### Bah Humbug

**Summary**

“It’s not what you think!” Peter is mortified and hunched down, panic distorting every nerve in his body.

“What's going on?” Tony whispers urgently, eyes scanning a mile a minute, anger and concern etched in his fine lines.

Peter winces and takes a deep breath through the pain sinking into his bones. He meets his mentor's eyes and tries to keep still, though every instinct was telling him to jump out his arms. In a tone he knows is shaking, he barely manages, “I think I'm dying.”

**Notes**
Welcome to I hate myself part 528

Beta is the lovely MidnightWrite

- Inspired by Keep Calm & Don't Die by itsallAvengers
- Inspired by Identity Theft by KitCat992
- Inspired by the stars the moon they have all been blown out (you left me in the dark) by madasthesea
- Inspired by don't leave me now by iron_spider
If Peter had known how his day was going to end, he probably would have just stayed in bed.

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It starts at 1 A.M on a Thursday at the end of December.

It's an uneventful night in Queens, only a few attempted muggings and vehicles struggling to get out of snow banks that needed Spider-Man's appearance. A lost little girl returned to her mother and a belligerent police officer later, Spider-Man is swinging home, exhausted from walking the tightrope between two lives.

The strength that lifts him through the air and drops him into almost roadkill is always exhilarating. The adrenaline of fighting and saving someone never quite fades away.

Being Spider-Man is more than a past Peter Parker feels he ever could be.

There's nothing quite like New York in the winter. Peter blames his late mother for it, remembering that she took any chance she could get to visit the Empire State Building after working long hours during the holiday season. The city is flashy and colorful, vibrant with Christmas lights and neon Santa signs. Queens is buzzing with frosted energy and mid-week drunks singing Jingle Bells. It's days until Christmas and, albeit Peter being a Scrooge, it genuinely feels like home.

He has already left a voice message to Happy about the night. He is about to climb through his window and can hear May's faint snoring when his spidey senses are set off again.

A few streets over is a discernible scream. Not like bad horror movies where the girl hides in the closet, fake and over-rehearsed, but the blood-curdling kind when all safety is pulled out from beneath your feet.

Peter knows that scream because it's how he constantly feels without Spider-Man. Peter Parker, who's constantly unsure of where he stands or what his future would be. Peter Parker, who just wants his Mom and Dad back. Peter Parker, who hides in textbooks and outdated manuals, so no one can see how lost he feels some days.
Peter moves faster than he thinks is super-humanly possible when he hears that scream.

A blur of red and blue, he swings his webs past crumbling brick buildings for a mile before K.A.R.E.N. pins down the exact location of the sound. A group of three men dressed like dementors are circling a woman in her 30s, drunk and trembling, in a back alley of an empty store for rent. They look like a cult, with one man standing in front of her, a knife trained on her neck, and his henchmen holding her arms back. They look boring and generic, the type of people Peter figures you would meet on Craigslist who seem like they have something better to do. Peter shifts from on top of a nearby roof into their peripheral vision.

He's instinctively about to web up the men restraining the woman when their leader steps toward Spider-Man. He's wearing a lopsided, twisted up smile, a deep scar down the right side of his face. His head is tilting strangely towards the webslinger. He's bald, in a black cloak stretching to his feet and the knife in his hand is covered in something with a metallic hue.

“Spidey! How nice of you to finally join us! How lovely...” His voice sounds eerily calm, like a fucked up Mad Hatter at a tea party with dead bodies as guests. He states in a hushed tone, “I've been waiting for you.” There's an uncomfortable familiarity to his voice but Peter's brain is currently offline. He feels chills scatter across his body and he knows it's not the from the cold.

“I thought I recognized you, Voldemort! You're still a sight for sore eyes without that nose of yours!” Spider-Man shoots a web, binding henchman #1 as he was reaching his hand into his pocket. He flies overhead in milliseconds and kicks goon #2 in the ribs, slamming him into the brick wall.

The He-Who- Shall-Not-Be-Named knockoff is ultimately not impressed; a hellish scowl appears on his face and his eyes narrow, switching from a dark brown to a blinding red, as he's moving closer to the woman and Peter.

He's about to shove the woman behind him to finish off Tom Riddle when she falls to the ground in a seizure-like state, frothing at the mouth and screaming. He's trying to remember his first aid protocols and plot a course to the nearest hospital, ignoring his suit's sensors flashing IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION NEEDED and kick this guy's ass because seriously, what the fuck dude, when K. A.R.E.N. lets out a frantic, “Peter, look out!”.

There's a whoosh of air, a flash of silver and then numbing pain in his side as he kicks out and shoots webs at his assailant. The sound of unsettling giggles fill his ears, then there is a black nothingness.

When Peter opens his eyes next, the Harry Potter asshole is gone, the bad guys are passed out in their webs and the woman on the ground is not moving. There's a zinging pain in his side where his suit is
ripped. K.A.R.E.N boots back up and tells him that his suit went down for a few seconds as she was alerting police.

He frantically drops to his knees and searches her neck for a pulse, turning her to her side. His voice is tight as he takes a breath to steel himself and gazes up into the sky. “K.A.R.E.N., vitals, now.”

K.A.R.E.N. hesitates before she says without any discernible emotion, “Her body is rapidly decomposing. There’s signs of a dissolved tissue and it seems her internal organs are rotting quickly, Peter. Should I call Mr. Stark?”

He's flipping the body before K.A.R.E.N. can finish, and her skin is too pale, like she's been bleached and she's colder than the snow she's laying on. Her veins are washed out and vibices have already sprouted on her arms. The scent is an overwhelming, amplified aura of expired meat, stale like week old garbage flooding his every sense. Her eyes are blank and her hair i-

Within a second of his spidey sense tingling up and him jumping to the other wall of the alley, a purse falls from where it's perched on a nearby dumpster and he hears the sound of a dainty glass breaking.

A small red and white Christmas ornament falls out, a snowglobe with a miniature Santa Claus holding a present out to a mother and child, smiling gleefully.

He feels like he's going to throw up as he speaks to K.A.R.E.N. quietly, “Just get the police here.”

The police arrive and Crabbe and Goyle are arrested. Spider-Man gives his account of events and the NYPD have to call in men with hazmat suits. The area is being quarantined with tape and medical sensors when Peter sees the faceless men dumping the woman's body into a large, blue duffle-like bag and then loading it into some biohazard capsule.

Peter doesn't even know her name and she's being thrown away like a piece of trash into a body bag where her cadaver is disintegrating into nothingness. Soon, all that will be left is a pile of smoking cinders.

He didn’t sign up for this; to fail to catch the criminal and see someone’s mother die in the same breath. He feels small and young and like he's not equipped for this. He just wants to go home.
As Spider-Man swings home, the throbbing in his side disappears without any trace of a scar. Peter chalks it up to his healing factor that night and attempts to sleep after the whole ordeal.

Somewhere, he knows it’s not his fault that the woman is dead, and yet, the pit inside his chest filled with all his guilt and confusion feels bigger than ever.

As he closes his window and pulls the covers to shield himself from the day of horrors, Peter fidgets with the broken Santa Claus figurine in his fingers, an oxymoron of holiday cheer and dread lulling him to sleep.

So, yeah; Christmas isn't starting off great this year.

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Peter's day is bad from the moment he opens his eyes.

His alarm clock goes off ten minutes late and May is two seconds from banging down his door. He feels sluggish, more so than usual, like before the spider bite when he would wake up to a headache and cold or from lack of sleep. But he can't get sick and he's not that kid that gets nightmares about his parents never coming back anymore.

“Peter, hurry up!” He hears May knocking at his door and the dangle of her keys and her hospital access card, but something's distorted and off kilter. Peter can't put his finger on it. “I have an early shift! Let's go!”

“Alright, I'm up! I'm up!” Peter yells back, stumbling around his bed, frantically searching for his backpack and pair of jeans.

The room usually stops spinning by the time he rinses out mouth, but today it is blurry and off center.

He's got no time to consider that as he rushes around and out of their apartment. But it's strange because he can't quite remember what happens next; one minute he's in his cramped Queens bathroom and the next he's dressed and on his way to Midtown.

In hindsight, it should've have been the first red flag, but Peter isn't known for his common sense.
He’s got his bag on his shoulder, a cold strawberry Pop Tart in his mouth and his keys in his hand by the time he’s halfway out the door.

The sugar is usually enough to hold him over until lunch or until he’s in the vicinity of a vending machine. But today as he’s sitting in May’s hatchback on route to Midtown, his stomach feels too empty and his body feels like it could go back to sleep for 12 full hours.

It's nights before Christmas and he's already suffering from Queens’ cold temperatures, layered in his thickest T-shirt, an ugly burgundy sweater from May a few birthdays ago and a heavy insulated fleece winter jacket.

His spidey senses really come to bite him in the ass sometimes. He can feel every gust of wind and the chill of the temperature dropping another degree on each hair on his arms.

It's not even fully snowing yet, only greyish-brown sludge carpeting the sides of the roads and an inch of white snow barely sticking to the grass, melting on his fingers into water droplets, as if they never existed.

Peter doesn't mind the uncertainty of having a white Christmas. The heater in his suit saves him during his patrol but the rest his days are spent avoiding unnecessary seconds outside.

He'll never tell anyone but he wants to spend this Christmas alone. Christmas hasn't been the best holiday for years.

He’s losing memories of his parents and their traditions. If he clenches his eyes hard enough, he can still smell the over sweetened gingerbread from the bakery across the street and he can see the vague colors of their stockings hanging off the fireplace before the cold huff of a memory dissipates into smoke.

And then there's Ben. Ben who lifted a younger Peter up above his head to place their star on the top of their shedding pinetree that hit the ceiling and curved down as May giggled in the kitchen, shrieking fear and laughter, plating their delivery takeout Christmas meal that was always from the same Chinese place near Cunningham Park. Ben, who sat with Peter through Rudolph and Elf every year and made the same stupid jokes as they stole cookies off of ‘Santa’s’ plate, creeping late on Christmas Eve so May won't notice. May, whose eyelashes were decorated with pirouetting snowflakes after picking Peter up from the last day of school before winter break and smile brighter than all of New York on New Year's Eve, a new wrinkle on her face, each one displaying a year full
of love to come.

Yeah, so Christmas hasn't been the same for years.

He's still lost in thought when May snaps her fingers near his ear, irritable and calling his name. The radio is blaring some god awful Winter Wonderland cover, a dog is barking across the street and there's a teacher standing outside his Prius a few yards away, in distress over a dent on the bumper.

Distantly, he notes that this isn't something that should happen anymore with his spider sense; he hasn't been so unaware of his surroundings in at least a year. Maybe it's the approaching cold or the lack of bank robbers and petty thefts on patrol that's getting under his skin.

They're idling in the back of Midtown's parking lot, groups of teenagers with Starbucks’ paper cups swarming past and towards the entrance. Peter bolts up too quickly and almost chokes on his seatbelt, attempting to force his spider senses to get with the program.

“Sorry, May, I'm just tired,” He says, trying to clear his head.

She sighs, drawn out to a point where he can see the hot air of her breath, and uses her Aunt voice, “If you're falling asleep and getting behind in your classes because of Spide- insect problems,” she corrects, “then we might need to renegotiate your patrol hours again.” She's tapping her foot against the door and glancing back and forth to the clock on the dashboard, eyebrows furrowed in annoyance.

“No!” He fumbles, “I mean- it's not like that- I was just thinking about how off the holidays feel.”

Her face softens at this, from annoyance to sympathy in a heartbeat. It takes a second but before Peter blinks, the woman with the rose colored glasses is back.

May tries so hard to keep the two of them from falling off the deep end and she does well all things considered, Peter notes, for a kid and a life that was never supposed to be hers. Their life isn't perfect and a million ‘what ifs’ are on the tip of his tongue, but they try as hard as they can and make due.

Despite it all, Peter wouldn't trade it for the world. He loves May and even if they aren't blood related family, he knows there's no one in the entire 8 billion of the world that could compare.
(There maybe is perhaps one mentor that could, but Peter knows better than to get attached to people that aren't his. Even people that are supposedly his disappear eventually.)

“Oh, honey, I'm so sorry,” He can see her guilt surfacing, “I'm just so stressed with last week's report and my bonus this ye-”

“Hey, it's alright,” He says, shushing her before she can get worked up and grabs his backpack, “It's just an off day. I'll see you later tonight, alright? Love you, May.”

Peter jumps out of the hatchback, slamming the rusted door shut, and is already sprinting towards homeroom when he hears May’s muffled laugh and calls “Love you too!”.

Peter's faster than the entire track team at a moment's notice, but today is... strange. His depth perception is off and he nearly waltzes into a door frame. His body is covered in goosebumps and his mind is full of fog. The air blowing through the door is a few degrees too icy and he can feel the veins on his neck straining for any source of heat.

Thermoregulation can really be a bitch for a spider enhanced vigilante.

He is so intent on getting away from the chill and to his locker, where the air vent is warmer because it's near the cafeteria and thermostats that no one checks up on, that he collides into Ned in the hallway.

“Whoa, dude! You alright?” Ned's textbooks are flying to the floor and Peter's brain is still trying to catch up to the present when he attempts to grab them before they fall. They crash on the floor a half second too late.

Huh. His reflexes are askew. He notes off-handedly that he probably should've eaten more but he can't even recall going to the kitchen this morning.

“Sorry, man,” As he instinctively kneels down to pick up Ned’s belongings, there's a sudden rush.

Searing pain hits his left temple unexpectedly and he almost loses his balance, nearly nose diving to the floor.
“Get a room, Penis!” Flash practically announces to the entire student body and shoves Ned into a locker door. Peter's on his knees in front of Ned and if he wasn't fending off a migraine that was squeezing his brain into orange pulp, he might be embarrassed or angry enough to punch Flash.

Ned's grabbing his arm and lifting him up before he can fall into those violent tendencies and worridley rushes out, “You look awful, Pete”

If Ned can tell he's off, Peter belatedly thinks, he must be some kind of fucked up. He really should take an Advil and check on that injury from last night.

Peter's on his feet with books in tow before his best friend can scrutinize his erratic state and gives him what he hopes is a charismatic smile.

“Had a late night, I'm still waking up. So, how did building the Lego Millenium Falcon go last night?”

Ned is buzzing with energy and Peter is smiling.

And just like that, he feels back to normal. Life seems to be okay again.

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School is horrific, to put it nicely.

Peter feels like he’s going to pass out from the lingering migraine in the locker room before Phys-Ed. He's not even working out yet and he's pathetically weak.

It doesn't make sense and the fog in his brain is just getting thicker.

The scent of plastic candy canes mixed with burnt meat from the Home-Ec department is driving his senses to an eleven.

He's suddenly aware of everything except rational thought, the overpowering scent of deodorant, the sound of a ticking clock in sync with his heartbeat and the squeals of sneakers hitting the gymnasium floor and just how much he wants to lay down and close his eyes.
His coach is already yelling at the class to get a move on for attendance before he can breath and he's off, failing to ease the worry about the consequences.

But then Michelle is flipping him off and greeting him, eyes crinkling with holiday festiveness and a pin that says, “Christmas is the most heart-warming celebration of capitalism”.

“You look like a truck hit you, loser.” Michelle doesn't often show concern but he knows that she's far too observant to miss the disaster of a day he's having. He knows he ought to tell her about Spider-Man soon, but Tony would probably freak and send too many NDA’s or lawyers for what Peter considers a private conversation.

He's got on a bright smile and is putting an excessive amount of thought into his steps as he parades closer to the girl's side of the court as he says, “You don't look too bad yourself, MJ,” glancing at their navy and yellow uniforms and she smacks him on the side of his head.

Routine begins to settle and Peter subsequently forgets about the bizarre headache.

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He's made it thirty minutes through the hour into his chemistry quiz and he's already convinced that his bad start to the day is over. His brain is sharp against topaz floating in chloroform and carbon tetrachloride. He answers ionic compound questions without hesitation and his day is looking significantly better.

That's when his energy levels plummets and his body goes into fight-or-flight mode.

Distantly, he can tell his blood pressure drops to around 80 mmHg or something equally dangerous and his hushed heartbeat is far too slow for a New York high school nurse’s pay grade. Peter knows that if he were normal, he would’ve passed out long before now.

Even for being enhanced, this isn't right. Peter knows it and still attempts to will the alarm away.

He's finished his paper just before his extreme fatigue hits and lowers his head into his crossed arms on the desk. He can get a decent fifteen minutes of respite before the period is over.
When Peter blinks open his eyes, Michelle is shaking him awake and students are scattering out the door for lunch.

Her face is drawn out in a frown and her eyes are searching for something; it's the same look Michelle gives breaking news on the White House from CNN or a new novel she's rereading for foreshadowing she's missed.

“Hey, you alright?” He unintentionally shakes her off a bit rudely and tries on the smile from this morning, saying, “Best I've ever felt in my life,” but he knows it’s unconvincing. Michelle brushes him off and leaves without him, but he catches her eyes as they oppose her actions, a sweep of disappointment and trivial betrayal.

He's losing time and energy like sand in a tornado and he doesn't know why. If he doesn't get his shit together, he's going to lose more friends than he has.

But he's Spider-Man and this isn't the time to overreact.

He’ll be fine. Really, he knows it will pass. He just needs to give it a day or so.

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It does not, in fact, pass.

Lunch isn't any better. He figures once he gets some food in his system, this funk will be over and he can be a functioning member of society again.

Michelle is arguing with Ned about the anti-feminist undertones in Lord of the Flies and Peter is wearily staring at the the remains of his lunch, desperately hoping that he’s eaten enough to flush whatever out of his system.

What he's not prepared for is how his energy level skyrockets. It's like before the spider bite after drinking several cups of coffee and cans of Redbull to pull an all-nighter for exams or a last-minute project.

But he isn't that kid anymore. He just can't be. He can't go back to being an introverted and geeky nobody. He can't be just some typical kid in the sea of typical people.
(“You're anything but typical, Pete,” Ben's voice is clear as glass and it cuts into his heart just as sharply.)

It’s like being dunked into freezing cold water and the tiredness is over and Peter is somewhat back to normal. He can still feel his metabolism and internal organs overworking intensively to fight off this virus or infection but it's kind of ruining his life at the moment and he is not here for it.

He chalks it up to a fluke of influenza and embraces the wiry feeling, jittery and exuberant. If it really was an issue, he'd know by now.

(Spoiler alert: he does not know.)

Flash, Eugene really, is shouting something tables away but Peter's whole body feels like it's going to explode or fly through the ceiling. It’s not necessarily a bad feeling or disorienting, just off kilter.

Maybe, this relestness is better than nearly passing out. Maybe, he can get through this day.

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Peter realizes he may have spoken too soon. That's when everything precisely goes to hell.

He's in Woodshop & Engineering and he's feeling a lot better. There's no signs of his earlier lethargy; Ned is smiling and making jokes and Flash is mostly quiet from being berated by his teacher earlier. They've been working on a major project involving designing holiday ornaments and batteries for a month. Ned is ripping his last pieces for a reindeer sleigh that teeters forward. Peter is excitedly finalizing his calculations and mechanical blueprints for a small train set. He's already got every wooden and track piece organized and assembled, only left configuring the battery and gears for the wheels.

(The train itself looks picturesque, deep red and royal blue, and if he stares at it too much, he sees a boy, lost in a world of diagrams and mechanical models to repress his grief; a boy more concerned about the inner workings of a toy train set than the memory of his parents setting it up the year before for Christmas.

It's a boy who doesn't care about the people in the houses or how many Christmas presents they're going to open; it's not a child playing make-believe and waiting for the magic of Christmas; It's an orphan looking in between the lines of a family photo for numbers and science instead of the painful reality that he will never have his mother and father back.
If he squints, he sees a boy building a world of houses and cars because his real life is tragic. There is no magic to save him, so the boy sticks to numbers and formulas instead.

He's considering including a mini hydraulic braking system. He could probably bring it up to Tony later and have F.R.I.D.A.Y. check over his calculations. He knows Tony would love it, over-complicating a simple high school assignment into something innovative. There's still doubt but he thinks Tony would be proud of anything he did.

It's a bit ironic that Tony and him bonding over a train could connect them more than his actual father building it with him. He knows that since Ben died, he had been more than a little hostile towards the few men May dated and that's not even mentioning his bad attitude towards authoritative male figures throughout the years from his teachers to cops he meets on patrol.

So maybe he is projecting just a bit.

Peter knows that Tony's different. He's protective and understanding; he knows what it's like to have so much ambition for the world so young and the struggles of balancing real life as a superhero. He knows that no matter who May brings home or where his life takes him, Tony will always pull through as his dad.

It doesn't stop the child-like fear that he will lose everyone he ever loves.

His day is going relatively well until he's near the band saw with Ned. He's giddy with glee of day going right and running formulas in his head when it happens.

A burst of something catapults through his body and suddenly he's not in control of his body. His brain isn't transmitting a message to his nerves or muscles and the migraine returns from this morning with worse pain wh-

The world turns to a burning feeling across his face and everything goes black...

In the back of his stomach before he faints, the intolerable pain bubbles into a simmering irritation before he dives forward and yanks her legs back and they both stumble to the ground.
The next time Peter opens his eyes, students are haphazardly glancing and awkwardly maneuvering around his hollow-eyed form, crumpled on the floor, heaving into the ground with sweat crowning around his entire body when a wave of cold air from a nearby window rushes in and shoves him back into reality.

Michelle is worriedly sending looks across the room as if he’s grown a third head and a couple of his classmates are a few footsteps away, observing him, a zoo animal behind a cage.

It takes him aback. This sickness just tried to plunge him into the serrated blades and turn him into wood chips.

He is a danger to himself. How the hell can he be Spider-Man like this? Peter feels nauseated and it’s not just from the technology department’s fumes of burnt iron and synthetic motor oil.

Ned attempts to heave Peter up, his limp frame heavier than usual and hobbling, and is nervously chattering about taking him to the nurse's office to his teacher, when the bell screams for the end of class.

The sound is louder and like when there’s too much bass at one of Flash's parties, distorted and mechanical instead of melodic. There's a taste of metal in his mouth and Peter barely comprehends that his nose and ears are bleeding slightly.

Breathe in. And out. He needs to stay calm. Breathe in. And out.

He really needs to talk to K.A.R.E.N. but he doesn't have the suit at school.

Shit, he thinks. The memories of this morning in his apartment are melting in his head, wax candles in an oven, and he can barely breathe without inhaling the polluted air of toxic chemicals and wood fibers attacking each one of his senses without remorse.

This is spinning out of control and Ned is attempting to shepherd him towards the nurse's office when he blinks next, on the opposite side of the school. The worlds is blurry and without second guessing his instincts, Peter grabs his bag and bolts outside the doors of Midtown, the biting chill scalding his esophagus.
He’s on the subway, daydreaming as he passes the powder-frosted rooftops of New York on the afternoon Q30 subway, blinding and never ending landscapes of blizzards that burn his retinas.

He loathes the season; from the holographic sequin tinsel across the city to the belligerent drunks of SantaCon stumbling and passing out in the middle of Times Square; whether it be the expectation of a flawless, beaming white-picket family opening presents under a flashy tree or the tackiness of freezing his ass off for some fireworks and the reminder that he’s alone on New Year’s Eve, again; it’s the exaggeration of peppermint, chestnut and eggnog symbolizing unity or the stupid Hallmark movies May loves that are reminiscent of a life that’s no longer theirs.

Call him a Grinch, but he can’t stand the shiny plasticity of it all or the kids’ unwavering dreams of Santa.

In spite of his loathing for the season, he’s not selfish and still tries his best to celebrate for May’s sake; he’s budgeting for a last minute Christmas gift. He wants to get May a Polaroid and he still has one of his old dumpster finds. If he brings it to Tony’s lab, he’ll probably be able to get it in good condition with a little time and tools.

He knows Tony would insist on paying for a brand new model or a Canon if he so much as mentions presents, which is why he never plans on breathing a syllable of the word. He doesn't want to be more of a burden and Tony already gives so much to him.

Nonetheless, he's still workshopping his gift for Tony. What do you get the man who has everything in the world at the tips of his fingers?

He has an old, stationary wooden model of Iron Man at home. Peter wants to add some sort of windup web-shooters to it and repaint the armor red, black and blue. Adding in a small blue LED as the arc reactor will be a breeze but Peter’s still unsure about the mechanism for hollowed-out gauntlets combining with a mock web fluid.

It makes him happy; to be able to make something still true to himself while also embracing his alter ego.

It’s as soon as he gets to his stop in Queen’s when there’s a faint burning smell that’s sending chills of ‘Danger! Danger!’ to the back of his neck. It’s not the scent of New York’s boroughs, burnt hot dog stands from a block south or extinguished cigarettes dying on the sidewalk two hundred yards away. He can’t remember the smell, but it’s uneasily familiar and he sh-
It hits him from the night before. Beneath his jackets and sweaters is his hand smoldering with a black patch between his index finger and thumb. It’s small enough to look like a bruise or a callous but the stench is suddenly encompassing every inch of Peter’s attention.

It reeks of the same grotesque scent on the woman from last night, anonymously rotting into a contamination bag served as a grave.

He’s home and in his room as his thoughts trail off and is hurriedly slipping into his suit when he stops dead in his tracks.

His room is still ransacked from this morning’s stupor but there’s something prominent that’s absent. His head is no longer spinning but there’s a thick clouding

His suit still has a tear in the side he was stabbed and he’s supposed to be in Spanish class. May will eventually find out when the school calls h--

Fuck. He *forgot*.

It’s a Thursday and he’s usually upstate by now. Life at the compound feels as normal as life in Queens. Some days consist of training with Black Widow in stealth combat while bantering in Urdu or German with Captain America moderating. Others are spent working on schematics and prototypes of robotic fossil-fuel vacuums for Delhi’s pollution crisis with Mr. Stark while Dr. Banner works on possible sedation drugs for the Hulk.

It’s a family, second to May, and he’s not some fucking amateur. If any of the Avengers detect even a hint of his outbursts of poor health or inconsistency, he’ll be benched for weeks from lack of communication, self-care or another excerpt from F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s long list of ways for him to screw up.

If Mr. Stark so much as gets word of this...

There’s the lingering fear that he’s not good enough for the team and, that no matter what, he’ll shatter the thin ice he’s so gracelessly barreling across.

He can’t lose the suit again or watch the true purpose of his life vanish from his fingers again.
needs to be stronger and less on edge. He’s Spider-Man, he can do this. He can be the hero people need.

(I just wanted to be like you, pitifully loops over and over and over again in his head like a broken cassette squealing through tape in disrepair.)

Peter fishes out and blunders with his phone, sending as message to Tony with an excuse of emergency decathlon session as he shoves out of his layers of ugly, thick sweaters.

It's for the best, he reasons. He's going to be fine and deal with this. He's not going to be a kid in the Avengers’ eyes and reverse all his hard work on his reputation with Sam and Clint from a stupid virus.

So his memory is blocking out some of the most important parts of his daily life. Okay, well that’s not exactly comforting, but Peter knows that whatever is doing this probably has a lifespan.

The suit boots up and K.A.R.E.N. greets him, blue light dancing across his sight. He's used to the heater comforting his winter blues and his oversensitivity to the world leveling out.

That's not the case when he suddenly feels colder than without his civilian clothes and he’s recognizing the early signs sensory overload. He isn’t even on the streets yet and it feels like the end of a Friday night.

Peter's swinging building to building, watching a group of kids trying to throw snowballs at his soaring form and couples clinging to each other for heat.

That’s when nausea hits him square in the jaw.

His senses are overalert and his eyes are heavy. His stomach lurches violently and his lungs, which have barely recovered from his almost asthma attack earlier, begin to constrict so that every breath is a struggle. His face has long stopped burning from the environment of corrosive chemicals but there’s a persisting slump in his body, slow enough that Peter feels like he’s Elphaba from the Wizard of Oz, melting at the slightest touch of water.

He doesn’t want to ask where Mr. Stark could possibly retrieve his data from but this is way past a flu.
“Hi, K.A.R.E.N. Can you pull up my vitals?”

K.A.R.E.N.’s tone is concerned as she inquires, “Peter, you're showing signs of hypothermia. I've been programmed to alert Mr. Stark with your expressed permission if the matter is not life or death. Would you like me to call him?”

Shock slaps Peter in the face. Who said anything about life or death?

Digits and abbreviations cloud his vision in the suit and he feels unsure; there’s a dangerous mix of numbers too high or low for a common flu. He’s not an expert in Biology but his intoxication level should not be so high for barely eating lunch. But if K.A.R.E.N. isn’t automatically detecting fatal or immediate danger, it can't be that bad, right?

Right?

“No, it's fine!” He stumbles out, “I think it's a 48 hour bug. It'll pass eventually.”

K.A.R.E.N. makes a unconvinced sound and Peter knows he doesn't even believe himself. Before he can second guess himself, there’s a flare up on the back of his neck hairs and boisterous yelling a few miles away. Just like that, the city that never sleeps is calling on their friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.

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It’s only 5 P.M. and patrol is going by painstakingly slow. He knows May has probably called and left a brief yet furious voicemail about him skipping class, but the very thought that would normally make him shudder with fear seems miles away in the haze of his mind.

The melting feeling has passed and he’s not running on overactive energy fumes anymore, but the world is still blurry and his Spidey-sense never quite fully quiets. He's finally found something attention-worthy and not proof of a paranoid vigilante; a small homeless man is mugging a freshman when the bum throws the kid's backpack at Spider-Man but it feels like the force of a speeding bus. It hits its mark dead center at Peter's stomach and he falls backwards from his webs into the concrete and gravel. He's momentarily gasping for air like he's been drowning in the open ocean. It hits his ribs and the air is too thick. It feels like the nicotine plumes from smokers and the busy, electric nightlife are suffocating him.
His extensive vision and hearing are yanked from under his feet. In the time he's incoherent, all feeling in his body clicks off. He doesn't even know if he exists because his suit and K.A.R.E.N. feel like they are light years away.

He doesn't know how long it's been when he opens his eyes and he's in a goddamn dumpster. The scent of week old garbage and alley sewer water paves over any other sensible thought and it's all too damn much.

In that moment, he can feel his heartbeat wildly speeding up and his lungs, stomach and lungs beating in his body, pumping into overdrive as if his body will stop any second.

It's not a panic attack and it isn't who Peter is anymore. He's not some lanky kid who barely makes it past a mugger and is winded by asthma attacks burning like molten lava down his esophagus.

Panic rises as chaotic thoughts crowd his mind and he knows his face is bright red under the mask. What if he's losing his powers? Is that even something that’s possible?

When his heartbeat finally slows down from an almost anxiety attack, Peter knows he should at least take a couple Aspirin for his metabolism or talk to Tony or something.

His body is between state of an immediate shut down and his enhancements are trying to break into the glass of the emergency backup generator.

It hits Peter when his body doesn't reboot and his senses are more than muddled, a draining feeling like a black hole, sucking every ounce of stamina out of his body. He feels too slow and everything hurts.

Something is trying to kill him.

His time and depth perception are off and his hearing is fading; his sight and smell is going all over the place without warning and his body temperature is dropping faster than should be humanly possible; he's on the brink of throwing up or passing out, his energy levels are fluctuating and he's almost gone into cardiac arrest just within the past half hour.

Whatever demon plague is doing this to him is meant for enhanced folks like him. And based on what Peter can grasp, it's working. Targeting every bone in his skeletal system with a pinching
pressure, his respiratory system clogged and heat smoldering in his circulatory system, in what feels like third degree burns and his cells stopping reproducing randomly throughout the night.

Maybe there was a drug on the knife from the stabbing last night or some infectious disease from the dead woman in the air. He decides his best bet is to stave off what symptoms he can through patrol and track down the guy he saw last night.

The periods his body works properly are still present. Peter can do this without help but he’s got to find Voldemort and an antidote before the night is through.

By 7 P.M., K.A.R.E.N. is monitoring Peter’s vitals when he asks to review the footage from that morning. K.A.R.E.N. reluctantly gives into Peter’s determination and tacks on, “I strongly advise calling Dr. Banner or Mr. Stark.” He’s already found vague surveillance store footage of the man from the stabbing and tracking his general area patterns in Queens, retracing his footsteps.

As hard as he tries, all he can see when he closes his eyes for too long is the woman’s dead body, limp and withering away like dried up vine. He sees his mother. Eyes twinkling in the Christmas lights’ reflections, bright and happy turning into the body he buries in the casket, lifeless and empty. It’s the nightmare he’s had years before Spider-Man, the one where he wakes up screaming and sleeping in May and Ben’s bed to try and calm his worst fears.

And suddenly, he's not Spider-Man anymore; he's the boy with the cookies and the train set, drowning in the snow sodden city, alone and afraid. The pain in his stomach is indescribable. Acid and fire, swirling like the snow in the sky into a hazy mess.

He hasn't felt this scared since Ben died, clutching onto his fading heartbeats like he's going to fall from a cliff; not since his parents disappear suddenly and May clutches a young boy that cries so much that it might drown everyone else he loves; since she said ‘I love you, my baby’ to him like a forever prayer as Ben's body lowers into a grave.

It's humiliating really, not being able to perform normal human functions, much less administer control over his powers.

He’s halfway through his traditional route outside of Manhattan when panic hits his Spidey sense hard and he nearly falls from a streetlight into oncoming traffic. He is so not in the mood to become Spider roadkill when his eyes narrow frantically and stumble upwards upon a figure that makes his stomach drop.
Peter sees the man who stabbed him smirking and tilting his head sideways, holding the knife directly in front his throat on top of a skyscraper roof, at least a hundred stories high. The sky is dark for so early in the evening and the light illuminating him from the nearby hustle and bustle of Queens irradiates a silhouette like something straight out of Psycho or The Shining. It seems like the snowflakes are cascading everywhere in the sky except onto the crook’s form.

The kid with the train set and cookies be damned, this is Spider-Man’s territory now.

Spider-Man detours onto the rooftop, landing a few yards away from the bootleg dementor guy and nearly collapsing off the railing, staggering in another sudden outburst of pain.

Oh God, he realizes. It’s so much worse than he expects. The air is thin from the altitude and his vision is doubling. The right side of his body loses all sense of feeling for a whole ten seconds as he tumbles into the snow and his left leg feels frozen. ‘Not you’ve been outside in the cold for too long’ frozen but ‘freshly sharpened daggers are individually sinking into his skin’ frozen.

“Hey, Edward Cullen!” It’s not his best nickname but forgive him for being more out of it than usual.

The man smiles impossibly wider and shifts the knife towards his ear. His voice is eerie and, suddenly, the city is dead quiet. It’s just the two of them standing there.

“I’m so happy you came.” The sentence is a leer and the voice reminds him of a music box, off-key and creepily melodic. Now in more light, Peter can see that he has no hair or eyebrows and his body resembles that of a corpse, veins an unruly brown color and skin flaking off dry patches across his entire face.

Everything hurts and Peter can barely make out the words without wincing, “What the hell did you do to me?” He’s flushed with irritation abruptly and this is so not the time of year to be dealing with this shit or a part of the kindred Christmas cheer.

“Just what’s due. Making sure subjects like you are eliminated.” Mad Hatter is raising an eyebrow and blowing puffs of air out that don’t appear. It’s as if his body isn’t… alive.

“Don’t be a such Grinch, Malfoy!” Peter retorts, aching and all of a sudden bone-chillingly disturbed. There’s something wrong about this and everything feels like it’s foreshadowing something much, much worse. “Why don’t you make this easy and answer to the Avengers about an antidote and some jail time?”
The counterfeit Houdini’s eyes are a solid red, fiery and intimidating, as he sneers, “All of you mutants deserve to rot.” He’s seething and is foaming at the mouth, much like the woman from this morning.

“To be fair,” Spider-Man quips back, “I’m enhanced not a mutant.” He’s still standing a few feet away and it leaning on the cool metal railings, trying to dull the discomfort all over his figure with the sensation of something solid.

Peter’s patience runs thin and he knows that he needs to do something, now.

“I hate you mutants. You act better than us, you cause misery and-” Evil death dude is unexpectedly cut off as Peter bolts straight towards him.

“Sorry, buddy, don’t have time for the evil monologue right now!” He jumps several metres in the air and goes to kick the goon in the chest and web him up when the blade is suddenly thrust towards him.

His reflexes kick in last-minute and he’s narrowly succeeded in avoiding the blunt of the dagger when it scraps lightly across his wrist and plunges into Houdini’s chest.

A look of horror washes upon the criminal’s face as he falls to the ground, convulsing in a seizure and body beginning to singe like burnt flesh, decomposing before Peter’s very eyes.

The stab wound flickers like a candle to his nerves, on and then off, and Spider-Man proceeds to black out from the tyrannical shock of agony that washes over his body.

Promptly, Peter Parker falls off a skyscraper and plummets into a snowbank six-hundred feet below.

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There’s a sharp yell when he comes to.

He can feel snowflakes dancing on his fingertips too precisely and he wants to stick out his tongue and taste them like he did the first Christmas without his parents. May clutching him on the balcony tightly, as if he might fall off the ledge of the fire escape, and Ben straining a smile despite the stockings missing from the apartment inside. In that moment, he’d do anything to be that young and
carefree again, with a whole family and no fear.

He’s in a shallow body of water, somewhere, snow piling in mini clumps on his suit, and a masculine voice is barking at him. He slowly blinks open his eyes to a blinding neon light and squints in overexposure when the memories rush back to him.

Panic kicks in and Peter jumps and wildly kicks at the feeling of the person hovering over him.

He slams into something metal and hard, an explosive crack striking his leg as he flails backwards and peers upwards.

Iron Man is hunched over Spider-Man and the faceplate is flipped upwards. Tony looks pissed off, to put it lightly, and is already mid-lecture him when his hearing comes back.

“-me, I mean do I need to hire a babysitter or take the suit away because this is ridiculous-”

He doesn’t mean to but he slips back into the water, toppling over his feet as a new sensation controls him.

Everything it too cold, his body is numb but he can feel every organ and fingernail, he can hear arguments blocks away, his vision is darkened around the edges like a vignette and the pain.

Oh Jesus, the pain isn’t anything Peter’s experienced before. It’s no longer burning fire; it’s scorpion stings on the outside and gouged out eyeballs on the inside, like he’s been skinned alive for a taxidermy.

Tony is eyeing him, used to the bumble and buzz of teenage energy and childlike glee despite his trouble-prone tendencies. Peter is zoning in and out of attention when Tony cuts straight to the chase.

“Are you drunk?” The words are incredulously angry and Tony’s face is furiously disbelieving. There’s something deeper than disappointment, a blasphemous tension overtaking the air like the fetor of death hanging off his molted skin.

“No, it's- I'm,” He's stumbling through his words and saying but the agony is so intrusive that he can
no longer articulate coherent sentences.

Peter can feel himself starting to faint when the burning scent roundly punches him and he lets out a 
gasp as he starts to shake.

Tony is there in an instant, clutching Peter in his armor, arc reactor brighter than the decorations 
across New York City at midnight, and rants but the sound is jumbled in his ears, “You need to 
sober up, kid. Actions have consequences, you should know better.”

Tony takes a breath and sadly resigns, “I wanted you to be better.”

Peter is shaking his head wildly, needles in his chest as his vision is fading too much. He can’t deal 
with this guilt and disappointment and failing his metnor, his only father-figure left on this earth for 
Christ’s sake-

“Too… loud… Need… Help!” His voice is broken into wheezes and retching. He throws up over 
the red and gold suit

“Peter, kid! What's going on?” His mentor is suspicious and Peter is violently scratching at his ears, 
causing them to bleed and his fingers are turning brown, decaying and covered in a rotted ash

“It's not what you think!” Peter is mortified and hunched down, panic distorting every nerve in his 
body.

Tony’s expression changes in a millisecond and says something off to F.R.I.D.A.Y. but Peter can’t 
discern it, everything is distorted and spinning and fading fast.

“Peter!” Tony yells and shakes him; distantly, he registers something like blood-curdling terror in the 
mechanic’s voice and tries to grasp onto that and his fleating conciousness.

“What's going on?” Tony whispers urgently, eyes scanning a mile a minute, anger and concern 
etched in his fine lines.
Peter winces and takes a deep breath through the pain sinking into his bones. He meets his mentor's eyes and tries to keep still, preventing every instinct from jumping out of his arms and skin. With a trembling voice, he barely manages out his words, “I think I'm dying.”

Peter chokes off in a sob and scarcely sees Tony’s eyes widen in a mix of grief and fright.

And then there is darkness. Clear cut and dry. Nothing and nothing as far as this existence breaches.

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So, yeah, it's three days before Christmas and Peter is a bit of a Scrooge. So Bah Humbug to all.

Chapter End Notes

Back on my bullshit, y'all. Back on my bullshit.
Do I have chapter 2 done? No. Am I going to finish it in like one day because I procrastinated? Yes.
I'm going to end up posting a not chapter tomorrow morning because it's late and no one is going to read this right now.

Dear beta: Thank you for putting up with my shenanigans.

See you soon, lovelies.
2.

Chapter Summary

Even for a Grinch, this is not how he envisioned Christmas this year.

Chapter Notes

Not edited, y'all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Peter opens his eyes, he feels off kilter.

Well. That's not exactly much of a detail considering his life or death dilemma but it's all he's got at the moment.

There's something adamantine pressed against some part of his body and almost jarring how he can't tell if it's real or not. There's no certainty to the sensations that hover around his body but he's acutely still aware of everything.

His hearing is dissonant, all echos and resonation, several bars of da capo and staccato with and the constant hush of diminuendo.

Music theory never was his strong suit. It doesn't make sense.

Everything crashes like a car caught in a deadly blizzard, losing you grip while slipping futilely on ice and a snowstorm's damage heavily tipping down trees and shards of glass into your chest as you flail to kick out of your seat belt choking the last of your air.

Feeling comes back and his body is alight with inferno. Every sense flares up and there's a migraine because of the sudden rush of information. He's over aware of the slightest pin drop and nothing is connecting to his brain fast enough.

His super hearing is picking up tiny footsteps, pen scratches, someone's heartbeat miles away and his own pulse in his throat is too goddamn loud.

He's on a table and it's so fucking cold but his insides are burning. He wants his ugly ass sweater but also to be drenched in freezing water. His hairs are standing up, his face is in a manic sort of sweat and he there's a discernible taste of metal and bloody flesh in the ventilation across the expanse of wherever he is.

He can't speak, his vocal cords are nonexistent, but he tries to let out a gurgle when big, warm hands cautiously press against his face.

He throws his eyes open and tries to move but his stomach is full of splinters and rose thorns, twisting and turning like a merry-go-round. Everything is stark white and blinding and he starts flinching in a seizure like state.
Everything slingshots and his hearing is clear, every ounce of pain is suddenly soothes momentarily.

“Pete, I need you to focus on me! Breathe and come back, kid. C’mon, you’re safe, I just need you to stay focu-”

Tony is rambling, eyebrows creased with frustration and a blaze in his eyes with a plan while he’s hopped up on some drug-laced trip, squinting through his eyelashes barely conscious.

Shit. Even for a Grinch, this is not how he envisioned Christmas this year.

Peter knows he should feel comforted by Tony caring and trying but it makes every muscle in his stomach and neck tense and swirl with uncertainty. He can feel something gnashing in his wrist where the stab wound happened. He swears whatever that dementor fucker slipped into his bloodstream is only being combatted because he didn’t take into the effect of Peter’s venom.

Yeah, his blood pressure is always high and his strength or speed is incredible. His fast reflexes and sixth sense, as well as an impeccable healing factor, are the best, but the venom entangled inside his core helps him against natural predators and radioactivity.

He supposes this isn't exactly the ‘natural’ cytolytic peptides scientists study in arachnids.

The episodes of pain are getting worse and longer. This isn't okay, holy fuck, okay God? Of you're looking to teach him a lesson he gets it now. He'll never be ungrateful for May's nearly inedible cooking or the thermostat being a few degrees too cold, chasing the last bit of heat from his fingers and toes under the blanket in November nights.

He's losing his mind and he only has so much time before he can't remember that he's dying and becomes a shell of a spider. He needs to take advantage of being conscious and figure out how to fix this. He has to. There can't be an “if”, or has to be a “when’. Before it takes him into a quiet place of solitude and he is no longer soulless and an existentialist.

Within the timespan of a blink, the irritation begins to dwindle and plateau to something constant and endurable. He props himself up slightly, reaches over to his right arm, the last remainder of discomfort panging, when a I.V. tube yanks him on back again.

“Hey, Peter? Are you back with me?” Things are clearer but still a bit of a mess, vision dancing with black circles and triangles. Tony has several holograms open and numbers are scrolling faster than Peter’s mind can keep up with.

Frankly, the engineer looks like shit. Eye bags are surrounded by dark blue veins, his regular Armani attire is disheveled and rolled up and his wrinkles from creasing his face in concentration never vanish.

And it’s Peter’s fault for not letting him know sooner.

Once this is over, he knows the man behind the suit of armor is going to distance himself and possibly drink himself into a stupor. He’ll lock himself away in the same workshop Peter lays in while also monitoring his every move as Spider-Man and never let him live this down.

“Sorry, Mr. Stark, ” His voice is raspy and when recognition flickers in his psyche, his anxiety accelerates. “Shit! How long have I been out of it? Is it a toxin? A virus? Is it really kil-”

“Hey, no,” Tony is in front of his eyes instantly from his post a few feet away and calling to F.R.I.D.A.Y. “Don’t answer that, Fri. You’re going to be fine.” His eyes are determined and a safety net for walking a tightrope. “Don’t let the paranoia get to you. It’s only been thirty minutes. We're in
the Avengers facility, kid. You need to calm down, your heartbeat is going to start
overcompensating.”

He didn’t even notice the heart monitor beeping erratically, pulse quickening. Tony lets out a
breathy, humorless laugh. “I can only do so much for the pain, I don’t have any of Banner reinforced
analgesics for the Hulk or Cap.”

He’s in Tony and Bruce’s lab. There are blue-tinted, glassless screens surrounding Tony. He’s next
to an I.V. and few other high tech looking machines he’s never seen before. None of them seem to
be helping with his metabolism. Microscopes, incubators and a microcentrifuge are splayed across
the room. Tony is pacing around quickly with purpose in his steps, talking to his A.I. through
possible medical procedures and treatment steps. There’s a wall next to him with medical utensils he
recognizes; a defibrulator, an oxygen ventilator and a BP transducer lay mockingly unused.

“Peter is displaying evidence of a developed stage of extreme hypothermia,” F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s Scottish
accent cuts through the fog in his head with a restrained, desolate tone that can only be described as
empty as she recede back into her melodic tones of scanning.

A thick, electronic blanket appears out of a compartment from the wall next to him along with a
strange fizzy, carbonated solutions.

“Thanks, FRI. That’s exactly the kind of calm he needs right now.” Sarcasm drips from his voice but
it’s out of place and it’s kind of fucking Peter up. Tony has his back to Peter to adjust something with
the banana bag when his enunciation turns somber. “I’m running through every element and illness
on the planet. Every chemical composition or molecular dipole. I’m going to fix this, alright.” His
eyes are piercing and Peter knows that he’ll be dealing with the repercussions of lying until his grave

He sips the drink and settles into his makeshift bed, ready for the long haul. His stomach suddenly
screams out and Peter wheezes, “I’m hungry.”

He’s not a kid and he knows better than to act like one in front of a fucking Avenger, but he’s not
Spider-Man right now. He’s the boy staring into May’s eyes and soul, clutching her like a life-vest in
the water, his last lifeline before he’s buried alive in sorrow.

Tony’s voice is soft and there’s a despairing look in his eyes Peter knows by heart. It’s the same look
he got at the funeral of Ben or when he tells a teacher his parents are dead. God, he hate that look.

“I know, kid. But we can’t risk anything messing with your metabolism right. FRI, what’s the status
on a vitamin or liquid I.V. right now?”

F.R.I.D.A.Y. is reading off statistics when the pain subsides into butterflies in his stomach.

“What if there’s no cure?” Peter blurts out, his mind refusing to filter out the nervous notions
bubbling to the surface.

“Then we’ll make a new element. I’ll get the Wakandans on the line or Thor here of there’s nothing
on earth, goddammit.” Stark is barely making eye contact anymore, wildly devoting his attention to
the abbreviations on a nearby

He’s managed to sit up when he twists around and asks, “Where is everyone else?” There’s an ache
of something in his chest, a squeezing let-down the other Avengers aren’t here and maybe, just
maybe, don’t care.

Tony sags down and pauses briefly in Peter’s overwareness, “I haven’t told any of them. Bruce and
Barnes are MIA, Wanda and Vision are training, Steve and Sam are at the V.A. doing charity events,
Clint is with Romanoff and his family in Times Square.” He exhales tensely. “I can’t focus with them breathing down my neck, but they’ll lay into me later at the New Year’s party.”

Since the Accords and their pardons from the Raft, the Rogues have been getting better at skating on thin ice. Tony and Steve fight and tend to avoid each other a bit in some dick measuring contest, but it still feels like a family. Bucky is in and out of the compound but is getting better at trusting everyone. They’re dysfunctional but they’re still a team. There’s a grace to them, the way they battle and are still martyrs, despite the media’s claims of traitors. They’re still Peter’s heroes, no matter what the world claims.

“FRI, conduct an x-ray every few minutes. If he so much as loses another milliliter of blood, I want to know.” The way his mentor’s tone changes so quickly send alarm bells in the back of mind, distantly registering that he’s trying to compartmentalize the fact that he could die. Tony sees this as another mission, like the tesseract, and Peter is a subject instead of nearly his fucking kid.

It hurts on an entirely different level than the stabbing in his stomach.

“On it, Boss.” F.R.I.D.A.Y. responds and it occur to Peter that if this was going to get better, it probably would have started.

He doesn’t know how much time he has left and there’s the pounding Ego from Freud that it’s never getting better than this.

Peter’s stomach lurches at this realization and he can feel the nausea trying to crawl back up his throat as he shoves his fist in his mouth to stave off this nonsense.

Man up, Parker, he tells himself.

He’s going to be fine, yeah? He’s going to get through this and deal with May’s crappy holiday puns and eat too much candy at the party in a few day.

He’s. Going. To. Be. Fine.

(Shocking revelation over here, but he is not.)

About an hour later is when the muscle spasms start. He’s watching some dumb Hallmark movie about a Christmas prince to ease his worry and drinking the green syrup that helps with the shaking, when the inside of his body convulses and he can’t keep still.

But they’re not normal ticks; he can surmise some violent outburst happening in his bones and a zinging burst or torture hits his head. It’s not a migraine and he groans out, falling back onto his back.

A paroxysm of weeping escapes from his mouth and he's rocking back and forth to ease the panic limiting matches in his brain.

Tony is yelling something at him but he can’t hear because it hurts, it hurts, holy fuck, it hurts.

Is this it? Did he go through the spider bite for nothing? How can he save someone without even saving himself? What about Ben? What about May? What about Christmas and snickerdoodles? Is he a zombie, waiting for his inevitable perish? Is it worth it to the world of his powers struggle to work? Are the Avengers going to throw him out on the streets?

He's losing his superhero family. He's losing his last related family and the only male role model he's ever deemed worth it to his life.
How is it he always lose everyone that cares for him? Everyone he looks at with his heart eyes and devoted adoration turns to stone, like Medusa cursed for all eternity.

His face is hot and it feels flushed red, like when you've been crying for hours and your whole body wants to sleep. Except there are no tears and instead lies the ambient swarm of exhausting emotion and an absence of relief.

Peter is curled in a ball, and all he wants to do is sob and scream. Everything is pain and loud and too much. He goes to throw up beside him and nothing but blood and spit come out, hacking and choking on clean air that feels like splinters in his lungs.

He can barely hear Tony snap, ""F.R.I.D.A.Y., get me Banner on the line and Cho in New York, now."" as he drifts off to Neverland, lost and still a boy.

Everything starts to fade and there's no time or space. There's no line between sleep and reality. He's not floating, just dwindling further and further away. He can't feel anything and after so long he is nothing. He doesn't think and does not exist. He's shrinking and shrinking until he's the size of an atom and soon he will never hold any matter and there will be no proof that he ever was.

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There are church bells ringing, leaving a tingle of vibrations at the back of his skull, and suddenly, Peter isn't on an operating table. He's in front of his parents, making offers of spare change and lighting short tealight candles, a vigil to Baby Jesus.

“Mom?” He croaks out in disbelief but his voice isn’t right. It’s higher pitched and younger as an alive Mary smiles and motions him forward.

There are wreaths and poinsettia strung around the room, stained glass letting in white daylight from the snow outside. It's Christmas day and at least 10 A.M. Most visitors for the service have trickled out from an early morning prayer.

Mary's eyes are a bright jade green and her hair is a milk-chocolatey brown with hints of angel-hair blond fading from years of dyeing. There are speckles of snowflakes across her body, a slim insulated down fur jacket stopping at her shins, crimson red like the decorations strewn across the pews. Her mittens and hat match, a dark emerald green cotton blend with pom poms dangling off the sides and a small decal of a Santa hat on the inner wrist and tags still attached. Richard is dressed like a marshmallow, puffy coat, face shrouded by a long knit scarf and a snug grey hat pulled over his ears. His glasses a fogged up from the contrast in temperatures and his exposed nose is a clownish colored pink as he sniffs.

Although it's cold and the skylight is white from the outside, there's a golden hum across the building. Every statue of an angel or cherub and portrait of holiness has a festive kind of light radiating from its location across the rooms.

There's an airiness, filled with peppermint and baked goods. An offering to church goers as a thank you. He remembers his dad always saying he only comes for the free food and Mary stifling her giggles.

She was raised a Catholic but Richard wasn't. Though their disagreements and fights about religion are heated, they raised Peter to be thankful. Thankful for people and food and school (although he misses his mom at recess). Grateful for math and friends and laughter. To appreciate the little moments, good or bad, because that’s what life is made of. To acknowledge his privilege of having both a mom and a dad and be a happy cityslicker.
Mary has always had an innate radiance of maternity. As a kid, his mom is synonymous with teddy bears and cookies. His father is a bit more square but he’s Peter’s biggest supporter, carrying him piggy-back style, making airplane models out of clay and reading him excerpts from adventure books.

They both tuck him in the covers on Christmas Eve, fresh pyjamas and a stomach full of ham, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce and the sneaky tang of dessert; brownies, sugary-sweet candy canes and gooey chocolate chip cookies washed down with warm milk.

It’s a memory of when he was four years old. The recollection of a silver train set surrounded by blue polka-dotted wrapping paper and cinnamon rolls from the bakery around the block for breakfast sizzle. A card for his dad and a bracelet for his mom, both made from school with macaroni, and the proudest look on both of their faces. There’s the stretch of an enormous smile and a child dancing with his parents around the house to Io Rockin’ Around The Christmas Tree and A Charlie Brown Christmas vinyl.

He doesn’t know how, but the place feels like a warm hug, safe and sound, with his parents holding hands and shielding their baby from the horrors of the world.

Peter could stay here, with his mother’s arms outstretched for a hug and his father grinning beneath layers of wool. It’s his family and he’s a kid, right? This is his and he’s allowed to be selfish for fucking once.

It’s placid and festive and Peter might actually start to like Christm-

There’s a loud explosion off to the right side and a scream and everything goes black.

Coney Island is ablaze and Iron Man isn’t moving. The sky is full of ash and smog, the Vulture swirling in the sky and mechanical whirs fills his ears. He’s under the rubble of a building and Captain America and the Falcon are yanking Tony’s armor off yards away and checking for a pulse.

Wanda is casting red energy from her fingertips as she soars through the atmosphere, lifting debris from Toomes’ alien tech carefully while Vision is evacuating civilians while glancing over Bucky who’s bloodied and missing an arm.

It’s all so wrong. It’s so fucking wrong and this isn’t how it goes but he can’t speak, he’s can’t breathe and there’s gas filling his lungs-

“You killed him.” Black Widow materializes out of thin air and her tone is flat. Clint’s eyes are blue and Peter recognizes them from the new-reels of Loki’s mind control.

“You’re not worthy of being called an Avenger.” Clint sneers uncharacteristically and smirks as he towers over Peter’s frail form.

Everything each hero says or does is unnerving and amiss; this isn’t how they walk or act and it’s like a bad parody but it’s real and here and now.

Peter splutters and tries to claw out of the wreckage atop his chest as Clint readies an arrow from his quiver straight for Spider-Man’s eye.

And then he shoots a trapped Spider-Man under the ruins of a Stark Industries plane.

There’s the environment of a summer campsite, muggy with fresh oak and pine trees, a hot sun
blazing without mercy and smoke from less than a hundred yards away clouding the forest. There's a mix of musk, sandalwood, ambergris, charred cardboard and oud, hints of grilled meat and freshwater from a few mileways.

The warmth of the sun is hugging his body with every step he thinks he takes. The strong current of sunblock with SPF 50 and mosquito repellent is covered by the odor of hot cocoa.

There's a male figure crouched near a fire pit tending to the kindling and fanning the small sparks with cardboard. A shorter female figure is is few feet away, zipping up an orange and black tent, slipping on flip flops from the dirt-ridden floor mat and staring upward at the tarps above their outdoor shelter, the rain pitter-patter like tap dancing shoes. She carries herself over towards their picnic table, arms shielding over her head like a hat from the water droplets, and begins to take out several thermoses.

The campsite is hazy and not quite concrete but it's homey and alluring. There's a lullaby of peacefulness, no high stakes or darkness, just the hot sun staying constant and the promise of a full meal.

It doesn't make sense. He's only been camping once with his Boy Scouts group, not his parents or May and Ben.

Peter startles with a fright. This isn't real. He needs to claw his way back to what's true.

Maybe Vision is fucking with him in his mind or Wanda is playing on the happy parts of his mind that he locks away for himself.

And then there is nothing. He doesn’t know what time or space is. There is no color or sound, there just is this.

Chapter End Notes

Oh. Last chapter is still in the works.
I'm trying people.
I'm trying to finish before Christmas.
Happy holidays and I'm so sorry in advance.
See you maybe tonight.
- Reshma
I just want to post something before the next chapter because people are reading this. The holidays can be really fucking hard and lonely. A lot of this story stems from my love-hate relationship with Christmas and New Year's and I sometimes end up really depressed.

If you're feeling suicidal or alone or even just off, please call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) OR go to http://suicidehotlines (dot) com for international numbers.

This isn't a warning or anything, i just care about y'all.
3.

Chapter Summary

Dark and darker.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He smells burning and smoke. Is something on fire?

His fingertips are freezing but and he thinks his leg is shaking.

He tries to lift up his body

Dark and darker.

When Peter opens his eyes everything is full of fog. Tony has one hand on his chest and there are other people but it doesn't make sense. It's dark and only dark.

The figures around his body aren't the same though. They walk through the walls and their smiles twist up weirdly, deformed with scars and anything but friendly.

One figure with brown hair and green eyes comes up to Peter and begins to touch his face. At first he's curious, because he thinks he should know this person who's caring and attentive, and then the sensation all over his face happens.

It's like bees stings swelling and knives cutting him open. His chest feels like he could burst and his eyes never cease from tears.

He tries to kick and get away but his arms are restrained by something hard.

Fuck. No, no, no, no.

Instantly, Ben's face appears next to the woman's. His eyes are black and vacant and the isn't Peter's Uncle Ben. He tilts his head and Peter can't hear anything but screaming from somewhere.

Will someone turn the noise off? There's a loud buzzing of white noise and it takes Peter until the next figure blows smoke from his cigarette in his face to realize the screams of agony are coming from him.

He sees a glint of metal out of the corner of his eye and there's a needle.

All he can process is the reek of burnt meat and smoke when he hears Tony. He tries to grab onto his mentor's sounds like a goddamn lifeline.

"-ter, Peter! Whatever you're seeing isn't real! Look at me! Stay focused!"

Peter recoils. The figures begin to subside into shadows and there's a mask over his nose. He tugs it off his face because it's making him sluggish and he's going to die, death is coming for him, he knows it.
“Tony,” The name sound foreign on his tongue and Tony's head whips up to see Peter's eyes rolled back, weakly attempting to prop himself up. His voice is hoarse from hacking and tone is urgent. “If I don't make it, you have to m-” Peter is stopped by another round of retching. He falls back onto the floor and tries to catch his breath before continuing. It's like inhaling toxic gas with needles and he's got his mouth twisted up in screwed up position to keep his airway cleared.

Tony tries to force the mask back over his nostrils but he bats it away.

“I just want May to be okay, someone to take care of her;” He gasps out and there's a manic sort of spirit in his eyes as he grasps Tony likes he's the one who's going to disappear any moment. “You need to make sure someone looks after her.”

It's not as if she's a child or an orphan but Peter knows better than just to trust her. That's not to say he wouldn't put his life in her hands if it came down to it, just that there's more to her than she shows.

She worked insane shifts at the hospital in the elderly ward when Ben first died. He barely saw her outside of mornings when she would drop him, barricading herself in her bedroom or bathroom to cry for hours on end.

The flush on her cheeks wasn't because of her overabundant smile or blush and the chills she would shake from that she thought he never noticed weren't from the cold as they drive near where Ben was shot.

That first Christmas was silent. He tries to block out as much as he can now. There weren't many presents and the tree wasn't even up. Not lights or annoying Christmas music. No family and no festive cheer. May was drinking a little and taking too much Benadryl for just allergies. She was trying to sleep off the grief, as if it was ever that simple, while sparing Peter from her misery.

Peter realizes that's why he hates Christmas so much. It reminds him of death and loneliness, an ache that never truly subsides despite the forced smiles and holly lined window sills.

After a few months, May snapped out of it. She's a nurse, for Christ's sake and has her head out of the clouds. She's intelligent and resourceful.

He'll take it to the grave, how much May neglected him, hurt him and how she tries to make up for it now, a helicopter parent now that scrutinizes Peter's every blink. He's forgiven her and he let bygones be bygones.

Since she found out about his… insect problems, there's been a twinge of a change in her eyes. It's not disbelief or concern, although he can drown in enough of that from her, but her glasses aren't as rose tinted now.

She carries herself differently, not walking on eggshells but not truly the happy-go-lucky aunt figure people assume. She watches Peter from the corner of her vision and sometimes lingers outside his door at night when she thinks he's asleep after patrol.

She's terrified all the time as much as him that she'll lose everyone she loves.

Peter listens to her heartbeat on sleepless nights sometimes from the other room. He tells himself that it's only because of his enhancement that he worries but that's bullshit and he knows it. It's to make sure she's alive and cheery, not losing herself at the bottom of a bottle again.

This isn't the life she ever wanted; in her premonitions of the future, there wasn't a kid clinging to her or missing warmth on the other side of her bed. She told Ben on their first date she didn't want to deal with pregnancy and a mini human hurricane. It's not the world she ever saw for herself, without
a husband or anchoring rock of a person.

It's just the two of them. Peter knows that May believes it is enough. They're two floating safety lines made of rope at the beach, bobbing underwater and trying to keep others afloat by setting the safe zone. Keep your expectations low so disappointment never gets you and all that. She'll glare into his eyes and hold him by his jaw tightly, long enough that he believes her in her core that he is indeed enough and not so she just lets him go.

Christmas is different now. They don't put stockings on the fireplace, just their bedroom door handles. The lights on their cheap, fake tree are broken and cracked. They still get the same Chinese takeout every year but it always tastes slightly off without Ben even though the staff swears to May that the recipe hasn't changed. Maybe it the placebo effect after all.

But against the odds, it is still May's favorite time of year.

The star on top of the tree that only Peter is tall enough to reach without a stool still shines as brightly and the aroma of May's extensive holiday candle collection (that she swears on her life is not hoarding) still lingers. Garland and Christmas crackers decorate the walls. Although the stakes are higher than ever this year, the current is low. They're not drowning and they're still breathing and here. The worst has passed and the best is yet to come.

It's where Peter gets it from, his unwavering hope for good outweighing the bad and trying to save lives. May is a nurse that loves her job and has seen more than most. Peter is Spider-Man in a way to honor that. It astounds him the privilege he harbors, being raised by such a determined spirit. Come hell or high water, he knows May is a fucking fighter.

To be frank, being Spider-Man is the only way he knows how to sacrifice himself for everyday people while being 16. He can't keep his true self from her, no matter how hard he tries.

And yet, here he is dying from the hidden troubles he never wanted May to see. It may as well break her into pieces when Happy calls her to notify her of his death.

He's hurting her now, his ultimate fear, embedded further in his blood than his spider DNA.

He knows he's never going to have another Christmas with her in that moment

“Stop that,” Tony snaps and he’s furious. His face is turned up and he looks like he's deteriorated, “You are not going to die, not on my watch, kid.”

He knows he should be comforted but the edge of his vision are slipping and darkening around the edges. One sinister-apparition resembles the Houdini dude and goes to slide his blade of Tony's throat as he stands behind the engineer.

He has no strength to stop it and he feels powerless.

Everything is overbearing and his face is back to flames. Everything is his sense of smell clouds together and it feels like air from a burning building Spider-Man swings through.

That being said, Peter feels like he could disappear and dissipate into ash; that a small gust of wind could topple him over like a house of cards.

The pain is all he is. There's nothing that has existed before and nothing will exist every again

Peter knows something in the same way that May holds his face down to hers and whispers “I love you, honey”s. The truth; that this is going to kill him and through gritted teeth he clambers to the last
of his consciousness as he starts to gasp through incapacitating nausea.

It feels like a parasite bleeding him dry and he wishes he were dead or that someone would just end it. It doesn't hurt or ache; the only word that comes close to how he's feeling is mutilation. He feels like he's being skinned alive and his eyeballs are gouged out, soon to stuffed like a deer head in a hunting lodge. Every body part is blurred into the next and there's no telling how long he's been here or how long he has.

He stares at Tony's brown eyes who are tired and lost. There are tears threatening to spill over and it's not his favorite superhero staring at him; it's just Tony.

"I don't know how to fix this, Pete. I'm way out of my field over here but you need to stay conscious before help gets here." Tony sounds broken.

He tries to nod his head but even that take incredulous amounts of energy.

Fuck. Spider-Man is supposed to be better than this. He's supposed to be better than this.
Tony is staring and patting him down, attempting to ground him while motioning to F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s scans of Peter's dying lifeform.

Time passes like a montage of dreams, no sense of logic or time. It feels like he skips from location to location suddenly and without concern. New people, colors and shapes metamorphose without any realism and excessive omnipotence. Eyes turn into shadows, hands into haze and blurs absurdly swirl into kaleidoscopes.

He feels small and helpless, the way he hasn't been for years. He's not a man or a hero, but a boy with nightmares of guns and agonizing screams.

There's no line between existence and truth. There aren't memories or names or rationale. There simply is this and only this purgatory.

Tony keeps intermittently checking his hands and arms, slapping his hands away when they force his ears to bleed or begin to yank his hair.

"Don't, Peter." His mentor is frustrated and Peter hates the face he has on; he's seen it enough to last a lifetime.

"The substance in your system resembles a cross between a poison and a cancer. It's stopping your cells from reproducing correctly; it's attacking your central nervous system and chemical makeup. It's spreading because of your metabolism, rendering your senses useless."

Logically, what the A.I. says makes sense but science and numbers are shutting down in his brain right now. All he knows is falling and falling into the rabbit hole. It feels like he doesn't have shoulders for his head, falling forever like Alice. He's ten feet tall from a 'drink me’ potion and has never been more alone. He could forever stay lost his attempted way home for the rest of his measly life.

There is a flip in his stomach. Whatever effect the most recent drugs had, it is transforming, changing from hyperactive distinction to a sick, overpowering stir in his abdomen, and he shudders, all encompassing, unstoppable tremors. Just as soon as the ability to think came, it slides away.

The drainage of built-up adrenaline is savage. He realizes he hasn’t eaten since that morning, which is probably also a factor: since the bite, he has found he has to eat almost constantly during the day to keep up with his energy expenditure. The hunger and the fear and the drugs make for a dangerous combination. His system is so overburdening and he suddenly feels like he might pass out from all
Peter doesn't pass out. He does vomit a lot: a thin yellow trail of bile trickles down the remainders of his suit clinging to his body. He watches it slide down his chest like a sloth, rolling over and over itself in a branch of saliva before settling into the fabric, hot for a minute and then cold.

Something explosive bursts; he feels a sharp pain in his bicep, a tiny bomb under his skin.

Then he doesn't feel anything.

It takes ages before the next bomb-like explosion in his neck.

Tony is there throughout it all, he knows, but he can't see or hear or feel anything but pain.

He's aware that he's high and uncomfortable numb but it still fucking hurts in all the wrong ways.

It's electrocution like shock and glass cutting into his blood vessels and he still can't see anything.

After what feels like 20 minutes, the pain subsides and all he wants is to fight-or-flight mode activated and blaring.

He never thought opening his eyes would be such a daunting task.

But twenty-four hours spent either twitching and jerking against drugs and electric current in his bones and all kinds of torture has turned his muscles to doll legs and his muscles to jelly. He can't get his legs to work, and he’s too frightened of setting off a worse kind of pain to use his arms. After several moments spent shuffling uselessly in the dirt, Peter ends up wedging himself into the corner and using it to sort of shimmy up the wall until he is standing. It’s awkward and humiliating, but as soon as he’s on his feet his legs loosen up a bit, relieved to move. Peter braces himself, takes a step.

Something jerks painfully at his neck. He almost falls--would fall, except he manages to fling himself forward on the table.

He doesn’t want to raise his limbs. He’s horror-stricken at what will happen if he moves them. But the IV bag--empty now--is locked to a hook on the wall and there is a new needle pulsing deep in his neck.

He is struck, once again, with the overwhelming desire to be home, to be done, to not have to do this. They must be looking for a cure. Banner or Cho or Strange or goddamn Pepper. They have to be. Maybe the public is tearing the city apart looking for Spider-Man and all he can do is sit and rot.

He wonders of the Avengers would care if he died.

Peter makes a choked sound that is not quite a sob and not quite a laugh. There’s something ridiculous about the idea of all of the Avengers rip-roaring through New York, searching for a lost teenager. Even if that teenager happens to be Spider-Man. Especially if that teenager happens to be Spider-Man. Because that’s the thing about being an Avenger (or “not an Avenger,” air quotes emphasized), isn’t it? They’re a team but they’re on their own more often than not. Every single Avenger has gotten into some sort of scrape and had to get out of it alone. Why should Peter be the exception?

Peter is shaking so hard he might as well have a club at the end of his arm instead of fingers, for all the dexterity they provide. But--slowly, slowly--he lifts them anyway. He doesn’t slide the needle in his left arm out so much as jerk it out.

He hopes he doesn't have long now. If the hourglass has already turned upside down, he doesn't
want to watch the grains of sand individually trickle down.

Imagine Peter's surprise when he starts to see white specks of light. Fairies and Angel's dance in the dark. Ben and May are snuggled into each other for warmth by a fireplace, sporting matching pajamas and cups of hot cocoa with mini marshmallows on a well loved futon.

They look way younger than Peter has ever seen them and he realizes that this what he ruined. They were happy and flawless as a couple before Peter. Now Ben is laying six feet under.

If this is it then at least May might finally be ridden of his burden. No more stress and nail biting, less expensive groceries and more time to focus on herself. She'll have so much time, he reasons. It breaker his heart more than ever and he can't help but mentally curse every God and every enhanced.

And in that moment, time is what Peter Parker wishes would cease to exist.

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Chapter End Notes

Okay I know it was only going to be one more chapter but I'm struggling. Another chapter will be up later tonight. Forgive me.  
- Reshma
4.

Chapter Summary

They are family, blood or not.

Chapter Notes

Ahhhhhh?!?!?!?!?!?!
May Parker and Helen Cho are not women to be messed about with.
They don't have time for your regular scheduled bullshit, Tony.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Avengers compound is eerily empty just before midnight on December 24th.

(Like he said, if Peter knew how his day was going to end, he probably would've stayed in bed.)
Tony will be damned if he can’t fix this. He’s a mechanic, this is his job.

The thought of Peter dying is unfathomable. He’s become a part of Tony’s screwed up family. At first the team was skeptical and for good reason, the kid is a twig compared to super soldiers and assassins. But now there’s a domestic sort of familiarity in the way they operate.

Rhodey and Rogers were both mad that the kid kept his mask on and wouldn’t tell them his age or name, solely going by ‘Spidey’. (“He’s an underage soldier, Stark.” Steve yells and Tony ends up fighting with him in their gym later that day. They may be civil but their grudges are never going to quite die.) Natasha did not remotely trust him and Tony’s pretty sure she followed him home on multiple occasions despite his heedances. It’s surprising but Bucky and Clint began caring for him very quickly, the latter planning pranks across Sam’s and Roger’s private quarters and the former sparring. Wanda was an exception, which Tony knew before they met after Germany; she of all of them could see into his mind and soul and without a doubt his identity. She was quick to defend Peter in arguments but kept her distance.

That was months ago. Peter’s face is now the first thing that most members of the team see when they evacuate kids, fighting Doombots in Washington or giant lizard creatures in London. They’re not entirely a fully functional machine but they all work towards the same goal, gears and bolts be damned.

Peter is pale, dead corpse white and his veins look fake or drawn on. His skin has a sickly blue tint and he's hallucinating something traumatizing. It reminds Tony of Afghanistan and the way his head would spin after waterboarding. He doesn't know of it's better or worse that he can't see the images swirling in the kid's head.

His CAT scan is showing whatever drug is impacting his hippocampus and straining his skull memory. Basic functions like moving and breathing. The strain on his cranial nerves that control his senses are threads away from completely decaying and Tony doesn't remotely know how to tackle
that. His short term memory is still in tact but his long term is struggles under the weight of leading his entire body. It's going to break if Tony isn't fast enough to fix his kid.

His enhancements are both saving him, slowing down the disease, but also prolonging his suffering. What should be near instantaneous fatality for normal humans is being hindered and forced to spread everywhere else. From his respiratory system to his brain, the tucker that poisoned him is trying to make sure no one can ever replicate his DNA.

Jesus, he's barely thought about the asshole who pulled this shit. He can't because he has no time. He considers calling Black Widow but she's a last resort for when he's panicking. And he can't panic.

Also, the rest of the Avengers would eat him alive for keeping this from them. So. Yeah.

His body is already melting and his lungs, heart and pancreas are trying to fight back but can't due to his brain sending fucked up signals everywhere.

It doesn't make sense. Whatever is in his bloodstream isn’t being detected as a solid virus or infection and his symptoms are all over the place and erratic. Even for an enhanced there should be some scientific explanation. Whatever is targeting him went for his enhancements first, courtesy to K.A.R.E.N. keeping his medical logs backed up as a priority; his super hearing, his sharp sight and depth perception are pretty much gone now. Next came his asthma and general vision; Peter wore glasses long before the spider-bite and it was far from a fashion statement. His asthma combined with the poison weakened his respiratory system without remorse.

Next, it went after his digestive system, botching his insulin and glucose levels. Migraines demanding too much of his presence to fend off blacking out in the middle of class. It didn’t take long from the combination of it all to basically gouge out his lymph liquid in his tissues. The worst was his nervous system going haywire and forcing his circulatory organs and functions from going into overdrive. His brain telling his heart that he’s going to die was not a coincidence.

On top of it all, his stomach, liver and parts of his arms have began to rot like dead flesh.

It's all too much and Tony can't help but picturing lowering that face in a suit and tie into a casket and May screaming and crying and never forgiving himself. A gravestone with the year written to soon. Pepper who will hold him and clean up his mess in the media, then probably leave him for being a killer like after Ultron and Happy barely speaking for anything more than security proto-

Stop. Focus. He's a genius and a philanthropist. He's Iron Man.

"“F.R.I.D.A.Y.?” Tony's voice is halfway to crying and his hands are shaking.

“Yes, Boss?”

“Call Pepper.”

There's a few seconds of silence and then a groggy, pinched voice asks confusedly, “Tony? What happened?”

He feels bad for waking her, she's on the other side of the goddamn planet, but there's too many miles between them. And hell, it hurts like a wound that never quite heals when she has to fix his fuck ups.

“I need you to come home. I'm sending the quintet. Just-” His voice cuts off as he takes a staggering gulp of air. “Please. Don't ask questions.”
There’s a pause and then Pepper being ever the superhero she is underneath her skin says, “Okay. I'm leaving now and coming home.”

Years ago home was foreign. It would've have been a celebration with expensive champagne and a yacht-side view to hear the love of his life say those words.

Now they just feel like an imposter on the phone.

“And Tony?” He makes a nonchalant noise still trying to keep himself together towards his girlfriend.

“Don't panic.” The call cuts off and Tony is, once again, alone with himself.

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Tony is inches away from losing his mind, failing with elemental compounds and doctors who tackled the recent Zika outbreak when a fluster of voices enter the workshop.

It's eleven P.M. It's almost been exactly twenty four hours since the stabbing.

He’s been so caught up in briefing Helen and her team as well as maybe working on saving a dying teenager poisoned by some demon drug when it happens.

Banner was last seen in surveillance footage in Tokyo or Osaka for a conference. He’s running out of time and Peter is getting worse and fucking fast.

He’s been trying to play it safe, with his A.I. monitoring his every breath and using minimal doses of analgesics so he doesn’t stop his heart.

This type of illness wouldn’t stand a chance against Wanda or Barnes, destroying their body before they even could notice.

He won’t admit it to anyone but he’s called Strange to no avail. If this is some magic shit, Tony out of his element over here.

But this is killing his kid. And all he can manage to do is throw himself into his work and try and fix this to prevent him from having an actual mental breakdown right now. He can’t kill this kid, not after barely maintaining his composure at him refusing to become an Avenger and a part of his family.

Of course, that's when his progress goes to hell.

“What the hell, Stark?!” Clint is in his face in a flurry and anger is seeping from his skin. The air vents are open for Peter's sake, not Hawkeye to slit his throat. “Is this some human experimentation shit? The fuck did you do to him?” It’s hard to remember that he’s a family man at his core and Peter is practically his son’s age. It might have something to do with being a master assassin and a spy. Right.

Vision materializes, passing through Clint’s body who flails backwards and mutter “Not cool, man” as a facilitator.

“It’s not like that, Barton.” Tony’s voice is annoyed and he’s trying as hard as he can not to cry. “He got stabbed from some mutant hater and his body is trying to fight this shit off.”

Steve has his arms crossed with a Santa hat gripped in his knuckles turning white. Sam is lingering in
the doorway, a shadowy silhouette emanating a threat as Wanda stalks over to Peter’s dying lifeform with purpose.

“Don’t go near him.” Tony is about to shove Wanda away from the boy when Vision grabs his hand. A gauntlet appears at his wrist before he can blink out of habit and the room goes deadly silent. This is going swell. It’s not like the team was already being held together by expired glue, cracked at the surface and unrepairable.

“Stark,” Sam is tense with anticipation. “We need to be on the same page over here. We’re not trying to fight right now.”

“He is in pain. I just want to help him.” Wanda’s accent is thick and strained with sadness and Tony knows that Peter is practically all she has left of Pietro. They’re both messed up kids in this messed up world and they needs each other in the breaking craziness of the Avengers. “I will not let another family member be hurt because of you, Stark.”

“Don’t you think I’m trying?” Tony seethes out, disabling his gauntlet and pinching his nose, leaning his forehead into the hologram screens and onto his desk.

Sam takes a beat and says, “Clint, man, you need to calm down. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Am I just supposed to trust the futurist over here? Because last I checked, he failed to clue any of us in here.” Clint isn’t as angry, just frustrated and Tony knows grief when he sees it.

God, it’s not fair. This is his fucking problem and he feels like he’s trapped by an avalanche, impossibly heavy weight on his chest and freezing to death slowly.

“You’re supposed to trust the team, ястреб.” Wanda sounds downtrodden and hesitant towards Hawkeye but the fury is undeniable in her eyes.

“Who told you?” Tony growls out because this is a hundred percent not what he needs right now.

“I did.” Vision steps through Tony, past the vitals and and takes his post beside Tony as the mechanic blinks in bewilderment. He’s already begun talking before Tony can argue with the team ganging up on him. “I ran through F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s most recent logs and assembled the other Avengers. It's surely is a situation requiring assistance.”

Tony wants to scream.

He states, “Tony’s right, Wanda.” Vision is raising his eyebrows, still in human form, and using his matter-of-fact tone that resembles J.A.R.V.I.S., leaveING no room for discussion. “We can’t mess with his pain tolerance right now. He could start going through withdrawal at the slightest bit of magic.”

“That’s what you care about right now, Tony?” Steve’s voice is gruff and his boots are still covered in melted snow. “Didn’t we talk about this after Ultron? Not keeping secrets? Jesus,” He breathes out and his resolve begins to collapse. “He’s a kid, Tony! And you pull him into enmity and lawlessness.”

Before the room can erupt into chaos, Vision cuts in. "Doctor Helen Cho will be here any moment. What drugs did you medicate him with before our arrival?"

“200 milligrams of Morphine and 720 of Tylenol 4,” Tony answers swiftly, still eyeing the Captain for his outburst. “He’s burning through it too quickly and we haven’t had enough time to poke and prod him for research.”
“What about the Captain’s medical supply? Could that perhaps work with his healing factor and metabolism?” Vision’s voice is cool and collected, his form still somewhat new to Tony, the Mind Stone glowing in the middle of his forward like a lighthouse in a storm.

“That’s locked in a vault ten floors upstairs. It would take too long to get that supply that might not even synthesize with his DNA, with paperwork and all of R&D’s speculation.” Rhodey’s voice is no-nonsense and he emerges from Tony’s private entrance and walks over to Tony’s side.

Well, shit. Now he’s truly fucked.

“Colonel,” Steve greets haphazardly and a little skeptical. “What’s the latest?”

“I’m trying to keep it under wraps from the military but we need to make sure this isn’t airborne or contagious. We can’t deal with an enhanced illness rampaging the streets of New York and not have the UN at our throats.”

“Again,” Clint remarks, perched on top of a countertop where he has a clear view of Peter.

God. This is his family. He forgets that they care about everyone and they’ll never leave one of their own behind again. In that moment, Tony knows how badly he’s fucked up.

“Any new symptoms?” Vision is ever the savior just before F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s voice and alarm glares bright red across the room.

“Pulse is dropping rapidly, blood pressure is up to 190 milligrams of mercury. Body temperature is and another asthma attack is coming in 5.2 seconds.”

Tony begins to sprint towards Peter but it’s too late, he’s hacking and in a seizure-like state..

“Jesus,” Sam mutters under his breath as Tony and Steve strip the blanket from Peter’s body and try to clear his airway. Vision has an oxygen mask and Tony has a catheter at the ready when his heart stops.

There’s no pulse and Tony has never felt so scared in his life. Not the fear from Afghanistan or Ultron but a different one. One that will never be eased despite the remaining years on this earth he has. Good Lord, he already had a (lack of a) heart condition and his kid is going to be the death of him.

He’s frozen to the spot he stands and Steve is pushing past him and starting chest compressions when the numbers flashing begin to stabilize.

His blood pressure is still way too high and F.R.I.D.A.Y. is not helping as he states, “Mr. Parker’s bones are fusing together and his internal organs are attempting to decompose. His enhancement is trying to heal but it’s growing weaker and weaker by each hour.”

Before anyone can make another move, the chatter of Korean and French fill the air like steam through the main elevator connected to the R&D sector.

“Get out of my way and get me to the operating room, or so help me, I will kill each one of you idiots.” Helen and about twenty of her employees fall in line and swarm his kid like vultures. Her tone is calmly menacing for a doctor.

“Helen-” Tony starts but she isn't in the mood to be dealing with his bullshit.

“Je m'en fiche, let's go! Let's go! Operating table and start him on lito- What did I just say? Ani ani
ani!” She switches as fast as she blinks and she's more put together than Tony's status of mid-mental breakdown.

There's a frenzy as the cult of surgeons with equipment and nurses barely glance at the Avengers. They wheel Peter out of room at record speed and Helen speaking broken pieces of Korean to a tall, south-Asian lean man with a clipboard and Tony follows.

It's like the parting the red sea, drowning in white lab coats and scrubs. A dissonant compositional symphony is playing and Tony can barely hear his own thoughts over their quarter notes of medically term and terrifying harmony underlying with fear.

“Take the board and move him up!” Helen's walking is fast and Tony can hardly speak, but he can fucking run.

“- as well as hemorrhaging on the left si-”

“-limited white blood cell count were working with-”

“-bones are fused together, x-ray is-”

“Watch it!” Helen all but screams at her staff.

“-ne fonctionnera pas CPAP-”

“-Who's got an I.D. card for-”

“Get the restraints, he's a code delta, hostile! Hostile!”

“Litho drip might work, and- You're kidding, come on-”

“-Back, back! 100 for light-” Someone with a thick Hungarian accent is groaning with more authority than the rest of the team and next to Helen at the far end of Peter's bed, all but jostling Tony and Peter around.

“-V-tach, prakaashit kar do, Jane-”

“Pulse?!” Tony is louder and more panicked and he swears his empty heart stops right then and there.

“Incapate him and reprefuses, he's gonna wake up otherwise.” Helen is more collected and they're less than 100 meters to the operating room when Peter's eyes fly open.

He looks dizzy and panicky, wildly jumping the nurses who attempt to restrain him. Even nearly dead, Peter is still superhuman. His strength is unparalleled and Tony can see the bruise and scratches through torn fabric left by his hands and grimy fingernails alone.

Tony doesn't even hesitate before striding over down the hall to the head of the gurney and grabbing Peter’s face between his hands.

“Peter, hey!” Tony can’t take this and he needs for Peter to get help and his body is operating on impulse not though.

Peter stops struggling almost instantaneously and any doubts of being a failure of a mentor seize.

“We’re going to fix you up, okay Bambi?” He doesn't know where the affectionate nickname comes from but Peter is staring at him with cloudy, dilated, doe-like eyes and his mouth is ajar. Tony needs
his cooperation, doped up or not.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y. and Dr. Cho are gonna take care of you, yeah? And I'll be right here and you're going
to be fine.” Tony is slurring some words quickly, undoubtedly from the trouble of the past few hours.

Peter's eyes settle straight on his reactor glowing like the light at the end of the tunnel. It's fast and he
nearly misses it, but Tony swears there's a flicker of cogs turning in Peter's eyes.

"You're warm. Are you gonna stay?” he gasps. “Are you really here?” His voice is going soar and
sounds like it's taking all of his effort, as if he wasn't about to kill an anesthesiologists thirty seconds
ago.

Fuck whatever hallucinations he's been having if he thinks Tony is ever leaving his side again.

“I promise, just breathe for me Bambi.” Sincere isn't a word often used to describe Tony Stark but it
drips from his tongue like honey.

It seems to do the trick as Peter lie back, still tense and taking deep breaths.

They're in front of the operating room on the the other side of the compound before he can say
anything else and Helen stops outside the swing, glass paneled doors with a glare pointed at him
comparable to Natasha's death stare. She's just as calm and precise with her movements as a woman
with a box of sterile instruments and gloves begins to dress Cho with gloves and face mask as she
speaks in a hushed melodic tone.

“You need to stay out here.” Without sparing a second glance, Helen Cho walks into the operating
room with an arrogance of determination replacing her features.

As fucking if.

As Tony steps past where she once stood, two sets of gloved hands halt his march.

“You can't go in there, Mr. Stark. You're not sterile-” A scrawny, white man with a South African
dialect with circular glasses and a face mask speaks as his companion blocks the doors. The other
man is comparable to Captain Roger's, large biceps and has at least a half foot on Tony's height. The
hallway is empty aside from an odd nurse running towards a room they've passed for materials and
paperwork.

“You don't understand,” Tony insists despairing. “He's my kid, I can hel-”

“I need to ask you to leave. He's in good hands. Back down.”

Tony barely lets out a sob masqueraded as a breath before he turns on his heel and rejoins the
Avengers who have all relocated to the nearest common room.

It's not fair. He's a parent without a kid and he cant lose him right now. He's too raw, emotionally
vulnerable and there's no suit to hide behind right now.

“What happened to the guy who stabbed him? Should Nat be tracking him?” Sam’s voice is
concerned and angry as he enters the room filled with soldiers and a game plan.

Rhodey is long gone, the War Machine suit no longer standing idly outside a window, instead a
nearby hologram displaying that he's headed back to base. Clint is in the kitchen and Wanda and
Vision are sat on a loveseat, the former looking distressed and the latter striving to provide comfort.
Sam is pouring out a caramel colored substance from a blender into a water bottle. Steve is standing
and leaning over a sofa, too uneasy and fidgety to sit down.

“I'm already working on it.” Romanoff appears out of nowhere with a tablet in her hands and a
earpiece blinking green, Barnes in tow because they both are scary Russians with a knack for never staying still. Her posture is rigid and she’s expressionless but Tony knows better. She can deny it to everyone but she’s more maternal towards Peter than she is towards Wanda. Maybe even more than Pepper. Natasha has seen a lot in her life and been a light throughout Tony’s dark times as a hero but this isn’t the same. This is something she may never forgive him for.

If he loses Peter, the team may never forgive him.

Wanda is moving her hands in circles, closing her eyes in tunnel vision and emitting a pinkish power from his palms, “The man is dead. Паук saw him die before you found him.”

“Wanda! What did Cho just say? You could kill him!” Steve is cross and Wanda looks shell shocked.

“No one ever said he was dying, Stark.” Clint’s voice is too sober as he stares at Romanoff and Vision is still hovering over Wanda.

Before Tony can even cough out an excuse, he’s interrupted.

“He’s still alive.” Bucky’s voice is foreign. He’s suddenly hunched over Natasha as he speaks to F.R.I.D.A.Y. “Tower lady, show them”

A hologram pops in the centre of the room, projecting largely and glimmering on Wanda's pale face.

A man's face is shown in several splits of footage reels, looping from different time stamps from the past 24 hours. Peter's suit footage is weirdly angled and vertigo inducing from the first perspective of his flips and acrobatic habits.

A badge number and a mugshot are displayed further to the right with an alarming notion.

The man in the profiles looks young enough to be a little older than Wanda, slight greying hairs mixed with an ashy blond on a simple haircut, fair, reddened skin that looks of Irish origin and hazel eyes. He has a neutral expression with a clean-cut beard and a suit-and-tie vibe that Tony reads loud and clear. He could be a man passing you in Manhattan from Wall-Street or your next door neighbour you don't hear much from.

The man from the footage looks anything but human. Sure, he looks young, if by young you mean experimented on. His skin looks blisteringly dry, pupils a fire truck red and skin subtlety covered in old scars in facial detection searches across CCTV scans F.R.I.D.A.Y. is running. He's balding and has no eyebrows His face looks hollow and frail.


“62?” Clint repeats disbelievingly. “Jail must have done a number on him.”

“I doubt that's the only thing he's hiding if Oscorp is involved. His court records and police investigations all hint towards his involvement unethical human experimentation.” Bucky’s voice is flat and Tony knows it's only a matter before the kettle boils.

“But he was released in 2011 and they cut ties with Bernales in 2015. His records are gone, nothing financial or before 2008.” Natasha arches her eyebrow somehow without changing her expression and raises her perfectly manicured fingernail towards him barely shifting her hand’s position as she concurs her findings.
“HYDRA and OsCorp,” Steve mutters but Tony is striding straight for a minimized icon on the far right hand side.

“He's a protester. Hates the enhanced and tries to flush then out so he can kill them.” He knows this because he trusts what Peter's told him. He also recognizes him from several years of being a warmonger.

Despite the knot in his stomach, he remembers passing by a man with striking resemblance with Peter. The two of them had driven around the city late at night and the man had turned confrontational at a diner they stopped at.

He cited things to the man behind Iron Man like putting a brand on mutants and keeping them in line with the Accords. Tony remembers Peter shrinking back and trying to put as much distance between them as possible.

Tony ended up calling the cops and getting the hell out of dodge with Peter in tow.

“I think I should go lay down,” Wanda utters. She looks like she might faint and Vision guides her out of the room without another thought.

It makes sense, an angry civilian robbed by Oscorp and HYDRA after being tested on. A man who hates mutants and enhanced because he's not a hero that can hold a press conference and have the world back him as a savior in 2008. He's no supersoldier reappearing in 2011 to save the world from an outer space try-hard. Spider-Man being the easiest to lure for his age and inexperience, obviously.

“Stark,” Sam says leaning on the counter next to Clint, unsure at the sudden tension in his figure.

He searches for Tasha's eyes and she understands because she's his friend and a spy before she states out bluntly, “We can take him down. Just give us the word.”

Tony just holds his breath.

She mutters something in Russian to Bucky and Clint and jumps up, promptly disappearing out of the lab with along with the other spies and Sam.

The only two left are standing shell shocked several meters away and barely making eye contact. Two twin flames, they are Tony Stark and Steve Rogers.

Just as he thinks the momentary chaos is over, Helen is charging back in the common room, headed straight for a flustered nurse hurriedly trailing behind looks anxious.

“What the hell is this shit, Stark?” She's marched right in front of Tony's face as he steps back in surprise.

“Wait, Doct-” But it's like she can't hear Rogers and her face begins to turn an angry pink.

“He's gone through a whole microgram fentanyl and 500 milligrams of propofol. We've tried enough drugs to kill the Hulk five times over. His body isn't reacting to any of our traditional measures. Where are his studies?! His figures and normal vitals? He's an enhanced not invincible!”

Tony shakes his head in panicked hurry and splinters out, “We didn't have time! He's a goddamn vigilante not a test subject!”

“I am not operating on an awake minor who's had to already be revived six times! I need a solution, now!”
Tony is shivering and frozen, rooted to his spot on the ground and all his nerves exploding in shock.

No. This is not happening right now. Peter dying is not an option.

Becoming Iron Man and an Avenger was supposed to stop bring destruction too close to the ones he loves. He's seen first hand how this superhero business sets off a tripwire to Rhodey with Vanko and the nuclear explosions it creates from the Mandarin, with Pepper and Happy.

He's seen what his hands create in a cave in Afghanistan, terrorists and bloodthirsty demons profiting off vulnerability and strife.

He's seen how his good intentions create a monster leading humanity to extinction with Ultron.

Of everything he's ashamed of in his life, of all the mistakes he wishes he could take back and of each individual fuck up he's created and had to scramble frantically to fix, Peter was never supposed to be on that list.

Peter was supposed to be better. Spider-Man is not meant to be synonymous with conflict and apocalypse. He's a specialized niche in a world of superheroes that don't know how to be heroes.

He's… unbelievably and arrogantly optimistic. He's purely good hearted, not like Captain America or Scarlet Witch, making a sacrifice in their situations for the greater good. He's forgiving and calculated in his naivety. He's an idiot with a messiah complex, carrying the city on his shoulders, but is the smartest kid Tony's seen. He's brilliant in chemistry and mathematics and he knows Peter could be in MIT if he wanted to be by now. If he ever gave up Spider-Man, which he never would, Tony knows, because the kid's stubborn like a bull in a china shop, there's no doubt or hesitancy in the change he could bring. Be it engineering cleaner water or agricultural alternatives to the world's overpopulation, tackling extreme and immediate solutions to protect the ozone layer from calamities or curing the next Ebola-like illness outbreak, Peter has more potential in his left pinky than most of Caltech’s alumni put together.

Tony is brought back out of a self-loathing daze as Helen claps in his face rapidly, face deteriorating cross and tone clipped, without time for Tony's bullshit.

This is failing and fast. He can see the walls closing in, slow-motion and anxiety-ridden. What is a father without a child? Useless or a burden?

"I- I don't know, I can't-" He's shaking uncontrollably and he can't stop the way the world slows down all of a sudden.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This is not the time for a panic attack and wormhole to be all consuming him again. His mind goes blank and his hands are sha-

"Use the vibranium laced sedative I developed and then start the cradle for his cerebral cortex. We'll flush his system after his organs are stable and then get to work on restoring his enhancements."

Tony nearly blacks out at a familiar voice’s declaration.

Bruce appears from a hidden entrance, disheveled in sweats and a little green at the neck. For a man who turns into a giant rage monster at the shear mention of stress, he's a little shit and more calm than people perceive him to be.

Aside from that, he's Tony's saving grace at the moment.

“This not what I asked for! Ani, ani, ani!” She's practically rolling her eyes, slipping into Korean.
“You do not pull this shit with me, Stark.”

“Helen! We don't have time! His chances of survive are dwindling right now.” Banner barks and Helen exhales an overly, relaxing her shoulders.

“My team is never operating on Spider-Man without normal enhanced medical records and recorded variations of his powers.” She is ushered out the door by Bruce, barreling through the Avengers’ compound and speaking some evolved dialect of Hindu.

The there is silence for a whole 2 minutes before-

“Has anyone notified his family?” Rogers is quiet and grim, unimpressed but also nervous.

“No, and I don’t intend to let her know.” Tony's been struggling for so long to come to terms with being a father-like figure to Peter and he knows May already isn't his biggest fan and would rather have the kid avoid him and the Avengers until their grandchildren are buried in the ground

“You heard Dr. Cho and Banner. He's unlikely to live. You have to make a decision; your pride or a woman not knowing her child is dead.” His voice is tight and Tony flinches at his words. It's too real and this is too much to deal with.

She doesn't have a sixth sense and she's not biologically maternal with hormones and yet, she's still stronger and an independent woman who doesn't need Stark and his gadgets.

So, excuse Tony of he doesn't want to piss off Ms. May Parker, a woman who can nurse an entire elderly generation at a hospital, a teenager mutant, a hangover or any problem in her way.

“Stark,” Steve sends a warning tone, cautious, to him and he knows the Captain is right. “Let me do it.”

Tony nearly drops his coffee while getting into scrubs and letting several of Helen's coworkers swab him for the risk of contamination. He splitters out monotone, “That is out of the question, Rogers. Are you insane?”

“Tony,” Steve's voice is softer and Tony can't help but stare at his face. “I'm a soldier. I've seen soldiers shell shocked and had to deliver KIA messages to widows and dependent families. I'm your best bet.”

It hurts that he doesn't have the balls to tell May. He's ashamed and terrified of losing the best thing in his life; of admitting it and dealing with the repercussions.

But he promised to keep May out of the dark. He has to own up to this loose end because, in the end, it will be his fault, alive or dead.

“Happy will take you. Make sure she comes right away.” Tony's tone is flat and he feels like his soul is empty from the knowledge that he will have to face May.

“Tony,” His voice is uncertain and hesitant. “This isn't your fault.” Steve's voice in unnecessarily leader-like and this so is not what Tony needs right now. This isn't a mission for fuck's sake.

He needs a drink. He needs several drinks.

That's precisely the moment Pepper walks through the doors and calmly says, “I'll take it from here, Captain.”
Steve blink and stiffly nods, ever the martyr, vanishing through the elevator doors promptly.

It's all Tony can do but not fall into Pepper's stems and begin to shake violently with small quivers.

It's like a dam breaking loose: everything happens at the same time, water flooding, rocks pummeling the current and forest debris snapping. It's overwhelmingly and without consistency, pattern or direction.

Pepper shushes him and guides him towards his private elevator, up to his private quarters.

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May Parker is a terrifying individual.

Not in the way Hawkeye or the Winter Soldier, articulately promised threats or information no one knows about but you and sharpshooter skills that leave the world winded at the slightest blink revealing no remainder of their presence ‘terrifying’.

Not in the way Pepper Potts has natural inclination to be a C.E.O. you do not fuck with, finding every loophole or miniscule flaw that can be taken advantage of or the persuasion skills of a mob boss or a poker champion ‘terrifying’.

It's the ferocity of being a mother who never wanted to be, adamant and unwavering loyalty; the fact that she's not Dr. Strange and, yet, can see every possible outcome for her nephew. It's the way her eyes subtly twitch at the mere mention of the Avengers or the Battle of New York. It's her resilience to salvage the ashes and rebuild and empire out of straw, never playing herself as a victim and always keeping on top of what's next.

She's the type of woman that could topple a whole government without sweating or kill a hundred men maintaining a constant heartbeat; she would scour the world and the sea if it meant protecting Peter.

May Parker may not be an assassin, a soldier, a scientist or a C.E.O., but she's more of a hero than the whole of Avengers combined when her terrifying demeanor emerges.

At first, when she found out about Spider-Man, she spent a whole two hours screaming at Tony. He knows he is no woman to be trifled with and reminds him of Natasha. The exhaustion of a fucking kid being Spider-Man forces May puts her energy toward the one thing she has some modicum of control over: making sure the time Peter spends outside of the suit is as regular for a city boy as possible. But even this is no easy battle. Peter has always been crazily intelligent, concepts and projects flowing out of him so fast, she’s never really been able to keep up. She and Ben had discussed sending him to private school, or having him skip a grade or two, but they ultimately decided against it, wanting him to have as good a shot at a normal life as he can still have.

She's thrown herself into monitoring Peter’s days so much, she has begun to wonder if they made a mistake in not just letting be reckless when he was a literal child. She cannot keep track of the encyclopedias, the artificial intelligence, the science fairs or the decathlon meets--that’s all Peter. He's growing up too fast. She's caught like a deer in the headlights. One day she's going to reach for him and find nothing but an air current.

She has this determination and cut-and-dry sense of morals. She's not spontaneous or eclectic. Tony's always glad that Peter still has a voice of uncensored reason But neither of them despite their
influence in his life will ever be able to stop his superheroing; trust him, they've tried. Peter is 16 in between an adult and a child, tiptoeing the sudden new rule book that grows that no one knows what is allowed. He's a scared in-between that never stops thinking about the future and wishing he was older.

Tony may be Iron Man and have several degrees but May knows best for her own nephew. To deny that is dumb; she's practically raised a terrified, sickly boy who wanted to be pitied into Peter Parker, an intelligent, selfless man. He's not a boy anymore and May knows he would take a bullet or a knife for any stranger in or out of the suit. She always says she doesn't get it from her side of the family but it's redundant. Peter has lost so many people and yet May has taught him how to keep himself together.

She may appear a bit ditzy but she's not one for bullshit. Her scrawny body for her mid 30s and smile is a front to most, guarded and protected; in reality, she would rip the five boroughs and Harlem apart to make sure Peter is safe. She never rests and always has one finger on the pulse of the world.

She must truly be a match for Captain America because when he appears an hour later with May marching towards Tony in his lab, Steve is white like a ghost.

She's already finished butchering Steve alive and yells at Tony until her voice is hoarse.

(‘You said you'd keep him safe, Stark! What the fuck?! You don't deserve to even be breathing the same he needs right now you fucking murderer!’)

She winds up beside Peter's room in the medical ward, clutching his hands and sobbing. She speaks to him, the way expecting mothers do to the fetus in their womb, clinging to the superstition that it will help their baby develop.

Helen is a miracle worker but Bruce is a phenomenon. His vitals have legalized and his liver, stomach, heart, both lungs, intestines, pancreas and fused bones have been restored with the cradle. It'll end up taking him a few weeks for his powers to come fully back.

The vibranium capsules are practically android body parts and reacted well to the disease, soaking into each pill as if it was the most powerful organ in the body; to be fair, it kind of was at the time.

Helen said to May that it was possibly the worst operation she's ever had to go through. She says she questioned the purpose of Peter's suffering towards the end, when the stakes weren't as high. The doctor wonders what science this would ever serve or what betterment in society would provide.

May knows the answer before it's even implied; the world wants heroes, people who are pure and good and believe in progress over power; people exactly like Peter, sacrificial and a blundering teenager with the thought of a city surviving solely on his back, like the Lenape myth of ‘The Great Turtle’.

Several of Helen’s nurses, even Bruce, have reassured her that Peter will pull through but the panic never truly subsides.

She can't imagine burying another body.

He's not fully conscious but May can't help herself in times like this, or even hospitals, to be honest with herself.

“Baby,” She cries blubberingly to thin air. “I can't lose you, too. I know you'll be mad but your superheroing has to stop for a while. But,” She inhales through her nose and forces her tears back into her eyes when she says, “I love you and you're never going to lose me. I'm so proud.”
“I know you hate this time of year... but it's not about the gifts or traditions from the world. It's about family, baby. You're sick of peppermint chocolate and eggnog drinks. You hate cinnamon and apple cider. Turkey and gravy to you just sounds like excuses to overindulge, eventually wasting food and creating more landfill trash.” May let's out a snooty laugh and reaches over for a tissue from a heavy sidetable.

“But we're together. If you die right now,” She's barely managing out her words as she continues, 'at least we're together.”

(Subconsciously, Peter's overtaxed brain registers as finally happy and safe)

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Natasha is humming ‘What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?’ under her breath, though she’ll deny it to her last breath and then some. She ends up toying with Peter's matted hair, greasy and knotted, as May has out to take a shower and nap. She's not memorizing his face as a mark or assessing patterns for a future target; she is observing the way each breath he takes cuts through the thickness of the air, her presence resonating an aura of tranquility.

Wanda has been alone with Vision for hours. She's been a bit of emotional wreck and it's best she keep her distance in case it affects her powers. The team trusts her, just not the flowy magic of doom at her fingertips’ disposal. Clint is with his kids and Laura in his private wing of the compound.

Sam, Bucky and herself killed Bernales. Clint was keeping an eye on radio and cell phone surveillance from about a half mile away as they surveyed the area. She's the first to find him, a gun holstered to her hip and missing her first three shots when she jumps him in Staten Island in an underground HYDRA base.

He's fast but she's not called the Black Widow for nothing.

It turns out the man is one for theatrics and has died more times than he can count on one hand. His Oscorp files they find later show multiple identities and a flare for the dramatics.

She calmly infiltrated his hideout with pictures of his failed experimentations and printed photographs of all of the Avengers plastered on the walls. She's wearing a skintight, biohazard suit for battle, still unwilling to risk the chance of the illness being airborne.

(“It's just research!” He spluttered as his final words. “Please! I needed my job back at OsCorp- Please, we can make a deal-”

“It's been a pleasure doing business with you,” she says in a sickly sweet voice and she twists his head 180° around, swiftly breaking his neck.)

The woman who died on the 23rd happened to be an old OsCorp employee, a failed test subject who never got paid. She was meant to be taken out by HYDRA's agents but Bernales offered to test his newest concoction to wipe out to enhanced and mutated race.

Now, NATO has seventeen HYDRA agents in custody and the world is a bit safer.

Her face is hard and her stare is cutting lasers into his jawline, teeth clenched and pupils full of fire, when she swiftly turns her head away from the boy and closes her eyes tightly.

The next time she opens her eyes without being obvious, Tony is curled around Peter to her left, holding onto him like he still might disappear and tinkering with an amateur wooden toy set out of a Jansport backpack.
He gazes every few seconds to stare at Peter's chest rising up and down. He occasionally brushes hair out of his eyes and lays a damp washcloth over his forehead, wringing it out in a nearby basin.

He'll paranoidly ask for updates on Peter's condition just in case and Bruce has to come in to triple check when Tony freaks out over small twitch and groan out of his unconscious mouth.

It turns out to be a good dream and Wanda verifies this, telling Tony, Bruce and ‘sleeping’ Tasha how he's imagining Tony helping him with his train, having a snowball fight and the two of them mummifying Clint in wrapping paper, tinsel and bows.

They're such a dad and son, it makes Nat roll her eyes at both of their insecurities and man-pride.

She knows he's probably made a couple hundred advanced upgrades to the spider suit and May is going to scrutinize him for as long as he lives for hurting her baby. She knows he'll never forgive himself or try to run away from the family member he's closest to but...

They are family, blood or not.

And then and there, Natasha decides that it's more than enough of a sign that the two superheroes can survive anything

As long as they have a team and each other.

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When Christmas Day begins at 8 A.M. over at the Avengers’ compound, Natasha Romanoff knows this is what family looks like.

The facility is covered in poinsettia and mistletoe, frosted blue and white ornaments and strands of golden ribbon across walls of the hallways. It’s the perfect picture of the holidays and there’s the faint murmur of tension from yesterday, trumpets and saxophones singing in perfect harmony.

Tony Stark has never looked so giddy and can't help but stare at Peter with a proud, parental look on his face. He sees so much in Peter's potential and loyalty to his family and the city.

The scent of freshly baked bread is mouth watering and savoury. The quiet is accompanied by the distant soft, jazzy piano notes ringing from the other side of the facility. There's a harmony of sparkly laughter and whimsical stories by the fireplace.

When Peter Parker begins to hobble out of his room in a wheelchair (much to Bruce Banner's horror) and I.V. tubes connected to a banana bag and a tube inserted in his neck, he sees what family looks like. There are giant balloons in the shape of Christmas trees, hundreds of presents addressed to and from the team, a few pranks including a box full of glitter from Clint and a whole platter of festive food; cranberry sauce, steamed vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy, ham, Turkey, stuffing, cinnamon rolls, brownies and fruit with heavy cream.

They've all waited to celebrate with him.

Tony tries to gift him a car to May's protested avail and Sam gave him a book called A Guide for Dummies: Spiders.

The main tree looks a hundred feet high, various ornaments from different cultures and countries decorating the room and shining in the light, a kaleidoscope of hominess.
On the top of the tree lays a golden star with a large Spider-Man ornament swinging towards the bottom of the tree.

So, if Peter Parker knew how his day was going to end, he probably would've stayed in bed.

But if Peter Parker knew how Christmas day would start, with criminals behind bars and the people he loves surrounding him, he would take the pain and suffering in a muffled, drug induced heartbeat.

And dysfunctional or not, he maybe begins to loosen the Grinch's chokehold on his neck for his family.

Maybe.

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap.
Sorry for a late upload because I totally didn't just finish writing this.
Forgive any grammar or spelling errors.
Thanks for the ride.
Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. I hope your doing well.
Shout out to my beta for dealing with my stupid ass. (MidnightWrite)
100% did not expect this to get such a positive response. Thank you. It means more than you know.
(This is NOT medically accurate at all. I'm not a science person)

Was this originally supposed to be 23,000 words?
Did I stay up until 4 A.M. for several nights to post this?
Do I hate Christmas that much?
Is the sky blue?
Hotel? Trivago?
The only person who knows is me and whatever body I stole and ad to shed to finish this.

As always, I'm an emotional little sock.
- Reshma
5.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Only Natasha Romanoff notices, but Peter Parker hangs the Santa Claus ornament he got from the woman who died the morning he was stabbed. He places it on the main tree in the Avengers facility on Christmas morning, Tony Stark smiling behind him and staring in wonder of a complete family.

So, maybe, Christmas isn't so bad after all, Peter figures.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to include the goddamn last line.

Works inspired by this one:

5 Times Natasha Kept An Eye On Peter by Reshma

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!