Stone being destroyed later today.

"I can't today."
"That's fine. But we should talk soon." She glances at Mr Stark for a second, and any hope Peter had left that she meant anything else vanishes. "Okay?"

Peter glances at Mr Stark, too, since he figures he's been caught out. Steve is telling him something about his father that makes Mr Stark chuckle darkly.

"...Okay."

* *

He makes his way to Lab 377 after the debrief, knowing Mr Stark will be there working on the nanotech suit reprogramming, and knowing Nat probably won't be. He's right. Bruce is there too, working with Mr Stark from his own station. The best desk is still empty; seemingly waiting for Peter to use it.

"Peter. Good of you to join us," Mr Stark says casually.

"More web fluid today?" Bruce asks.

"Yup. Want to try out new mods." Peter walks up to his desk and props himself on the stool. Before getting to work, he texts Ned and MJ some updates that conspicuously exclude any of the stuff him and Mr Stark have ended up doing when left alone this past couple of weeks. He also posts another Tweet; a picture of the pancakes he made this morning captioned 'My new signature dish'. One of the British royal family retweeted him last week and he gained a new wave of followers; he's now the Avenger with the biggest social media presence as per Pepper Potts' last email. Apparently there are administrative assistants specifically assigned to run accounts for some of the other team members, but it's not the same.

Ned texts back about being bored in class immediately, and then sends him PopSugar's 'Which Avenger has the Best Booty?' poll (which Steve is winning so far). I voted for u fam

thanks dude u got my back

literally hah

"...should probably ask Shuri."

"You should. She'll know better than I do, for sure."

Peter looks up just as Bruce gets up from his desk.

"Are you going to call Wakanda?"

"Yeah. But I also need Maria in on the meeting, so I'll do it from upstairs."

A tingle of nerves flutters to life in Peter's stomach.

"Okay. See you later then."

"Later." Bruce gives them both an unsuspecting smile and wanders off, lab door shutting behind him.

Peter keeps looking down at his phone for several moments, waiting. Unsure. MJ tweeted a Vanity Fair article about intersectional feminism that looks interesting, but--
"Hey."

He looks up.

Mr Stark is watching him.

Peter puts his phone down. "Hey."

"So my impulse control was never great," Mr Stark says conversationally. "But one could argue it's been shot to shit, lately."

Peter surprises himself by snorting with laughter. "I'm... sorry?"

"Oh no." Mr Stark stands up, casually strolling over to him. "No, that's the one thing I won't let you do. You don't get to apologize at any point, because you have nothing to apologize for, as I have repeatedly stated. I, on the other hand, have everything to apologize for." His gaze becomes a touch distant. "Everything."

"Mr Stark--"

"I want you." He motions up and down Peter's body, and Peter feels his blush bloom to life with particular gusto. He didn't think they were going to rush into statements like that first thing. "Think I've made that obvious but I figure it bears saying. I want you, Peter, and that's... not good."

Peter shifts in his seat. "Might not be healthy, but... s'good."

Mr Stark huffs. "Nice." He wags his finger at Peter. "Using my own words back at me, good job."

He shakes his head. "I'll grant you that it's not illegal, but that doesn't make it good."

Peter reluctantly nods.

"And that's on me, not you. Like I said." Mr Stark swallows. He's gotten pretty close; an arm's length away. He looks less perfectly composed from up close; there's a distant panic in his eyes. "Which... doesn't mean I can stop thinking about it."

Peter stills.

"I have tried. In so many ways. To stop." He rubs a hand over his mouth. "I've tried to be better. For you, I want to be. I feel that the... dynamic here is not..."

"...Good?"

"Exactly." His gaze is dark. "Not good."

Peter waits him out.

"And." He looks at Peter's mouth. "And I want good things for you. Only good things. You're... the best damn thing this planet has going for it. You deserve..." He steps forward, close enough now that if Peter slid out of his chair he'd land pressed up against him. "But I."

Peter looks up at him, pulse thundering.

"I get it, Mr Stark," he says finally. "Why it's... not good. I get it." And he means that. It's just.

Mr Stark nods. His voice is also quieter. "Knew you would. You're the smartest kid I know." He smiles, self-deprecating. "Smartest anyone I know."
Peter swallows. "Yeah, well. I still." He can't say it. He shouldn't say it.

Mr Stark's heavy gaze says he filled in that blank, anyway.

"I know. Me too."

They stare at each other, helpless. Peter's knee is almost touching Mr Stark's thigh. If he leaned forward...

"So... what now?" Peter whispers.

Mr Stark tips his head to the side. "I'm going to let you decide that," he says gently. "I know you understand how and why this is a bad idea. I trust you."

Peter starts to smile, never tired of hearing those three words.

And then Mr Stark keeps going: "And I know that there are amazing things in store for you. Better things. Good things. Someone who's actually good for you will come along, Peter, you'll see."

Peter's smile fades.

Mr Stark steps away, and his eyes become harder to read. "And I'm going to be so happy for you when they do. Because I know that this..." he gestures between them. "Will go away for you. And that's a good thing."

Peter almost wants to shake his head. The word 'no' is at the tip of his tongue.

"And good things are what I want for you, remember? First and foremost. Always. So that's... good."

He'd started to feel like they were on the same page; like they understood each other fully. Almost as if they were on the same boat, ironically--and now--

Mr Stark doesn't get it. He doesn't get what Peter's feeling at all.

"What happens in the meantime... that's what I'm leaving up to you."

He starts to walk away, abandoning Peter on his little work stool.

"Either answer will be fine, and I want you to know that I will always be damn glad you're on the team. Nothing you say will change that. There's nothing you could do that would change that."

Peter feels hollow-chested; like someone scooped out his lungs, leaving too much space for his heart in there.

"I just want you to really think about it. Okay?"

"...Okay. Y-yeah I'll think about it."

Mr Stark sits at his own workstation and Peter decides in that moment that there is no way he will get any work done here, near him. Just...no.

He leaves the lab without another word, and when he runs into Agent Phung on the elevator he makes a point of mentioning his damn allergies, and sniffing loudly through his nose.
As sunset draws closer, the tension in the compound seems to get worse.

No one outside of the team knows what Wanda is going to do, but the highly trained SHIELD agents seem to have picked up on the unease among the Avengers throughout the day, and it's infected them, too. Peter passes people along the corridors and watches them clam up and shuffle nervously; a few even thank him for his work again, or wish him 'good luck'.

By the time 8 p.m. rolls around, the whole team has gathered at the lab. None of them are suited up but every single one of them is there to support Wanda, and her small smile says she knows it.

"All right. Let's do this thing."

Mr Stark instructs F.R.I.D.A.Y to open the double doors and, as they do, Peter can't help rushing up to Wanda's side and grabbing one of her hands in both of his. "I'm sorry," he tells her. "It's my fault you had to do this sooner."

"Sorry?" She frowns. Behind her, the dimly lit vault with the Gauntlet comes into view in Peter's peripheral vision. "If this is an apology for being the person Proxima Midnight decided to kill first, I hope you will take it back." She gently extricates her hand, and it occurs to Peter that touching her was actually kind of dangerous thing to do. "You defeated Thanos, Peter. All I feel is grateful to you."

"But--"

"Hush, now. Let me concentrate." She winks at him to soften the words, and Peter reluctantly steps back.

"Be careful, dear," Vision murmurs. She looks over her shoulder at him. "I will." And walks into the room.

"Helen's team is on standby," Mr Stark mutters to Vision as they all walk in after her. "She's gonna be just fine."

The heavy doors slide shut behind them, mechanism clanking and clattering, and Peter randomly remembers a section of the Accords that specifies that whenever possible the Avengers should split into groups in order to avoid becoming a single target. And yet he can't think of a single one of them who would leave right now if asked; everyone is standing in a haphazard circle, intent on the woman at the center of the room.

Wanda stands in front of the Gauntlet for a long moment, and no one says a word. And then, very slowly, she raises her hands.

She starts to glow. It's an electric red, an eerie color that is most intense within her palms and in her eyes. An impossible breeze starts up, making her hair sway in the air.

"Be weary," Thor says quietly. "This stone has a mind of its own."

As if responding to his words, or to her power, the Reality Stone starts to gleam brighter, too.

Wanda performs a strange, complicated gesture with her palms and a ball of red energy forms between them; it crackles, fizzing like a loud fire, and it starts to grow larger.

"You got this, Wanda," Steve says firmly.
Wanda's hands shift and she takes a deep breath, her eyes emitting an unnerving amount of radiation now. The scarlet energy expands, and it feels like there's wind flowing through the locked room, messing up Peter's hair, too.

And then, in the instant before she shoots, something happens to the Stone.

The solid jewel liquefies, swirling into the air as if they are in zero gravity.

"What the--"

It looks like a blob of sentient Kool-aid, but nothing has ever been more terrifying to Peter than the small streak of red floating in mid-air above the Gauntlet.

"Everybody get back!" Thor roars, but he's too late.

Mr Stark is standing closest.

"No!"

The red fluid launches directly at his chest and vanishes inside of him.

"Tony!" Steve yells, and, "Dammit!" says Rhodey, both of them running to Mr Stark, who stayed standing right where he was.

"Wait!" Thor snaps, and they both stop.

Peter stops, too.

Thor advances slowly, walking past Peter, Rhodey and Steve until he's standing directly in front of Mr Stark. Mr Stark looks at him, but something about his eyes is dark and vacant.

"Stark?" Thor says.

Mr Stark blinks, but it's not him. It's not him.

"Can we snap him out of it?" Natasha murmurs. "Cognitive recalibration?"

"No." Thor makes a dismissive hand gesture. "The Aether—the Stone is possessing him. A defense mechanism, as it turns out; it's done this before. We must extract the Stone from him to save him."

"How?" Vision asks.

"If it senses a more powerful being it may try to swap hosts." Thor cocks his head. "I am surprised it chose a human in the first place, to be honest."

Mr Stark continues to just stand there, silent and still. They all look at him, the atmosphere tense as a bowstring.

"Guess we got lucky it's just Tony," Bruce whispers. He was standing next to Mr Stark in the circle, and he is still quite close to him now.

"It's not just Tony, it's Tony powered by the Reality Stone," Sam says warily.

"Yes, but at least he's not in his suit. Can you imagine?"

A horrifying thought hits Peter right as Mr Stark moves for the first time; lifting his left hand to look
at it, front and back. Splaying his fingers. As though the Aether is inspecting its body.

"He has a suit," he blurts.

"What?"

Mr Stark was doing better, but he hasn't fully recovered from Titan; that's not how recovery works. And this morning, against his back, Peter had felt...

Mr Stark looks from his hand down to his own chest, and Peter activates his web shooters, shifting into a fighting stance. "He's wearing the Housing Unit under his shirt."

"What?"

"Get his hands," Steve snaps, and Peter immediately shoots webs at Mr Stark's left wrist as Thor grabs his right, preventing him from tapping the Housing Unit, and suddenly the whites of Mr Stark's eyes aren't white anymore; they are swirling in black.

That's when all hell breaks loose.

A shockwave of red-black energy blasts out of Mr Stark's chest and topples every Avenger but Vision backwards, and by the time Peter has managed to right himself, head spinning from the blow he sustained against the reinforced steel, he sees Mr Stark reaching to tap his chest again.

"No!" He scrambles upright and shoots another web, just in time to trap that hand. Thor leaps to his feet and grabs Mr Stark's other arm again, and then Natasha, Sam and Rhodey are running to hold him down, and Wanda starts to float in mid-air, still containing the crackling red energy within her palms, hair streaming around her.

Mr Stark's face remains inhumanly dispassionate, but there's a rumble like thunder gathering, and even as the team fights to keep Mr Stark's arms in place there's a second shockwave that tosses them to the floor again.

Peter kicks-up to his feet again, panting, and is about to run to Mr Stark when he gets distracted by a loud, pointed groan.

"Oh God, Bruce be careful--" Natasha cries, but it's too late. Bruce rips through his clothes as he expands, growing taller and taller and greener, and his groan turns into a deep, guttural growl.

And then he's not Bruce anymore; he's the Hulk.

There's enough room for him to stand without hitting the ceiling, but it's close, and the Aether doesn't seem to like that. Mr Stark's head turns towards him and the next blast is targeted; a beam of black-and-red that hits the Hulk square in the stomach.

Peter gasps as the Hulk staggers backwards, seeming to make the ground shake. Bruce is making himself the Stone's focus.

Mr Stark's eyes are pitch-black, utterly unseeing.

"Should we open the doors?" Sam yells, stumbling back to his feet. "If I had my gear--"

"Can't risk it!" Steve replies. "Come on, hold his arm!"

It looks like a tug of war between Nat, Sam and Rhodey against Thor, but the black energy coursing through Mr Stark seems to make it hard for them to hold him for very long.
"Peter! Get the Unit!" Steve shouts. "That's why the Stone picked him!"

Peter shoots a web up at the ceiling and uses it to launch himself up high, narrowly avoiding another shot that the Stone aimed at the Hulk, who absorbs it with a roar.

Then Peter lands right in front of Mr Stark.

Mr Stark's eyes look at him they don't see him, and even with the adrenalin pumping furiously through his veins Peter feels a clench of agonizing worry, that he may never get that back.

"It's going to try to transfer hosts as soon as that power source is out of Tony," Thor warns through gritted teeth. Mr Stark seems to have acquired superhuman strength and is slowly but surely flexing his arm upwards despite everyone's best efforts. "That may be our only chance."

"I'll get it when it does," Wanda calls, from three feet above the ground behind him. "Do it!"

Peter turns back to Mr Stark, full of resolve--but Mr Stark blinks at him, and the black recedes from his conjunctivae for a moment.

Peter hesitates. "Mr Stark?"

Mr Stark blinks again. His pupils constrict and dilate as the lighting changes with Wanda's flashing powers, and he seems... alert. Maybe. Is he...? Does he...?

Peter leans forward. "...Tony?"

And there's a split second where he is sure--

"Peter!" Steve yells.

Peter snaps himself out of it and looks away from Mr Stark's eyes. He grabs the front of Mr Stark's shirt and yanks, tearing it, exposing his chest and the glowing Housing Unit at the center of it.

"On three!" Steve calls. "Ready, Wanda?"

"I'm ready."

"One!"

Peter digs his fingers around the insertion points of the triangle, deliberately looking at what he's doing and not at Mr Stark's familiar face, but he can feel the weight of Mr Stark's stare and he knows that's it him; in this instant, they got him back.

"Two!"

Vision flies to help Thor hold onto Mr Stark's right side, and Bucky's metal arm wraps around Mr Stark's waist, keeping him still.

"Three!"

Peter wrenches, as hard as he can, and breaks the Housing Unit free.

Within seconds, the red liquid shoots out of Mr Stark's chest, up into the air. Everyone lets go of Mr Stark, who staggers but remains standing, and they all watch as the Stone hovers, suspended, for just a moment.
Then it moves, hurtling towards the Hulk--

"Now, Wanda!"

Wanda blasts her red beam right into its path, and the impact sounds like a titanic explosion; horribly loud in the contained space, making Peter wince and close his eyes, cover his ears--

And then he feels someone's hands covering his ears as well, warm palms cupping Peter's own.

He opens his eyes again and meets Mr Stark's worried gaze, instantly knowing himself the focus of that worry. Mr Stark's brown irises are lit by the scarlet light, but it's still him.

"You okay?" Mr Stark mouths, frowning in concern.

Relief floods through Peter and he nods, smiling. The red flashes and fireworks go on for several long seconds, and so they stand there like that, with the others all around them. No one seems to think Mr Stark's gesture is anything other than what it is; a kindness, and nothing else. Sam even pats Peter's back in support.

And then it's over, and there's a thump behind Peter; the impact of a body falling on the metal floor. From a height.

"Wanda!"

#

Wanda is transferred to the medical wing almost immediately, but Mr Stark refuses to go.

"I'm fine," he insists to the medics. "I was only possessed for like a minute. I'm fine."

"You had an Infinity Stone inside of you, Stark," Thor argues. "The toll--"

"I'm sure I've had worse things inside me than that, and yes I do mean sex stuff, if anyone's wondering," he raises his voice at the end of the sentence, looking around to make sure the medical team heard him. Dr Cho rolls her eyes and gives up right then, as Peter knows Mr Stark intended. "But seriously, all I want right now is to go to bed, and get some rest. Please, can I just...?"

Thor grunts in frustration.


"I will."

Peter watches him walk away from the chaotic scene, and the medics just let him go. Just like that, because apparently Tony Stark still carries enough authority to scare them and the SHIELD agents into submission, and no one tries to stop him.

The nurse examining Peter gives him a 'get a load of that guy' type of look that Peter returns with a huff.

"Is he nice?" she asks him, dabbing at an abrasion on Peter's cheek. "I know he's a hero and all that, but I can never decide whether I think he's nice."

Peter smiles sadly. "He's always nice to me. Always."
"He'll be right there," F.R.I.D.A.Y says.

Peter waits patiently. He may have purposefully chosen to wear his Britney shirt after recalling Mr Stark's comment to him about it, but he's not here for any sort of late night seduction.

"Peter."

"Hey."

Mr Stark looks pleased to see him, at least. "Come in."

Peter does, and makes his way to the foot of the bed to sit down.

"Can I ask you something?" Mr Stark asks curiously, watching Peter fold his legs Indian-style.

"...Sure."

"Earlier, when the Reality Stone made me its sock-puppet... did you say my name?"

Peter only hesitates for a moment before he nods.

Mr Stark sits down at his desk chair. "I thought so." He smiles faintly. "I heard you."

Peter puts his palms on his knees to avoid fidgeting, and he looks at Mr Stark with resolve. "Hear this then," he starts, and Mr Stark's eyes widen in surprise, but Peter keeps going. "I've decided what I want to do in the meantime."

Mr Stark goes perfectly still, and he doesn't say anything. Peter's not entirely sure he's even breathing, actually.

He's given a lot of thought to the wording--there's a reason it's one in the morning and not eleven at night right now. He thought about saying 'I want you, too' or 'I want this as long as you'll give it to me', or even confessing that Mr Stark's whole 'meantime' concept is pointless when Peter is going to feel this way about him for ever.

But in the end, he gets up and walks over to Mr Stark, who tracks his movements with his mouth slightly open, up until the moment Peter is standing over him. Peter doesn't miss the twitch his fingers make in the direction of his bare thigh, but doesn't address it, either.

There's something close to fear on Mr Stark's upturned face.

Peter puts his hands on Mr Stark's broad shoulders and leans down, and kisses him.

Mr Stark inhales sharply and immediately reaches out to grab Peter's thigh with one hand, reaching up to grab Peter's hair with the other, and Peter sinks gratefully into his lap. He opens his mouth to lick into Mr Stark's and Mr Stark surges to a stand, holding Peter up with one arm under his ass as Peter wraps his legs around his waist, and walks them over to the bed.

"You want this?" Mr Stark asks, pants against his lips.

"Yeah," Peter breathes. "Yes, please, yes."

Mr Stark puts him down on his back, careful but not slow, and then he's on top of him, knees at either side of Peter's hips.
"I'll give you whatever you want, Peter."

Peter nods, panting. "Want this."

"Then I." Mr Stark grunts, gripping Peter's thigh like his life depends on it. "I'll give it to you. You understand?"

"Yeah," Peter gasps. "Yeah."

He'll take it. Poor choice of wording aside, he will take as many days, weeks of this as he can get. That's his decision, and it's final. He will savor anything he is given, and as Mr Stark kisses his neck and pulls his hair and squeezes his ass he knows, knows it was the right choice, because anything is worth this.

And he will lock away how it felt to say Tony's name somewhere it can't hurt him.
The Meantime

Chapter Notes

My patient readers; I am SO grateful for the love and support this story has and also
obviously for the LOVELY PATIENCE everyone has displayed. Thank you. SO
much. I present an 9K update and the next chapter is actually partly written already—
ended up splitting them differently and long story short this fic will have 19 chapters :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Please,” Peter whispers, desperate. “Please. Please.”

Mr Stark gently pumps his fingers in and out of him with an obscene squelching sound, and Peter
whimpers.

“Please what?” Mr Stark grunts.

“Let me.” Peter curls his toes as another shiver rocks through him. He feels full and empty all at
once, but he was warned he would not get everything he needs tonight. “Please let me.”

Mr Stark leans down so their noses are almost touching, staring intently into Peter’s eyes. “You need
my permission?” he asks quietly.

Peter looks away from him, humiliated and turned on out of his mind. The fact that he’s made it
through Mr Stark undressing him and fingering him without completely losing it is almost
miraculous, but he’s so hard he’s actually in pain at this point.

Will you--

Not tonight.

“Please,” he whispers, stomach clenching. There’s a weird, ear-ringing satisfaction to this strange
form of begging that feels right and wrong in the best way. His mind is in a million different places
and yet laser-focused on this one thing at once. “Sir. I. I need.”

Mr Stark nods and kisses Peter on the cheek. “I know what you need.

But I--

Not tonight, Peter. Tonight, you can have this...

Peter whimpers again.

“You’re being so good.” Mr Stark kisses him on the lips and Peter instinctively opens his mouth,
hips rocking up into empty air, desperate for a touch, a pressure, something. “So good for me, Peter,”
Mr Stark says against his mouth, still torturing Peter with his fingers. “So, so good that I’ve
decided...” He pauses and Peter doesn’t breathe for anticipation of what he’s going to say next, every
muscle locked tight, every nerve straining. “I’ve decided you can come if you—“

At the word ‘can’ Peter’s dick flexes and shoots, painting his stomach with a stream of white.
“O-oh—mph—”

Mr Stark puts a hand over his mouth, and for some reason that makes Peter’s eyes roll to the back of his head and release another spurt of come, muscles twitching helplessly, his strength briefly out of his control and striking Mr Stark, who takes the hits without so much as a grunt of effort and seems, if anything, to relish Peter’s abandon.

When it’s all over and Mr Stark has painted his stomach, too, Peter curls into his arms and pants into his chest. The Housing Unit is gone tonight and it’s just scar tissue that’s left, smelling powerfully of clean sweat and Mr Stark’s aftershave.

They are both quiet for a time, just breathing. Peter watches the shallow rise and fall of Mr Stark’s pecs and rests his fingertips against the fibrotic skin between them, feeling... thankful to it. The loud thumping of Mr Stark's heart kept safe behind the sternal bone seems to vibrate against his fingers.

“I probably shouldn’t stay, huh,” he makes himself say.

Mr Stark stills, and his chest stops rising and falling.

“Probably not,” he says. “But you shouldn’t be here in the first place.”

Peter winces.

Mr Stark tightens his hold around him immediately. “By which I mean, ‘shouldn’t’ is ninety-percent of what’s already happened.” Peter keeps staring at his chest and wishes he could see what’s in his eyes right now. “At this point... I think you should do whatever you want.”

"And you?"

There’s a beat. "You haven't figured out what I want, yet?"

Peter is the one who stops breathing, this time.

It's hard to tell what that question means without seeing Mr Stark's face.

"I want you to have every fucking thing your overgrown, overgenerous heart desires, kid." Peter feels another kiss, this time at the top of his head and not particularly pointed; just the pressure of Mr Stark's lips on his hair. It feels like an apology. "S'why I've been giving you anything I can think of."

But that's not an answer.

Not really.

It makes Peter feel like Mr Stark just gave him this because he, Peter, wanted it. Like it was a favor. Something one-sided; the way he gave May that new TV set and Ned and MJ those incredible gifts, all for Peter.

Are you ever going to call me Tony?

'What do you want, Mr Stark?' he should ask him. If he was feeling less vulnerable, or less uncertain, he might have done so. But clearly the title of Bravest Avenger is overrated, because Peter keeps quiet.

He doesn’t end up staying.
“So... that was intense.”

“Yeah.”

“That stone trying to possess Tony was unexpected.”

Rhodey sighs. “What do we know about Wanda’s shot at recovery?”

“Dr Cho is hopeful,” says Steve. “She’s consulting with Wakanda’s healers, and she’s optimistic that Wanda will wake up.”

Vision is conspicuously absent from the debrief, but the atmosphere is grave and tense with worry.

“Well, thanks to her I can leak the destruction of the Stone to my underground sources,” Natasha says. “It should take all of a day to reach the Scorpion’s men, and discredit Proxima’s claim.”

“That will prompt her to take matters into her own hands,” Steve says. “And finally act.”

She looks at him. “...Exactly.”

“We should choose the location,” Mr Stark says. “If she shows up here all desperate and armed I don’t want Peter getting caught in the crossfire. We should lure her someplace.”

Maria sighs. “And how do you propose we do that? Make a date?”

“Peter is her target,” Thor rumbles. “We can make her believe he will be somewhere he won’t.”

“A rumor,” Bruce says thoughtfully. “Nat, maybe you can get your underground sources to—”

“The TV interview.”

Every head turns to Peter.

He shrugs. “Right? It’ll get the most publicity; it’s an easy rumor to spread. Jimmy Fallon did that bit about me in his ‘Thank you letters’ just last week.”

*Thank you, Peter Parker, for saving the world while looking like a member of One Direction, and making sure I have to hear about you from my daughter every day for the rest of my life.*

There’s a brief silence.

“That could work,” Sam says.

“That’s a great idea, Peter.”

“We won’t actually use you as bait, though, to be clear,” Mr Stark says firmly. “We’ll make Proxima think you’re traveling for this interview, but you won’t be.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “I know, I know, house arrest.”

“Good boy.”

A warm tug makes Peter’s dick twitch and he shifts in his seat, pulling out his phone to appear distracted.

“We should bring in Pepper again,” Rhodey says. “To help us amp up Peter’s publicity, for this interview thing.”
The words on the phone screen blur before Peter’s very eyes.

“I... can’t think of why not,” Mr Stark says. “As long as we’re clear on why she’s coming to the compound, Rhodes.”

“Of course.” Rhodey raises his hands innocently. “She’s the best, and one of the few people with a high enough security clearance.”

“SHIELD has a PR department,” Steve points out. He is looking at Mr Stark, and it’s cautious, though Peter isn’t sure why.

Mr Stark hesitates for a moment, then shakes his head. “Pepper runs circles around them, and we’ve been friends with Jimmy for years.” The casual ‘we’ is unpleasant to hear. “She’ll make sure this works.”

“All right.”

They start to wrap up the meeting and Peter tries to think of an excuse to be alone with Mr Stark again. Maybe he can ask for help in the lab...?

“Tony,” Steve says, and Mr Stark turns. Something about the look in Steve’s eyes makes him stay in the room, and Peter has no other option but to leave with everyone else, despite the powerful urge to linger and listen in on what’s being said.

“Hey Rhodey, wanna go for a swim?”

Rhodey turns around mid-stride and smiles. “I got a couple of conference calls with the DOD to take care of first, Peter.” He winks. “But I promise to do it tonight. You go ahead without me.”

Peter nods and turns to take the corridor that leads to the elevators for the basement levels, but is stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

“Walk me to the hangar first, Parker.”

It’s Nat.

* *

“You flying somewhere?”

Natasha nods. “Actually visiting Clint, this time. He’ll want some of the Wanda updates in person. He feels responsible for her, in some ways—I’m sure she’ll tell you the full story of her brother some time.” She slants a look at him. “Are you nervous? About talking to me?”

Peter nods at a passing group of SHIELD agents and tries to smile, but it feels shaky even to him.

“...Yes?”

She looks quietly amused at the idea. “Don’t be. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Peter swallows.

“I’m serious.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

They get to the front lobby where agents are milling about during their lunch breaks, and the security
guard at the doors makes as if to open them for Nat but she shoots a dismissive gesture at him.

It’s a bright day outside and the lawn looks green and well kept as ever, and with every step they take Peter’s nerves crank up a notch.

“Steve is asking Tony how you knew he was wearing the Housing Unit yesterday.”

Peter stumbles.

“W-what?”

Natasha tips her head to the side slightly but keeps walking, and Peter struggles to do the same. “It’s a simple question,” she says casually. “Should have a simple answer.”

Peter feels himself pale, and for several moments just keeps putting one foot in front of the other and isn’t sure how to answer.

But then he thinks back to how he found out, when he did. It was before anything had actually happened—when he hugged Mr Stark, when that was the most contact he'd had with Mr Stark. And so, the true answer is...

“He told me.”

They’ve arrived at the hangar, but Natasha stops before entering the enclosure. Peter has no choice but to face her, looking into her impenetrable gaze.

Her eyes narrow infinitesimally. “He told you?”

“There was this day at the lab, where I caught him wearing it. And then he told me. He’s been dealing with... he’s had some trouble taking it off since we came back from space.” Peter swallows. “I mean, everyone almost died, and he thought he was gonna die, and then he came back and the—the love of his life broke up with him, so. I think he’s doing pretty great, all things considered.”

Natasha is silent for a moment.

“I agree. He’s doing pretty great now.” She slants another look at him. “Now that you’re here, yes. He wasn’t doing so great four months ago.”

Peter remembers Steve and Rhodey both making comments that allude to that, and he himself has noted how Mr Stark looks better lately. But. Natasha’s tone is a bit sharper than Steve or Rhodey’s had been when making the observation.

“He trusts you.”

“I guess.”

“He doesn’t trust easy, our Tony.”

Peter supposes that’s true, too.

“I like seeing him well, and I’m sure you do, too.”

“Of course.” It’s hard to speak when he has the feeling she could turn any of his words into a confession. “Mr Stark is a great mentor. And. I think we’re friends.”

“Friends,” Natasha echoes, expressionless. “Is that how you’d describe it?”
I'm sorry, I'm confused as to the relationship here. What is he, your ward?

Peter shrugs, feeling his ears heat with blush. He’s talking to Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow. And he’s never been that good a liar.

“I don’t know. But. S’kinda hard to explain.” That's certainly not a lie.

“Relationships are hard to describe in this line of work.” She looks up at the sky, blinking in the sunlight. “Someone once asked me whether the thing between me and Clint was love. I was unwilling to label it so childishly at the time. Now... I don’t know.” She looks back down at him and he feels pinned. "Rhodey likes to make jokes about the fatherly love Tony has for you; especially when you're not around. It cracks him up."

She's like a hunter with a target. Peter was right to be terrified of this conversation.

"Tony doesn't seem to think it's that funny," she goes on. "He used to, but he doesn't anymore. Especially lately... he doesn't seem to find it funny at all."

A distant rumble registers in Peter's ears, as one of the jets readiness for take-off.

"Why do you think that is?" she asks him.

"I." He can't. He can't find the words. The jet's engines are so loud.

"You can’t think of a reason?" she adds.

"Nat, I don't."

She doesn't change the pitch of her voice to be heard above the noise, knowing Peter will be able to hear her anyway. "I saw your face when you thought Tony had gotten back together with Pepper."

Peter winces. The thought of saying, out loud, that Mr Stark is willing to give him something in the meantime but that it has an end date is too much.

But suddenly her momentum pauses.

The gleam in her eyes--the hunger for information that was starting to show fades, and is replaced only by kindness, and compassion. Whatever is on Peter's face must have made her change her mind.

"Hey." Her voice has lost its sharp edges. "I'm sorry. You don't have to answer me, Peter. I just want you to know that I trust you." It rings true. "I trust how big your brain is and how much you've had to grow so fast. I'm in your corner. I'm here for whatever you want. I will support whatever you want."

She puts a hand on his shoulder, turning them both just a little, and suddenly Peter understands that in this particular spot and at this particular angle, the security cameras won't capture her lips moving. The volume of the jet engines has grown deafening at this range, but Peter can still make out what she's saying.

"And whatever you don't want... I can take care of. Do you understand?"

There isn't a trace of humor on her face.

The jet takes off with a thunderous roar, stealth mode off, and the wind buffets Nat's hair, and Peter is pretty sure the Black Widow just threatened to assassinate Tony Stark for him if he wants.
"So let me know."

She walks away, leaving him stunned and still unclear as to what, exactly, he just gave away.

After dinner, Peter snaps a picture of their empty takeout cartons and posts it on Instagram, captioning it 'On Wednesdays we order Thai'. He makes sure the franchise name is omitted from the shot to avoid accidentally promoting a brand—the last time he did that Pepper emailed him saying *La Croix* stock had gone up because of him, and to be careful. Then he texts May good night and turns off his notifications for the next few hours to avoid his Stark Phone blowing up.

Vision joins them at the quarters for the first time since Wanda destroyed the Stone. He doesn't eat, but Peter suspects he was forced to leave his vigil by Sam, who probably used an excuse that had nothing to do with the team to get him out of the medical room for a few hours.

Wanda hasn't woken up yet.

"So in a couple of days my fake interview will be scheduled to film, and then we'll know where Proxima is. Me and Dr Banner are working on a tracker that's base off of the alien traces we picked up from the poison and the gun... she can't just walk around Earth undetected."

"Nat will probably be back from visiting Clint, right?" Bruce asks, casual. He's sitting on one of the comfortable couches Peter picked out weeks ago, which must have been installed overnight last night.

"Yup. I think we'll all be here." Peter turns back to Vision. "Anyway, we'll get her. That's the plan."

"I see. I like the part where we are not using you as bait," Vision says. He looks like a man again today, and the man's skin never seems to change in tone but something in his voice sounds like he would have bags under his eyes if he could.

"That was me." Mr Stark raises his hand from his seat on the armchair without looking up, tablet stylet between his teeth. "You're welcome."

Steve snorts. Him, Sam, Bucky, Peter and Vision are the ones still sitting at the table. Rhodey is swimming and Thor is meditating on the roof. "It'll probably be in LA," Steve tells Vision. "So Peter will be far from the action, this time. Sorry again, kid."

Peter shrugs, long-suffering.

"Look, we get it; you're just itching to sacrifice yourself for everyone," Sam says, beer in hand. "Don't think we'd have let you on the team if we hadn't gotten the sense that you had a martyr complex, kid; it's basically a requirement for entry."

That last part hit Peter pretty hard, but he barely has time to recover before Sam goes on:

"I think we need to address the elephant in the room."

"...What elephant?" Peter squeaks.

Mr Stark is looking at them now. His spidey-senses can feel it.

"The elephant is..." Sam leans forward, and his deadpan face is too good. "What's the deal with this
shirt of yours, man?"

There's a soft clatter, and Peter whips around to see Mr Stark quickly pick up his dropped stylet from the floor--no one else seems to have noticed.

"W-what do you mean?"

"I mean it's real tight, you wear it all the time, and you're gonna give poor Agent Phung a nosebleed if he sees you in it." Sam smirks, triumphant like he just made a hilarious joke.

Peter snorts. "That's not true."

"I'm serious! I may not be gay but I'm not dead, either; you look like trouble in that. And poor Phung has a major crush on you--"

"Isn't Agent Phung in his thirties?" Bucky asks.

Sam shrugs and makes a kind of 'eh' gesture. "Peter's eighteen, man."

"Aw, I keep forgetting you're only eighteen," Bruce says.

Steve looks exasperated and Vision just seems confused, and as much as he wants to Peter doesn't turn to gage Mr Stark's reaction to the turn this conversation has taken.

"The media forgets about his age all the time, too," Vision comments. "The, uh... 'shipping' of Peter with various celebrities amused Wanda a great deal."

"Didn't Lady Gaga say something about you in an interview just last week?"

"She's in her thirties, too, I think," says Bucky, and there's a moment where everyone looks at him and the question about how he knows that hangs in the air, until Sam lets out a belly-laugh and punches him on the (non-metallic) shoulder.

Bruce smiles, motioning at Peter. "I mean come on, with that face? No wonder they are all falling for him."

"No argument there," comes Mr Stark's voice, and Peter's grin twitches as his spine zips with nerves. Mr Stark is back to looking down at his tablet, and sounds almost bored at having to make the point. Certainly doesn't sound as electrically jittery as Peter feels. "But twenty years seems like a notable age difference, no?"

"Peter's young, but he's legally an adult and free to make all the bad decisions in the world," Sam replies. He takes another sip of his beer, looking casual as you please. Unsuspecting, which is not what Steve looks like.

"So you're saying if Phung asked him out, that would be okay?" Mr Stark responds. He sounds utterly casual right back, and still hasn't looked up.

"Of course."

There's a pause.

"Do I get a say?" Peter asks, voice as steady as he can make it.

Most of the others laugh, with the notable exceptions of Steve and Mr Stark.
"Of course you get a say, Peter," Steve says firmly. His eyes seem to be conveying some sort of point he's unwilling to say aloud--almost reminds Peter of his talk with Nat and the things that weren't said aloud then. "It's about what you want. We all trust you to know what you want."

In Peter's mind, the tension coming from the sofa where Mr Stark sits has taken up a physical, tangible form, and makes the air so dense it takes special effort to inhale and breathe. But not everyone who is a part of this conversation seems to be aware of it; or they are all better actors than Peter himself.

"Thanks," he manages, voice a croak. He clears his throat. "Glad that's been decided." And then he switches the topic to his Ben&Jerry's flavor's commercial success, and the chatter turns into a predictably competitive Googling session about ice cream sales, and moves on.

"Leave any room for dessert?"

Peter blinks at the sight of Mr Stark on his doorway, holding a box of the Swiss chocolates he has so regularly delivered to his room since the UN summit.

"Um. Yeah." He steps aside to let Mr Stark in, wishing he'd thought to clean it up more. He's made himself at home by taking over way too many surfaces. "Always, actually."

Mr Stark smirks slightly and nods to himself, opening the box and presenting it to Peter. "Care to share?"

Peter takes an uncertain step towards him once the door has clicked shut. Before Mr Stark knocked on his door he'd been watching a link May sent him about a profile piece; a reporter travelled to Queens last week and did background on the deli where Spider-Man used to work, the school he used to attend, and even interviewed Carla at her churro stand and asked her how Peter liked his churros (chocolate-covered, obviously). The video ended with an audio voice-over of Mr Stark's small outburst at the press conference "...next to me was one of the strongest, bravest, smartest heroes I ever met, and he's out there right now, living his life under the radar and not wanting any of the recognition he is owed for saving the universe."

As Iron Man casually strolls into his bedroom at the Avengers compound, Peter can't help but think of how much things have changed. And of how he wishes they would change just a touch more.

He smiles slightly. "Of course, Mr Stark."

Mr Stark's sweatpants hang low on his hips, and he smells strongly of having recently showered. His hair looks like it would feel humid to the touch; vaguely tousled in a purposeless swoop. He's holding the box like a present, half-expectant, half-something else that has more of an edge. Anticipation, maybe.

Peter walks towards him and pretends to look down intently at the box, making a show of picking which chocolate he's going to eat. "More presents?"

"As many as you like," Mr Stark replies. "I told you."

Peter picks an ornate gold-dusted bonbon and bites into it, staring up at Mr Stark. He chews and swallows it without looking away from Mr Stark's eyes, knowing he's flushed and red and probably kind of dumbstruck-looking but not caring too much.

He mumbles: "Can I have another one?" after he's swallowed.
"Many as you like," Mr Stark repeats immediately, but then he pauses, and seems to reassess the situation. "...Do you want my permission?"

The word sucker-punches Peter in the gut, and the thing he'd been trying not to think about suddenly is right there in front of him.

"I." Please.

But Mr Stark steps back, and he shakes his head as if to clear it, blinking, shutting the box.

"Okay, wait. Actually, I can't just let it keep happening without asking..." he levels Peter with an intent look. "All this... 'permission' stuff."

Peter's dick throbs at the acknowledgement, and he presses his lips together. "M-hm?"

He’s been trying not to look at it directly—only allowing himself slanted glances at what’s been setting his blood on fire. But it's not like these weren't thoughts he'd never had before.

"You've never played around with that stuff, have you?"

Peter shakes his head.

"But you've thought about it before?"

Oh he's thought about it. He’s been thinking about it really hard, in fact. Really hard.

"Yeah. I've thought about it."

Mr Stark nods, mostly to himself. He seems to be on the verge of something, and his jaw is clenched tight.

"There's a conversation we should have. That we haven't had."

Peter's dick throbs again, impatient. Aching. Ready. "Doesn't have to be right now, does it Mr Stark?"

Mr Stark huffs and looks away from him, taking a moment to seemingly come up with a response to that.

"Just out of curiosity; were you always aware of how hot it is when you call me that, or did it happen by accident?"

Peter smiles shakily. "Um..."

Mr Stark shakes his head faintly, a self-deprecating smile on his face. "God, Peter. Killing me softly, here."

He walks over the Peter's desk and deposits the chocolates there.

"You know what I keep forgetting?" he murmurs. "How strong you are." He finally looks back at Peter. "Physically, I mean. Emotionally, I always know it. But physically you don't show it off, and I forget that you could break my arm if you were careless with it for just a moment." His eyes are dark. "But then I remember."

Peter feels weak as a newborn foal right now.
"Get on the bed."

He somehow makes his way there on legs that suddenly feel gelatinous, and he gratefully drops down onto the mattress, staring at Mr Stark helplessly.

Mr Stark advances on him immediately, and Peter clumsily shuffles backwards and for a lightning of an instant the scene looks like he's trying to get away, except that he isn't and the wet spot in his boxers gets wetter.

Mr Stark knees onto the bed and the broad span of his shoulders is everything, the weight of him providing desperately needed pressure on Peter's groin that Peter immediately rocks up into. Mr Stark kisses him open-mouthed, his beard rough against Peter's cheeks and chin just as remembered, and Peter moans and humps up against him.

"Will you...?" he slurs into Mr Stark's lips.

Mr Stark grabs his head by the hair and leans away to look him in the eyes. "No," he says firmly. "Not yet."

Peter groans, frustrated, but keeps rubbing himself against Mr Stark's stomach, feeling his erection through their clothes.

"When?" he mumbles, eyes sliding shut as the pressure in his gut crests, building. He wants to make it last. "Please, when can I..."

"Not yet, Peter."

Mr Stark's other hand grabs Peter's bare thigh, spanning most of the meat of it, and Peter tips his legs open to better facilitate access, hooking his left ankle around Mr Stark's waist for purchase and locking their hips flush together.

"These legs have been giving me so much trouble," Mr Stark mutters. "You walk around in that shirt, those shorts, and I'm supposed to, what, just go about my day?" He rakes his teeth down Peter's neck and Peter's dick spills a puddle of precome into his embarrassingly moist boxers. He can't stop bucking up into the hard give of Mr Stark's stomach, something for his dick to press against and relieve the ache there, but not too soon. "You have me showering in ice-cold water twice a day. Three times, that day you spilled juice on your lap."

Peter tries to remember--breakfast, several weeks ago; Bruce had knocked a glass over and a few droplets had dribbled down his thigh.

"Had me thinking about licking you clean."

Peter shudders. His heel is digging into the small of Mr Stark's back and drags upwards, bunching up his shirt with it. He tries to hold it together, just a little longer.

"You've got me thinking some crazy stuff, kid." He kisses under Peter's jaw, warm at wet, angling Peter's head at his pleasure. "Got me crazy."

Peter hooks his other leg around Mr Stark's waist and crosses his ankles behind his back. He's going to lose it too quickly again, dammit. "Sir, I..."

"Do you trust me, Peter?"

Peter stops moving.
Mr Stark stills, too, but they are both panting too much for the moment to be entirely frozen. Mr Stark's breath is a warm gale against Peter's ear, right next to it.

"It's okay to say 'no'. I don't really trust myself around you."

Peter tries to gather his scattered thoughts and form words. Words that won't give away how utterly and blindly he trusts Mr Stark, words that won't scare him away too soon and take this delicate 'meantime' from him.

"I trust you."

Mr Stark kisses the side of his neck briefly. "Do you trust that I will always do as you say? Whether you ask me to stop or to buy you Switzerland for your birthday?"

"Y-yeah."

Another kiss, this one lingering slightly longer. Like a 'thank you'. "Good boy."

Mr Stark lets go of Peter's thigh to shove his hand between them and grip Peter firmly in his palm, and Peter's breath arrests in his throat, his ears still ringing with those words.

"Good boy, Peter."

Mr Stark's hand pumps and Peter arches his back, lifting them both briefly off the mattress before thumping back down. He's not going to make it. He is clinging to restraint with every ounce of his willpower.

"So good. So fucking good."

"Oh..." It's impossible to hold on.

"You deserve everything," Mr Stark pants. "For being this good, Peter, you deserve... I want to give you... so much..." Mr Stark switches his grip to slide his hand further down... and back.

Peter hiccoughs, overwhelmed, and his toes curl in the air. He can't. He can't stop it.

"Want to give you so much." Mr Stark's voice keeps getting deeper and more guttural. He's rocking against Peter's thigh, rubbing his erection against the soft inside of it. "Want so much for you--fuck."

"M-Mr..." He's so close, he's not going to make it--

"Want... you... so goddamn much..."

Mr Stark's finger gently pushes in and Peter loses it instantly, like a button was pushed and vanished his self-control. He spills hotly and uncontrollably into his underwear, sobbing with relief at the release, tension jetting out of him in warm pulls.

He comes back to the situation to find that Mr Stark kept rocking against him, and his movements have become less elegant, less restrained. Peter feels sated and mush-brained and his body has become limp and useless, so all he can do is lie there and nudge his thigh into Mr Stark's erection, head lolling, weak.

"Fucking... Christ..." Mr Stark's face is buried in his neck. "Fuck..."

"S'this for me, too...?" Peter mumbles, eyes drifting shut.
"F-fuck."

"Are you only doing this 'cause I want it, Mr Stark?"

Mr Stark thrusts against him one last time and groans, and Peter feels warmth spreading against his leg.

*You haven't figured out what I want, yet?*

He hasn't, not really. But maybe it's not all quite so one-sided after all.


Peter is in medical when he gets a text from Rhodey that says: **Pepper is here & wants a chat, u around?**

“Everything okay?” Dr Cho asks, smiling.

“Y-yeah. Just... a meeting kinda came up.”

“Oh. Then please go; we’ll continue these scans some other time. It’s non-urgent.”

He sat at Wanda's bedside with Vision for a while and tried to distract him, but she looked pale and fast asleep and eventually Peter decided to give them some space and let Dr Cho and her team work on his anatomy some more. It's been a weirdly flattering morning of awed exclamations and medical talk; especially when one of Dr Cho's residents managed to elicit Peter's tendon reflexes and he accidentally kicked a table full of instrumentation across the room. They barely let him help clean up after, they were so excited.

He flashes the doctor a grin. "Sorry Dr Cho. I'll come back, I promise."

“I told you, you can call me Helen—“

“See you later!”

He takes off, high-fiving Dr Tomaselli and Nurse O'Donell in passing, and texts Rhodey back to let him know he’s on his way. Then he opens the group-chat between himself, Ned and MJ, needing a touch of reassurance for what he's about to face even if they don't know the extent to which his relationship with Pepper Potts is complicated right now.

*omw to hang out with ppotts again*

*i cant hate her guys shes too awesome*

MJ is typing...

*tstark has good taste*

*remember when the pics of him/the kenyan diplomat leaked? smart+hot people are his jam*

Ned is typing...

*none as smart+hot as our peter tho*

*pffft tstark wishes, MJ replies.*
Peter chuckles out loud, which makes a passing administrative person do a double-take.

And he laughs again when Ned instantly replies: *um duh who do you think helped may set up hers*

By the time he’s crossing the bullpen towards the fishbowl meeting room he feels a bit better about seeing Ms Potts, even though half of the internet is still convinced that she and Mr Stark have reunited (the other half is ‘shipping’ her with the Lakers’ point guard).

Of course, he wasn’t expecting Mr Stark to be there as well.

Shit.

“Hi Peter. Good to see you.” Pepper smiles and Peter smiles tightly back, heart thundering. Rhodey and Steve are there, too, and he can’t shake the horrible feeling that all three of them will be able to read ‘I’ve had sex with Iron Man’ like it’s written on his forehead.

“Hi.”

"...Are you going to sit?” Mr Stark says, eyebrows raised.

Peter rushes to do so, cheeks burning.

"Did you see what Elton John said about you yesterday on his podcast?" Pepper asks conversationally as she turns her Stark tablet on.

"Um, no, must have missed it," Peter admits. He takes out his phone to check his notifications but then hesitates, in case it's something bad. His late nights Googling before he got used to crashing in Mr Stark's bed led him down enough internet wormholes.

"There was a whole nice part about representation and how important you have become to the gay community as an out and proud superhero," Pepper explains, eyes kind as ever. Then she turns a bit mischievous. "And then he said something about wanting to date you if he'd been a decade younger."

Peter lets out a hysterical laugh, and Rhodey goes "Ha!" in response. Steve looks quietly amused. Mr Stark's lips purse but his smile is tight.

"We should get started, Pep," Mr Stark prompts.

"Right." She tucks a nonexistent strand of hair behind her ear, even though her ponytail is perfect. "So, Peter. After looking over our options, I think Jimmy Fallon is actually the best cover story."

The amusement leaves Peter's body.

"His network has the most flexibility and the building is willing to work with us to allow the kind of setup the team will need to spring Proxima Midnight a trap."

Peter is already shaking his head. "That's New York. I thought we said it was going to be California." He turns to look at Steve. "You said it was probably going to be L.A--"

"This opportunity came up," Steve says. Peter can tell he knows exactly why he's upset. "It's going to be a contained op, Peter. No civilian lives should be at risk."
"They never are," he says. He looks at Mr Stark, but he, too, knew this was the new plan judging by his expression. "I'm coming to New York, then."

"No," Steve says.

"You can't stop me," Peter reminds him. "I'm going."

"Peter, be reasonable--"

"I can't stand by and let--I can't do that. My family may be in danger. My friends. My neighborhood."

"Peter."

His throat feels tight. No. No.

"I have to act," he says. The memory of--the one time he--"I have my powers; I'll be fine."

"We will handle it," Steve says.

"I have a responsibility--"

"It's courting risk for no reason. No."

Suddenly he hears a clang and realizes he's leapt to his feet and the chair flew backwards--into the back wall, metal striking glass. Pepper's eyes are wide, and Rhodey is surprised, too. Mr Stark is gazing up at him with a conflicted look in his eyes.

"Please," he manages, and it comes out strangled.

Steve sighs. "I'm sorry. But it's been decided."

And suddenly the choke of emotions is too much, and the possibility of breaking into unexpected tears in front of all these people is too much.

So Peter turns and leaves.

The SHIELD agents around the bullpen watch him go, and a hush has descended as he walks out. He's so distracted by the boiling emotions right under his skin that when he rounds the corner of the armory he almost runs directly into Sam.

"Whoa! Hey, Pete. You okay?"

"I. Y-yeah, I--" Peter tries to conceal his upset but it mustn't work, because Sam immediately puts a hand up to stop whatever lie he was about to come up with.

"Tell you what; come take a jog with me." He motions down his body and Peter notices his sporting gear for the first time. "I'm doing a couple of laps around the compound, you can tell me about it. Come on."

He has no choice but to follow. Half the Avenger wardrobe doubles as running shorts, too, and he's dressed for the occasion.

"...and I won't," he says. "I can't do nothing."
Sam nods, sweat running down his brow. "Of course not. None of us..." he takes a deep breath. "None of us are any good at that." His eyes flicker down to Peter's legs, which are keeping time with his pace without issue. Peter can fake many things but he can't generate fake perspiration when he's barely short of breath. "...Are you taking it easy on me?"

"No," Peter lies, and slows down further.

Sam snorts and ignores this. "Anyway, I hear you. I think Steve does, too, and I'm sure so does Tony." He tips his head to the side. "Tony does nothing but listen to you. It's... kind of adorable."

Peter stumbles as they take on the slope of lawn that goes down towards the lake.

"But don't forget you're easy to underestimate." He wipes at his forehead and Peter pretends to do so as well. "So maybe remind them of that."

"You agree? That I should go to New York?" Peter asks, grateful.

"Course."

They reach a fork in the path that leads towards the dock or around the lake, and Peter immediately chooses the latter. The dock is a bit eerie, and it gives him a bad feeling sometimes for no reason he can pinpoint. He prefers to avoid it.

"You don't like being left on the sidelines, huh?" Sam goes on.

Peter's thoughts run into the wall behind which he keeps one of his worst memories. "No," he says.

"Any reason in... particular?" Peter slows his pace again, having realized he spend up without consciously thinking to. "You must'a gotten picked first for teams, since the spider-bite, so that can't be it."

"I." He let it happen. "I don't..." He could have stopped it but he didn't. It was his fault.

"Kid?"

And suddenly Peter is feeling short of breath--not just that, suddenly he can't breathe at all, and he stops in the middle of the path.

Sam stops, too, and quickly rounds to face him, chest heaving with exertion.

"Hey, hey, s'okay, man." He smiles, and his eyes are so sure and trusting that Peter feels, for the first time, the desire to say the name. "You wanna tell me what happened?"

It's quiet, where they are. The lake is enormous and they've barely jogged a quarter of a mile around it, so they are alone and surrounded by nothing but woods and water; the security perimeter and the cameras are so well hidden that it feels completely secluded. In the distance, a bird is chirping.

"It was... my Uncle Ben," he chokes.

Amazingly, the world doesn't end. The bird chirps away.

Sam nods.

Peter feels his eyes sting. "He died," he adds, voice thready. "I wasn't there."

Sam nods again, completely understanding.
When Peter doesn't say any more, he pats him gently on the arm and motions for him to start walking again, and for a long while neither of them say anything else. The silence itself feels healing; or maybe it's Sam's grounding presence. He knew Sam was a therapist, but he never really stopped to think about it. Or to think about how that might be a good thing.

"You need to talk to them," Sam says eventually.

Peter wipes at the corner of his eye. "You think?"

"It's how you feel, and that's important." Sam smiles with half of his mouth. "Tony will listen. And Steve won't admit it, but he really respects Tony's opinion. You'll convince them."

Peter smiles, shaky, and punches him on the arm. "Steve respects your opinion, too."

"Oh I know," Sam pants, smile becoming a grin. "But this is a co-captain decision, kid. The Falcon is wise but he ain't messing with that."

Peter laughs, and the birds chirp away, and eventually him and Sam start running again.

* 

He finds Steve and Mr Stark back at the quarters. They are sitting at the living room table, and a giant 3D world map is rotating in the middle, with red dots marking hot spots that Mr Stark is assigning priority levels to.

When they spot him--sweaty after Sam eventually goaded him into showing off just how fast he can sprint--Mr Stark gets to his feet in a startled movement.

There's a beat of awkward silence as the scrape of the chair Mr Stark vacated remains the only noise in the room, and Peter realizes he must look a mess, and notices Steve look at Mr Stark and then at him with an expression that is impossible to decipher, but may be in the realm of 'pitying' if he had to choose what to label it.

The three of them seem caught in a stalemate until Steve breaks the silence, first.

"The whole point about this interview is that you're safe. Away from her."

"It's New York," Peter counters. "May is there. Ned is there. I can't... I have to be there. I can stay hidden; I'd been doing that for years, way before I joined you guys. Since I was fourteen."

"Peter—"

"I have to be there," he interrupts, firm. "And if you guys won't fly me then I'm going to break out and get myself there some other way. You know I can."

Steve still looks unconvinced, but Mr Stark's mouth twitches at the corner and Peter thinks he looks quietly proud.

"...Avengers Tower is ten blocks from the studio."

Peter's heart swells in places where he thought he had already reached a maximal fullness. Yes.

Steve looks at him. "Tony."

"He could stay there. It's the most secure place in New York, and one of us can stay with him."
Wait. “I don’t need a babysitter—“ Peter starts to say.

“Hey. We’re already caving to your demands, you should quit while you’re ahead.” Mr Stark holds a finger up at Peter, and he levels Steve with a stare. “It’s feasible.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“It’s not, Steve.” Mr Stark smiles sadly. “Put yourself in his shoes for a second and you’ll see it’s not. Come on. If anyone had tried to tell that gangly kid in the 40s that he had to stay away from the fight, he would have punched them in the face.”

Steve seems torn, and he takes a step towards Peter. “If you get hurt... it’s gonna be on us, for having let you.”

Peter shakes his head. "No it won't." He takes a step towards Steve, too, and looks up at him with every ounce of resolve in his body. "I'm not fifteen anymore. You're not letting me do anything."

Steve looks down at him, pensive, and Peter gets to watch his blue blue eyes soften from up close, and the turning point happens right in front of him. And so Peter knows, before Steve finally breaks into a reluctant smile, that he managed to change his mind.

"I'll say." He claps Peter on the shoulder. "Guess I'll know better than to forget you're your own person, next time."

"That's right." Peter grins.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Mr Stark sit back down in his chair with a heaviness that seems disproportionate to the light tone with which the scene ended.

*  

He's alone in the lab that evening when Mr Stark walks in.

Peter had been wondering--in the back of his mind he was hoping for this encounter.

"Hey Mr Stark."

"Peter. Hi." He walks up to Peter's desk and looks admiringly at the screen where Peter's chemistry notes are projected, then down at the different mediums Peter has been working on to isolate the particles that exist only in outer space, where Proxima came from. Peter's wearing his NASA shirt for the occasion.

"You showered."

No way that was disappointment in his tone... was it?

"Uh, yeah. I think it's recommended, after a workout?"

"Novel. You were with Sam?"

Peter nods, leaning over the desk to grab his old draft of handwritten notes to look over an old calculation. "Yeah. He's really fit; I think all that jogging with Steve has him thinking he's slow compared to us, but he did great."

"Hm." Mr Stark stands next to him and looks down at the notebook, too. "He said you looked like 'trouble' the other day."
Peter frowns down at his own writing, wondering what that has to do with anything. Then Mr Stark's finger enters his field of vision and points at one of the hastily scribbled graphs.

"Did you factor in the mu coefficient here?"

"Cancels out because of gravitational force," Peter says.

"Not in the deep space regions; the galaxy's centripetal forces will still need to be counted."

"Oh." Peter blinks. "You're right!" He grabs a pencil and scribbles the correction. "Thanks, sir."

Mr Stark looks at him, and Peter looks back. The crow's feet return, and Peter wishes the wall of windows would black out on command so he could kiss him right here.

"For the record; I'm richer than Elton John."

Peter blinks, and turns to face him fully so that his back is to the desk.

"...Okay?"

Mr Stark takes a step so that Peter is trapped between it and him.

"Just so you don't go getting any ideas."

He's obviously trying to be funny, but Peter wonders if there's a tiny part of him that genuinely thinks the amount of money and power he has is the reason Peter feels... the way he does about him.

"Isn't he happily married?" he says lightly, lifting himself up onto the counter. Their faces are further apart this way--it is a standing desk, after all.

"Is he? Great, that makes one of us." Peter winces, and Mr Stark shakes his head. "Not that I--that stuff is in the past for me." He stares up at him, blazer over his classic rock shirt, the scattered grays in his hair visible and perfect from this angle. He puts his hands on the desk at either side of Peter's thighs, and leans up slightly. "You got me living for the meantime, right now."

Peter blushes in spite of himself.

But he has to ask: "Did Steve ask you how I knew about the Housing Unit?"

Mr Stark nods.

"What does he... what did he say?"

"Well, first he asked me if this fatherly thing we have going is still... only fatherly." Peter's ears go red-hot. "To which I responded it never was because I am much too much of a selfish asshole for that." He doesn't look away from Peter. "And then he asked me how you knew, and I told him you found me out." His voice softens, and he's almost smiling. His eyes certainly are. "You caught me." He leans up further, possibly on his tiptoes. "Hook line and sinker, fully caught me."

*I'll grant you that it's not illegal, but that doesn't make it good*, Mr Stark said last time they were here.

But this feels good.

Peter leans down.

"I think Steve knows how much of a sucker you've made of me, and that's okay. He should know
what a terrible person I am." Peter opens his mouth to protest but Mr Stark shakes his head, and he seems so strangely at peace with what he's saying that it disarms Peter back into silence. "He doesn't know I think about your thighs nonstop because I've actually had them in my hands." To which he puts words into action and grips both of Peter's legs up top, squeezing through his sweatpants. "He knows you could have me disband the Avengers in a sentence or less, but he doesn't know what you let me do to you at night."

_Not yet_, thinks a desperately hopeful part of Peter's brain, even as his gut seems to churn with arousal like a hot sludge.

"I thought about you in this exact position on this exact desk, by the way," he adds, right before Peter can't wait anymore and leans down further to kiss him.

His tongue is hot and probing, and Peter is bent nearly in half to reach him, and: "This is actually kind of uncomfortable," Peter pants against his mouth, smiling.

Mr Stark chuckles darkly, and breaks the kiss to step back and suddenly Peter gets what this position does for the height of Mr Stark's head in relation to his body. "I've got you right where I want you," he says, and slowly pushes Peter's thighs apart.

The wall of windows does black out on command, it turns out.

* It's Mr Stark.

Peter's designated guard, at the penthouse. Of course it is.

The whole team excepting Wanda and Vision flies to New York in the Quinjet, and the atmosphere is tense but electric. Everyone is in their gear, Peter included, and he can't help admiring Steve's shield, Sam's wing apparatus and Thor's cape ("What is that fabric, anyway?" Mr Stark butts in at one point, "Crepe? Charmeuse?"). Bruce is preparing to become the Hulk for the first time since he was forcibly transformed and him and Natasha are speaking quietly in a corner. Bucky's arm gleams.

"Next stop, Avengers tower!" Sam announces from the pilot's seat. "Hold on to your butts, ladies and gentlemen."

They drop down onto the landing pad and the rear door thrums open, allowing Peter and Mr Stark to get off the jet. The sun is low and orange in the sky, likely setting soon, but before they leave again Peter turns to the team and gets his Iron Spider mask to peel away, so they can see his face.

"Guys," he starts, looking at all of them; every face attentive and serious and listening to him intently. They have never looked more formidable, more ready for action, but he has also never felt closer to all of them. "I just wanna say thanks."

Steve smiles. "Thank you, Peter."

Peter grins back, and Sam hits the switch on the door as the jet glitters back into stealth mode. After it takes off, even Peter has trouble making it out from the evening sky.

Mr Stark is standing next to him, and Peter knows he is being looked at as he squints to try to figure out the jet's parting silhouette.

"Can you still see it?"
"Nah." He finally turns to look back at him, and is struck by the desire to kiss him again right here, where a passing news helicopter could capture it; where it would look cinematic and sunset-tinged and as big as Peter feels it. He wishes Mr Stark would tell him to; 'Kiss me', so that he could do it. He wishes he could call him by his name.

Mr Stark nods. Then he motions behind him to the large, empty penthouse and the long night ahead.

"Shall we?"

Chapter End Notes

YOUR SUPPORT MEANS ALL THE THINGS THANK YOU!!!!!!

Hoo-boy am I psyched to share what's coming up... :D :D :D

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