'Infinity' Protocol

by TreonGuy1705

Summary

Not everything is explained to Peter Parker. But after the Decimation, or the Snappening is reversed, nobody has any answers. And there are so many questions you don't know where to start.

But Peter knows what happened on Titan. And how do you even start after that?

Endgame(ish) Compliant (Updates every Mon/Fri.)
“Go ahead Mr. Parker. You have five minutes.”

*Five minutes.*

I nod as the suited man by the door pulls it open for me, revealing a white room. Forcing myself to step inside, I let out a breath before the door clicks shut and I jump out of my skin.

*Easy. Easy Pete…You know what’s here.*

Involuntarily, my eyes fall on the polished wooden box displayed directly in the center of the room, white linen emitting from it flawlessly.

*Five minutes.*

Quickly, I let out another breath and glance at the small book beside the…coffin.

**Anthony Edward Stark**

1970-2018

I let my head bow as I crouch down, barely grasping my edge of the coffin, but enough to tell him.

**Mr. Stark.**

My next breath comes out more like a rattle, and I can’t stop my hand from shaking slightly.

“I’m so sorry…”

*“Make a play kid!”*

Seeing the staff wielding goon of Thanos get caught clean by one of Mr. Stark’s blows as behind him, Thor, the blonde haired chick and Groot are all trying and failing to stop him. Instinctually, I jump forward and kick him and the face as hard as I can, sending him flying multiple feet in the air before I am blasted aside by another blast from that glove.

*The whole entire thing was brutal. Pick whatever word you want for it.*

*Ruthless, cruel, vicious, inhuman.*

I don’t know how they did it exactly. I don’t think anybody except they actually know what they did to get that far.

They went back in time to get the Infinity Stones that fit in the Infinity Gauntlet, all thanks to that huge Ant-Man guy from Germany.

*Wait…*

*He’d want me to stand up. Not kneeling. He wouldn’t be happy I’m this close to crying, but I can’t do anything about it.*
He’s gone. I know he’s gone.

_I know he’s gone because Ben’s gone._

The most brilliant man of all time. Created a revolutionary suit of armor that has literally changed the world for the better. After taking over Stark Industries after his father died.

_Was killed. Apparently the news on that has changed too._

A lot’s changing.

“Son, Husband, Friend, Mentor and Father.”

_Father._

Pepper’s pregnant. She has been this whole time.

_Through all of this._

From what I have been told by…everyone, it took them five years to fix everything. Five entire years. The world literally moved on.

_That’s not the problem._

Everything worked. Thanos’ plan…worked. With half the population gone, apparently the world was a happier, more stable, united planet. Obsessed with taking to space and getting back at Thanos.

I don’t know. I was…

_I don’t know exactly._

Feeling my hands shake again, I wipe them on my slacks before remembering that these are $5000 slacks, and that I probably shouldn’t do that.

It’s Italian. They bought it for me. Fitted, tailored and everything.

_What do I know?_

I know that Captain America’s death was violent.

_Still haven’t watched it back. It was bad enough live._

I don’t know how they got the glove off. The first thing I recall is falling directly onto the ground and hearing the worst scream of fury I’ve ever heard.

_They got it off, and the first thing they did, was bring everyone back._

Cap basically was bludgeoned to death. By Thanos. He threw himself at him to buy us all time to get a plan together.

_Find a way to win._

The first punch basically broke his shoulder. The second one…is the one I think that did…it.

_But he kept hitting him. Again and again and again._
As Thor. And Mr. Stark. That girl. And Mr. Strange, the Doctor. And Drax. And what felt like everyone else tried to stop him.

I tried to tackle him and force him off, but I got batted away.

*Like a fly.*

I couldn’t do much. There was too much going on.

*I saved people a few times. I don’t know.*

It’s a blur now.

At some point Cap’s shield broke. Thanos was the only one who didn’t freeze.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!”

Not now…

*I have to keep it together. I don’t have much longer.*

Again, I force myself to stop crouching at the foot of the coffin and stand again, and this time forcing myself to look at Tony’s face.

*They put makeup on his face even though it’s going to be a closed casket ceremony.*

Probably for the few visitors that were granted access in here.

All five living presidents. Leaders from basically every major country that talked themselves into the room to pay their personal respects.

The whole world’s been stopped for two whole weeks.

Since I dropped out of the exact spot in the sky that I hung onto that doughnut of a ship. But there was no ship to grab onto.

*Wouldn’t have mattered. Coming back from whatever that was hurt like hell and I couldn’t get my eyes open until I had already bounced off a building.*

Somebody did the math. I’d been terminal velocity for 19 seconds as I fell, straight from basically space, completely unconscious.

I hit the second building so hard that I was redirected a full three blocks. I barely caught myself on the ledge of the third building as hell on earth broke loose.

*Half of humanity had just returned to Earth.*

It’s not that easy though.

The world celebrated. The New York Times posted the headline that could be iconic.

“Everyone is Forgiven Now”

*This wasn’t an act of God.*
It took one for sure god, two maybe others plus all of the rest of us to stop him. Them. All of them.

Tomorrow is the day. Normal life is supposed to start back up.

After the celebrations. After the news hit.

After the world doubted. Then mourned.

After the world seemed like it was ready to burn to the ground.

Steve Rogers’ Funeral was Friday. Two days ago.

Today is the last National Day of Mourning.

I’m supposed to go home after this. After THIS.

Some genius said “Humanity will be fighting this battle forever. An Infinity War.” It stuck.

This whole thing is the “Infinity War”. Joining the “Battle of New York”, the “Destruction of the Triskelion”, the “Ultron Offensive” and of course, the “Avengers Civil War”.

None of it matters.

I blink and look into Mr. Stark’s face, placid and at ease.

“It’s time.” Somebody says behind me.

No.

“It can’t be.” I say through my closed throat.

The room is silent for a brief moment before I start to feel that the entire room is full.

Thor. Colonel Danvers. Dr. Banner and Widow. Tree, who only says ‘I am Groot’, the raccoon who can talk, Star-Lord and his green girlfriend. Sam Wilson and the Winter Soldier, Bucky Barnes. A girl I don’t know beside Thor, who seems to be putting on a face she doesn’t actually mean.

Dr. Strange and his buddy. T’Challa too.

Everyone from Earth is wearing suits, like I am. The rest, like Thor and the girl beside him are in their armor, looking ready to be immortalized.

This is an immortal moment.

And I have to put on a mask for this one too.

Widow showed it to me at the Compound. It’s easy.

Just slip it on and tap the side of my head twice. The face I’m wearing is already programmed in, and disguises me instantly.

I’m some guy they picked. I don’t know who. He looks decent. Tall, Dark, Handsome type. I was blonde for Cap’s ceremony.

Feeling everyone’s eyes on me, I pull my mask out of my jacket pocket, and slip it on before stepping aside.
Colonel Rhodes looks to Thor, who hesitates for a half second before taking point and together, lifting Tony up into the air. I jump into position behind Rhodes as beside me, T’Challa takes the burden gently. Dr. Banner slides in behind me and immediately puts his hand on my shoulder.

Support. I’m not alone. We’re doing this together.

I glance back and see Widow beside Dr. Banner. Happy and Scott at the other portion of the coffin. Everyone else falls in behind us.

I went to Cap’s ceremony as a blonde. Same general look, meant to be studied and obsessed over like it’s my actual face.

They’ve got something else coming today.

May joked that the internet was in for a shock. Our trick is going to become apparent today. But that’s the point at the exact same time.

My “face”, hell my entire body is disguised. They will have no idea what I look like.

But it’s a mask.

May. Home.

Home.

How am I supposed to just go home?! Lie in bed? Stare at the ceiling? Wait for what’s next?

School is tomorrow supposedly. It might be a half-day though. I can’t remember what May said.

I know I’m missing stuff right now. Two weeks might as well been two days. I’m having a hard time focusing.

Everyone’s said it’s normal. Grief. Loss.

Death.

It’ll be “a little while”, the psychologist lady said.

Which is real specific.

May can’t talk about it with me. It’s too close to Ben.

Uncle Ben was so bad.

And it makes this worse.

I couldn’t save Uncle Ben. And I couldn’t save Mr. Stark.

Someone gently taps my shoulder, and I hop to it, rejoining T’Challa, who immediately meets my eye.

I don’t want to go to school tomorrow. I’m not gonna learn anything.

One more blink, and we’re walking through the cathedral, armed guards and soldiers every few feet, all at attention as we walk up to a massive, polished wooden door.

We’re here.
It’s time to say goodbye.
“Good luck Pete.” Happy smiles at me as Natasha pulls open the door for May and I. As best I can, I smile back at Happy.

“Thanks.”

*First day of school all over again. Again.*

Once everyone is out of the car, Natasha turns to me. “Lead the way.”

*Alright.*

As instructed, I lead the way for May and Natasha up the main stairs, past the ornate display for the Midtown School of Science and Technology and finally up, through the main doors before turning left and into the main office.

“Oh!” I hear Morita’s secretary exclaim as I walk in and see her snatch up a walkie. “Parker’s here.”

Sheepishly I smile at her before I hear “Keep him there.” Reflexively, I turn and see that Natasha has activated her disguise and is standing beside May.

“Where have you been?” The secretary accosts me. “School started back up four days ago!”

“We’ll explain that as soon as Peter gets off to class.” Natasha counters firmly, garnering the secretary’s ire in the form of a glare before I hear Morita’s footsteps rapidly approaching.

I turn in time to see him walk in and see his face split into a smile. “Peter. Mrs. Parker. I’m glad to see you. And I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Principal Morita…” May smiles as I can feel Natasha’s eyes behind me.

“Let’s talk in my office.”

I’m nudged subtly behind me toward the door before Natasha says “Get to class.”

“Have a good day.” May smiles at me as Morita looks at the disguised Romanoff.

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure. Edward Morita.”

Natasha smiles widely. “Natalie Rushman. If we can step into your office, I can explain Peter’s absence. After you, sir.”

*Ooh.*

I nervously laugh as Morita’s expression completely changes to one of well disguised anger. “Very well. Follow me.”

*Time to go.*

Tugging on my backpack straps, I slip out the door and into the hall, ducking into one of my favorite shortcuts and popping out near my locker.
“Kid, what are you doing here?”

“On a field trip!” To MoM—AHH!!”

“Oh thank god, it’s you. You’re here. You made it after—” Ned is suddenly blustering rapidly.

Whipping around to face him, I smile and raise my hands toward his face. “Shhh…Hi.”


“Yeah.” I start tossing my brand new books and notebooks into my locker. “Of course I’m alive.”

“Everyone around here thought you’d died in The Decimation. And with—”

I stop loading up my locker and fix him with a glare that shuts him up. “I can’t talk about it.”

“I knew you’d say that. Everyone has been—”

I slam my locker door shut, revealing myself to the rapidly filling hallway, causing a few people to turn and look at me. “Everyone? I don’t care what everyone thinks.”

And now it’s time for my carefully crafted cover story.

“I got dragged into the Stark internship thing. Then when the snap happened they made me stay until everything cooled off.”

Kind of.

It’s still absolute chaos out there.

“The penis has risen!” I hear Flash say behind Ned, probably still about ten feet away. “Or erect or whatever…”

“I am not doing this right now.” I say to Ned’s face as he’s still trying to catch up.

Ned’s face suddenly drops dramatically. “That’s it?”

“Right now, yeah. I’m bound by legal documents. More now that Stark’s lawyers are in control.” I growl, coming off as angrier than I intend. “I’ll see you during second.”

Behind both of us, Flash finally appears. “Party tonight Parker. I guess you can come. Call it a ‘Survived the Decimation’ party.”

Survived.

It’s all a game to him. Who lived and who died.

I turn on my heel, laugh hollowly and start off to art before my phone buzzes in my pocket.
I stuff my phone back into my pocket and keep walking as it buzzes three more times.

She did scare him if they’re out this fast.

Smiling as I set my notebook down on my desk in Art Appreciation, I quickly fire off a reply to Romanoff.

“Go to that party though.” - Romanoff

The bell rings a little louder than necessary as the rest of the class filters in. “You said yourself on the way that I’m about to have a weekend’s worth of homework.” I reply to her a final time.

Suddenly, the small of my back is gently scratched by the person sitting directly behind me. “You going to Flash’s party?”

Michelle.

“I don’t know.” I shrug while turning to face Michelle, who looks exactly like how I left her. “I think I have a bunch of homework.”

Michelle is Michelle.

“From when you were gone? Nah.” She waves away my concern. “The first day not even all of the teachers showed up. We just started back for real yesterday. You didn’t miss a thing.”

“Oh.” I blurt out. “I…guess so then?”

Oh man, that sounded terrible, even to me.

My pocket vibrates again.

I know that they said they’d be keeping an eye on me, especially today to make sure everything goes well. But this is ridiculous.

And why is Agent Hill texting me?

Technically she’s supervising me. Anything related to Avenging, Spider-Man, I’m supposed to talk to her first.

I’m not even supposed to text the surviving Avengers directly.

“I’m glad you’re back.” Michelle suddenly says with a smile.
A very nice smile.

“Thanks.” I reply as Mrs. Kramer walks in normally.

**Wait, I thought**—

I whip back to face Michelle and ask what is going on, but she beats me to it. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” I mumble feebly.

Her response is a quiet sigh. “Yeah. And I don’t have to replace your chronically late ass.”

**Haha.**

“I can’t believe you’re going to a party already.” May says happily. “It’s like you never left!”

Nervously, I laugh. “Yeah.”

**Why isn’t she worrying sick about me?**

May glances over at me briefly. “You don’t sound excited.”

“Just tired.” I shake my head quickly.

“Do we need to turn around? Buy you a coffee?”

I quickly shake my head again. “No.”

“Do you not want me driving? You said—”

“No May! I’m happy with your driving.”

“Then what is it? You’ve been weird all day since you got home. And you said it was a boring day, outside of all the questions and attention.”

**My story kind of stuck, but that’s because that’s what everyone else kind of assumed.**

**Everyone thought I was tied up with Stark stuff. I couldn’t possibly have been actually dead, everyone who got snapped has come back.**

But they remember. Everyone kind of does. It’s strange. Whatever Cap and Mr. Stark did to fix everything made space-time very jumbled.

“It’s…how everyone remembers kind of what happened. Those guys dropping on New York. Chasing them. Then I’m falling from the sky and everyone’s back. I don’t get how everyone’s just okay.”

**I’m not. I know I’m not. I’d know if I was.**

May pulls up to the curb just before Flash’s enormous house. “I don’t think they are. I know most of the adults aren’t. Your friends don’t understand what actually happened. It was just a couple of weird days that ended with the Avengers winning.”

“Winning.” I barely breathe out a laugh.

**Whatever this is, it isn’t winning. You’re happy after a win.**
“You’re doing great. And I’m so proud of you. I…and I think your uncle would be too.”

My stomach drops precipitously as May smiles at me, clearly proud. “Thanks.”

“Now go have fun. Be a normal fifteen year old kid. And text me when you’re ready to go.” She keeps smiling as she throws my door open for me.

“Okay.” I nod, hopping out of the car then lingering at the door awkwardly.

“Bye!” She says loudly before shutting the door and darting back out into the road, leaving me stranded at the curb.

Okay.

After a moment, I turn toward Flash’s house, where strobe lights and figures dancing means that the party has already started.

“You said you were already here?” I text Ned as I hit the front sidewalk.

"Yup. By the DJ table. It’s not Flash btw."

Awesome.

I open the front door with a forced smile and am immediately bombarded with various “Peter!! You’re here!!’s from everyone by the door. Smiling as quick as I can, I get away from them and find Ned as he’s talking to Betty.

“—maybe a coffee shop or something—.” Ned explains patiently before Betty cuts him off.

“Peter! Hey!” She lights up, then tightly hugs me as Ned turns.

“Hi, Betty. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” I apologize, then start to move to get something to drink, only for her to grab my sleeve and keep me in place.

“No, no you’re not interrupting.” She says, smiling too much. “I’ll be right back.”

Ned and I both watch her go for a moment. “I interrupted.” I state the obvious.

“Yeah…” Ned answers, sounding depressed.

“I was gonna wait until—”

“No I know you were, you always do. It was her, she…”

Ned’s expression suddenly changes multiple times.

“Ned?”

He blinks two or three times even as he’s turning to actually look at me. “Yeah.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing up. Why would something be up?”

He’s lying.

I cross my arms and barely frown. “Dude.”
“Nothing’s up dude, I promise. You’re the one something’s up with.”

What?

“What?” I blurt out. “No Ned, I’m fine.”

Ned subtly turns and steers me to face the glass wall looking over the river and the city. “No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. Just a little rusty from everything.”

“No.” Ned shakes his head. “You’re not talking. You didn’t talk at all in class or at school today. You’re always talking.”

“I’m not always talking.”

“Okay, well you’re always ready to talk. The only person you kind of talked to today was Michelle. Everyone else you kind of ignored.”

“Blocked them out. And I talked to you, and Betty, and lots of people. What’s going on? Why’d Betty act like I hadn’t seen her in forever? She doesn’t even really like me.” I ask Ned.

Ned shrugs. “I dunno.”

Really helpful. Great stuff.

“Okay. Well then, I’m going to see if I can make a sandwich or something. I’m hungry.”

Ned replies by nodding and drifting off, leaving me awkwardly lingering again.

Sandwich.

Purposefully, I start toward the kitchen and Flash, who is holding court by the kitchen table.

“Flash! Mind if I make a sandwich real quick? I ate early and am starving.”

“Yeah, go ahead Parker. Just don’t use all of the mustard or my parents will go nuts.” He replies without looking at me. “Anyway—”

“Thanks.” I say to Flash, who is already ignoring me for his conversation then quickly throw together a ham sandwich with lettuce, tomato along with a little bag of sour cream chips from a bowl that was sitting out for everyone to grab.

I think you can get to the roof if I follow those stairs.

Silently, I slip up the stairs, where I can hear ping pong balls bouncing off cups, laughter and music playing loudly before pushing open a door and seeing the starry night sky along with an empty rooftop.

“Finally.” I say to myself.

I haven’t had any time to myself all day. Woke up early for school, didn’t have time to breathe there. And once I got home, May was already fretting about this party because Agent Hill texted ahead for me.

Setting down my plate on the edge of the roof, I glance up at the night sky right where I think I fell.
The video has over 50 million views on YouTube. I finally saw it at school today. I fell like a rock. Completely dead weight.

I should have been able to see it earlier, but the Compound blocked that video for me, along with a whole bunch of others.

Like the one of me holding Mr. Stark near GCT.

They couldn’t hide that picture from me. I think it might end up like the picture of Armstrong on the surface of the moon, being the one that everyone associates with the moon landing. I know it ran worldwide online and trended forever.

Quickly followed by the one of everyone trying to hide Cap.

You couldn’t tell how bad Stark got pounded, but Cap was obvious, even from far away.

Why’d Ned say that I didn’t talk all day? I’m not talkative right now, but I think that makes sense.

He’s probably mad about me not showing up until today. In my defense, I was upstate up until last night, when they moved me back here.

Turns out, the plan was never for me to go right back to school. I had to take a ton of tests, meet some administrators and sit in a lot of meetings that I wasn’t allowed to talk in.

Behind me, I hear the door open, causing me to turn back and see Michelle holding a plate in one hand and two drinks in the other before laughing. “Hah. I didn’t think you grabbed a drink. Here.”

It’s not alcoholic.

“Thanks.” I smile sheepishly at her before I feel my cheeks burn and look away.

Michelle sidles up beside me, setting her plate down and looking at mine. “Are you actually hungry, or did you just want to get away?”

“I’m hungry.” I defend myself, causing Michelle to laugh at me.

Great.

I open the drink Michelle brought, take a sip then ask “They tweaked the schedule?”

“Yeah.” Michelle nods. “Summer got cut short by three weeks.”

It’s ridiculous but I guess life has to go on. Which means changes to school schedules that we’ve never done before.

“Do you want to be alone? I can go inside if—” She begins.

“No, I—” I start myself, then stop. “Sorry. Stay, if you want. I didn’t mean to sound so mean.”

Michelle smiles and opens up her chips. “I assumed that. Your tone has been all over the place today.”

“No it hasn’t.”

“It has.” She says before biting a chip with a loud crunch. “You’ve been quiet all day.”
Not you too.

Instead of responding, I take a bite of sandwich.

Not too bad.

“I can’t blame you though. You actually were there for all this stuff.” Michelle observes. I shrug, then open up my chips.

“How’d you…” I start, then stop myself.

I haven’t told anybody that outside of the Compound and May.

Michelle simply shrugs, her shoulder brushing mine. “I pay attention. You’re not right yet.”

Paying close attention.

“Are you drawing me?” I ask her, causing her to briefly tense before she shakes her head.

“No, but we share most classes, and Decathelon right? I see you a lot, why shouldn’t I notice?”

I guess so? I don’t know.

Not knowing what else to do, I shrug. “It’s bad when even I can feel that I’m being awkward.” I joke. Michelle laughs right away, then smiles at me again.

“At least you can stay on brand.”

Yup. That’s my brand.

“But seriously though, for just a second?” Michelle says, her face turning serious to match her tone shift. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Thanks.” I smile and nod, then fiddle with a chip for a moment.

“You’re welcome.” She answers with a smile, then together we look out across the river, and to the city, which is lit up like always, with the exception of a massive spotlight being shot straight up.

Straight up into space.

Past where I fell.

To exactly where Thor told them where Titan was.
“Wow.” Is all Ned has to say as I try not to burn our grilled cheese sandwiches.

Try.

“Hmm.” I mutter quietly.

Please say something different.

I poke the edges of both of our sandwiches to make sure they don’t stick while Ned just takes a lap, oddly talking to himself.

“It was really scary, you know.”

Yeah.

“Peter.”

I glance up at Ned and thankfully see that he’s gripping the couch and looking right at me. “Was that to me? Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m just trying to work it all out in my head. It was really scary. The part where you fell.” He says, looking a little pale.

“I bet.” I try to joke and keep the mood light. “Where were you at?”

Ned answers instantly. “Home with my Mom and Dad, watching all the coverage of everything. The detection of multiple objects coming into Earth atmosphere, followed by the Decimation. And then boom, everyone came back, you fell from the sky and…”

It was over.

“And you…faded?”

I shrug at him, poking the grilled cheese again. “I don’t know what it was called. Everyone at the Compound called it ‘The Snap’. Because you know how cops and soldiers wear body cams?”

“You all wore them?”

“Mine got covered up by the new suit.” I lie before Ned takes another lap around the couch.

“A whole new suit…” he beams. “Think of how much time and effort he put into that! For a situation that might never have happened.”

I quickly shake my head. “No. Uhh, I was told that, well, hang on.” I stop myself short. “I wanna explain this right. Loki. When he came when we were kids.”

“Yeah.” Ned nods.

“Same dude. Sent Loki.”

Ned’s eyes bulge. “He sent Loki?”

“They said that he was obsessed with it. Wouldn’t wear normal shirts, always was tinkering,
tinkering, tinkering…Obsessed.”

And I was a part of that.

Tony Stark’s obsession to protect the world.

Ned looks at me critically. “They? You’ve been saying names this whole time.”

“Mrs. Potts. Pepper. His wife.” I reply quietly. “She wasn’t happy about it when she told May.”

“She told May?!”

Once more, I nod. “They were on the same wavelength on that. No secrets. And you know May, after Coney Island.”

“She almost killed me.”

The only time May has yelled at him. Credit to Ned, he took it. Sat on the couch and let May just get it all out.

“But yeah.” I say abruptly while I reach to get us plates. Ned takes advantage of my preoccupation to move the pan off the burner for me. “Thanks.”

“Welcome. Back to that…what’d you call it?”

“We all have called it ‘The Snap’. He snapped. The glove, with the power of the universe basically. He thought ‘Half of all life is now gone.’ And everyone got dusted.”

Ned runs his hands through his hair. “Wow. How’d it feel?”

Horrifying.

Mantis just poofed. Was just gone. Then Drax and Quill.

“I felt like somebody lit the inside of my body on fire. It was slow at first, like a stomachache. But by the time I got the words out, it was already too late.”

Ned shakes his head and I put our sandwiches on our plates. “I don’t think you had a chance to be fair.”

I nod in agreement. “I should have stayed on the bus. What’d you say to everyone?”

“You got called away to the Stark Internship.”

“And what’d Harrington say?”

Ned smirks. “That I was lying for you. But you weren’t there and nobody really cared other than Harrington and May because of that fight.”

“Not much of a fight.” I comment.

“You dropped a taxi on that dude!” Ned lights up.

I smile as I pull open the fridge and grab drinks for us. “I just did it. I was going to throw part of a tree next because I don’t know if you saw that dude, but he was massive.”

“What was he?” Ned asks as we start toward my room.
“I dunno.” I shrug, then kick open my door before Ned sees the new additions.

The glass case with the ARC reactor with the display on it.

“Proof that Tony Stark has a Heart”

I didn’t really want it. But Pepper gave it to Mr. Stark. And she said that the best thing he ever did was find me. And so it was now mine.

The other one is his battered, half cracked open helmet.

Both just sitting side by side on my desk.

A loud crash makes me jump and see that Ned has dropped his plate and is staring at the helmet. “Oh…My…” I have to swallow a lump in my throat as Ned creeps over to my desk and takes a better look.

“It’s real?”

I nod, before Ned makes a move to grab it. “Please don’t…not yet.”

Ned stops, arms not even half extended. “Oh yeah, sorry, of course, my bad. I’ll grab the broom and dustpan…” He says, dashing around me toward the half bedroom that holds some of our cleaning supplies.

He knows how damn hot you have to get in order to start melting Iron Man’s armor. It’s partially melted on the side.

It’s nanotech!! That’s almost impossible to melt!!

Ned starts cleaning up his shattered plate, sandwich completely forgotten as I set mine down next to my new computer.

A gift from the Compound. Installed while I was gone and completely customized how my old one was. I think they used Karen to do it.

“You told May all this right?” Ned’s voice brings me back.

“Yeah.” I answer, then clear my throat. “Yeah. She saw most of it first. Before I could tell her.”

I don’t really remember the first 24 hours after everything. I remember waking up after my fall. Everyone frantically trying to secure the area as the military, which was still investigating the ambush descended on us first to arrest us, then protect us once they saw what happened.

All the bodies. Of Avengers. Of a massive, ten foot tall purple dude with an axe in his chest. Thor covered in purple blood and roaring in anguish and fury.

“Sorry. I explained things so bad.” I tell Ned as he walks back in, sandwich on some paper towels. Ned waves away my concerns. “It’s okay dude. I wasn’t expecting you to want to talk so soon.”

It’s the Tuesday after I went back to school.

I still don’t want to talk. I mostly just listen, try to take notes and wok on whatever the assignment is.
Clearing my throat again, Ned turns to me as I say “The psychiatrist said that talking might help me.”

“You saw a psychiatrist?” Ned’s eyes widen.

“I didn’t have a choice.” I laugh. “I was in my room, trying not to cry. Trying to get my head around everything and the door just opened.”

“Yeah, that’s not a choice. But I was just thinking, after Ben—”

*I said no to the psych doctor. Because a lot of psychiatry isn’t science. It’s guessing.*

I take a bite of my grilled cheese then run a hand through my hair anxiously. “I’m going to try and get the video for you one day. That planet I went to, before the Snap—”

“Decimation.” Ned corrects me, before I fix him with a glare. “Sorry.”

“You’re fine.” I smile at him before continuing. “The planet was off its axis. I avoided one of his blasts by accidentally jumping twenty feet into the air.”

*And then he threw me into Dr. Strange.*

Ned looks at my anxiously. “Can I say that’s cool?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “But the dude told us the story of what happened. Why he was doing it.”

“He did?” Ned voice drops to a whisper.

I nod once. “You know the drill.”

*I told him when we got home today from school. Whatever I tell him, if he tells anyone, it’s not me he has to answer to.*

It’s Thor, Captain Marvel, Romanoff, and the army of people at the Compound.

*I’ll never see him again.*

Ned nods fervently, and I take a sip from my bottle of water. “He said that there were too many mouths, not enough to go around. He used one of those stones to turn that planet, which was all rusted and completely ruined. No life anywhere, into what it was however long ago it was. He said it was beautiful.”

“Was it?”

I shrug. “Looked like some of those artist renderings of what Earth might look like one day. Kind of. Point is, he had the solution, and he did it.”

“And you fixed it.”

“I didn’t fix it.” I counter him.

*I lost.*

Ned nods. “Yeah you did, you’re an Avenger. And the Avengers—”

“The original Avengers fixed it. And half of them died to do it. I just came back after the battle had
changed."

That blue lady who flew in on that craft and drove it into Thanos grabbed the glove and tried putting it on.

She basically evaporated. The glove clanked to the ground, the stones popped out and vanished. Nobody cared about that because we had bigger issues.

Thanos was taking heads.

“What was his name again?” Ned asks.

“Thanos.”

“And you have no idea where those stones went.”

I nod.

I said that. Thor and Captain Marvel are out there right now, talking to what apparently are the governments of other affected planets and telling them about it so the word can get out galactically.

But I’m not allowed to tell Ned that. I’ve said as much as I can.

“I’m glad you’re alive.”

I can’t help but laugh before I realize that I’m smiling. “Thanks Ned.”

“You know what I mean though. You could have died like ten times!”

“Fifty. I should have died in space attached to that ship.”

But I didn’t. I put one hand in front of the other and pulled myself as hard and as fast as I could to that ship, into that tiny little compartment before it shut.

“I should have stayed on the bus.” I say, for maybe the hundredth time.

“Don’t say that. Beating yourself up doesn’t do anybody any good.” May says, leaning in the doorway.

Ned jumps up. “May! Hi. I’m sorry about the plate.”

“Plate? Oh dammit…” May darts off before calling back “Oh! It’s okay! I hate those plates anyway. I bought them because it was a flash sale.”

“Whew.” Ned exhales before looking back to me, relieved.

May calls back to us from the kitchen. “Seriously though Peter! You did what you thought was right in the moment. That’s all anybody can ask for.”

I don’t know about that.

“And you got tractor beamed up. How’d that feel?”

“Like a magnet had grabbed me.”

Ned’s brows furrow. “How would you know that? Humans can’t feel magnetic attraction.”
“I don’t know Ned! I was beamed up way faster than I’d ever gone in my life and then I was trying to grab onto that ship and save that guy.”

“The wizard.”

“The guy nobody’s seen since.” May adds, still in the kitchen.

That’s a lie.

He came back as we were all deliberating last week. After the funerals. Just…popped in.

* Came back with his Infinity Stone. Said that he was more than willing to help us in the future, but that his main priority now, and until we needed him again, was to protect the Earth from threats that only he can protect us from.

“Yup.” I play along.

“What’s he like? What’s the magic like?”

I smile. “Like teleporting in a game. One second I’m in the financial district. Then I’m here. Then boom, I’m in Jersey.”

“And he couldn’t beat him?”

“Oh he tried.” I laugh.

*With the craziest light and picture show I think I’m ever gonna see.*

He’s definitely a magician though. Because Dr. Banner apparently crashed through the roof of his compound or whatever. It’s a building here in the city. Thanos’ goons, the ‘Children of Thanos’ basically parked on top of that building.

*And now nobody can find that building.*

It isn’t on video. Any of the seven traffic cameras that have a view of that whole scene just show Dr. Banner, Mr. Stark and Dr. Strange with Wong, the nice one rounding a corner.

*Don’t know where they came from. Just there. Like magic.*

“I’m glad you kicked that guy’s ass though Peter. That speech he launched into. The whole planet would have erupted if they’d heard that.”

Thor actually laughed when he saw the video that had been put together.

*He explained that he was on a ship, actually heading for Earth. Since apparently Asgard is no more.*

That hasn’t been explained, just waved away. Bigger problems.

*That guy, who is absolutely named Squidward had apparently given that same speech to Loki and Thor, but only after Thanos had wrecked his ship, beaten the hell out of everyone and you’ll never guess how many people he killed.*

Half.

*HALF. THE GUY IS OBSESSED WITH HALF.*
“That means get lost Squidward!” Ned yells spontaneously, causing all of us to laugh before I finish off my sandwich.

“So, when are you going out on patrol? Can I be ‘Guy in the Chair’ here? I brought all my stuff.” Ned asks me, turning his chair to face me.

*Oh yeah. I forgot about this part.*

“I don’t have my suit.” I reveal.

Ned jumps up. “WHAT?!”

“They took it. To repair it, and apparently make it better.”

*I saw Dr. Banner give it to T’Challa, who handed it to his sister. Who actually was pretty cool.*

“How are you supposed to help the Avengers if you don’t have a suit?” Ned asks.

“That’s the right question!!” May calls back to us from the living room before I hear the clanging of a pan. “Ned, are you staying for dinner? I’m making curry!”

Ned and I look to each other before we both shake our heads. “No! I’ve gotta go home here in a second!”

“Oh. Okay!” May answers, sounding disappointed.

“Answering your question.” I smile at Ned, who smiles back. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t know?”

“Don’t know.” I repeat myself again. “And I’m kind of okay with it right now honestly.”

Ned nods slowly. “I can get that. After everything you saw, went through…Michelle’s right. You’re far from back to normal.”

“Michelle?” May says loudly before dropping something else. “Oh for fuck’s sake! Ned! *Michelle?*

*Uh oh.*

“You didn’t tell her?” Ned asks me.

“Tell me what?” May snaps, footsteps storming towards my open door.

I raise my hands, palms to the ceiling as soon as May appears in my sights. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“She’s really the only one Peter’s talked to. And that was on the roof at Flash’s party.”

A huge smile breaks out onto May’s face. “Michelle? Peter…why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because there’s nothing to tell?” I counter, trying to bank my frustration. “We talked for like five minutes, then sat on the roof in silence for like 30 minutes before we went back inside.”

“We.” May seizes upon the word.

“I did. She came with me downstairs.”
May makes a face, which causes Ned to pull his collar up to his nose to try and hide his laughter. Before I know it, my plate is flying across the house and hits the front door before it shatters.

“PETER!!!” May screeches.

“Well let’s not focus on my word choices okay?! I demand of both of them. “Jeez guys…” I hop up, then snatch the broom up and—

A loud pop causes me to stop, followed by a stabbing pain in my hand. I let go of the handle partially to realize that I’ve also snapped the broom handle clean into two pieces. “Dammit…” I mutter, then toss the broken broom aside. “I’ll go buy a new one May…just let me grab my wallet.”

I walk past Ned, scoop up my wallet, phone, keys and headphones before starting to the front door. “Sorry May.”

“It’s okay dear.” She smiles softly at me, a smile I return before opening the door, sliding through and shutting it behind me.

Underneath the door though, I hear the next part of May and Ned’s conversation.

“Is that…also since all this happened?” Ned says, sounding very nervous.

“Yes.” May answers before sighing to herself. “But I don’t know if it’s because of his grief, his stress, his anger and frustration, or just puberty.”
Blood thrumming in my ears, I jog back up to Ned, which causes him to start smiling widely again.

“Already in the locker room…” he breathes out, trying not to laugh. I just try to keep an even face.

We played dodgeball today. And Flash decided to be lazy, and take potshots at me. Which turned into laser beams at my head.

After he missed in the third game, he swore so loud he spun completely around on his heel, right into a throw by Betty.

BETTY. The whole game stopped for maybe a minute as everyone caught their breath, laughing. Including Betty.

“What do you think we’ve got today in Warren’s?” I change subjects entirely.

Ned’s face slightly falls. “I don’t think quiz. But that would be her style.”

“It’s either that or homework.”

“I think I’ll take the quiz?” Ned turns to me, sounding confused at his own conclusion as Betty appears behind his shoulder.

I nod, smile at Betty, then silently leave them and turn for the Boys locker room.

Better than awkwardly third wheeling it up. I’ve done more than I’ve wanted, just on accident.

I’m happy for him though. He hasn’t really said anything to me about it. But that’s cool. Eh I probably annoyed him talking about Liz.

He’s playing it better.

Voices suddenly raise deep inside the locker room, causing everyone around me, and me instinctively, to run inside.

Fight? Terrible accident?

“THOMPSON!! I hear Wilson yell.

Everyone around me, eager to see what has happened, surges me forward towards the showers.

Oh. That’s why he came in here first. But I had that in my lock—

I turn back to see that my locker has been basically torn open, and is completely empty.

“SHUT OFF THE SHOWER! NOW!!!”

One of Flash’s friends darts into the shower and turns the handle. But my backpack and clothes are already completely drenched.

Great. I had my phone, wallet, house keys in my backpack. Not to mention all the books not in my
locker, all my notebooks and notes for class.

Phone charger. Tablet charger. The tablet that I was given at the Compound. I don’t have a way to charge it.

And a whole new backpack. I’m dead. If May doesn’t kill me, they’ll just send Romanoff.

“—enough for you to just miss? NO! No it wasn’t. You had to humiliate him, and did more to yourself in the process. Truly shameful.” Wilson paces around, irate.

“Coach Denning went to grab Principal Morita.” Somebody in the back chimes in, and Wilson acknowledges it with a wave.

I am so dead.

I don’t hear Ned approach, I just hear “Dude.”

“I’m so dead. They’re gonna kill me.” I say blankly.

I’ve done everything right. Agent Hill told me to do well in class, keep my head down, and not get into any trouble. And that they wouldn’t forget about me.

But I had “reestablish normal”.

Because May was still frazzled about me being Spider-Man. Because my whole situation at MOMA was too weird.

Hearing Morita’s voice brings me out of my thoughts, and I see him point Flash and a couple of his friends, out the door in the direction of the office.

I know there are higher priorities than me. We’re talking to other planets for the first time ever. Nobody cares about me, and that’s how it should be.

Until now, where I just destroyed all of my school stuff.

“Parker!” I hear, causing me to jump and see Principal Morita looking at me before he turns to Wilson. “Get his clothes over to football and into the dryer, I’ll get him back over.”

Wilson nods before Morita steers me to the door before leading me down where his personal office is.

“Principal Morita, I don’t know what I did wrong…” I ask quietly as we hone in on his closed door.

Morita suddenly laughs, and smiles while grabbing his keys. “You’re not in trouble. I’ve…needed to pull you aside for a few weeks now.” He confesses while pulling open his door and gesturing for me to walk inside.

“I didn’t because I thought, along with everyone else in your life, that it was best for you to fall back into being normal. But if the time I waited hurt, I’m sorry Peter.” Morita says solemnly.

He knows. Some level. I don’t know what.

Morita laughs again, before pointing up at the picture hung up on the wall of Captain America. “Superheroes have never been just the guys on the news to me. That’s my grandfather, with Captain America Peter. To him, it’s not about what he did. It’s who he was that made him special.
Everyone thinks of it as a gift, but on many levels, it’s kind of a curse. You can never be “normal”.

“Your friend, Mrs. Romanoff, the Avenger? She didn’t tell me everything, but what she said made sense. Your work with Stark and the Internship whatever it is, is important enough for them to take an active role. And you can trust me to keep that a secret. I know that burden too.”

He goes silent for a moment, then jokes “Now I can’t just write off a detention or anything, but…” which causes me to break and reflexively laugh, causing the tense feeling in the room to vanish.

“Sorry to lecture. But it’s actually really been eating at me to get that right. That’s what’s important, not money or power. Or even knowledge.” He smiles. “Says the Principal of a great school. It’s all the teachers and students. I just do what they tell me to.”

“You knew it was her? Romanoff?” I finally ask.

“Yeah.” He nods. “She got into my door as Rushman, but once we’d all sat down she made things pretty clear.”

Okay then.

“She said that you were doing well. Pretty quiet, but after everything, it’d be a miracle if you focused on anything for the rest of the year. You’re doing good.” He continues, checking his watch before hopping back up. “And if we walk slow enough to the fieldhouse, your clothes will be done drying, and we can figure out what to do with your backpack.”

We can do that. It’s the money that’s the issue. I had a lot of stuff on me because, well, I have to. I guess we’ll just figure that one out on the fly.

“I have to admit though, it didn’t sound like you really taunted him or triggered this Peter. I know Flash’s personality is a little brash, but this is extreme.”

“I just played dodgeball?” I shrug as we walk the halls, eventually outside.

Morita seems to consider this as we walk, then says “Can’t punish you for doing as you were told to do in class.”

Yup.

When we arrive at the fieldhouse, Morita stops and smiles at me. “Well, I have to go back to being a Principal. We can keep your bag in the office until you can go home and explain the situation if that works for you.”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” I smile sheepishly.

Better than my locker. It’ll just get gross and semi-moldy with all the wet paper and everything else. Gross.

Morita nods, then claps me on the shoulder before starting back toward the majority of the complex. Leaving me to the laundry rooms and my drying clothes.

May will kill me though. She still hasn’t forgiven me for losing all those backpacks in the fall.

Denning waves me inside when he spots me, and lets me snatch up my clothes and duck into the locker room proper to throw my now dry stuff back on.
Those have to be industrial size dryers. Because even my jeans are completely dry and a little too hot. But that’ll wear off and I walk to class.

Scooping up my clothes, I quickly start back toward the main doors, stopping only to straighten my hair and fix my collar.

I doubt Flash is in class, he has to still be in the office. But everyone else is going to be looking for mistakes. Michelle is in there and sits right behind me.

And I have to make sure her view isn’t ridiculous.

Quickly, I back up to the same mirror, set by the sinks.

Yeah. I’m good.

One final time, I round the lobby corner and out into the concourse connecting Football and Athletics just as Principal Morita is arriving back at the main building.

Huh. It took me a minute to get changed—

“Over here.” A familiar voice calls out, not visible to me.

Black Widow.

I whirl around and try to spot her, to no luck. “Marco?”

“Polo.” She says, clearly in front of me but…I can’t see her. Just as I open my mouth to say something, she speaks again. “Glad to see that old tricks still work. Even on a kid who has a sixth sense.” Natasha Romanoff slides out from behind the pillar to my left.

SHE WAS NOT THERE. I should have seen her, I don’t understand.

“How?” I fumble out after a second of her scrutinizing me.

She smirks. “I can’t just tell you and give away all my tricks. It’s just an old school spy trick. Uses your eyes against you. C’mon. Car’s out front. Which reminds me…”

Pulling out her phone, she quickly types out a massage as we walk.

What is happening?

“He’ll grab your backpack and everything.” She adds after a moment. “You weren’t expecting us.”

I shake my head strongly. “No. I just saw my Principal when he walked me here and—”

“I politely reintroduced myself and volunteered to take you home.” She says, an odd kind of smile on her features. “Unless you’d like to go back to that quiz you’re missing.”

This time she turns back and smirks as I laugh. “No thanks.”

“That’s what I thought. And I would prefer not to wait long…” She mutters, checking her watch as we walk up to a nondescript black car.

If Happy is here, which this looks like his car, we’re all set except for my backpack. Unless we brought a third?
Which seems dumb if the goal is for nobody to notice that I’m gone.

Casually, she opens the driver’s side door, revealing that it’s empty.

She’s driving.

“Get in. On the infinitesimal chance there’s a sniper…” She grumbles at me, and I pull open the door and duck inside as fast as I can.

“Sorry.”

“I said infinitesimal…now don’t tell me you’re lost.” I hear her scowl as she looks at her phone again.

This is a similar car to the one Happy always drives in. They probably just own the car, and use it for trips into New York like this one.

Spontaneously, the door on my left opens, revealing Dr. Bruce Banner climbing in. Hastily, I give him space before he closes the door.

“About time. What’d you do, stop for coffee?” Romanoff questions him, seamlessly pulling out at the same time.

Dr. Banner rolls his shoulders, buckling in. “It took a minute. And I got caught looking at a mural. Did anyone mention to you that this is where Howard Stark went to school?”

“No.” Romanoff shakes her head.

Yeah. He and Dr. Erskine, the man who created Cap’s super soldier serum are both alumni of Midtown. It’s our claim to fame.

“Did Tony reroute you here?” Banner turns to me.

“No.” I shake my head. “Tested in.”

Kind of. My grades didn’t speak to my test scores got me in after May and Principal Morita talked about my admission.

Grades are a lot better now.

“Hell of a coincidence. And explains why he didn’t just pull Peter out of school. Tutor him with us.” Romanoff comments, then eyeing me using the mirrors.

I quickly break her eye contact, then see that my bag is on the floor by Banner’s feet. “Oh, my bad.” I quickly apologize and snatch it over the divide in the middle and set it by my feet.

“You’re fine. What’d they do anyway? Just throw it in the showers just because?” Banner waves away my concern.

“Basically.” I nod. “I, uhm, had the charger for my tablet in here. I’m really sorry…”

Get out in front of it. Brace the news a bit.

Banner instead, just looks at me, slightly confused. “Okay?”

“We’ll get you a new one.” Romanoff dismisses my concern. “The tablet wasn’t in there was it?”
“No. I keep it at home.”

Dr. Banner asks “No problem.”

“No problem?” I ask again.

“Yeah, we’ll get all new stuff.” He nods. “We can get Karen on transcribing your notes into new notebooks so you don’t have to rewrite everything—”

“It might help him to study by writing it again.”

“No.” I jump in. “I’m okay with transcribing it.” Dr. Banner only laughs quietly.

“I’m Bruce, by the way.” he extends his hand to me. Out of habit, I shake his hand before he continues “I know we didn’t get to really talk before you had to come back. But we figured that waiting might work out too.”

Romanoff glances back at me again. “Are you hungry Peter? Before we totally get out of the city?”

*No, I’m fine right now. And I can get something at the Compound. If we’re going there.*

“I’m fine, thank you. Are we going upstate?” I glance into the mirror.

*Nope.*

“Yeah. Let you know what’s sort of going on with everything that’s going on. You can’t really help right now, you’re in school and that’s important—I know you want to help but hang on.” Dr. Banner cuts me off.

“I’ve been in school this whole time. When I got my powers, stopped that flying vulture guy, the guys in the ship that I met you at—” I tell Dr. Banner. “What’s different?”

Banner and Widow share a meaningful look in the mirror, before Widow turns to me. “Thor.”

“Thor?” I repeat.

*Why Thor?*

“Asgard got destroyed. His home. Big long story, but point is that I was there. Hulk saw it happen. I can see it now. He now needs a new home.”

“Which he now has.” Chimes in Widow.

“okay, where?”

“He basically bought Oklahoma and some of Kansas and Colorado.” Banner shrugs.

*Bought?*

“I…thought states couldn’t be bought. When’d that become a thing?” I ask.

*And if it’s a thing, can somebody please put an end to New Jersey?*

Widow explains “In exchange for protection of the planet. Earth is his home now, and the land he bought will be his.”

*That sounds bad to me. Thor isn’t like magic. He’s a god, but I don’t think that’s how this works. I*
don’t think people are going to just not commit terrible crimes just because we have a god. They don’t care.

They’re criminals. It’s a mindset thing with them.

“You’re not sold.” Dr. Banner observes.

Widow’s eyes flash to me again. “Why not?”

It takes me a moment to get out “The Accords.” I tell her, then look to Dr. Banner. “Have you had a chance to look at them?”

“A little bit, why?” He asks, looking genuine.

“You fought on Stark’s side.” Widow fires at me.

I nod. “So did you.”

Banner’s head pops up. “You did?”

“I was handed a problem and no real solutions. It was either that, retirement, or jail.” Romanoff defends herself. “I tried to make the best of a bad situation.”

“That law’s bad. I didn’t read it until after that fight at the airport.” I explain to them. “There’s all sorts of clauses and loopholes. Especially for ‘vigilante heroes’. Hmm?”

You can’t trust Ross. May can’t stand him, and I’m starting to see her point.

“Ross isn’t heartless. I’d bet he was told to find a solution, just like you said Nat.” Dr. Banner replies evenly.

I counter “Well, if that’s in effect after this? Am I next? Or do I have to retire?”

“You’re not retiring. Relax.” Romanoff coolly replies. “The world’s just changing. And we all have to change with it.”

“Oh, then what do I do?”

“First. We give you your suit back.” Dr. Banner says with a smile. “We fixed it, separated it from the Iron Spider suit and stored that away. And we tricked it out a little more.”

It’s tricked out enough. I don’t need anything else. What I have is fine.

“I think I’ll just take my old suit.” I answer confidently.

Widow looks up at me again. “We’ll see. Oh damn, Bruce. Call his Aunt. Your phone’s busted, isn’t it.”

“Yeah.” I nod, then look away, feeling my cheeks get hot again.

“Oh! That reminds me. Nat. You’ll never guess who I saw.” Dr. Banner suddenly smiles

“Who?”

“His girlfriend. Outside the office that our friend was in. Apparently she went off on one of them after she heard what they did.” Banner smiles widely, looking from Widow and back to me.
“I don’t have a girlfriend.” I interject.

*She. Michelle is in gym, Betty wouldn’t do that…*

*They can’t be talking about Michelle. She’s not, no no no.*

She barely pays attention to me. And I’ve tried to be a better decathlon teammate.

Romanoff laughs quietly up front. “You don’t? Maria Hill said that she’s the main person you talk to. Before class, in the library, in your shared classes, via text, in your decathlon…”

“She sounds like a girlfriend to me.” Dr. Banner confesses.

*They think Michelle is my girlfriend.*

“No, she’s not. Who are you even talking about?” I ask him.

Dr. Banner simply pulls out his phone, activates the screen and scrolls right to a series of files, taps multiple times before a profile of Michelle pops up. He effortlessly flips it around so that Michelle’s face is facing me. “That’s her.”

*And that’s an old photo. From Freshman year.*

“No.” I shake my head.

Widow’s eyes find me again as we’re now out of the city and beginning to hit the tunnels that lead onto the larger highways. “No?”

“No. Michelle’s just my friend.” I say strongly. “Head of our decathlon team, I have some classes with her. And yeah, I guess I do text her. But I don’t see the problem with that—”

“No problem.” Banner jumps in, smiling. “There’s no problem.”

“But she did go to see you on the roof. At the party when you first came back.”

Horrified, I snap back to look at her.

“How’d you—”

“We are paying attention to you. Maria Hill told us.” She smiles.

“How?” I raise my voice. “I get keeping an eye on me but c’mon!”

“We didn’t actually hear anything. Just saw you through some security cameras.”

*And now you think she’s my girlfriend.*


“Okay.” Romanoff shakes her head. “She is pretty though. She won’t be single for very long.”

Dr. Banner smiles to himself, then shrugs at me. “I agree with her Pete.”

“You would if you knew what’s good for you.” Romanoff comments, shifting in the driver’s seat. Leaving Dr. Banner to helplessly smile at me.
Thank you to everyone who has read and bookmarked these first few chapters. Planning on keeping to a routine schedule with updates in the future. Feel free to reach out, comment, etc with questions.
(A/N: Thank you for all of the kudos, bookmarks, comments and PMs on the first four chapters. They mean more than you know for an initial voyage into a new fandom. Hope you enjoy the chapter, you'll know what song I was jamming to while I wrote this. Hint: I watched Guardians Vol. 2 yesterday after work.

One warning: For probably the only time, there is some discussion about suicide and that kind of mental state. I kept it in because I want to be realistic and mental health is a key part of recovery after losing a loved one. If you feel like there isn't any other solution, you're wrong. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. You can do this. Talk to a professional, your family. This isn't the end. I promise.

Enough serious talk. ON TO THE STORY. Thanks for reading!)

Stoichiometry is often used to balance chemical equations (reaction stoichiometry). For example, the two diatomic gases, hydrogen and oxygen, can combine to form a liquid, water, in an exothermic reaction, followed by the equation:

\[ 2 \text{H}_2 + \text{O}_2 \rightarrow 2 \text{H}_2\text{O} \]

Reaction stoichiometry describes the 2:1:2 ratio of hydrogen, oxygen, and water molecules in the above equation.

Okay, that’s great. And the math on that?

“Karen, pull up those tables again.” I ask her as I grab my equation sheet.

“All this made sense in my head when I wrote it down.

“Sure Peter. You seem to having difficulty mastering this.”

I laugh once. “Yeah, I’m just trying…to wrap my head around it.” I grunt out as I stretch out to grab my tablet, which has my textbook already on it.

“Would you like me to ask Dr. Banner for assistance?”

“I can do that?”

I CAN DO THAT?!

“I can attempt to ask him for his help.”

“I guess so, yeah. But if he’s in the middle of something, don’t ask.” I answer Karen before somebody knocks on my door. I turn, and—

“Karen? Cancel that call.” I hop out of my chair, then pull open the door.
Dr. Banner walks in, both hands full holding two bowls of ice cream. “Sorry, don’t mean to interrupt. They were just having ice cream, and it’s good for the soul. Strawberry? Neapolitan?”

“Neapolitan. You’re not interrupting. I actually, uhm, was going to call and ask for your help.” I confess, taking the ice cream.

“Help?” Banner repeats me, then looks at my mess, then to my display, filled with stoichiometry equations and my beloved tables. “Stoichiometry.”

“Yeah, and I’ve got some of it. But these equations—”

Dr. Banner cuts me off. “No, no I get what you mean. I know this stuff really well. Grab your stuff, let’s go talk about this in the living room.”

“Okay Why?”

Dr. Banner slides my notebook, freshly reprinted, under his arm and scoops up my pen, marker and highlighter. “All this will drive you mad if you do it alone. My doctoral studies just about put me in a psych ward until I got with a study group. Turns out, I wasn’t alone.”

“You had trouble with your doctorate?” I ask him.

“Yeah, those things are death slogs designed to kill you. If you make it out, you’ve earned it. It’s seared into the top of your skull at that point.” He explains as we walk through the hall.

“Why are you lugging all his books?” I hear Romanoff ask Dr. Banner.

“Because he’s trying to wrap his head around stoichiometry. And that’ll drive you insane.” He replies, quickly setting everything down in an orderly fashion. “Here Pete, you know how you like things. Karen, pull up his screen, and the problems.”

Maria Hill shoots me a look, drink perched precariously, yet totally secure on her knee. “I hope you don’t want my help. This is when I bailed on chemistry.”

“Right?” Romanoff laughs. “All my knowledge is useless thanks to the Jolly Green Giant over here.”

“Don’t blame me.” Banner laughs. “We just finally got computers that could figure some of this shit out…and now throw it at kids apparently.”

“Higher, further, faster.” I quip.

“altius adhuc citius.”

I turn to Maria Hill. “But you know Latin.”

“It’s useful.” She fires back.

“It’s a dead language.” I reply. “there’s no point.”

“And that’s exactly where I use it to beat you.”

Romanoff jumps in. “Internet. Quick search and boom. You might as well know Latin.”

Thank you!
I smile at her, and she barely returns it before reaching over and stealing some of my ice cream.

“Hey.” I say as Hill laughs.

“Cost of doing business kid. There’s a toll coming and going. Now c’mon. Are we working on Latin or chemistry.”

“Chemistry.” Banner nods, looking at the floating display of my chemistry work. “You’re close. On the right track. But your math is wrong.”

I glance at my sheet before pushing it away. “I think I prefer the ice cream.”

All three of them laugh before Romanoff steals another bite from me, causing me to protectively scoop up a huge chunk.

“Thank you, by the way.” I smile at Dr. Banner.

“Why didn’t you just ask when you started having trouble?” Maria Hill asks, then sips my drink.

Romanoff turns to me before I answer “I’ll have to figure this out on my own eventually. Might as well just do it myself.”

“It takes a village.” Banner furiously scrolls through web pages, looking for something.

Two footsteps sound out behind me before I hear “Oh hell no. Nope.”

*Falcon.*

“You’re on your own on this one kid.” He rubs my shoulders before asking Maria Hill “You want another one?” She nods, and he silent retreats to the kitchen.

“I think he’s flat lining doc. I want to call it.” Romanoff smirks again before he waves her down.

They’re…

I shake my head before Hill almost imperceptibly rolls her eyes. “Karen, bring up the ratio for aluminum in which it completely reacts.”

“That’s not aluminum.” I tell him.

Banner shakes his head. “No. I think your problem is broken. I don’t think the…” He stops as Karen throws the new information up. “Oh, no dammit. The limiting reagent.”

*Basically the restrictor plate on the reaction. It isn’t capable of consuming everything. I’ve been assuming it is a complete reaction, like Dr. Banner said.*

“Don’t feel bad Peter. Have you even learned about that yet?” Banner asks, flying through a paper.

Getting up as Sam walks back in, I join him at the screens. “It was at the end of the slides I found today.”

“Pull up the slides.” He tells me, and I start sorting through all my tabs.

“You’re so messy.” Hill adds, setting her bottle aside and taking a different one from Sam.

He adds “I can’t go farther than three before my OCD kicks in.”
“I just got used to it, looking at fifty monitors a day. Karen, double check the security settings.” Hill says without skipping a beat.

Romanoff laughs quietly. “You mean that a company named ‘Blackboard’ has a security problem?”

“Yes.”

Sam laughs with Romanoff, and I try not to smile. “What are you thinking Pete?”

About?

I turn to him and see that he’s waiting for my reply, expression unreadable. “About?”

“Your briefing papers. What do you think?”

“Trying to focus.” Romanoff chastises him.

“No.” Banner disagrees with her again. “Give me time to work through this. Actually help teach rather than walk him through it.”

“It’s beaten you?”

“I’ve spent two years on a foreign planet, I haven’t thought about stoichiometry in a minute. Gimme a second.” Banner shakes his head then scratches his head.

“It can wait. This isn’t due until Sunday at midnight.”

Banner responds “Is this the only one?”


“Pulling up the other problem, Dr. Banner.”

“Peter.” Romanoff says simply.

*She knows I’m stalling.*

I shrug as the other problem pops up. Banner quickly copies it onto another screen.

“Peter.” She repeats herself patiently.

“We can help.” Sam adds.

“How are people taking his side?” I turn and ask Romanoff.

*They have limited information, most of which is easy. Big purple guy that wanted to kill half of everyone that exists.*

I don’t care that it’s a fringe group. I don’t understand how anyone can side with him.

“Because they’re nihilists looking for an excuse. And disguising it as reason.” Hill cuts to the chase.

I turn away from the monitors and walk toward the empty chess set before turning back around, turning it into a pace. “Do you think they released too much?”
“Oh, absolutely.” Hill agrees wholeheartedly. “The whole truth should almost never be public. It’s too dangerous.”

“Hence the shadow game we’ve been playing since we saw you in Germany.” Romanoff smiles, then gets up. “You tempted me Maria. This is your fault.”

“You’re welcome. Can you grab the pretzels?”

“I can!” She calls back.

Sam turns to me. “I wouldn’t worry about them right now. In time, maybe.”

*Children of Thanos.*

That’s even their freaking name. They don’t know how on their nose they are.

“And Colonel Danvers?” I ask Maria Hill. Who smirks.

*I must be on the right track.*

“Still sorting the good from the bad. The basics are there, but nothing formal.”

*She used to be Kree after they experimented on her. Apparently she used to be a normal person, a pilot in the Air Force but accidentally went through a hole in space somewhere.*

*The Kree aren’t on our side though. It’s the Nova Empire that she’s talking to right now apparently, as of two days ago.*

According to a notation by Quill, the guy I met on Titan, he thinks that the Nova are kind of okay, especially their leader.

*When the going gets tough, she put her people above any agendas. Sounds like a decent place to start.*

“The Nova Corps aren’t bad. There’s way worse out there. It’s like the frickin Wild West out there.” Dr. Banner comments.

“Where were you again?” I ask him.

*His notes weren’t exactly through on where he’s been. Not that I should know, but, you know. They’re just giving me all this information. It’d be a shame if I didn’t at least think about it.*

Romanoff walks in with a bag of pretzels and a drink in one hand, a bowl of ice cream in the other. “You went for the ice cream?” Sam asks, looking mildly surprised.

“I told you, it’s all her fault.” She smirks, handing the pretzels over and dodging a kick in the process.

“Clearly.” Hill rolls her eyes. “Let’s talk about something more fun.”

*She smirks again.*

“I like that idea.” Dr. Banner says, up to his neck in a paper with a calculator out.

“Are you close?” I divert the topic.
“No, not really.” He confesses, rolling his neck in a circle to loosen it up. “Sorry.” He adds, looking sympathetic.

“It can wait, like I said, I’ll figure it out.”

“No no, I’m going to get this. Or I’ll be up all night, trying to work it all out in my head.” He summarily dismisses my argument as Sam laughs.

“I’ll get drinks.” Sam volunteers, then jumps up in a flash.

Great.

I guess I can ask the other question I really need an answer to, but don’t really want.

“Are people still jumping?”

The mood in the room changes dramatically. Dr. Banner turns around, Maria Hill bites her bottom lip and swirls around her beer bottle and Romanoff leans back.

“Yeah.”

*Probably still mostly in Asia. I don’t know enough about Eastern culture, but apparently it is an enormous shame to have been Snapped.*

You know if you were snapped or if you weren’t. There’s a literal list online of people. Governments try to scrub it, hackers put it back.

The cultural shame, the enormous guilt, and the memory have been driving people to suicide ever since we Snapped back.

*On a certain level, I get it. And people…did that daily before the Snap.*

Even when he’s dead, Thanos is still winning. Except that it’s real people this time. They can’t come back now.

*They’re gone.*

It’s not just Asia of course, it’s an epidemic everywhere. Everyone that got snapped knows the feeling now. It’s removed a roadblock in a lot of people’s brains, kind of.

*We’ve got maniacs out here thinking they can just build spaceships and fly into space. They blow up. We’ve got people in cars running red lights because ‘why not, can’t kill me now!’*

Except you can. They can. And they are.

*The number is in the thousands.*

I double checked the briefing too. They all are dealing with what I am.

*What happened inside the Soul Stone. I didn’t know it was called that. I just recall an orange hued, blank slate.*

“I leave, and the mood dies. I really am the life of the party.” Sam jokes, walking back in holding two glasses. He strides right over to me, puts the glass in my hand and raises his. “Cheers.”

Following his lead, I sip, then try not to grimace.
“That’d be rude.”

“Dammit, I knew I put too much in.” He frowns.

“No.” I disagree. “First time.”

*I don’t think they’d judge me for that. I’m a good boy.*

“First drink? Oh hell yeah.” Sam breaks into a smile and barely pumps his fist.

Hill calls out “Wait a sec, hold on. What the hell is in those drinks at your parties?”

“I don’t drink there. My buddy mixes up fakes for us.”

“Real cool kids.” Romanoff relaxes back in her chair again as Hill frowns at me.

*I can’t tell if it’s disapproval or disappointment.*

Sam smiles at me, then raises his glass again. “Well, I appreciate you giving me the honor. Give it a second, let the ice melt. It’ll mellow it out a bit for ya.”

“Dumb question.” I ask him.

“No such thing.” Banner quips, and Maria Hill snaps and points to him.

*Agreeing.*

“Is it always this bitter?”

Sam quickly smirks and I hear Hill and Romanoff laugh. “Don’t laugh at him. You just said no dumb questions.”

“Sorry.” Romanoff apologizes. I turn and see that she does look genuine, but is still smiling.

“It can be.” Hill admits. “Depends on the drink. What’d you make him Sam?”

“Old fashioned.”

Hill winces. “Bourbon? We’re starting him on bourbon?”

“Uh oh.”

“It’s easy to sip! I’m not going to make him chug it.” He defends himself.

*I don’t mind that part. He obviously was thinking about me and took it easy on me.*

I sip my drink, which instantly gets Sam to smile. “My man. See?”

“It might take some getting used to.” I confess.

*There’s some bite to it.*

Dr. Banner asks “Did you add the bitters?”

“Yeah, White label though.”

At least it’s not vodka. I think she could kill me with some stuff she could find.

“I bet one drop of Brunheld would put him down for a day. That stuff is something else.” Banner smiles.

“Thor’s flask thing?” Hill asks him.

Banner nods. “Yeah. Now that’s the lethal stuff.”

“Let’s stick to the easy stuff for now. You down?” Sam asks me, then extends his fist. We exchange a fist bump, and he smiles.

“Bad news, you’re an adult now.” Hill comments.

“Never mind, I hate it.” I joke, pretending to hand Sam my glass back, causing everyone to laugh for a minute. “Take it back.”

“No return policy. You drank it, you bought it. That check’s cut.” Sam nudges me.

Romanoff smiles at us, then asks “So tell us about her.”

Hill instantly smiles, biting her lip again. “I will if you won’t.”

“There’s nothing to say!” I answer the two of them.

“About the girl? What’s her name?” Sam asks.

“Michelle. Michelle Jones.” Maria Hill tells him, causing Sam to quickly pull up her file.

Oh no, they made her a file.

“Guys…c’mon.” I groan, then start pacing again.

Sam says only “She’s pretty.”

“That’s not a new picture of her.” Hill informs him.

“Yeah, and she’s prettier in person. I saw her when I went to grab his backpack from the front office. Apparently she yelled at the guy who washed Peter’s backpack.”

“I like her even more now.” Sam smiles at me, sending me back to pacing.

That is nice of her. Don’t get why she did it, but okay. I appreciate the thought. I’m sorry she got in trouble for it.

Hill adds. “She likes him. Every text she starts, she says basically “Hey loser”.”

“Oh yeah. She likes him.” Sam smiles at Hill, who smiles back at me.

“How close are you watching me?” I ask her.

Hill gives me a noncommittal shrug. “Not super close. Karen monitors the texts, lets me know if certain things come up. I don’t read everything, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Oh thank god.

“So glad we don’t have that kind of time.” Romanoff smiles at Hill who nods again.
“I’m telling you. It’s not a bad gig. He behaves himself, but he hasn’t been able to be a superhero yet.”

“I think she’s working on this too.” Banner suddenly says.

“What?” I blurt out, whipping back around. “How would you know that?”

Dr. Banner simply points to the chat function in the top right corner, where there’s a green dot, indicating that I’m publicly online with a drop down to see who else is on Blackboard and active right now.

_She’s there, but her icon says she’s idle._

“Let’s find out. Karen!” Hill calls out.

“Accessing desktop view.” Karen says simply before I can protest.

_It’s open to Spotify. Playing ‘Drawing playlist’_

Specifically the song “Mr. Blue Sky” by Electric Light Orchestra

“A banger!” Sam calls out. “Karen! Audio!”

_“Mr. Blue Sky, please tell us why you had to hide away for so long, so long.”_ The song suddenly starts playing.

_“Where did we go wrong?” Sam sings out, taking my glass from me before Maria Hill gets to her feet and starts to the kitchen, dancing along the way._

_What. Is happening. Right now._

_“Mr. Blue Sky, please tell us why you had to hide away for so long, so long.”_

_“Where did we go wrong?”_

Helplessly, I look over to Romanoff, who is smiling at Banner, then looks back to the kitchen.

_“Hey, you with the pretty face. Welcome to the human race. A celebration, Mr. Blue Sky's up there waiting. And today is the day we've waited for!”_ Sam and Maria Hill sing along as their voices drift off to the kitchen.

_I think she’s had one too many of those beers._

_“For!”_ They both sing out, voices echoing in the kitchen.

_“Mr. Blue Sky, please tell us why you had to hide away for so long, so long. Where did we go wrong?”_

_I expect this from May. She loves lots of older music._

But not here. Upstate at the Avengers Compound.

_But here I am._

Sam and Hill make their way back in, clearly playing off each other while dancing and singing along to the song. Sam hands me my refilled drink before Hill pivots around me and they turn it
“I like her even more now!” Sam transitions into a two-step sort of thing, as Maria Hill is just…

*She’s just dancing like a dork.*

The song continues as they continue dancing until it dramatically changes to a totally different voice, completely distorted before the mouse moves and taps the fast forward button.

*Oh no.*

It’s actually her.

*And this is Rubberband Man. This is actually a good one.*

“Oh no!” Romanoff calls out before laughing and stretching out on the couch. “Nooooo!!!”

“Hey, are you working on stoich?” I text Michelle.

*This is a disaster.*

I sip my drink and watch Sam and Maria Hill dance, both holding their drinks with one hand.

*Not that it matters.*

My phone buzzes. “*Never shorten it to stoich again.*” – Michelle

“My bad. I didn’t like it either.” I fire back, then turn and see that somebody has walked in.

*I want to say her name is Hope. She’s got that crazy shrinking tech.*

Silently, she looks to me, then points at the sight in front of us. Not knowing what to say, I shrug and prompting her to shake her head, smiling before walking away, purse and jacket in hand.

*Guess she was out. It’s late, like 11:30.*

I glance back to my new phone, helpfully reloaded by Karen, just in time for it to buzz again.

*“Have you gotten past the first problem?”*

No.

I laugh as the conversation has now moved to examining Michelle’s whole playlist.

“No. I don’t think it’s a clean reaction.” I respond.

*I don’t need to think about Michelle right now.*

I have no interest in anyone right now. Haven’t really since Homecoming.

*I can barely keep May from getting mad at me, and even then I’ve scared her to death more times than I’d like to.*

*I can’t add somebody to that list. No way.*

I wouldn’t have done that to Liz. I don’t think Spider-Man has a love life.
“Don’t tell me that, I’ve gone through five pieces of paper before taking a break.”

Hence the drawing playlist.

“Shit!” I hear Maria Hill yelp.

“Why’d you change the song?!” Sam demands of her.

“I didn’t mean to!”

Beside me, Romanoff and Banner walk back in, Romanoff walks past while Dr. Banner stops beside me, now holding a drink.

“I don’t think we’re going to get them back on track.” He jokes getting me to laugh and hang my head before he adds. “Don’t listen to them. Give it time. She sounds really cool.”

She’s…

I don’t really know the word.

Wait.

Liz.

I haven’t thought about her in months. Definitely not in the last month. It feels like a lifetime ago.

Like a different person.

It kind of is.

“You there dork? Fall asleep in your pjs?”

“I’m here.” I scramble back to my keyboard. “Sorry. I’m being distracted.”

They’re still debating music.

“—I’m still not doing Metallica.” Banner tells Sam simply.

“Ned’s been trying to get ahold of you since you left. Don’t tell me it’s your Internship thing.”

“It is my internship.”

“How much longer are you going to keep this up? It did get you out of a quiz.”

Huh.

Romanoff knew about the quiz.

In front of me, she and Sam and watching Maria Hill and Banner debate something.

“I already don’t want to make that up. It’s going to be this HW all over again.” I text MJ, then sip my drink again.

Much better. Not nearly as bitter.

“Guaranteed.” Michelle responds.
How do I answer that one?

I know.

“Don’t let me distract you.” I tell her before I fiddle with pool table, eventually taking out the ‘4’ ball and bouncing it off the bumpers and into the side pockets.

“Distracting me from my break. Yeah. Terrible.”

“You too though. Are you taking a break?”

“Yeah.”

“ Weird day?”

I glance back to the others before answering myself with a nod.

“Yup.”

“Did you know you were leaving?”

“No. I think that was the point though. Didn’t make a scene.”

“Yeah, you just vanished.”

“Whoa. Whoa whoa whoa.” I hear, causing me to look up and see Maria Hill as she starts pulling screens right and left. Quickly, she settles on…

UH OH.

Messages pops up.

Right to my screen. Right now.

“Whoa.” Banner says, turning to me.

“You sneaky little…” Romanoff mutters, brows furrowed.

Maria Hill quickly scrolls right to the top and starts speed reading.

“You really though you could sneak this one by us! Didn’t you!” Maria Hill calls back to me. “I’m almost insulted!”

Sam nods and points out “Proves your point though.”

Oh god not this again.

“No, it doesn’t.” I run my hand through my hair.

Why’d I even start to text her again? I was just thinking that I didn’t need to think about her!

Without prompting, the song changes.

“Hey. You there? Or am I going to fall asleep on you?”

“This remix has a little life to it…” I hear Romanoff say.
“No. I’m here, but keep getting distracted. Shiny things. Go to sleep. Don’t let me keep you up.” I text her back, then finish my drink.

_Huh. I guess what they say about alcohol calming the nerves is true._

“No, he can’t even hear us right now. He’s on Planet Michelle.” I hear Sam say loudly. Quickly, I frown at him.

“I’m telling you. The stats are ridiculous. He’s texted her twice as much as anyone else. May excluded. And multiple hour long video chats.”

“For Decathlon.” I explain myself to Hill. “I’m helping her get used to being the leader.”

_She’s not a natural, vocal leader. She’s quieter than an alpha. But she’s not a beta either._

She’s Michelle.

“Sure.” Romanoff quips as my phone buzzes in my hand a final time.

“Okay. _Let me know if you solve that problem._”
“May?” I call out as I walk through the door, then shut it behind me.

May pokes her head out of the hall, holding a laundry basket. “Hey! Back already?”

“Yeah, Happy just dropped me.”

Behind me, I hear, “Mrs. Parker.” Which causes me to whip around.

*How? He didn’t take the elevator with me.*

“How?” May waves, setting the laundry basket down abruptly. “Thank you for driving Peter.”

*Oh. She wasn’t ready for guests.*

“No problem. I just came up to see if you guys needed anything before I headed back.” Happy explains himself.

*Sure. Just like everyone else.*

I hide my annoyance with a smile in Happy’s direction, garnering only a passing glance.

“No. I grabbed everything we need for dinner. Unless you need anything Peter?” May says, shooting a look at me.

“Nope, I’m good. Thanks again Happy.”

Happy graciously nods and smiles. “Great. Figured I should double check. Have a good night. Peter, I think the plan is once a month, but don’t quote me on that.”

“Okay. Thanks Happy.” I smile before he gives me a friendly wave and slips out the front door.

A moment passes before May asks “Did you know he was there?”

“No.” I answer, before May walks by in a tank top, shorts and no shoes.

*Yup. Lazy Sunday laundry day clothes.*

“I washed everything in your hamper. Should be sitting on your bed!” She called back to me.

“Thanks May!” I call back, walking through the living room and into my room, where everything is where May said it would be. I set my duffel bag beside the two piles of laundry and start unpacking.

*Might as well. Otherwise I’ll just set my bag aside when Ned gets here and remember it days later.*

“Good weekend?” May asks, peeking past my open door as I hang up my shirts.

I nod and keep focusing on what I’m doing. “Yeah. It went well.”

“What did you think?”

“Everyone was nice. Did Maria Hill tell you what the plan was?” I turn and ask May, grabbing
another shirt.

May smiles. “Yeah.”

“Why are you smiling?”

“She likes you.”

Agent Hill?

She was exactly the same person she was after the Snap, with Friday night being the exception.

Weird night.

“What makes you say that?”

May replies “She’s always giving me little updates, so I don’t have to worry—”

“May!!” I groan and turn to her. “I’m not doing anything crazy.”

I’m trying NOT to worry her. And she’s still acting like I was. I’m trying to be better.

That’s what this weekend was really about.

“I know you’re not.” May continues. “But she knows I worry, and keeps me updated. That’s not my point.”

Okay.

I turn to May, expecting for her to continue. Finally, “My point is, she’s always bragging on you. You remember how I said she’s been over a few times?”

“Yeah.”

Makes sense. She doesn’t get out of the Compound much, and when she does, she and May hit it off well, so why not?

“She just likes you. Not just as the person she’s trying to protect.” May starts smiling again. “But as the massive dork, with a girlfriend that he keeps texting, and never tells me about!!!”

“She told you??”

May reloads. “Of course she told me! You texted her for like an hour on a Friday night, and didn’t make it seem like a big deal!”

I repeat myself for the hundredth time. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“So? Spill! I’m fine with you having a girlfriend!”

Exasperated, I groan and close my closet door. “We were talking about chemistry. The homework this weekend was awful.”

“I know, I heard you and Dr. Banner were up late last night figuring it out.”

We were.

It’s dumb to say, because he’s one of the best minds ever, but if Maria Hill is allowed to like me, I
can like Dr. Banner.

_He keeps on making me call him Bruce._

_He’s super nice, never dismisses my questions, and is good at explaining things._

If he wasn’t an Avenger, I can totally see him fitting in at a university, teaching the toughest class there is there.

_He didn’t give me the answers to my homework. I had to work on it._

I nod in May’s direction, not really having anything else to say on the matter before I’m left with only my suit left.

“Ahh…” I hear her say, savoring it. “Glad you have it back?”

_No. I don’t think so, actually._

“It fits different.” I try to explain to her.

_Most of the daytime hours were spent with me, getting readjusted to the suit. Walking me through a lot of functions, figuring out situations in which to use them, that sort of thing._

It feels tight. Really, really tight.

_And everything is reminding me of Mr. Stark in there._

Everything.

“Like…tailored? You told them that right?” May looks to me, confused.

“Yeah, I did. They gave me a little more fabric this morning. But I still feel it.” I try to explain.

I see it hit May, and her comprehension. In a snap, she’s pulled me into a hug. “Did they tell you what I heard?”

I laugh reflexively, getting May to smile. “I don’t know what you heard.”

“It’s not your 24/7 job to be Spider-Man. You can’t save everyone. You have to think of yourself.”

_I know. Again, the point of the weekend._

I’m going to have a lot more help now. Karen will be used a ton on the police scanners, emergency services. If I’m suited up, Maria Hill will be on standby.

_And if it’s a quiet day, then I’ll probably end up going home._

There won’t be a schedule, any schedule is noticeable. But they are making me be flexible. It’ll be a lot easier now with May knowing.

“Open up there, Spider-Man.” May pretends to knock on my forehead. “Talk to me.”

“I’m thinking I should have told you sooner.” I explain. “It’ll be easier.”

_She knows why. It was right before Ben. I couldn’t do that to her. And she knows that too._

“I know.” She kisses my hair.
“You’re the best.” I smile at her in return, before she smiles back.

“C’mon. Ned’ll be here soon and I want the details.”

I nod and walk behind her. “Did you hear about Karen?”

“Yeah, I like it. You don’t mind, do you?” May looks to me.

“No, I love it. I’d just never thought of it.”

Pepper had the idea, and told Maria Hill, that Mr. Stark used Jarvis, his original AI to manage everything. Pepper had access to Jarvis for years.

Why not do that with Karen and May? Make her life a lot easier and hassle free.

No more fighting with the government over my parents any more. Or Ben’s retirement and benefits. No stress there.

Karen will take care about that. It’s not even about the money. We were fine beforehand, and the way Mr. Stark’s will was set up, May and I are going to be fine.

Better than fine. God I’m like May, this isn’t the point.

“That security firm they’re flying in from San Francisco is supposed to be here at the end of the week.” I tell May as she digs in the fridge.

“Yup. Text Ned, ask if he want chips and salsa. I’m hungry but don’t want to order yet.” May tells me, and I pull out my phone.

“May’s thinking snacks. Chips and salsa okay?” I fire off, then set my phone on the counter and move to grab a bowl for the chips.

May takes the bowl from me. “Maria also said you talked to Michelle last night too.”

“Yeah. About that homework. Ned and I might end up video chatting her tonight if he’s confused.”

Not everyone has Dr. Bruce Banner behind them. And now that I can explain stoichiometry enough, I need to help them.

“Great! Invite her too! She can even stay for dinner if she’s like.”

Quickly, I pivot near the couch to look at her. “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“I want to meet her!” May complains teasingly. “If she’s important…” I hesitate to reply, and May seizes on it. “C’mon…”

It’s not that.

“I’m just texting her like I do Ned. Everybody’s making a big deal out of this when it’s not.”

“Maria said you text her so much more than everyone else.”

“I’m not texting anyone!” I counter quickly. “I don’t want to.”
She said that if I don’t want to talk, then don’t talk. But I can always talk to her.

“Then why her?”

I shrug helplessly. “I don’t know. She’s been nice since I got back. She never was mean, just… more standoffish. I don’t know. She’s complicated.”

“And you don’t want her over.”

“It’d be weird. All we talk about is decathlon and homework in our various classes together.”

5 out of 7.

“Then find out what she likes. What interests her.” May advises me. “I’m giving you great advice I wish I’d heard at your age kid!!”

I groan, then fish out my phone.

“That’d be awesome. Maybe ask her to make a small thing of her ranch dip and carrots or celery? If you have it.” – Ned

“Do we have stuff for your veggie dip?” I ask May as she digs in the cabinet for something.

May beams. “Yeah! I’ll make some of that too.”

“Thanks May.” I smile, then relay the news to Ned.

“You’re welcome. Invite Michelle.”

“No.” I reply to May as I switch messages.

“Hey, did you figure it out?” I send off, then look back to May.

Only for her to be looking at me. “Yes.”

“No.” I roll my eyes. “I don’t want to scare her off.”

I will scare her off. I’m afraid I’m texting her too much as it is, even about decathlon stuff.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I glance down. “Yeah, I did. Thanks for the help. Now just working on Harrington’s definitions.”

Those weren’t bad. Karen made me flash cards and printed them out. Studied them on the way back here.

“Mom just dropped me off.” – Ned

“Ned’s mom just got here.” I inform May as she is chopping celery.

“Already?” She complains. “Dammit. Tell him the door’s open. And come help me.”

“Sorry.” I apologize with a smile, then move into the kitchen and grab the chips.

The sound of the door opening comes about a minute later. “Peter? May?” Ned calls out.

“Right here Ned. Hi!”
“Hi!” Ned says cheerfully, shutting the door behind him. “Nice weekend?”

“Yeah, I could actually sleep in without this one here to make such a racket.” May smirks back at me. “Do you know Michelle?”

“Oh come on!” I call out.

Ned laughs as he walks towards my room. “Yeah.”

“Ned got a girlfriend.” I reveal to May, causing her to spin around and face me, then whirl back to face Ned.

“NO.” She begins beaming widely.

“Peter!!” Ned looks to me, betrayed. “You said you’d let me tell her eventually.”

“You just hung me out to dry about Michelle! We’re even!”

Ned shakes his head and starts back to my room again. “We are so, so not even.”

“What’s her name!” May asks me.

“Betty.”

“The girl from those inter school news segments? She’s cute Ned!”

Ned?

Ned doesn’t respond, instead silently in my room. I nervously look to May, as she peeks to see what he’s looking at.

Oh.

“You got the suit back.” Ned finally says, turning to look at me, and away from the folded suit on my bed.

I smile sheepishly.

Yeah. I did.
“Morning.” I smile at her as she files past me to sit in her normal seat.

"Exhaustion." Michelle grumbles as she sets her backpack down. “I’m almost surprised you’re here.”

“Why?” I ask, moving to look back at her.

“Flash is going to be goading you all day.”

So?

I smile at her. “It won’t work.”

“You get new stuff?”

“Yeah.” I smile again. “Heard you yelled at Flash.”

Michelle’s head pops right up from her bag. “Who told you that?”

“Ned.”

“Liar.”

“No.” I smile at her as she keeps digging in her bag. “Ned really did tell me.”

“And it definitely wouldn’t be the Avenger I saw walk into the office and grab your backpack.” Michelle says quietly.

*She recognized him.*

“Huh?”

Michelle almost throws one of her sketch pads off her desk, bouncing hard off the back of my seat. “Don’t play dumb.”

“I’m not.” I reply, fishing my phone out of my pocket to text Dr. Banner.

“*Bad news: Your cover got blown. She recognized you.*”

“No, you are dumb. I didn’t do anything.” Michelle says obstinately.

I turn back to her and try not to smile. “Well, thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Oh god, don’t make it weird Parker. C’mon…” Michelle looks disgusted at me.

I raise my hands in defeat and turn around as I hear the bell ring, signaling the start of class. Then out of nowhere, I’m smacked on top of the head by the heaviest of Michelle’s sketch pads.

*OWWW!!!!*

“Ow!” I say, wincing and rubbing the top of my head as I turn back to face her again.
Only for Michelle to be smiling at me.

*Keys, keys, keys…*

I continue patting down my pockets, finally hitting them in my back right pocket of my jeans, fish them out with my pinkie and unlock the front door.

“May! I’m…home.” I start to call out, then watch as four unfamiliar people turn to look at me.

*Actually, only three.*

“Oh. Hi.” He smiles at me as I finish walking in, then quickly shut the door behind me.

*I can’t believe I almost forgot. It’s Thursday.*

“Hi.” I smile at him as he walks up to me, away from the guys he was just instructing on something.

“You remember me? It’s cool if not.” He starts off, smiling still.

“No, I remember you. You’re Scott.” I smile at him as he extends his hand.

We shake hands as his smile widens. “Hell yeah, cool man.”

Why is Ant-Man in my house?

“So, what’s up?” I ask, looking around to see May, Maria Hill and one other person out on the small porch.

“Oh.” Scott seems to regain his bearings. “We’re installing all the stuff they want you guys to have here. We’re still working on the hardline into your aunt’s room. But your AI, Karen is all set up if you want to go test it.”

*Yeah, sure.*

I nod, then turn and see that Scott’s three friends are all just staring at me.

“Guys.” Scott says simply.

“No. No way.” One of them says. “Noooo way.”

“You said that hot aunt’s kid was the Spider-Man.” The other one says in slightly broken English.

I turn to glare at him in particular. “Yeah. I did. This is him.” Scott says simply. “Peter, this is Kurt —” He points to the offending party. “That over there is Dave.” He points to a guy in a beanie feeding Kurt wires. “And that over there, the really scary looking one is Luis.”

“Cool. You call my aunt hot again, and we’ll have a problem.”

“He ain’t the Spider-Man.” The one named Dave comments.

“Oh. Is that right?” I ask him, then see Scott look antsy. I smile at him before walking towards my room to drop off my backpack.

As I’m in there, I hear Scott say something to the others, then stop as I walk back in. “Do I need to prove it?”
“Nah. That’s really really cool though. But you can, you know. Only if you want to though.” Luis blabs on.

**Sure, why not. I’m in the mood.**

I shrug, then walk back to my desk, open up the bottom drawer that I’ve rudimentarily locked with a bike lock.

“Alright…focus. Let’s get that hardline done—” I hear Scott say, then I walk in, and web Kurt’s hand to the wall.

“What the—”

The whole room looks at his webbed hand, before they all turn to me.

“Told ya.” Scott brags.

“How the hell are you so young?” Dave asks, as Kurt starts tugging at the webbing.

“Don’t do that…it’ll only make it tighter. I’ve got to get my dissolvent. Which…” I pretend to stall. “I think I have to make more of.”

“Oh come on man! We got a job to do!”

“You just had to piss him off, didn’t you.”

Scott smiles at me, picking up on my joke. “You didn’t piss him off.”

“He’s bragging.” Hope van Dyne says confidently, and I turn and see her and Maria Hill looking in on our conversation. “Hi Peter.”

“Hi. Did I miss an email? I didn’t know you were coming. I would have told May.” I confess. **I thought it was just a bunch of tech guys and maybe Maria Hill.**

“No. They’re with him.” Maria Hill points from the gang of idiots to Scott. “It’s their company. He’s supervising, and we’re here for the entertainment.”

“How was school honey?” May asks in the kitchen. “You hungry?” **Yeah, actually.**

“It was okay.” I shrug. “Boring.”

“You’re in a good mood for boring.” Hope observes with a smile. **Oh not her too.**

I turn to Maria Hill, only for her to sip her what looks like iced tea then walk back towards the kitchen. “it was school.”

“He’s got a welt on his head.”

“Hey.” I frown at Hope. She simply smiles at me. “Hi Spidey.”
“Hi. I don’t have a welt. I bumped my head.”

“She hit you in the head.”

“No. And I’m hungry.” I disagree, then walk into the kitchen, leaving the room mildly bemused. “My dissolvent is right here under the sink.” I explain, then toss the spray bottle to Scott.

“Thanks.”

May smiles back at me and lets me grab an apple before hugging me. “Glad you had a good day.”

“Everybody just lectured. I only have homework in Chemistry.” I explain, then take a bite of my apple. May takes the opportunity to examine my head.

“Ooh. You do have a bump. What’d you do?”

Maria Hill, Hope, and Scott all turn to me. “She hit me in the head with her biggest sketch pad.” I mutter quietly. Immediately, Hope and May start laughing.

“Oooohhh…That’s cute.”

Maria Hill adds. “Told you.”

“What’d you do to deserve getting hit with her sketch pad?” Scott asks.

“Well, I was just talking to her in homeroom, art, and she started teasing me about possibly seeing somebody…” I trail off, not sure if we can trust the Three Stooges in the living room. “She made it weird, then blamed it on me and hit me.”

Hope laughs again and Scott smiles. “Sounds to me like you did deserve it.”

“I still can’t use Karen to access Peter’s address book and invite her over myself, can I?” May asks Maria Hill.

Hill bites her lip, smirking. “I mean, you could, but that probably wouldn’t go over well.”

“No.” I tell them all succinctly.

Scott breaks up the conversation by walking back to the kitchen and handing me the web dissolvent. “That’s some strong stuff. The webbing. That works too.” He says clumsily.

“Thanks. Made it myself.” I tell him, then spin the bottle on my finger before putting it up.

“Where?”

“Chemistry.”

“So that’s why you need so much help on your homework.” May quips.

“May.”

“Yup.” Maria Hill bounces into, then out of the conversation.

“Is that iced tea?” I change subjects, and for May to nod.

I’m having some.
The Three Stooges all continue to work before Maria Hill turns to me, holding a tablet. “So here’s what we’ve got. A system of wireless electronic sound dampeners. So any conversation in here is 100% private. Karen is now hard wired to your internet connection, which we’ve tapped into, quantum encrypted and took control of that, so she’s now available anywhere in the house.”

“Really?” I ask, pouring a glass.

*That’s awesome. I don’t have to wear the mask anymore to use Karen.*

“Yup. Working on that hard line. We also came up with…this.” Scott hands me…

*A brick.*

“This phone is archaic.” I tell him.

*It’s one of those old blue Nokia brick ones. The ones you swear you can run over and have it be totally fine.*

“Yes. But…it’s also connected to your AI.” Scott continues on. “So you can make any secure call, any time with that phone if you don’t want to use your normal phone.”

“But there’s a trick to it.” Hope says, prompting him.

Scott nods. “It does. In the case of a true emergency. No electricity, cell signal is down, whatever. This phone will get a call out. One call, for however long you need it to. The signal is mind bendingly strong. Just one call though.”

“So get my number right.” Maria Hill instructs me.

“I will.” I smile.

“I’ve taken the liberty of plugging in some of the big ones for you. Mine, Hope’s, your aunt’s, Avengers HQ…you get my point.”

*They’ve volunteering to help if I’m in a bind.*

“Thanks. I really appreciate that.”

*Scott’s great too.*

“Don’t mention it.” He waves away any concerns. “I did notice one thing. And I’m not judging.”

“Okay.”

He simply takes three steps towards my room and points inside. “Bike lock.”

*Yup.*

Maria Hill and May march right past both of us and into my bedroom. “Eww.” Maria Hill frowns.

*NO.*

“No. That’s for…important stuff. That I don’t want somebody to open a drawer and just have access to.” I explain to everyone.

“So definitely the Playboys then.”
You know what…

I turn around and web both of Dave’s hands to the wall, causing Scott to snort because he’s trying not to laugh, and for Maria Hill to peer out and see my handiwork.

“That’s so cool that you’re so young bro.” Luis says excitedly. “How’d it happen? You know? Just be born with crazy spider powers?”

I laugh as Scott moves to retrieve the dissolvent again. “No. Long story. Maybe another time.”

“Okay, cool, yeah! That’s awesome. You know, I bet that it’s a really cool story.”

“Not really.” I disagree.

Maria Hill adds “It kind of is.”

“No it wasn’t. I thought I was going to have to take him to the hospital. Then he was just fine.” May reveals.

Scott disentangles Dave, who gives me a wary look that I smile at before turning back to my room. “It’s just stuff. The key’s in the top right drawer with my pens.”

There’s nothing to really hide to them. My old mask with the goggles, a piece of Thanos’ armor that I found right after I came back, an old note Ben wrote to me, my Avengers tablet…

Nothing lethal.

Maria Hill unlocks it as Scott walks back to me. “Do you want just general privacy? Cause we can do that.”

“Do it really good too.” Luis adds.

“Yeah. Maybe hook it up to Karen and have her ask for a password.”

Scott nods. “I like it. Your voice as the password, or just a password?”

“Just a password.”

If May would need my tablet for something. She would need to get in.

“We’ll add that to the list. Add in another…what? 45 minutes?” Scott looks to Kurt.

“Faster if I can just set a default password for him. It’s easy to change.”

Scott strikes an invisible buzzer with his finger. “Let’s do that. Cool?”

“Cool.” I nod, and Scott claps his hands.

“Great.”

“And we can still make dinner.” Hope smiles at Scott, then adds “Don’t worry. They’re on their own. It’s just for six.”

“We don’t want any of that fancy Italian food. Too rich.” Dave comments.

“Bad for stomach.”
May wants it then.

I look inside my room to see Maria Hill walking around, inspecting as May is…

Reading the letter.

Damn.

“May.” I quickly say, gently moving Scott out of the way.

May swallows. “No, no. It’s cool. I just was wondering where you’d put it.” She looks up and gives me a watery smile. I return it before my phone buzzes violently in my pocket, causing me to pop to my feet and pull it out of my pocket.

Whatever it is can wait, I’m—

Incoming Call: Michelle Jones

Uh oh. I’m in trouble.

I leap out of my room as I tap my screen to accept the call. “Hello?”

“Peter?” Michelle’s voice says immediately, sounding frantic.

“Uh, yeah. Hi.” I say, looking back to my room and see Scott giving me an interested look. “What’s up Michelle?”

“I think you accidentally took my sketchpad today when you were cleaning up. At least I hope you did, I can’t find it anywhere.”

I walk out on to the porch and slide the door mostly shut behind me. “No, I don’t think so.”

Everyone’s stuff got cluttered today at decathlon. Cindy and Sally had one of those exercises that everyone had to empty out their bags and ‘clear the air’.

It was weird, awkward, and into over fast enough. Ned was being weird the whole time and Michelle was twitchy.

Wait, that’s why she’s calling.

“Well it’s either that or somebody I don’t know has it. And I don’t want that.”

I’m already walking back to my room, one finger over my lips, asking for everyone to remain quiet. “Let me check. I really don’t think I took your sketchbook…”

The sight awaiting me in my room is that of Maria Hill having my phone screen up, with her looking confused and May gleeful.

“Hang on.”

“C’mon Parker. Be good for something for once in your life.” Michelle insults me after I set my phone down on my pillow and grab my backpack.

May laughs loud enough for my phone to pick up on it, and I say “May!”

“I’m sorry!”
Michelle says something, causing me to snatch up my phone again as I unzip my backpack and start rifling thru it. “Sorry, didn’t catch that.”

“Who was that?”

“My aunt. Sorry.” I apologize.

Nope. Nope. Nope…

“At least she agrees with—”

Oh.

“Oh.” I hear May say, Scott and Hope in the doorway as I somehow pull out Michelle’s sketchbook.

_Matte black, metal rings on the left side. With a ‘MJ’ artfully sketched in white on the bottom right._

_Uh oh._

“Uhh. Actually Michelle. I do have it.” I say quietly.

How’d I do that? I wasn’t in that big of a hurry to leave today. I forgot that today was the install date.

If I had remembered, I would have been in a hurry.

“Oh shit…” I hear her say to herself. “Oh, okay, Good. Whew. At least it’s not lost.”

I flip the first page aside to see “Property of Michelle Jones. Burn if found.” And laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“The first caption. Burn if found.”

“DO NOT OPEN IT ANY MORE PARKER. YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!?” She yells at me, startling me so bad I drop the phone in fright.

“Okay, okay, okay…” I apologize after picking up my phone and ignoring everyone’s eyes. “It’s closed, I’ve set it on my bed. I’ll get it to you tomorrow.”

“No, I need it tonight. I need it to practice. For class tomorrow.”

“In Kramer’s? We’re on cubism theory.”

_The rhythm of MJ tapping her foot impatiently on my chair is more important that that dumb theory._

“I need it. Can’t you call a cab or something? I’ll pay you back.”

“No, you don’t have to.” I disagree with her. “Give me a second, I’ll grab my jacket and head towards you. Where am I going?”

Maria Hill quickly starts typing, and screens start flying.

_Englewood. In Jersey._

“It’s in New Jersey. Just head over the VN Bridge and you’ll be headed right for me. Tell your
driver that. I’ll text you my address, but you have to let me immediately delete it.”

“Okay.” I nod and continue being submissive.

*She really wants this thing back. She does draw a lot, but damn.*

This is a lot for a sketchpad.

Without asking, Maria Hill marches right over and takes the sketchbook from me, then gestures for me to follow her.

*Okay.*

“Okay, I’m heading out now.” I inform her.

“Great. Bye.” Michelle hangs up, leaving me with a dead line.

“Well, she sounds fun.” Scott comments before May and Maria Hill start smiling again.

Maria Hill gently rounds the bend, pulling past the large display for the ‘Stonegate’ subdivision as her phone’s GPS continues guiding us.

“Thank you again for driving.” I smile over at Hill.

She thinly smiles back. “No problem.”

My phone vibrates against the leather of the seat, and I pull it out of my pocket again.

“No problem.”

“I’d keep your phone out.” Maria Hill tells me as we take another turn.

I nod, and reply to Michelle

“Just drove past a huge sign for your neighborhood.”

“So. While I’ve got you here.” She starts, forcing me to turn to look at her. “No suit.”

“You’ve kind of seen my day.” I reply.

Hill nods. “Yeah. But it’s been three days.”

*Three quiet days.*

The world spins on. We’re now worried about our response to this ‘Thanos’ and absolutely crushing these “Children of Thanos” maniacs in the press.

*People are being arrested worldwide. Little to no warrants, not much sufficient proof. Some voices are yelling about witch hunts and scapegoats, but they’re being sat on.*

We need a united Earth. That’s the global message being sent out.

*Either get with the program, or be prepared to be stomped underfoot.*

“You do know you can talk to me.” Maria Hill says, sounding dead serious. “I am capable of keeping a secret.” I laugh, and she even cracks a smile before we return to our silence.
“Is it mental? You know Tony had some troubles after falling thru the wormhole.”

I shake my head.

No. I’ve followed my old routine two days this week. Got off school, went home, went to the bodega, got a sandwich.

I honestly planned on finding something and suiting up, getting back to it. But there wasn’t anything I could do to talk myself into disappearing into an alley.

“We fixed the fit with the suit? Right? You said it was super tight.”

I nod again. “No, you fixed it.”

“Just ‘no’ huh?”

For the final time, I nod.

It’s a feel thing. I didn’t feel right.

Hill laughs to herself as we pull up to a curb and stop in front of a two story house with a driveway on the right and a pair of massive trees on the left. “Huh. Nice place.”

Yeah. Not what I had pictured.

I kind of figured that Michelle lived in a small, intimate, dark place. Not a huge house.

“Stay still.” I hear, before I’m spritzed with something.

“Hey!”

Hill only smiles at me. “Now stand up, get out and close the door but wait for me to roll down the window. Okay?”

Okay…

I nod to show her that I was indeed listening, then do as I’m told. “Did you spray me with cologne?”

It smells like cologne. Really nice cologne.

“Just a little bit.” She admits. “Don’t worry, it’s not just my choice. Nat and I spent a good hour and a half picking between samples.”

“Why?” I ask her.

“Girls like it when guys smell good. It’s science.” I sigh, then look to her for any other words. “Go get her. We can wait, I can push the reservation back a bit if she wants to talk.”

That’s not really MJ.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Good luck! Don’t get hit in the head!”

I laugh as I turn away from her, walk up the sidewalk, then knock twice on the front door. As I’m pulling my hand away from the door, it opens. “Hey Peter.”
“Hey Betty. Michelle didn’t mention you were here…” I trail off, tightening my grip on the notebook.

“She’s upstairs. She’ll be right down.” Betty explains, then looks down at my shirt. “You…put on cologne? It smells really nice.”

“I got sprayed. I didn’t know.” I confess with a laugh, and Betty smiles at me before peeking around me to look at the black car parked curbside.

“I like what your aunt did with her hair. She dyed it?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Something about changing things up. How are you and Ned?”

“Me and Ned? We’re great! Awesome. You and Michelle should join us next time we go on a date. Ned took me to this incredible place last weekend, it’s a Mediterranean—”

Michelle appears from out of nowhere, completely put together before fixing me with an angry look. “I’m not going with you on a date with Parker. Stop.” She tells Betty shortly before whipping to face me. “You have it?”

I extend the notebook to her as Betty goes slightly red and looks a little hurt. “What? I’m just trying to help your social life. And he asked.” She defends herself.

“I did.” I cover for Betty, earning me a grateful smile.

“Whatever. Give me your phone. I can’t have you creeping around here.” Michelle tells me, then extends her hand, palm up.

I hand her my phone and MJ immediately starts tapping and scrolling. “I—I’m doing you the favor.”

I don’t know what I did to deserve this.

“You stole my sketchpad. My property Parker.”

“It was my idea—” Betty defends me.

“It was an accident. No big deal.”

“Exactly! Michelle’s parents will be home soon. They said you can stay for dinner. I think they want to—” Betty smiles at me again before being cut off again.

“Mom’s doing a double today, and I think Dad’s picking something up.”

I laugh nervously to dissolve the tension. “It’s okay. I’ve got plans anyway.”

“Who’d want plans with you?” Michelle extends my hone back to me, incriminating evidence apparently erased.

Ouch.

“Lame people? I don’t know.” I say, slipping my phone into my pocket. “Sorry I interrupted. And took your sketchbook on accident.”
“Sketchpad. There’s a difference.” I’m corrected by Michelle.

I nod, the look to Betty. “I’ll get out of you guys’ way. Nice to see you Betty.”

“Bye Peter! See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow.” I smile at Betty before I look to Michelle just before the door swings shut in front of my face.

Well then. Okay.

I stick my hands back into my pocket and turn back towards the car in time to see Maria Hill’s eyes stay locked on to the top portion of the house.

“How’d it go?”

“I set a new record for making her mad.” I confess with a sigh as I strap back in and Maria Hill makes a move to shift us back into motion.

“How? That conversation barely lasted three minutes.”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head as we pull away from the house.

“Who answered the door? It wasn’t her. She was blonde.”

“A friend from school. Betty, she’s Ned’s girlfriend.”

Maria Hill bites her lip. “Right. What’d Betty have to say?”

“She was actually nice. Invited me out to a double date with them next time they went out.”

“With who?” Maria Hill asks evenly.

She’s being modest.

I turn to her, only for Maria Hill to stay focused on the road. “And?”

“That was when she came downstairs. Hard no.”

“Bummer.” She frowns. “Hard no.”

Like it was disgusting to her.

“Did she say anything about the cologne?”

“Betty did.” I reveal. “She liked it I think.”

“Then she had to have smelled it. Good.”

I turn to her. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that she likes you, and you accidentally taking her notebook got a little too close to her bubble. She freaked out.”

“That’s not Michelle.”

Maria Hill counters, taking one hand off the wheel. “She slammed the door in your face way
longer than necessary. And she watched you walk up the front drive the whole way.”

“She did?”

“There were five windows upstairs that moved between the time that I parked the car, and you walked back.”

*She had more people over?*

I just to turn to look at Maria Hill and try to figure out if she’s serious. “That’s not her.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but it doesn’t seem like she’s the most popular girl. It doesn’t add up. Except for your friend Betty.”

*Ned’s girlfriend.*

“I don’t know.” I stretch out in my seat and sigh. Maria Hill reaches over and squeezes my knee supportively.

“Let’s get some damn good Italian food in you, and you’ll feel better. I’ll think things over with a cocktail.”
Michelle POV

*I don’t get it. Damn you Parker.*

“Michelle?”

I turn around to see Betty talking to me. “Yeah?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said that the pizza’s here. C’mon, before Jessica and Sally steal most of the supreme.”

*I do want pizza.*

I nod to Betty, then aimlessly follow her to her kitchen where Mom is doling out pizza to everyone, three slices at a time with one unopened box held back on the counter. “Thanks Mrs. Jones.” Jessica smiles, purple highlights jumping out.

*The hair stylist fucked it up.*

“Got her.” I hear.

“Still on Jupiter.” Mom says, glancing at me.

“Stop.” I call out to her, causing Betty to move aside and smile. “Mom…”

*You promised you wouldn’t be so embarrassing.*

Mom laughs then goes and grabs the other pizza. “This is your dear.”

“You got a whole pizza for me?” I blurt out.

“You got a whole pizza for me?” I blurt out.

Mom gives me a lost look. “Of course. What am I? Your mother?”

“Yeah…” I laugh as Mom gives me my three pieces of pizza then hands me the plate.

“Love you dear.”

“Thanks Mom.”

Walking back upstairs to my room, I arrive in time to see Betty double check to see if I’m coming back upstairs. “I’m slow.” I defend myself.

“Can’t have you drifting off to the backyard or something to eat on the trampoline.”

“I’m not eating on the trampoline.”

Jessica comments “You did last week.”

“That was to burn off the potato chips.”

Betty justifies it. “Those were necessary.”
Jessica nods as I take a bite before we all eat for a minute as Netflix continues to play the random Friends episode Betty threw on my TV.

“You’re still psychoanalyzing yourself to death!” Betty exclaims suddenly, setting her pate aside. “MJ!!”

“I can’t get it out of my head.”

“Him! You can’t get him out of your head.” Jessica cracks at me.

Betty shakes her head. “I told you that you should have invited him for dinner. Everybody was almost home.”

_Betty’s parents work slightly off-hours so that the subways aren’t so bad getting home. So sometimes she comes home with me, like yesterday._

When her brilliant book switching idea nearly led to disaster.

“You just had him here!” Betty scolds me. “But no, you freaked out. Breathe!!”

I huff out a breath then eat more pizza.

“Today too!” Jessica adds.

_I was short with him today._

He wore one of those dorky science pun shirts that always make me laugh to myself and my favorite pair of jeans. It’s not fair.

_It’s better than last week._

“He didn’t play fair.” I say.

“All he was was nice!” Betty disagrees.

I turn and scowl at her. “You yelled at him.”

“Because guys are idiots and Ned and him wouldn’t stop walking in our way!!” Betty continues waving her arms exasperatedly. “God if you weren’t so smart you’d be dumb!”

_Yeah._

Jessica laughs and I try not to, “You know he’s there right now.”

“So? I don’t care what those two dorks do on a Friday. I’d rather not, to be honest.” I reply, then down the entire crust on my piece whole.

_I love it with the garlic and butter is just right. Delicious._

“Lies!” Jessica crows.

“Yeah. And you totally didn’t care to move to sit right behind him in every one of your classes together.” Betty smirks at me.

“Shut up.”

“You distract him. Text him!”
No, I’ve texted him way way way WAY too much.

And it’s been easy.

I texted him when he was doing whatever it is that he does with Stark.

Did. Does. Tony Stark’s dead.

I don’t know what he does. Never did. I thought that he could have been Spider-Man, but now Peter’s back and nobody’s seen him.

So cross that one off.

“He’s probably off cleaning dishes at the new Avengers lab or something. It’s a job for his aunt and he lies and calls it an internship.” I lie.

Kind of.

That’s kind of what I was leaning towards before the Hulk walked right into the office and stole Peter’s backpack, barely asking Mrs. Lyem for permission before vanishing, along with Peter.

Somebody said they saw Black Widow. Somebody else said a car.

I don’t think anybody but me saw anything.

Of course it’s a car, what’d they do, fly in?

It’s Stark. Maybe they could.

“I wish he’d opened the notebook. Seen himself in all these pages.” Jessica smiles, then moves towards my notebook.

My Notebook.

Jess stops as soon as she sees my look. “Text Ned, see what they’re up to.”

Peter POV

“You done Ned?” May asks as I set my container of chicken and rice inside the fridge.

“Ned?”

Ned looks up as I look back to him. “Sorry, Betty texted me. No, I’m not if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Peter’s just cleaning up.”

I smile as I walk back towards the table just as May floats back to her room and the news plays muted on the TV.

The news.

“Anything interesting Ned?”

“No. She’s watching a movie with her Mom.”

“Dammit. Just my luck.” May grumbles before walking back in in a hoodie instead of her long
sleeve shirt.
The TV shows a brief clip of the Triskelion being hit by one of those Helicarriers—
“—Peter wouldn’t tell me.”
“I told you what happened. She was surrounded by Betty and the girls today. I dunno why.” I shake my head.

*After she was rude yesterday.*

I brought her the notebook, eating into my time with everyone, and on a school night, and I didn’t even get a thank you.

“Did Betty mention the date idea thing to you?”

“She texted me about it last night. She said Michelle liked the idea.”

The S.H.I.E.L.D logo pops up, along with a picture of Maria…*Hill?*

“Karen?” I ask aloud before the audio pops back on.

“—rumored to be considered for the title of S.H.I.E.L.D’s next top boss. The organization is still without its leader since the odd events of last fall, when a rogue laboratory marched into an underground facility near Pittsburgh and firebombed the facility. All lives are believed to have been lost.”

_Huh?_

I turn back to the table and see that May and Ned are deep into a conversation. “—Kept on just turning into them just as they were talking about something we weren’t supposed to be listening to.”

“*Just stop following us Parker! Don’t be weird!*”

I was just walking to class with Ned. And got her tapping her foot furiously on the back on my desk leg, rattling the whole thing for the entire class.

*I don’t want to think about that.*

Instead I walk back to my room. “Karen. Text Maria Hill, ask her if she’s working.”

*I’m not interrupting her Friday night.*

“She’s not working.” Karen informs me.

*Okay.*

“Thank you.” I smile at my bed before I fiddle with my pen holder, and old brass cannon shell from World War I that May’s grandfather passed down.

*It’s kind of cool. And works. Even though it’s heavy.*

“Do I get to know what happens next?” I hear before I glance up and see that Karen’s thrown up a screen and Maria Hill is smiling at me.
I lightly glare at her before she laughs at me and sips her drink. “Karen said you weren’t working.”

“I’m not really in the middle of anything. What’s up? No suit again today.”

Yeah yeah yeah…

“I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Hill immediately looks concerned. “May didn’t say you had another nightmare.”

“Don’t call them nightmares.”

*It sounds like I’m five again.*

“It’s not a dream.” Hill counters.

“I just couldn’t fall asleep.” I explain. “Anyway, why are you on the news?”

“The news?” Hill furrows her face. “Like national news?”

I nod. “I just got done with dinner and saw your face on the news. Something about moving on to head up the new S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Oh, that. I’m not going to do that. Don’t worry about it.” She explains, then smiles to assure me. “There is already a new head of S.H.I.E.L.D. He’s really good.”

“How are they talking about a new head if there already is one?”

Hill gives me a significant look.

*Because the news focuses on the wrong things.*

“Mack’s good. That whole team is insular because of what they’ve gone thru. They don’t like being lorded over. It’s small, but it works. Don’t worry about it.”

“Team?”

Hill taps a few keys, and Karen pops up a window, indicating that she’s downloading something. “Old team, from right after the Battle of New York. They’ve always colored in the shadow-y areas. But they’re good. We wouldn’t have been able to find the Mind Stone without their intel.”

“Right before Ultron.”

“Exactly.” Hill smiles.

“So they’re kind of their own thing?”

She nods. “I think that they’d be okay if I did come and take over, but it’s easier this way. We’re all connected again though, which is good.”

“What happened last fall then?”

“Robots.” She deadpans. “That’s…a really long story.”

“So the people they found weren’t people?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Some of them were. And that was really tough. But they won the
fight, and the important people didn’t die. We can always move on, as long as the foundation is secure.”

And this Mack is a part of that.

“I’m afraid you’re stuck with me, kid.” She teases me, then gives me a legit smile.

“You’re not just sticking around because of me, right?”

“Nah.” She sips her beer again. “Why would I take less pay, more pressure, less fun and less power? No thank you. And more headaches.”

“Whoa.” I hear beside me, then turn and see Ned in the doorway with May behind him.

“Oh. Ned.” I say, then gesture for him to stay calm.

Ned glances back at me, then turns to the screen. “This is awesome.”

“Oh. You must be Ned.”

Ned takes a step back. “How’d you—”

“She knows everything.” May informs him as Hill leans off screen and I hear the tapping of more keys.

“Oh damn. You guys could have done your double date tonight.”

I shake my head strongly. “No. No. Betty’s with her mom watching a movie. She just texted Ned.”

“Yes. And you can never lie on a text.” Hill monotones, then gives me a look before silently disconnecting the call.

I turn back to Ned and see him already looking at me. “She wouldn’t…lie?”

But Maria Hill wouldn’t lie.

“What?” I ask May, who shrugs then walk away.

NO!  NO! NOOOOO!!!!!

“Peter!” Somebody yells at me before orange violently turns to incandescent light poking me right in the eyes. Immediately, I dive for my pillow.

No.

Not again.

I feel May’s hand gently linger on my back before she reaches and rubs my shoulders. “You with me now?”

I nod and reply “Yes” but it only comes out as “Mph.”

The light hurts.

But I can’t go back to sleep.
After a moment, I roll over and face May, who looks like I woke her up. “I did it again, didn’t I? I’m sorry…” I apologize.

“It’s okay.” May smiles at me.

*I made it four days.*

I groan, then put my head in my hands. “It wasn’t like this last night, I swear.”

*She got up last night for some water and saw that my light was on at like 2 AM and she assumed I’d woken myself up. And now here I am, haunted again for real this time, and now it looks like I’m getting worse again.*

“Karen.” May says quietly.

“Yes Mrs. Parker?” Karen asks quietly after a moment.

“Make a note for Maria Hill to see in the morning that he had another nightmare.”

“May…” I groan.

*They. Aren’t. Nightmares.*

I don’t know what to call them, but that’s not the right word.

*Haunts. It’s like a haunted part of my head that my brain lives in when I go to sleep.*

“Sorry dear. But you have to sleep. Did you take your melatonin?” I nod and point to the green bottle on my nightstand.

“Good.”

“One new message, from Maria Hill.” Karen informs her.

*Oh god.*

“I’ll have Happy pick him up at 9. Up here by 10, we can run some tests. Maybe actually prescribe something. Did he say what is was this time?”

May silently looks to me, and I turn back towards my pillow.

*No.*

I was just at the Compound for the first time last weekend. And it was good.

*Now I’m going back and everyone is going to be freaking out.*

“I’m sorry I woke both of you up.” I say, then roll over and see that my clock is showing 3:18 AM. Awesome.

May’s replied “No, he just rolled over. But he kept on begging for them to stop again.”

*STOP STOP STOP!!!!*
“Have him take another melatonin, then try to close his eyes.” Maria Hill replies.

I sigh and get to my feet, feeling the cold wooden floor beneath my feet. “I’m grabbing some water first.”

Cold floor.

Focus on that Peter.

Cold floor.
“Okay, settle down.” Mrs. Murphy says, as our rowdy class finally acknowledges her authority and starts quieting down. Once the jokes finally die down and the muffled laughter ceases, she turns to us. “So, as you all know, today is the Burn Book day.”

The class cheers in general, and I sink a little lower in my desk, just before MJ scratches my back.

_I never know when she is going to do it. Sometimes it’s once a day, in Art. Other days it’s multiple times a day._

Last week she changed it up and held her hand there for a moment, like she was looking for something before taking her hand back.

_Today is a two scratch day. This morning and now._

“—yes, we knew. So, I believe it’s Ms. Edwards that’s delivering the books via email this year. Five minutes into class is the number I heard. So…be civil.” She requests politely, then walks over to her desk and pulls out her phone.

_She’s done._

The class quickly bursts into conversation as I check my phone for messages.

_“Out for the day. Left money for food, whatever you want. I’ll order for me when I get home. Love you.” -May_

_“Sounds good. Have fun. Love you too.”_ I reply.

Behind me, I hear Michelle starts sliding her supplies back into her bag. “What do you think they’re going to say this year?” Michelle teases me.

_I was in it last year._

It’s an unspoken rule of the book that Freshmen don’t make it generally. They’re only mentioned in passing by the authors, that year’s female senior class.

The Book is part gossip rag, summarizing the school year, part bathroom “Hot or Not” poll denoted in scratches or marker, part state of the school.

_And I was in it last year. As “leading contender for biggest dork as a Freshman”. _

It should have been Ned and I, but nope. Just me.

_“Nothing good.” I groan and answer Michelle, barely looking back to see her already looking at me._

_She looks at me, smirking. “You did have a bad year.”_

_Bad?_


_So not Civil War. Right. Just a lot of things that are hard to explain._
“Got it!!” Somebody says, and the class scrambles to their devices to start reading.

Midtown School of Science and Technology Burn Book: 2019 Edition

It’s ironic, they named it the Burn Book after ya know, Mean Girls, but there’s been a version of this thing since the mid-seventies. And people don’t burn it.

Well, I guess let’s see how bad this is. Probably a bunch of disappearance jokes and some shots at the Avengers and Stark thru me.

I pull up the search feature, and type in ‘Peter Parker’. I hit return, then am dropped right to a massive bold headline.

Peter Parker.

“Oh what a year it has been for the previous edition’s “leading contender for biggest dork”, Peter Parker.

If only he’d stayed as good as he seemed.

This one is as toxic and dangerous as it gets ladies. Unless you like the following checklist:

Quits marching band, robotics lab and Decathlon.

Rejoins decathlon at the last moment, only to no-show Nationals and for Midtown to win, without him.

Successfully tricks beloved senior Liz Allan into going to Homecoming as her date, then promptly ditching her.

Refuses to say anything about the topic for months on end.

Ditches school sponsored trip to the Manhattan Museum of Modern Art to disappear just before the Decimation event.

Returns from said event, claiming that he had to go to his “Stark Internship”

Students of Midtown, let’s be adults here. There is no internship. There is no story. He doesn’t know the Avengers. Peter Parker is a messed up, chronically lying, cheating, unreliable piece of trash that you should not associate with. Point blank.

His best friend is the guy that got caught looking at porn at Homecoming. There is nothing more pathetic. Even Parker ditches him at parties. Whether it’s to go to the roof or vanish completely, you can count on Parker to be a complete non factor there too.

His work in the classroom is average at best, derided every step by the repulsive Flash Thompson, who is fortunate enough to be mentioned here and nowhere else in this year’s book.

We have seen what he did and what he can do. He single handedly drove Liz out of the state, and across the country. His moral compass is completely broken, if he even has one at all. Jury is out on that one, and since the Decimation, which for whatever reason he calls “The Snap”, Parker has become elusive, stoic and silent, eyes glazed over in the back of every class and alone (basically) at every lunch.

He has never known responsibility, another factor that makes his claim about the Stark Internship completely laughable and easily dismissed. Parker fanboyed over Stark from the time that he
nearly died at the Stark Expo and has crafted a complete lie as a personality. He cannot be trusted or believed about anything that he says. The bullied has changed schools, switched identities. He is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and a wolf in the hen house.

Ratings:

Hot or Not: 4 out of 10

Adorkable-ness: 5 out of 10

Personality: 1 out of 10

Hollywood Factor: 1 out of 10

Fun Factor: 1 out of 10

Known love interests: None (other than his hand and mattress)

Suspected crushes, romantic hopefuls: None”

What.

I find myself blinking a few times before I come to my senses as the class is debating random snippets.

I guess when you put it like that…I’m about to be a complete social pariah. Nobody’s going to want to do anything with me.

My ears are filled with what sounds like bees as I scroll back up.

“We have seen what he did and can do.”

“Under no circumstance can we bring the Time Stone to Thanos. I don't think you quite understand what's at stake here.”

“No. It's you who doesn't understand, that Thanos has been inside my head for six years since he sent an army to New York and now he's back!” Mr. Stark exclaims. “And I don't know what to do. So I'm not so sure if it's a better plan to fight him on our turf or his but you saw what they did, what they can do. At least on his turf, he's not expecting it. So I say we take the fight to him. Doctor. Do you concur?”

“All right, Stark, we go to him. But you have to understand this: When it comes to saving you, or the kid, or the Time Stone, I will not hesitate to let either of you die. I can't, because the universe depends on it.”

Good.

Moral compass.

Flash sits up near the front of the class, reading directly off his enormous, tablet sized phone. “— Students of Midtown, let’s be adults here.” He laughs. “There is no internship. There is no story. He doesn’t know the Avengers.”

Yeah.
Mr. Stark walks away from Dr. Strange awkwardly, looking uncomfortable. “Okay kid.” He says, tapping me on my left shoulder, then my right. “You’re an Avenger now.”

“Damn Parker. They didn’t even call you a dick! I’ll just have to fix that oversight.”

Behind me, Michelle cracks “The only dick here is you. And I heard it’s tiny. Like, need a microscope tiny.”

Some of the class laughs, but notably Murphy at her desk does, causing Flash to turn around angrily before turning back to Michelle. “And you are again? Nobody? Exactly.”

“I don’t need a dumb book to feel good about myself.”

“Yay, congratulations. You’re not the point, the guy you’re following around is.” Flash taunts, before I see the light bulb go off. “Oh! Hey! Add suspected crushes: Michelle Jones…on Penis Parker. Aww…”

“Hey.” I snap angrily at Flash. “You’re not in the book, that’s enough.”

That’s enough. She said be civil.

Flash ignores me and continues reading “—another factor that makes his claim about the Stark Internship completely laughable and easily dismissed. Parker fanboyed over Stark from the time that—”

You know what, I’ve had enough. Forget this. I’m out of here.

Without a second’s hesitation, I’ve thrown everything in my bag and am already in the hallway, walking to my locker before I realize where I am.

Shit, I’ve already committed. I can’t really go to my locker, they’ll hear it in the office.

I’ve just got to go.

I duck out of the closest door, then slip out behind the football fields out to the subway station.

Manhattan.

Away from here.

I want 14th and Union Square. I think it’s being rerouted to 18th. That’s okay, I can walk a few blocks.

I don’t know how long I sit down after I paid before I notice my phone, vibrating, indicating a missed text.

I don’t want to deal with that right now.

Setting my phone on Do Not Disturb, I put it back into my pocket, watch the display screen for our location and sit back again.

18th and Union. Bingo.

I attempt to blend into the mass of New Yorkers, coming from work, returning from lunch or
whatever it is that they’re doing before I find the nearest staircase and climb back to street level, where my eyes immediately drift up towards the skyline before I find the misshapen, jagged edge of the second building I tried to grab.

Broke that off like the first time. I don’t know the name of the building.

19 seconds. 122 miles per hour. 53 meters per second.

Dead weight. I had compound fractures in my arm and a broken rib plus a black eye and a couple cuts on my face from bouncing around so much.

And I dropped Mr. Stark.

I don’t even remember waking up. I just felt like I was lying in my bed, more sore than I’d ever been in my life, for what was long enough that I didn’t even think something was wrong. Until I bounced off something, jolting my eyes open as Mr. Stark flew away from me, his body careening aimlessly.

I panicked and screamed but I barely even heard myself.

The city was screaming. Everywhere.

Everyone was screaming. I sort of remember a helicopter somewhere.

The terror paralyzed me before I saw the second building at the last second, and made a snatching grab at it, only for the metal, glass and various other materials to give way, and for me to continue falling.

I caught myself, kind of soon after on the ledge of a penthouse. Before Hulk leapt up, close enough for me to see him out of the corner of my eye, sending my brain into overdrive.

And I panicked.

I swung down as fast as I could. When I got there, Hulk had set him down by Thor and Thanos as people ran away, screaming in horror, terror, bewilderment, fear, everything.

Everything.

Then the picture. Me cradling him, as it hit me that I lost.

I failed. Tony Stark’s dead.

At some point the police came. Then the National Guard. I was shuffled off to some tent somewhere inside a building.

I remember finally taking the mask off. It was two women that I didn’t recognize, talking to Ant-Man before they finally convinced me to take it off so that they could see how hurt I was.

He backed up over one of the rolling tables they had set up.

He didn’t think I was actually a kid.

“Hey. What are your parents’ phone numbers? We need to get them down here. Let them know that you’re okay.”
I feel like I didn’t wait long before May was hysterical. Hugging me. Crying. Clinging to me like her life depended on it. She didn’t let me go, even though I was covered in dust, dirt, debris, Avengers’ blood and worst of all, purple blood.

From the axe buried up to the handle in Thanos’ chest before Thor savagely ripped it out at an angle, forcing him to bleed out.

The reports at the Compound said that he was conscious when the cops arrived, muttering about how we’d already lost. How he had saved everyone.

And that we had ruined it.

People were everywhere. There was footage on YouTube for days, maybe even weeks on end before the Compound finally got the worst of it down. But the screenshots will live forever.

Thor roaring at Thanos as he’s completely immobilized. Colonel Danvers, literally glowing. Citizens literally within feet of them, running around them or away.

There was no “safe distance”. No warning. Just at 10:48 AM, the same exact time three day prior to that, the flying donut vanished in a fancy flash of light, I, along with half of the planet just came back.

I remember Thor and Colonel Danvers were waiting for us when we finally went outside, to a waiting car. Escorted us all the way out, with a fifteen block perimeter. We drove to a hanger, where there was a helicopter that flew us to the Compound.

I refused to look out the window or be near the door. I wanted to literally sit on the floor, holding onto the pilot’s seat so that I’d have something physical to hold onto if Thanos somehow blew a hole in the floor and we were going down.

I can’t do another fall like that again.

The buzzing in my ears subsides briefly, and I notice the crowds of tourists near the perimeter fences, here just chain link fence and green industrial fabric to block out the view. At the base of the fence, for as far as I can see without the view being obstructed by people, there’s signs, stuffed animals, murals and other tokens of gratitude, sadness, honor, grief…

The makeshift memorial.

Nobody knows what they’re going to do. Well, kind of.

They’re making a statue for Cap outside of the UN headquarters here in New York. What of exactly, nobody has decided.

He…At Mr. Stark’s funeral, apparently Cap had something written in case Tony died and he couldn’t be there to speak himself. Same thing the other way around. Cap’s funeral had a speech written by Tony.

My eyes drift over to the massive board that’s been erected, mostly out of plywood hastily, but has something written on it. Beside it, on the side of a building, somebody has artfully spray painted Iron Man’s helmet, with candles all around it.

“There will always be men like Tony Stark, to dream, to build and to create.”
That’s practically a planetary motto right now.

_Dream. Build. Create._

_Beat Thanos into the pavement next time._

I finally made myself actually looked at the files that Banner and the others had made, back in… the version of events that led to the Snap. I can’t put it all together right now. They had to use Mr. Stark’s ‘Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing’ device, combined with Colonel Danvers, to mess with time.

_That’s about all I understood._

But that’s what happened. They cleared out the entire compound except for essential personnel to run the whole thing so that the changes would be minimal.

_We don’t have tons of people appearing in places they aren’t supposed to be. That shatters the fabric of reality. Just small examples like me._

_And look where that’s gotten me._

_Here._

_We have to take the torch from Stark and Cap. That’s why I’m here. The Avengers have picked up where we all left off._

I guess I have to too.

_Next time we’ll be ready._

“Thanks for having my back today.” I grab another slice of pizza and look at the screens Karen has up.

_Still waiting to hear back from the Benatar. Colonel Danvers updated the Compound yesterday. And Thor calls when he wants to._

_“You’re welcome. He was being a dick.”_  

I wasn’t expecting an immediate response. _Huh._

_“Did I miss anything?” I decide to politely reply._

_I kind of can’t believe that I just walked out of class in fifth period. I mean, I did it, but I’m really about to get it._

I haven’t heard from Hill all day, I think it’s a day off for her.

_She deserves it, having to drive around, first with the security install, then taking me to Michelle’s on top of doing her actual job._

_“Dude.” - Ned_  

_Uh oh._

_“How bad are we talking?” I quickly reply, fearing the answer._
That damn book crushed him without even saying his name. That doesn’t even matter because he’s my friend.

Betty has to do something after everybody remembers the Homecoming fiasco.

And they were just starting to get rolling too.

“I’m drowning. I think we’re done.” Ned panics.

“No…blame everything on me. It was me. I told you to go to the lab for me.”

I take a bite and pace around the kitchen.

It was me.

“We had to stop Liz’s dad!” Ned shoots right back. “I was the guy in the chair! I don’t regret it!”

Yeah. Those first few weeks afterward weren’t even that hard to get thru. I was so excited that I actually saved that plane’s cargo and stopped everything that the trouble kind of didn’t matter.

“You’re taking too much blame.”

“Who can literally carry it? You or me?”

Ned can’t lose Betty over me. No. He’s been super happy. I can’t do that to him.

“I kind of think her mind is made up though.” Ned’s response pop up.

Yeah.

Behind me, the front door finally rattles with the sound of keys being inserted. “—Peter?” the door opens revealing May and…

Hill.

“Hi!” May smiles at me.

I’m not sure I like this. May looks like she does when she sips too much wine watching Lifetime movies.

Behind her, Hill is giving me a different look, but I turn away and smile at May. “Hi. Food?”

“Yes please. You know my Korean order.” May smiles as she sets her bag down.

Hill wordlessly pulls Karen’s screens to her as she crosses the room to lean on my door frame. “Do you want anything?”

“What’s May having?” She asks, shooting me a brief glance.

“It’s Korean steak with vegetables and soy mostly.” I shrug as May digs in the fridge. It’s good.”

May usually doesn’t finish it all, but I love it at 2 AM. And she’s only threatened me over eating it once, so that’s a win in my books.

“Sure.”

I nod, moving past my texts and to start ordering Korean.
Now I understand why I didn’t hear from her all day.

“Sorry we’re home late. Wine tasting down in Alexandria. It was really fun, but we talked too much.”

“You, talking too much?” I glance up and smile at May. “I can’t believe it.”

“Oh that’s not fair. Boo.” She waves me off. “We had fun, didn’t we?”

“Yeah.” Hill nods.

She’s not in Avengers or S.H.I.E.L.D mode at all. She’s dressed like May.

She looks kind of awesome.

May pours herself some water. “What’s he looking at?”

“The front lines.” Hill responds without pausing her reading. “With Danvers and Quill out in space.” Instantly, May turns to look at me.

“Why are you looking at that?” May asks me pointedly, causing me to look back to Hill.

Hill finally looks up from the screens. “We’re going to have to teach you a poker face.”
‘Poker’

“She kept on asking.” Ned says before we sit down at our normal spot at lunch. “What the Internship is. What I have to do with it. And I won’t say.”

_He sounds a little helpless. Because of me._

“Sorry.”

“You and the Avengers are working on everything right? I know I don’t mean to push—”

I smile at Ned. “Yeah. We’re close.”

_After yesterday, I woke up and feel better. Not awesome, but better._

Hill stayed here in the city last night. She and May were up later than I was, even after I did the work that I walked out on at school. I was kind of surprised that they didn’t freak out over me walking out of class.

_It’s like Hill was waiting for something like this._

They focused on that over their dinner, and as I worked. The book didn’t come up.

“Great.” Ned smiles at me. “So now what?”

“Finals bro.” I smile.

_We’ve got tests to study for._

They’re having to cram all of our testing into the last three weeks of classes. The normal test date was during the weeks after everybody came back. Obviously couldn’t do it then, so they moved it.

“This is going to suck bad.”

I shrug, then start to stand up and go get my lunch. “It could be worse. It could be next year.”

_Junior year test scores are what determines what colleges you can get into. SAT and ACT prep, college applications…_

“Peter?” One of the office assistants stops me before Ned can reply. “Your Aunt’s here. She’s up front.”

_Huh?_

“Sure. Be right there.” I act normal, then turn to Ned.

_Why’s May here?_

“May’s here?” He asks me.

“No clue.” I say, then redirect towards the front offices.

_What could this be about?_
When I round the corner, I see Maria Hill in a change of clothes, looking again, perfectly normal. “Hey!” She smiles when she sees me, then gets up off the little bench outside the office.

**Behind her, the secretary and both office assistants have their eyes on her.**

Silently, Hill moves to block their line of sight. “Thought you might want an actual lunch today. Ordered a sandwich, chips and drink. Sounds good?” She extends a reusable bag, sandwich from Mr. Delmar’s clearly inside.

“Yeah.” I smile, then see the corner of an index card.

*Oh. I see what she’s doing.*

“Thank you.” I nod, taking the bundle before she gives me a quick hug around the shoulders.

“I’ll see you after school then. Don’t forget to pick up that jacket from the cleaners.” She reminds me.

**Bring the suit.**

I nod, and Hill just starts back thru the doors without another word, leaving me to smile at everyone in the office then walk back to my spot at lunch, where Ned is off getting his food.

**Cover. I can use my backpack.**

Tossing my backpack onto the table, I set out the sandwich, chips, and energy drink before I glance at the note.

> *Hop off the subway today near Central Park. Happy will take it from there."

Old school spy stuff. Use New York to my advantage, blend into everything in order to get back upstate.

“May brought you lunch? And it's Delmar's too!!” Ned progressively becomes more and more jealous.

“Sorry.” I smile helplessly at him. “She surprised me.

He shakes his head before looking back to his pizza. “And she didn’t kill you for yesterday?”

“No. I think this is part of that though.” I confess, trying to lead him to the point.

**It's not May. But it's brilliant.**

Ned looks lost for a second, before it clicks, and he sees the note, barely covered up by my hand as I move to grab half of my sandwich.

**Just have to make it look normal.**

“Right. Did you see that new Lego movie trailer?” Ned changes tact.

“Yeah.” I smile and buy into the conversation before taking a bite and siding the notecard into my pocket while also pulling out my phone.

**Got it.**
Ned starts detailing his favorite aspects of the trailer, and I nod and listen before digging into my sandwich.

*The guy in the chair decided to come see me at lunch today.*

“Try it again.” Dr. Banner asks me before I glance down at the twin wristbands I’m now wearing.

*Web shooters.*

Smooth, edgeless metal appears on my forearms, extending into my palm, creating my web shooters.

“And how far away from actually having these are we?”

Banner shrugs. “Within six months. Shuri has already got this and is trying to compress an emergency stock of web fluid.”

*Her brother’s suit is crazy. It’s like Mr. Stark’s suit, but instead of having to wear athletic leisure wear 24/7, 365 days a year, all he has is a necklace. *I’ll take the wristbands though.*

“Nat’s already thinking of you wearing these back. All the time, school, home, wherever. Has an emergency beacon, gives us your vitals via satellite. And it’ll work when we get you a functional version, so you have these—” He points to my web shooters. “—in a pinch.”

Dr. Banner’s phone goes off, causing me to stop leaning on his lab table. “Ahh. Everyone’s ready, if you want to go that way.”

“Sure.” I say, then rub at my wrists as the wristbands start to chafe.

*Not used to wearing anything.*

“Have you ever played poker before?”

“No.” I shake my head. “She said poker face, not poker I thought.”

Dr. Banner tries and fails to hide a smirk. “Exactly. It’ll be fun too. It can be really fun when people start throwing darts at each other. You’re lucky Clint’s not here right now, or that’d be literal.”

“Is that permission? I’ve been waiting for that for *years.*”

Dr. Banner and I turn to the unfamiliar voice, who is smirking behind us, carrying a bag on his shoulder.

*Like he’s here for a trip.*

“No. Good to see you though.” Dr. Banner smiles and the two shake hands. “What’s the occasion?”

“Laura’s about tired of me being around so much.” He breaks into a smile, and Dr. Banner laughs and hangs his head.

“I’m sure she hasn’t.”

Whoever this is gives him an incredulous look. “Nat hasn’t told you?”
“No.”

_Uh oh._

The new guy shrugs, then turns to me. “Clint, by the way. And if you ever meet my wife, you
didn’t hear any of that. We square?”

“Uh, yeah.” I fumble out then shake his hand. “You’re Hawkeye.”

_I never really ever met him. He was gone before I even got to the Compound. I would assume to go
be with his wife._

“And you’re the Spider-Kid. Emphasis on the kid.” Clint turns to Banner. “Stark absolutely lost his
damn mind.”

“Would you rather he be dead after getting into something way over his head?” Banner counters.
“It is New York.”

Clint nods as we start walking again. “Fair point. But still. No offense kid.”

_Everyone said he was crazy for recruiting a 14 year old kid._

“I think Stark saved him.” Dr. Banner reveals.

“Clint?” I hear Romanoff call out as we walk into the living room area and the room turns to him.

“Hi. Surprise? I heard about poker.” He fires at her before cracking into a smile.

“Of course you did.” Maria Hill adds, then smirks at me.

Colonel Rhodes walks up, and the two exchange greetings as Dr. Banner moves to sit down. I slip
by everyone and into the kitchen to get something to drink.

_And maybe some pretzels too, later._

I grab a water, then walk back to see most of everyone sitting around the coffee table, having
pushed the two couches together to make a circle. “Don’t worry. I am horrible at poker, so you
can’t be the worst.” I hear behind me, then turn and see.

_Holy crap. Did she like walk thru the walls like Vision could?_

“At least you’ve played before?” I say, unsure of what to say.

Wanda Maximoff shrugs as she walks past me, then jumps over the couch beside Clint. “You
didn’t say you were coming.”

“Laura’s tired of me getting in the way. She baked for you by the way. It’s in my bag.”

“What is it?” She vaults back over the couch, narrowly avoiding Rhodey, who slides back to give
her space.

“I think she made cinnamon buns, but with something else on ‘em. Whole damn kitchen smelled
like cinnamon.” He smiles. “You’d better share at least one, because I didn’t sneak a bite. And that
was hard.”

Romanoff rummages in his bag for a moment, then pulls out a rectangular package, wrapped in an
insulated package meant for a casserole holder.

_Ooh. That smells incredible._

“Yeah. That’s impossible to resist.” Rhodey comments as the cinnamon scent fully floats over the table.

“I didn’t tell you how I resisted.” Clint smiles. “I had to move it to the back so I couldn’t be tempted, then took off.”

Everyone laughs, and I nervously look around.

_It’s Clint, Maximoff, Rhodey, Romanoff, Sharon Carter from Cap’s funeral, Banner, then me and on my left is Hill._

I remember Mrs. Carter. She’s the granddaughter of Peggy Carter, the woman who helped found S.H.I.E.L.D along with Stark’s father. At the funeral, they presented his flag to her.

_“On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Armed Forces and a grateful Nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s honorable and faithful service.”_

“Okay. We ready?” Barton asks, a deck of cards already in his hand.

Natasha however, hops up. “Yup! Hang on! Peter needs a drink.”

“I have water!” I call after her.

“That’s not how poker works.” Hill enlightens me.

“It sounds more complicated than it is. Words make it worse, like almost all things. You play cards much?” Clint asks me.

“Not really, no.”

“Do you know what a royal flush is? Or a straight?” He fires at me, and I nod.

_I’ve seen poker on TV. Just never have played._

Mrs. Carter pulls out a silver box, then starts counting out chips for everyone, then handing them out in neat little stacks.

“That’s two thousand bucks there kid. Don’t blow it in one place.” She teases me, getting a couple of laughs.

_Two thousand dollars._

I split my chips into smaller stacks, just like Romanoff as Barton shuffles multiple decks easily while talking to Wanda, who is…

_Cutting up a cinnamon roll. Multiple._

“—oh now I won’t tell her about this.”

“You can.” She smiles at him again. “Sharing is good.”
Clint counters. “She made those for you. I don’t know if that’s how it works.” Then smiles.

Wanda ignores him and hands out a bite sized pieces of cinnamon bun out to everyone, all of us instantly eat it.

*Delicious.*

As Hill passes out napkins, Clint hands the deck to Banner, who begins dealing. “So, side question. Is he available to be hired out? I could use him for a couple of projects I’ve been thinking about.”

“Yes.” Hill turns to look at me. “I think we might be able to do that.”

“We do get cellphone service, unlike this place. So…” Clint locks eyes with me, before everyone starts laughing and I feel myself go red.

*I get it, I get it…*

Silently, I pull my phone out of my pocket and toss it onto the table. Hill instantly snatches it up and puts it in her jacket pocket. “Karen, tell us if she texts us.”

“Smart. I like it. That’s our biggest advantage, give that up. Reposition.”

*Well this hand is a bunch of random crap. No face cards, nothing.*

“Motion for more cards. Romanoff tells me. “But don’t ask too many questions. Follow your instincts.”

I nod, feeling everyone’s eyes on me and try to focus on my cards.

*No.*

I motion to fold, then take my hands off my cards and glance back at everyone’s chips.

*Everyone’s still playing, but Rhodey, Barton and Romanoff are winning. I’ve lost a couple hundred dollars, but I haven’t done much. I’m just trying to learn.*

Natasha looks to Banner. “Whatever I did, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t blame me. Barton shuffled.”

“For listening to Laura. What am I supposed to do? Hang up and say ‘Sorry!’? I think she’d hunt me down.”

I fold, along with Rhodey and Hill as the conversation continues.

*Wife. Barton, Hawkeye has a wife.*

He probably had to have met her before becoming an Avenger. And somehow made it work.

*He probably was with S.H.I.E.L.D at some point, doing missions and stuff like that. Being gone a lot to keep the world safe, literally. I’m impressed that he made it work.*

“—a terror. I think I’m going to have to bring her by. Get her reflexes tested.”

I fold again, my hand not worth anything worth fighting over. “That quick huh?”
“No, not that. His vision is incredible. Spotted me driving down the road coming back from the store from the top of the bend.”

“What is that, a mile maybe?” Rhodey asks.

Clint shakes his head, pulling more chips to him. “Mile and a half more like. I can see farther, but she's almost thirteen now. Imagine what she can see when he’s his age?”

The two glance at me as I receive new cards. “Well, yeah. But maybe she just got a lesser version of what you’ve got.” Rhodey counters.

*I’m two cards away from a straight.*

I ask for more cards and keep listening.

_He has a wife and three kids. Three. No wonder he left the Avengers. His wife probably would kill him if he didn’t._


_Well over an hour. Everyone lost their little bet except for Sharon._

Grabbing my phone, the correct screen immediately pops up.

  “You stay home? I know you’re not at Flash’s.”

“—if you’re at Flash’s, I think he’ll pass. Thanks.” Barton calls out.

Sharon asks “That the guy that dunked the backpack?”

_That made it into the report?_

I groan quietly and sip my water before—“One new text message. From Michelle.”.

“Screen is up. Thank you.” Banner comments, then waves it away and Karen falls silent.

  “Have you started on that study guide from World History?”

  “Not yet.”

The conversation shifts back to Barton as the cards keep flowing.

  “Then what are you doing?”

  “Playing poker. Have no clue what I’m doing.”

Right away, her three grey dots pop up.

  “Fun. What cards do you have?”

  “Nothing worth keeping. Already folded.”

  “Next hand read ’em. I like poker.”

  “You play poker?”

  “My family taught me. For holidays or if we’re all bored. Ned with you? He’s not here. I assume
he’s the ringleader for your poker gang.”

Poker gang.

Banner gives me new cards, and I answer Michelle.

“Not with me. Why?”

“I don’t want to have to tranq her. She’s so mad at Ned because of you.”

“I know.”

“Then let him tell her. Tell me. Who am I going to tell?”

“Not up to me. You don’t want to meet so many lawyers. Sorry.”

I answer, then look at my cards and reply once more.

“Three diamonds, rest is junk.”

It’s kind of a start.

“Play for a straight.” Michelle orders me. “Why so many lawyers? What do you do, go get people coffee?”

Beside me, Hill laughs, and I kick at her foot. “Not funny.”

“What’d she say?” Wanda asks.

“She said Peter just delivers coffee to us. She doesn’t get why he can’t say anything to anyone.” Hill smirks before Sharon, Barton and Rhodes laugh.

I reply to Michelle while asking for more cards.

“I don’t have a job description. But not exactly.”

Another diamond.

“Got another one.” I relay ahead before three more dots appear.

“What are you playing by? Raise one chip.”

I grab a $20 chip and toss it towards the pot, causing multiple eyes to snap to me. “Ooh.” Is all Sharon says.

“I like it.” Banner comments before both Romanoff, Hill and Barton all check my bet and he looks to me, seeing if I want one last card.

“Yes, thank you.” I smile at him, then pull the card even to me, but don’t look at it.

Hill’s eyes are bearing down on me.

“Here.” I hand over my phone, setting it on the table between us. When she picks it up, I peek down.

Bingo. I’ve got a straight of diamonds.
Hill doesn’t say a word, simply setting my phone face down on my thigh, then looks at her card. “Got the straight.”

“Then win.”

I’m not sure.

“Okay then. Let’s see ‘em.” Banner asks, and I pull my cards to my chest as the others set out their cards.

*Nope. I lose. Barton has a full house. 3,3, Jack, Jack.*

I reveal my sad straight, then push it away and inform Michelle.

“I got tricked with a full house.”

“No bad.” He comments, taking in the small chip pile that now belongs to him.

*That was a $40 loss. That sucked.*

“Did they read you though?”

“I think so.” I confess. “I’m working on a poker face.”

At least I’m supposed to be.

“What’s she saying?” Wanda asks Hill.

Hill smiles. “She’s helping him.”

“Ahh…little phone a friend action.” Barton smirks, building his towers of chips.

“She plays poker?” Banner asks.

Hill shrugs. “Apparently.”

The cards are dealt, and I immediately fold, then inform Michelle.

“Trash hand.”

She responds with a gif from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise of Jack Sparrow waving someone away like they’re dismissed.

I watch as Romanoff and Wanda are the only ones to call for more cards, then call each other’s bets, before Wanda folds. “I don’t like this *that* much.”

*Oh no. Wanda has a full house.*

Romanoff sets her hand down, reveling a pair of 7’s, a pair of 10’s and a Queen of Spades. Immediately, Wanda facepalms, and Hill laughs.

“Nice.” Banner compliments Natasha as she collects her winnings.

“I knew it! I liked it, I knew it, and I backed off!!” She explains, sounding frustrated.

*She lost the staring contest.*
“Cold. Just cold.” Rhodey sips his drink then shakes his head as Sharon takes her new cards from Dr. Banner.

“How’s the party?”

“How’s the party?”

“Boring. I’m on the roof. It’s the best part of Flash’s house.”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “Rest of the place is too noisy. Did you raid his kitchen?”

“I’m disappointed you didn’t just assume. That’s why I come to these parties. Give me my food.”

I try not to assume too much with her.

“Who is ‘they’ by the way?”

Oh.

Aww crap.

I groan and sip my drink as the hand is still being litigated. “Ooh.” I hear to my left.

“Stop looking at my phone.” I ask Hill nicely. “Please.”

“You showed it to me.”

*I only have so much room. It’s either turn my phone on vibrate and turn the screen to face down, or unlock my phone after every message and reply.*

I don’t reply as Romanoff asks for the news this time.

“She asked ‘who is they?’” Hill smiles.

Sharon smirks. “Uh oh. He said something wrong?”

“Not exactly. He’s just talking to her.” Barton defends me.

“But if he acknowledged that he’s with people…” Romanoff responds.

Yeah.

“—then make something up. She doesn’t know where he is.”

“Did you ever say?” Banner asks me as Hill simply takes my phone from me.

I turn to respond to her, only to receive a glare, then look back to Dr. Banner. “No. I just said that I’m not at the party she’s at.”

“But you are playing poker with people.” Sharon points out.

“I didn’t mean to do that.” I confess.

Barton smiles. “She’s tying him into knots.”

“I like her.” Hill smiles, then hands my phone back to me, with a message typed out, ready to hit send on.

“I’m playing poker with a few scientists I’ve worked on with my Stark stuff.”
“Can I say that?” I ask.

Hill nods. “Yeah. Now go add a picture of the edge of the logo, extending out.”

“What’d you say?” Rhodey asks her.

“We're all scientists that have helped him with his internship.” Hill smiles as I walk away from everyone, toward the landing pad and snap the picture, then send it off without giving myself time to get cold feet.

*Well, I guess this will just be interesting.*

“And nice window.”

“Very funny. I can get in a lot of trouble for sending you that.”

*They've started the next round without me. That's fine.*

“Do I need to delete it now? Is that how it works? Am I a spy now? Are you with the Avengers?”

“No, I’m with some scientists. And yeah, delete that before somebody hacks us all.”

I scan the table quickly, trying to look casual.

*Sharon seems to be confident.*

“It’s gone. Another picture?”

*Nope.*

“Can’t do that. Sorry.”

“Figured. New hand?”

“Waiting for the next one. I had to skip a round taking that pic.”

This time MJ’s three grey dots linger, disappear, reappear, then linger again.

“Betty said that Ned told her that you’re working on something.”

*I am.*

The next hand comes out, prompting me to set my phone down, face down.

*Ace, Jack, and ten, all of diamonds. Then two other burn cards.*

I ask for more as my phone vibrates. “You ready for three versions of this? Only a little bit more of peace and quiet.” Natasha asks Barton.

He shakes his head. “No, I’m not. Coop’s quiet though. The girls at school already like him.”

“A, J, 10 of diamonds. More cards.”
“—no. Lila can’t get under his skin and it drives her nuts. She’s so much like Laura it’s hilarious. She’s always pushing me around.”

Romanoff laughs along with Sharon. “How mad are you that you had two guys and a girl? So close.” Colonel Rhodes asks, smiling.

“Ahh man. So close.” Barton laughs, then sips his drink. “No, that’s why I want Peter. It’ll give her a new target instead of me and her brother.”

“And she listens to her Mom?” Hill asks.

Barton nods. “They’re keeping the peace. Cut from the same cloth.” He stops and groans. “I’m so dead.”

“What are you working on that’s big enough to get invited to their Friday night poker game?”

Nanotech, I guess. That’s public knowledge, kind of. Mr. Stark suiting up in New York was caught on camera.

“Some of Mr. Stark’s tech he was working on. I’ve kind of inherited the project.”

Now that’s not nanotech. Tomorrow I really want to look at that BARF tech. Maybe run thru it once. See how good it is.

I change topics on her then look to Barton as he’s looking at his cards.

“Has Betty already decided to break up with him?”

How’d he do it?

My leg vibrates and I check the message.

“Yeah, probably. You didn’t hear that from me though.”

“I’ve already kind of pieced that together. She won’t look at me.”

“Then what can I tell her? I don’t have much longer on this roof before she starts asking questions. Oh crap, forgot that she’s still on that roof.

“Tell her I’m sorry. I’m working on it. I really am.”

Betty isn’t okay with having to share him, plus he’s hiding my secret from her.

“Peter.” I hear Romanoff prompt me, and I silently toss another $20 chip towards the pot.

Hill replies. “Gonna need more than that.”

“How much more?”

“One more chip.”

Fine.

“She knows that. Can I tell her about your card game with those other nerds?”

“That’s not going to help.” I respond as I receive my final card.
“Cards?” She asks me instead.

“Royal Flush, I think. They can read me but I can’t read them.”

“C’mon Peter.” Banner turns to me, as Romanoff, Rhodey, Barton and Hill all move to reveal their cards,

_Hill has four of a kind. Barton and Rhodes have straights, and Romanoff was bluffing again._

I win.

“All right!” Barton congratulates me as Banner pushes the pile to me.

“I think that she’s helping him too much.” Sharon says, smiling.

_Meaning that she’s not serious._

“No, no.” Wanda says, causing me to turn and see a red ball of energy.

_Oh._

“Then what’s going on?” Barton asks her.

“He’s trying to keep his friend from losing his girlfriend.”

Banner comments. “Well that’s noble.”

“Just trying to keep the peace.” I smile, recalling what Barton said.

Barton laughs and raises his beer in my direction. “See? Real world problem solving. He’ll be okay.”

“We’ve just got to get him back into the suit.” Romanoff comments, and the air instantly comes out of the room.

“Nat.” Sharon chides her.

Banner is already frowning at her. “I thought we talked about this. Time is the best medicine.”

I let them start fighting it out, build my towers then focus on the next hand.

“Blah start. Nothing decent. I won last hand, so I’ll keep going, see if I can luck into something.”

“How much did you win?”

“About $350 in small chips.”

“That’s a LOT. What did you start at?”

“$2000. I’m not playing for real money.”

“—have to make a call pretty early in the day I noticed.” Barton observes. “And if he’s not feeling it with his, what did you call it?”

_Makes sense. Have you seen any Avengers?_

“Yeah. One.” Hill says beside me as Barton is listening to Rhodey on something.
I toss my cards way, folding. “One?”

“Yeah. Dr. Banner. He said that she figured out who he was?”

“Should have worn a mask.”

Banner frowns at Sharon. “There was no need to.”

“You’re famous.”

“No.” He clarifies. “I’m infamous.”

He’s right. There’s still a lot of apprehension about him from the ‘global community’ I guess you’d call it. He came back down from Asgard and space, two years later and the same problems are still here, waiting for him.

“Yeah. I talked to Dr. Banner for a second today.”

When I look up, my screen is visible to the room. Right away, the message changes from ‘Delivered’ to ‘Read’.

“Anybody want anything?” Sharon asks, standing up and around the couch.

I raise my hands. “Some pretzels would be nice.” She smiles, then starts to walk past me towards the kitchen. “Thank you!”

“Can I say hi?” Banner asks Hill.

Hill shrugs and looks to Romanoff. “You are a nerdy scientist.”

“You’re a huge dork. If you wanna say hello, go ahead.”

“Then sure.” Dr. Banner ignores Romanoff’s insult and smiles at Hill.

Okay then.

“He says hi, by the way.”

MJ’s response stops, indicator blinking before it completely dies.

Sharon walks back in as Barton laughs. “He got her.”

“He did not. Don’t lie to me like that.”

“Told you.” Barton smirks as Sharon hands me the pretzels and a new drink.

“Oh, thanks, sorry.” I say all in one go.

Rhodey smiles. “The drink will help with her.”

No it won’t.

“Peter, get over here.” Romanoff calls to me, then turns to Sharon. “Scoot over.”

Oh no.

Sharon simply grabs my drink as everyone shifts down one before Romanoff folds my cards for
me. “Hey!” I protest, then plop down beside her.

NOT FAIR.

My drink and snack is placed at my feet by Sharon and Natasha, who both are smirking. “Price of business.” Romanoff reminds me.

*I really have to start watching out for her. She’s got it out for me. Ice Cream, her hiding trick and now this. She keeps beating me.*

“Thanks Peter.” Rhodey teases me as behind him, Barton throw in two chips.

“Welcome.” I smile politely.

Banner beside me, is holding my phone. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Take a picture.” Wanda suggests.

“I’m terrible at taking pictures.” He replies. “Who wants to look at me?”

Barton shrugs. “I don’t know. Hill?”

“I don’t know. What does he want?”

*What do I want?*

“I’m not here to show off. No. Gimme—” I say, my brain finally beginning to work before I activate my web shooters and pull my phone into my hand.”—that back.”

Banner’s head snaps to me. “How’d you get the webbing?”

“I, uhm, got bored in Chemistry today. Lecture. Made a small batch to fiddle with. Try to make it stronger. Put it in a vial in my backpack. Was going to test it tomorrow.”

*Yeah.*

Chemistry was super boring today.

“And you just carry around vials?” Romanoff frowns at me.

*Is that a frown? It’s not good, I know that.*

“Yeah…” I nod. “I bought some online.”

The screen in the middle of the table instantly retracts to Maria Hill’s phone, who starts typing.

*Oh dammit.*

“Yeah, that sounds super safe.” Sharon rolls her eyes, turning to Romanoff.

“We have to start doing that here.” She looks around me to Banner. “Small scale right now?”

“Forget that, how’d you get it to integrate?” Banner grabs my wrist and looks at my right wristband.

*I don’t know. I’ve been fiddling with it for a while. I guess it sort of…dissolved?*
Into metal? No, that can’t be it.

*I like this version of though. It was less viscous, more like rope than it usually is. But still could be manipulated.*

“I don’t know.”

“What the hell is this stuff?” Barton asks, loud enough for me to turn and see Wanda holding up a few pieces of webbing with her telekinesis, and Barton doing the same with his hands.

“Web fluid. Extremely versatile and strong adhesive.” Hill explains to them.

“So the swinging from buildings, climbing on walls, sticking people to stuff, that’s all this is.” Barton says, taking a closer look for himself.

“Not the climbing on walls.”

“Or that sixth sense?” Sharon asks.

“No.” I say simply.

Wanda looks past the webbing, and to me. “So you made this. At school.”

“Because you were bored? Barton looks to Banner.

Banner reaches over and grabs the remainder, then grits his teeth and pulls on each end, only for it to expand easily and stretch but not break. “To evolve it. He’s trying to make it stronger.”

To do more with it, really.

Mr. Stark’s nanotech is going to be more valuable than just about everything else. He was ready for literally every situation, all in one go.

*I can be too, but I can’t rely on the suit like he can. So I need a backup. Best thing I’ve got*

My web fluid.

I nod silently and look to Romanoff.

*They’re all looking to me.*

“I think that answers her question.” I hear somebody behind me say, in a deep voice.

No way. It can’t be him.

In front of me, Hill smirks as Barton and Rhodey silently stand up. “I thought you were retired.” The man says.

“I heard about poker.” Barton smiles. “Good to see you sir. Thank you.”

The man smiles, then silently shakes Rhodey’s hand as well. “So?”

Uhh.-

I open my mouth, only for him to motion for me to stay silent.

*It is him. One eye. Black trench coat disguising his true size.*
It’s Nick Fury.

“He’s not here to show off.” Hill responds to Fury. Fury smiles, but keep silent.

The room is silent for a moment, and everyone but Barton look at me for a split second. “So he’s here to work.” Sharon says, unsure.

“Not on Chemistry, or History, or whatever other class. And Hill said that he wasn’t exactly talkative on what made him walk out of school yesterday.”

Yeah.

“He did what now?” Barton turns and asks Fury as Wanda gives me a unkind, but not mean look.

She thought she had me figured out. She was wrong.

“He walked out of school. Hill tracked him to the exact spot in New York where you guys came back.” Fury continues.

I’ve been trying to think of how to say it.

I look to Fury and see that he’s looking to me. When he realizes he has my attention, he looks away. “He’s still trying to figure out which end is up. Which is why you gave him time.”

“We.” Romanoff adds.

He must be with us. It’s not S.H.I.E.L.D but he’s not alone I guess either.

Fury nods before grabbing a spare water then grasps the back of the couch. “I know that everyone here, whether they want to admit it or not has been wondering why he hasn’t suited up since he got back. Did any of you have ahold of your lives at 15, almost 16?”

Everyone simultaneously disagrees.

“Oh god no.” Banner cringes.

Barton winces as Hill laughs and Romanoff’s smile fades just a bit.

“So maybe instead of trying to push him back into the suit let’s focus not on what he’s got, but what he has that we don’t.”

My spider sense.

“It just…doesn’t feel right.” I turn and tell him.

“Your sense.” Banner clarifies. I nod as Barton seems to process this.

“Causes all the nerves in his body to stand at attention when there’s a threat of a certain level to him.” Fury explains. “Don’t know how.”

“I thought that Hill said he hasn’t felt anything—” Romanoff stops and turns to Hill.

Hill meanwhile, has seven screens up. “No. Nothing.”

“Maybe let’s focus in on that. But don’t provoke it out of him. When you’re pushing him around tomorrow, maybe throw something extra in. See if we can give him a little push in the right
direction.”

“And what direction is that?” I blurt out.

I don’t know.

“Easy.” Fury turns and walks back to me, face expressionless. “Do you want to learn how to really be an Avenger?”
Michelle POV

7:58 AM

As casually as I can, I open the door to homeroom and glance around.

Perfect, I’m right on time. And he’s already here. Now all I have to do is not smile too much and I’ll be okay.

“Excuse me…” I say quietly as I start up our row, catching his attention as he’s looking at something on his phone. After a moment, he barely smiles as I slide by him and sit down.

“Morning.” Is all he says, indistinguishable as the rest of homeroom is caught up in their own morning preparations.

Waiting until after I’ve taken out my notebook, a few pens and my sketchpad to hit him with if necessary, I look up and say “How was poker?”

“Fine. Thank you for the help.” He smiles, then looks back to his phone for an instant.

“Eh. I’m more surprised you got invited. But your friend?” I give Peter a skeptical look, forcing him to turn and for him to immediately cave.

‘He says hi, by the way.’

Nearly caused my heart to stop. I know he knows him, because of the whole thing in the office.

And now that I know what he’s kind of doing, it makes a lot of sense.

Parker’s a dork and a nerd. How Stark found him I don’t know, but he’s just another guy in the army of dorks and nerds that I’m sure Stark has. He has to have an army of them.

“I’m sorry.” Peter immediately apologizes.

Hah. Knew he was lying about him actually saying hi to me.

I don’t doubt that he was there. But he has no clue who I am.

And why should he?

“—I got distracted right after you replied. I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

Fall asleep. Right.
I give him a cynical look and flip open my notebook before I smell…

_Uh oh. Betty’s not here._

“Did you put on cologne?” I change subjects.

“Uhh, yeah. I kind of got sprayed on my way out the door this morning, why?”

_Well do it every day._

“Who you trying to impress?” I ask, leaning forward and smile before Parker goes white.

“Uhh, nobody.” He sputters out.

_Right._

“Morning everyone…” Mrs. Kramer calls out, forcing Peter to turn to the front and pay attention.

_Right back to his phone. Why does he keep looking at it?_

He’s so tense that I can see it.

_Again. What is it that could possibly stress you out so much?_

My pocket lights up, and I quickly move to pull my phone out, hiding it behind my sketchpad.

_He texted me. Already._

_“Today’s the day!!!!” –Betty_

_“The day for what?”_

“—final will account for 35% of your final grade. It will consist of three parts, each of which is worth 33% of that final grade.” Kramer says as I catch the end of his speech.

_So each part is 1/6th, really._

“—would suggest taking notes on this portion in particular, Ms. Edwards.” Kramer stops and looks at Andi, who is looking up from her phone, clearly caught red-handed.

_Notes. Right._

_9:01 AM_

Parker, as he always does, takes a left outside of our classroom door and vanishes into the crowd.

“Hey.” I hear Betty say, then turn back to look at her. “You ignoring me?”

I shake my head and frown at her. “No. Final stuff. Probably a bad texting day. I think all the teachers…” I lower my voice as Mr. Harrington is walking right this way.

“Excuse me.” He says, sliding past a crowd in the hall. “Michelle, Ms. Brant.”

"Hi Mr. Harrington.” Betty gives him her Hollywood smile, and he buys it hook, line and sinker before continuing to walk upstairs.
“When’s the next show coming out again?” I change topics abruptly.

Her face dramatically falls. “Tomorrow. I don’t like it. We’re running out of material.”

“What’d you do the show on?”

“Burn Book.”

*Of course.*

“I need Spider-Man to come back, help some lady cross the street. Doesn’t even have to be old. Just do something! He made the show easy. Always stuff to talk about.” Betty pines openly then turns to look at me again. “Ooh! Can you ask?”

*About?*

“What?” I ask as Parker shows up again, by the lockers talking to Ned, who is animatedly talking about something.

“About Spider-Man! Ask him. Did you talk to him in art?”

I shrug silently.

*He isn’t talking.*

“Ask him. It’ll give you something to talk about.”

“He’s worried about something.” I tell her.

Betty hits herself in the forehead lightly with her hand. “You’ve said that for weeks. Oh dammit, see, look what you made me do…”

*She smudged her makeup.*

I smile and turn to cover her as she pulls out a mirror and leans against the wall. “Seriously.”

“I am serious.” I tell Betty as she pulls out some concealer.

“You always want to talk to him, up until you see him. Then you do what you always do.”

“That’s who he knows me as. It’d be weird if I suddenly was all up in his business.”

“And you’re not already in his business right now?” Betty asks, barely looking at me as she fixes her makeup.

*That’s not fair.*

I groan as Betty snaps her mirror shut. “You’re not helping.”

“I am! It’s a great day. Did you hear about Pepper Potts’ appointment today? She’s going to find out what gender the baby is.”

I whip back to look at Betty as we start towards World History. “How do you know that?”

*No need to worry about the final in here after Parker made that enormous study sheet.*

“It’s all over online.” Betty informs me. “You wouldn’t know because you live in a cave, like a
troll or a monster.”

“I read.” I defend myself. “Sorry I didn’t know the exact plans of Pepper Potts. Why should we know anyway?”

“Because it’s Iron Man’s baby. It’s Stark’s baby. I bet Peter would tell you if you asked.”

No.

“No!” I snap at Betty. “He doesn’t know her.”

Betty thinks about it for a brief moment. “You’re right.”

“Yeah. And aren’t you still mad at him?”

This time, Betty punches my arm. “I’m trying to hook you up so you can stop talking to me about him!”

“So you can focus on Ned.” I smirk at her. As soon as we reach our door, Betty darts ahead of me and sits down, away from me as I sit behind Parker again.

“Boo.” I say quietly, then hear him laugh.

“Somebody’s in a good mood after hearing about that final.” Parker comments, not looking up from his phone again.

I briefly ignore him again and pretend to lift my bag up while I look at his phone.

He’s looking at…files. Or something. I don’t know, most of the screen is blacked out. I think the Avengers put a privacy screen like one of those you can put on your laptop so others can’t peek at the screen, on his phone.

It looks important.

“Eh. It’ll be easy.” I say, then impulsively move to scratch his back before he jumps away, wincing.

Whoa.

“Can you, please…don’t.” he says, suddenly looking sad. “Sorry. Just…slept weird. Back hurts.”

“Oh.” I blurt out thoughtlessly.

It does suck when you sleep weird.

“Must really hurt, ‘cause of how you jumped.” I tease him with a smile.

Parker however, continues looking pained. “Yeah. Sorry. I’m uhm, cool with later though. Tomorrow. And the uhm—”

Okay, I’ve got to stop him from destroying himself.

“Do you ever listen to the words coming out of your mouth?”

You sound ridiculous. You’re smart. Sound smart Parker.

Right away, Peter goes white, then seems to shrink up before he looks away. “No. Sorry.”
“No, hey.” I lean over my desk and catch his eye. “That’s cool. Just, your back must hurt. I think
Jessica knows somebody who works at a spa. You need a massage anyway.”

Always tense.

“I’m fine.” Peter says simply, then moves to turn away again.

“Yeah. Says the guy who always looks like a statue. C’mon. Loosen up.” I say, then gently rub his
shoulder before my pocket vibrates.

Not now Betty! Come on!!

I shoot a glare Betty’s way just as Parker slides out of my grip, forcing my attention back to him.
“Hey.” Instead of obeying, Parker simply leans forward and opens up his notes, sliding his phone
into his pocket before running his hand thru his hair.

“Parker.” I hiss under my breath, before chancing another glance in Betty’s direction.

Yup. She’s smiling again. She thinks it’s working when it’s really not. That came out way harsher
than I meant. C’mon Peter. Don’t do this to me now…

Peter ignores me completely until Cobbwell fires up the projector, indicating that class has started.

Just great.

10:03 AM

“I can’t believe you.” She groans as we walk back to the lockers.

“I didn’t mean to!” I defend myself.

Betty makes a grouchy face. “Do you even hear what dumb words you say, idiot?” Of course he’s
going to ignore you!”

“I didn’t say that.” I correct her.

Betty rolls her eyes. “Might as well have. You’re letting him be a bitch and a prima donna. He’s
doing all this for attention.”

I don’t think so.

I shake my head in time for Betty to catch the end of it and frown. “Oh why? Because he never
talks about it?”

“Exactly!”

“You think he’s a loser.” Betty growls, throwing things into her locker.

“NO, but you do.”

“Just…tell the truth! And give me my boyfriend back! I’m not letting him take both of you.” Betty
grumbles. “I’ll see you after lunch.”

“Bye.” I say sarcastically, and Betty smiles back sarcastically before turning and disappearing
down another hallway.

Great.

**12:48 PM**

“These actions single handedly forced the Red Army’s hand into a full retreat.” Harrington continues before I jot down a quick note.

‘Retreat into Russian winter isn’t an actual retreat’.

*It’s true. Nobody marched in there and came out alive after a winter. They can’t be invaded.*

Harrington clicks his remote, and the slide changes. “This caused a dramatic changing of position by the citizens in the surrounding areas, nearly all of whom…”

*Boring.*

I glance down at my feet, and see Parker’s foot bouncing anxiously.

*Tap tap tap tap tap tap…*

On a whim, I stretch out and tap his foot underneath his desk, then slide back to my normal position.

*C’mon. Loosen up.*

He briefly leans back in his chair, before resuming his note taking.

*He’s probably looking for study guide material here too. He’s probably making guides for every class he’s in.*

He’d let me have those guides too if I asked nice enough I’m sure.

*Let’s ask.*

“Making another study guide?”

*He’s really getting a hang of this new haircut. Even though I liked him with longer hair.*

I wonder what he’d do if I just ran my hand right thru his hair one day after practice. Just try to break his brain.

*It’d be worth a laugh to see him completely short circuit.*

Peter shifts in his seat, then moves to pull out his phone.

*Got him.*

He successfully sneaks his phone behind his book without looking down, then glances down—

*Oh what now?*

Peter stays where his is, completely rooted to his seat as the color slowly starts draining out of his face, leaving him a nasty, pale white.
Peter types out multiple messages rapid fire before squirming around in his seat, then leans forward. Without thinking, I reach forward and scratch his upper back. “Hey. Don’t ignore me.”

“Trying to listen here…” Peter hisses back to me, barely audible before he looks back to his phone.

*He’s talking to somebody. That’s the messages screen.*

“Yeah right. Tell Dr. Banner hi from me.” I tease him. Only it backfires and he leans as far away from me as he can and shivers before he types out a message as fast as he can.

*Oh come on!!!*

“I’m joking!” I text him again.

Harrington silently spots me with my phone out, before I quickly slide it away.

*He won’t call me out on it. I hope. Better actually pay attention. Just in case. I know he’ll ask me a question as soon as he can as punishment. But he’ll let me get away with this.*

---

3:36 PM

I open the door up for Betty and I, then drift off to my room to go drop off my bag.

*All day.*

All damn day.

*That stupid idiot got even more stressed out. All day. He was more wooden at the end of the day than the beginning!*

I let out a scream of frustration, then toss my backpack onto my beanbag and walk back downstairs, where I hear Mom and Betty talking already. “—I don’t know. She’s been mad about him all day.”

Mom simply looks to me as Betty pretends that I didn’t just hear her and goes to grab something to drink. “Hi honey. How was your day?”

“It was okay.” I shrug. Betty mocks my shrug by doing an exaggerated, Eeyore like shrug before hanging her head.

Mom quickly laughs and covers her mouth. \“

“Betty!” I snap at her.

“Sorry!” Betty apologizes to me, as Mom moves to grab a cookie off a plate by the oven.

*Ooh.*

“What’d this poor boy do now? Did you talk to him about this summer yet?”

*No.*

“No. Never got a chance to.”
Betty rolls her eyes at me before starting to scroll thru her phone. “You never asked.”

“He was wooden all day! Super tense. All day!” I defend myself.

*I tried being super nice, affectionate all day. Didn’t work at all. He might even be tired of me texting him. He’s ignored my last 5 texts. What’s even worse is how he was on his phone the entire rest of the day. At least the last three classes. Constantly texting, or working, or doing something.*

“Well maybe he’s working on something.” Mom hypothesizes.

She knows what I think. He’s a busboy or something.

*But the Banner thing doesn’t make sense then!*

“When are you going to ask him?” Betty looks up from her phone to me.

I shrug, then walk over to get a cookie.

*I need it.*

“I don’t know. I asked Liz and she said that everybody except him agreed last year. I think I can get everyone to do it again, but everyone will say no if I start off with a no from him. So…”

Mom understands, nodding. “Okay. Maybe tomorrow.”

*Maybe.*

“Oh my god!!! He’s BACK!!!!” Betty screams, then covers her mouth with one hand, causing me to jump out of my skin.

“What? What?” I turn around so fast fast spots pop up in my vision.

“Who is back?” Mom asks quickly.

*She looks mad that she screamed.*

“Spider-Man!! Down in Queens again! He finally came back!!!” Betty smiles from ear to ear.

*WHAT?!*

“He’s been gone since the Avengers won.” Mom comments as I run over to Betty and see her scrolling thru Twitter as fast as she can.

‘Yo, Spidey just saved a family in a minivan from getting totally wrecked.’

‘SPIDER-MAN IS BACK!!!!’

‘SPIDEY!!!!!’

“Where are all the pictures? Video?” I question her.

*There’s always pictures.*

“There aren’t any yet!” Betty says, frantically scrolling. “I think it literally just—”

Betty keeps scrolling, stopping when she think she sees video.
‘I was taking a picture during SM’s return and my phone bricked! Trash update man!’

‘Crowd surrounding latest Spider-Man sighting reportedly erupted into applause and cheering during his first public appearance in over a month.’

“Has it really been over a month?”

Mom looks back to me, changing the channel on the TV. “Yes dear, almost two. Oh, of course you’re not talking about him…”

Instead of the actual Spider-Man related news, the local news is running a rerun of some old, boring talk show.

“Oh no. She’s going to be hung up on that for the rest of the day.

Mom flips thru the local channels, none of which is the news. “Anything else Betty? I’m empty!”

“No…” Betty says after a moment. “It seems like he just kind of showed up, saved those people, then left.”

“No pictures or video?” I ask.

*That’s* weird. *They always* get him on camera. *He’s not exactly* camera shy.

Betty shakes her head. “Okay. Now you have to text him. You know he knows something.”

“You thought he knew Pepper Potts today too! He doesn’t know anything!” I reply to Betty, then roll my eyes.

*I don’t know what it is, but it’s annoying being hounded about it.*

Mom turns back to Betty as she walks back into the kitchen. “Pepper Potts?”

“Her appointment was reportedly today. I heard she was spotted near the Presbyterian & Cornell Medical Center today.” Betty informs Mom waving her phone.

“Peter’s the one with the Stark internship?”

Betty looks from Mom, back to me. “Yeah!”

“You didn’t tell me *that.*” Mom pivots to look at me.

*Oh come on now.*

“Yes! It’s apparently a ‘Stark’ internship. That’s what he always says. But he doesn’t know Stark, or probably his wife! He just does useless stuff, mostly I bet.”

“Has he told you this?” Mom questions me.

“No!” I fire back. “He won’t tell me anything!”

Right away, both Mom and Betty look to each other, then start smiling.
Oh what’d I do now? Defend him too strongly? Just because I actually kind of know something, doesn’t mean I can say!

“What’d he tell you dear?” Mom asks politely.

“Nothing!”

“No.” Betty smiles even wider. “He told you something. Listen to yourself.”

UGH.

I groan, then start back upstairs. “I’m taking a shower. Don’t come back for me if I accidentally drown.” I call back to them as I climb the stairs.

Stupid, stupid, all stupid.

Peter POV

8:50 PM

“Search complete.” Karen informs as I keep looking at this file.

“And?”

“We have very limited knowledge of timelines, or space-time. Most of which come from Director Coulson’s S.H.I.E.L.D team. Would you like for me to locate relevant files and load them into BARF Peter?”

Sure.

I groan, then try to pop my neck. “Yeah. Thanks Karen.”

“You’re welcome Peter. I’m detecting high levels of stress coming from you today. Shall I inform Agent Hill?”

No.

“She already knows.”

I glance around the lab as behind me, in Mr. Stark’s lab, the BARF technology is activating and warming itself up.

Morgan. Morgan Stark.

Pepper’s having a girl.

Which should be impossible. Because in the future, the one that everyone died in after Thanos won, Pepper had a daughter in that version of events too. And she named her Morgan. And according to all of our intel and notes, one of the last things Mr. Stark told Pepper was that he had some weird dream, that they had a child, and the name was Morgan.

“Memory successfully uploaded. Shall I look for alternate stress relief methods Peter?”

I smile, then scoop up my tablet. “No thanks Karen. Unless you can fix this.”

It can’t be a girl. A boy, maybe. Sure. But not the exact same outcome as when we lost. We can’t
repeat the same things we did when we lost.

It’s impossible. I don’t know anything about time and all that, but…

Maybe this memory will help.

I slip on the glasses, and hit play. In front of my eyes, the scene changes from a blank white room, with sparse furniture, to a dark, brick lined room with people all around a table.

“You're sure it was the future? My whole face was covered in—.”

“Karen.” I pause the video. Put markers down, telling me who these people are please.”

Immediately, everyone’s names pop up.

Director Coulson, Agent May, Agent Johnson, Dr. Simmons, Dr. Fitz, Agent Campbell.

“And Coulson shoots you?”

“Yep.” Agent Johnson repeats, holding the ice pack to her head.

Coulson speaks up. “Then I'll just ask the question that someone should ask at some point. Is this even possible?”

The room quickly starts debating amongst itself before Agent May cuts the discussion off. “That's a dumb question.”

“Okay, got it. So, we all agree it's possible.” Coulson concedes his point.

“Now what?”

“I can change it.” Agent Johnson says emphatically.

“No.”

“We can reverse-engineer the visions, figure out where this went down, and get there ahead of it. Save that poor man.”

“You can't. I mean, fourth-dimensionally speaking, is all. If you saw the future, then that's the future.” Dr. Fitz says, with an air of finality to it.

“I don't want to believe that.” Agent Johnson replies to him specifically. “I can't explain how it felt, but it was awful. I felt so helpless. I was inches away from him. I have to save him.”

“Edwin called in with your name for a reason.” Agent Campbell hypothesizes. “Maybe you're meant to change it.”

“And we know what this homeless man, Charles, looks like.” Coulson picks up on his point.

Agent May finishes the point for the both of them “And we're running a search.”

“If Daisy can remember details about the location and we get there in time, we—” Director Coulson starts chugging along before being cut off.

“Guys, there is no time. She glimpsed the fourth dimension. Time is an illusion. It's how we perceive the fourth dimension.” Dr. Fitz says, sounding exasperated. “Simmons.” He turns to the
woman near to him.

“It’s mathematics. He's talking about space-time.” Dr. Simmons clarifies to the room, who all look a little lost.

Dr. Fitz suddenly starts looking around. “How do you— How can I explain this? Right.” He says to himself, then grabs a large stack of office paper and sets it down on the table. "We're 3-D, yeah? Okay, but imagine, imagine that we lived in a 2-dimensional existence. Flat, just like a piece of paper."

“We wouldn't be able to conceive of three dimensions, of a cube or anything that's not 2 dimensional, okay? Right, so…we flat paper people would perceive this 3 dimensional cube as many separate 2 dimensional moments.” He draws a line on the stack of paper, then turns it around to reveal a line cutting across diagonally. “As time passing the point on the line traveling through space and time.”

“But, in fact, the cube, the line is fixed. It's just sitting there.” Dr. Simmons clarifies for him.

“There’s no future. There's no past. It just… It just is. And nothing you can do will change that.” Dr. Fitz finishes his explanation, looking thoroughly stressed out.

“You're hurting my brain.” Agent May says before Karen stops the recording.

Great.

So if time is fixed, unchangeable, impossible to meddle with, how am I here?

“Karen is anyone doing research on the space-time continuum right now? On a quantum level?”

I do know that Ant-Man was messing around with Pym Particles, which make his suit work and allows him to change size on demand. He ended up in another realm, time travelling in an effort to escape. He called it the quantum realm.

Which is how I have Morgan Stark’s picture and file, from the future in which we lost. Except now we’ve won. I’m alive.

HOW!!? None of this makes any sense.

“Yes, there are currently many papers being written on the subject. However, none go into the possibility of changing space-time.”

“Can I talk to this…Dr. Fitz guy? Where is he?” I ask Karen, double checking the name.

Karen falls silent for a moment. “No. I’m afraid Dr. Fitz died during Graviton’s attack on Chicago.”

Oh yeah. The natural disaster that literally nobody cares about.

Happened at the same time as Thanos’ invasion. And as a result, nobody cares. At all.

“Of course he’s dead. Everybody, who knows anything about this stuff is dead!!!” I yell in frustration, then toss my marker back towards my lab and the open door.

Stark dead! Rogers dead! Dr. Fitz! Dead! All dead!
But I’ve got an unborn baby, and the creeping realization that no matter what I do, I can’t actually change anything.

I’m stuck. Fighting a losing battle.

It can’t happen in this timeline, like it did in the last one. When we lost. And it turned out awful.

Apparently, the last thing Pepper told Mr. Stark as he chased after me and Dr. Strange, was to come back to Earth. She begged and pleaded with him, but he didn’t leave, obviously.

Once Captain Marvel saved him, Stark went to apologize, only for her to completely shut him down. Shut him out. She told him the bare minimum. There was a baby. But she didn’t want him anywhere near it.

*Their child.*

There isn’t much on the subject after that, but…since everyone that was there has said basically that Stark worked himself to death in order to try and make things right.

*It makes sense. And now he’s dead.*

And Morgan lives. Again.

I flip back and forth thru the file. Pictures of a beaming child with her mom, pictures of her making messes, running around, having fun, along with a simulation of what she looks like when she grows up.

*She’s going to be pretty. Red haired, just like her mom. But with Mr. Stark’s eyes.*

“I can’t explain how it felt, but it was awful. I felt so helpless.”

I know. You are helpless. I was helpless from stopping it on Titan. And I tried.

*I felt it come over me, like a wave.*

And if life is nothing but small moments, plugging along towards an inevitable conclusion, then what’s stopping Pepper from taking Morgan away and hiding again?

Somebody behind me knocks on the door twice, and I turn back to see that it’s Hill, dressed in slacks and a dress shirt, smirking at me. “You know, for somebody who was a hero today, you don’t look very happy.”

*Haha.*

I shrug. “Is everybody upstairs?”

“Yup.” She nods once as I move to grab my jacket. “Everyone’s really excited to see you. Congratulate you on today.”

*There’s nothing to congratulate me for.*

“I didn’t really do anything. I got lucky.” I shake my head as I pull my jacket on before Hill opens the door, leading outside and toward the main building of the Compound.

Hill laughs. “You caught a SUV! And made it look easy. I don’t care if we were performing system checks or not. I barely had time to see what was happening and you’d already saved the
day.”

I don’t know. I just saw it.

The suit worked perfectly, like it was supposed to. Retro-reflective panels allowed me to vanish into thin air after I caught the minivan, Hill saved me from unneeded press and scrutiny by destroying all the security camera and cell phone footage of me seemingly flying in from nowhere. All is well.

Easy stuff. Didn’t even take 30 minutes.

“Thank you for letting me come up here on no notice.” I smile, and Hill looks back and returns the smile.

“You’re welcome. It’s a treat, having you here on a school night.” Hill smiles as we cross the small harbor. “Have you checked your texts today?”

Yes.

Michelle was super needy today. I don’t know what her deal is, but she kept on teasing me, pushing, poking and prodding me, trying to get my attention all day.

“Do you ever listen to the words coming out of your mouth?”

Apparently not. Because if I did, I probably would sound like such an idiot lying to her about why my back hurts.

Not my fault I got hit with a metal pipe during training and my back’s all bruised up.

Hill doesn’t say anything else as the next door opens, revealing Scott, Romanoff, Rhodey, Sam, Agent Carter, Dr. Banner, a Asian woman in a white lab coat beside Dr. Banner, another man in a plaid shirt who is standing beside Thor, who looks very bored.

Dr. Banner is…dammit.

He’s looking at a screen full of mathematic equations.

He’s stuck on what I’m stuck on.

This should be impossible. It cannot actually be happening.

It can’t be possible.

“Isn’t it a school night?” I hear Fury tease from behind me, causing most everyone to look in his direction.

I force myself to smile and laugh before Hill replies “I’ll get him back to school on time tomorrow morning.”

“Good. Cause this might take a while.” The man in the plaid shirt says heavily.

I glance behind me to see Fury slide to my right and stand beside me. “Okay Dr. Selvig. Let’s get started then. Take it from the top.”

Chapter End Notes
FINALLY! After writing three different versions of this chapter, I finally get it right after totally scrapping what I had. Apologies for the long delay in between updates. For those who are interested, the scene Peter looked at is 3x15 from Agents of Shield. Thank you to everyone for their great feedback and passing this fic along, I greatly appreciate it. Until next time...
“Peter!!!” May calls back to me from the living room,

“Almost ready!!!” I answer, then grab my shirt. “Karen, where is he?”

“Mrs. Leeds’ car is two blocks away and closing in on your location.”

I smile as I pull my shirt on then dart thru my room and into the living room, where May is pouring two glasses of wine. “I’ll be back.” I comment, scooping my keys out of the bowl by the door before popping it open and sliding thru.

‘One block away. Stopped at the light.’

Perfect.

The moment the elevator door opens to the lobby, I see Ned talking to his Mom, halfway out of her car before he closes the door with a smile and turns to my building, only to see me.

“Hey man.” I smile, grabbing the door for him as he looks worried.

“You never meet me in the lobby.”

I shrug. “I can’t just be nice?”

“You can.” He concedes as we start thru the lobby. “It’s just different. Is May mad or something?”

“No. Just…hang on.” I stall for time before we reach the elevator. Beside me, Ned keeps looking around anxiously.

“Am I in trouble? I thought it was movie night?”

“It is.” I smile as the elevator starts back up. “But we’ve got to take care of something first.”

Ned immediately turns to look at me. “Is this about your patrol? How is nobody getting any footage of you?”

“It’s about that.” I smile at him.

“It is?” I nod and try not to laugh. “What?”

“Sorry man.” I clap his shoulder. “Relax. It’s not bad.”

“You’re just acting all weird. Which makes me act weird because—” Ned continues on as the elevator door pops open to my floor.

“You’re fine. More than fine. C’mon.” I wave for him to follow me before I open the door to the apartment.

“Okay…” Ned says reluctantly, following me before I shut the door behind me.

I smile and turn back to him. “You said you still want to be my guy in the chair right?”

“Yes.” Ned says instantly.
“You’re in the right place then.” Ned whips around to the kitchen, where May is holding a glass along with Maria Hill.

“You set me up.” Ned turns back to me.

I shrug. “You said yes.”

“Hi Ned.” May waves to him as Hill sets her wine aside, pulling up dual screens.

Ned smiles in her direction as Hill slides off her seat. “Okay. A couple of ground rules: One, no bullshit. None of this is a joke. Not at all. You knowing anything? It’s because I allowed it. Peter knows this. I assume he told you this?”

“Yes ma’am.” Ned nods, walking over to grab onto the couch.

Hill smiles. “Good. Because this is the big leagues. There’s going to be a day that I won’t be able to run the show for him. And we’ll need you to step up and run back end. It won’t be a game, or a simulation. It’ll be real. Understand?”

Ned nods again, and Hill continues. “Now, I’ve done extensive background research into you. You seem like a very smart kid with an aptitude for electronics and coding. And trouble. You disabled the ‘Training Wheels Protocol’ in his suit?”

“Yeah…?” He answers, unsure before he looks back to me for guidance.

Doing great so far.

I smile at him before Hill answers “Good. Not everything you’ll run into is like that, but it’s on that level. Are you in?”

“Yeah.” Ned says, almost laughing at the question.

“Good. Karen.” Hill asks the room.

Karen moves the screens from in front of Hill to in front of Ned. “Fill these out, and we can begin getting you clearance. Be completely honest. You lie on this, at any point tonight? You’re out.” Hill says simply, the threat well disguised, but clearly there. Ned nods, then Hill adds “Go crazy then.”

Ned nods once more, then sits on the couch and pulls one of the screens to him as I walk towards the kitchen, ignoring May’s smile in my direction.

“Did you tell her about what you did today?” Hill asks me, sitting back down in her seat by the island.

May shakes her head. “No. I never know what he does when he’s hero-ing.”

Hero-ing.

“So there’s these ricochet webs that Stark invented and installed in his suit. Along with a billion other combinations. I’ve been trying to get him to experiment on the garden variety thugs.”

So that when I meet another Vulture, or Thanos or whoever, I’ll have all of these tricks in my bag.

“Okay. This sounds promising.” May smiles, swishing her wine.
Hill smiles, then continues. “It is. So he got the drop on this pick pocket so bad that he didn’t even
know where Pete was. No clue. So he fires the ricochet web off the wall and catches the guy. Just
as a NYPD bike is rolling on by.”

Behind Hill, I see Ned turn back to the kitchen, listening in. “The web, because of the ricochet,
sends the guy flying directly into the police officer on the bike. Who just had no idea what hit
him.”

Oh. Hey. That worked!

“Special delivery!” I tell the officer, who is sprawled out on the pavement.

May snorts, then covers her mouth. “Was he coming to get the pick pocket?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug as I pull open the fridge to grab some tea. “How’d you know about that?”
I ask Hill after closing the refrigerator door.

Hill doesn’t answer, instead sipping her wine first. “Sharon sent me the day’s footage.”

I wasn’t out long today. Hour and a half, almost called it sooner, then swung back here, snuck in,
hopped in the shower so that I’d be ready for Ned and movie night.

Easy, just like this whole week was.

“Are you getting more comfortable in the suit?” May asks as Hill stands.

“Kind of.” I shrug. “I…I’m just doing. I can’t think in there yet without feeling super restricted.”

Restricted isn’t the word. I can’t relax in there yet and just be Spider-Man.

Nobody knows that because Hill is doing her job to the point that it’s becoming clear to the general
public that Spider-Man and the Avengers are working together to protect me.

May silently pushes the takeout menu to me as Hill is explaining something on the screen to Ned.

“Did you guys decide on a movie?”

“Not yet.”

“You could always invite Ned’s girlfriend over. Betty’s her name, I think. Right?” Hill suggests,
sipping her wine and smirking at me.

Uh oh.

“Yeah, that’s her name.”

“I think that sounds great. What about Michelle?” May asks Ned, peering around me.

“I don’t—” I start before I’m silenced by Ned.

“I think they’re together tonight. I’ll ask though.”

“That sounds good to me.” May responds before she and May share a look.

“Ned.” Hill starts simply, then looks over to me and spins to box me out.
“You know Michelle right?” Ned nods silently as he is still filling out the boxes on his screens. “What do you think?”

“Think about what?” He plays dumb.

“About Michelle.”

Ned shrugs. “She’s cool. Distant and kind of abrasive sometimes, but she’s okay.”

“Abusive?” May comments before her wine clinks back down to the counter.

Hill barely, quietly laughs. “How?”

“Uhm,…she’s not like most other girls at school. She doesn’t really care what you think. She does whatever she wants.”

_Not this week. She’s been weird all week, trying to loosen me up. Which has happened, but not because of her._

It sounds dumb, but just the time has helped. The roundtable at the Compound basically resulted in a stalemate and a lot of talk of timelines.

_Dr. Strange didn’t answer Fury’s request to come and explain anything, so…_ We’re stuck.

“Do you think she likes him?”

“No.” I laugh. “She’s mad at me again.”

“What for?” May pivots to me.

I shrug as Hill looks to Ned for answers. “I don’t know. She does keep following him around though.”

What? No she isn’t.

“No…no she isn’t following me around.” I counter.

Ned laughs at me, “She sits behind you in every class.”

“So?”

“She’s interested.” May reads into it.

“No.” I shake my head and snatch up the takeout menu.

_I am hungry. I think I’ll order my usual pepper chicken with rice an order a side of veggies and sauce. Even if I can’t finish it all, it’ll save._

Hill turns to me. “Invite her.”

“Yeah!” May smiles brightly. “I told you that you should do that!”

“No!” I tell both of them emphatically. “Is everyone ready to order?”
Ned thankfully answers “Yes.”

“Karen, pull up the screen for takeout. May’s favorite.” I instruct her.

On command, the screens pop up. “Why not?” May questions.

“It’s a Friday night. She’s probably at some party.” I shrug, then ask Ned. “Is Flash having a party?”

“Nah, it’s some place in the Water District.”

_Probably with glitter and college girls._

Hill pulls the takeout screen to her and starts entering in what she wants. “Michelle seems more like a movie night girl than a party girl.”

_Yes, she is._

“She is, she mostly goes for the food.” Ned reads my mind.

May smiles at Ned. “My kind of girl.”

_She’d have a fit with how touchy she was all week. And what makes it worse is how I liked it._

She listened, even after she made me feel like a fool earlier in the week. Asked about my back, if I was sore still, kept on mentioning her friend that works at a spa.

_Not really kept on, but still. Mentioned it like three times._

Ned looks away from his phone and back to his screens, full of open response questions.

_What political leaning, if any do you have, that kind of thing. Adult, big picture stuff._

Back in my room, I hear something vibrate, causing May and Maria Hill to turn and look before I walk back to my room.

_Yup. It’s my phone. I know what this is about. Ned weirded her out. Guaranteed._

We talked about movie night at school in passing, and I think Betty heard a little bit, but only our debate about what movie we want to watch.

_I’m not in the mood for Star Wars or Indiana Jones or anything like that so I’m letting Ned pick. But that was before I came home from patrol to find Maria Hill._

Plans, meet window.

 ‘You’re inviting us to Movie Night?’

 “Yeah.”

_Nope._

Feeling Hill’s eyes on me, I retreat deeper into my room.

_Oh hey, my frame came in._

“May? My frame came in?” I call out as Michelle’s reply pops up.
She needs to talk to me?

“About what? What’d I do wrong?”

Hill, on the doorframe.

“I thought they’d be done next week.” I say to her without looking back.

“Everyone Is Forgiven Now”

With me in the center of the photo, cradling Mr. Stark. You can’t see much else, Widow running past, Thor is behind me. Quill is looking up into the sky, Gamora hugging him desperately. Half of Cap’s shield is partially visible behind Mr. Stark.

“Pepper was having a whole bunch of things framed for her new office and threw it in there.” Hill explains.

I need to say thank you.

“Karen, can you text her? Say thank you for me please.”


“Thank you.” I smile before I see Michelle reply.

‘Nothing wrong. I’ll explain when I’m over there.’

“Okay. We’re ordering Chinese. What do you guys want?”

I set my phone back down, then look back to Hill to see her perched on my desk. "You're not good at relaxing."

“There’s a lot going on.” I counter.

Hill laughs. “There’s always a lot going on. You should focus on being normal.”

“I have a responsibility to help.”

“You’re also fifteen. Be fifteen. Focus on girls. You’re already ahead of most guys your age, it’s not all about her body. What is it about her anyway?”

“I don’t like her. We’re friends and talk a bit.”

They’ve always read too much into things.

Hill smirks. “You keep talking to her. Even when you’re at the Compound.”

‘Don’t buy me food yet. And I already knew that. Betty said Ned already asked.’

Yet.

“My aunt says yes. Now what do you want?”
“You remind me of me at your age.” Hill says behind me. “And that’s not a compliment.”

“You were at S.H.I.E.L.D at 15?” I glance back at her.

Hill smirks. “Not yet, I joined the Air Force first before Coulson saw something I worked on and snatched me up. Sent me to the Academy.”

“The Academy?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D Academy. There were three branches. I went to Operations.”

Were.

“Before the Triskelion?” I assume, and Hill smirks before my pocket vibrates.

“Yup, I—”

‘Chicken Fried Rice I guess. If I want something else I'll steal what you order or raid your fridge.’

“—anyway, that’s not the point. Did you order yet?”

I shake my head, then pull up everyone’s order and enter in Michelle’s Chicken Fried Rice, then add my order before sending off to May for her approval.

She has the card information they’ll want.

“That’s it?” May hollers from the other room.

“Yeah!” I respond as Hill pulls up the order and frowns.

“And you asked her what she wanted.” Hill double checks. I nod silently before picking up the framed cover of the Times.

I think I’ll hang it above the helmet and ARC reactor.

“Done and done. See you soon.”

See you soon. I don't like it. Sounds creepy. What am I supposed to type?

I stare at my screen vaguely before hearing Hill say “Stay still.” before I’m spritzed with something.

“Really?” I turn back to her as the cologne hits my nose as Hill is holding the bottle in her hand. “Now it’s going to look like I’m trying too hard.”

Sure, just go on ahead and walk into my bathroom, grab it and spray me.


She and May are going to embarrass me.

“What about you?” I ask.

Hill’s expression drops before she says “Excelsior.”
“Oh not fair.”

“Oh.” I say as she reaches down and scoops out my mask. “That’s mine.”

“And I’m infamous as a S.H.I.E.L.D agent. I’ve testified on Capitol Hill. This is a piece of cake compared to this.” She smiles coyly. “Anything I should know now? Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

I groan and put my head in my hands briefly before fiddling with my hair. “Just…please don’t embarrass me too much.”

“I won’t. I’d actually like to meet her as me.” Hill teases me. “You know, if you ever ask her out.”

“I don’t have time for that.”

“You could ask her to coffee after you eat. Let the actual couple watch the movie and try to make a move yourself.” Hill suggests.

“We’ll make ourselves scarce.” May smiles, suddenly standing at my door.

Hill nods. “We’ll just drink wine in her room. Maybe watch HGTV or the Property Brothers.”

May likes one of them. Keeps talking about how cute he is, on and on. I know she’s not serious, it’s really a joke but still.

I don’t know.

“God, you look one hundred. Relax!” May scolds me.


“Had to have High, high hopes for a minute…” The speaker by my bed, along with the one in my bathroom start playing.

“Oh god.” May groans. “I heard this at the store.” Hill shrugs while starting to dance like a dork again.

I can’t do this.

Saving myself, I walk into the kitchen as Ned is grabbing a glass for himself. “Can you grab me one please?”

“Sure. You didn’t say how much she likes you.”

“Who?” I ask.

Ned smiles. “Her.” Then nods to Maria Hill as she’s doing something in my room.

“Maria Hill?”

“Yeah.” He laughs.

“Yeah.” I lie and nod. “Hill’s…Hill. I don’t know.”

Ned laughs before pulling out the cranberry juice for himself. “I think she’s doing something in there. Better go check it out.”
He’s right.

I stifle a groan, then walk in and see…

She’s redecorated my room?

Hill barely glances at my reaction before smiling. “Fury’s idea. Uses Wakandan cloaking tech to hide what’s actually there.”

The helmet now looks like a plastic toy. The Arc reactor is now a router. The picture is now a commemorative photo of when the Mets won the pennant in 2015.

“Wakandan? From Wakanda?”

“Yup.” Hill nods, walking past my door before slowly shutting it with a gentle click. “Karen. I need the room.”

“Understood. What security level should I raise to?”

“Level 7.”

My clearance level.

My door clicks several more times, despite…there being no more locks that can click into place as Hill turns back around. “You aren’t just here to talk to Ned.” I put the pieces together.

“Smart cookie.” Hill smirks. “I need to talk to you about something. Karen, excelsior.” My desk drawer pops open once again, and Hill pulls out my tablet, emblazoned with the Avengers insignia on the back.

“There’s been some more movement, that you already know about. Thor’s back.”

Yeah, I saw him this week.

Didn’t say anything to me other than “Parker.” and clapping me on the shoulder.

Didn’t say much at the Compound either. He was there because we were there about Mr. Stark. Only asked about how much longer until Morgan was due to arrive, arrangements in the meantime, etc.

“I know. I saw him.”

“No, he’s back. Here. For the time being, at least.” Hill clarifies.

“Why?”

Hill lets out a breath. “Because there’s nothing more he thinks he can do. Colonel Danvers is working with the Nova Corps, and Thor is the protector of his Nine Realms, worlds, Earth being one of them. But he has work to do here, for Asgard.”

“He bought like three states I heard.” I say, and Hill nods.

“Parts of three states, and closed them off to the general public. One would guess, to begin building his home back up.” Hill says distractedly, logging into my tablet.

So we know why he’s here.
“Okay.” I say, waiting for Hill to continue as she pulls up a specific file.

“Well, here’s what the news is.” Hill says simply, opening file 042. I quickly straighten up as I see what it very clearly is.

*It’s the Tesseract. The Space Stone.*

“Thor found it?”

Hill nods. “Don’t know where. He just told Fury that he found it where he went looking for it. An old story, told to him by his father. And it mysteriously was there.”

A blue hologram of the Tesseract is projecting outside of the tablet, prompting me to reach out and grab it.

*It’s…warm.*

“Now we have two.”

*Thor has the Tesseract. Dr. Strange has the Time Stone.*

Hill smiles, setting my tablet on my desk and sits on my comforter.

*Now hold on. He said it himself, right after the UnSnappening.*

> “It’s too dangerous to keep these Stones too close together. The temptation for any being is too great, even if they cannot hope to wield their power. It is best that they remain separate.”

“I thought it was too dangerous to have two stones here on Earth.”

*Look what happened last time. Thanos came down and boom.*

Full House, took the pot and went to his farm upstate.

“He didn’t say that this time. But if we can’t trust Thor with it. If we can’t who can we?” Hill ponders to me.

*Fair point.*

I shrug, feeling her gaze on me. “I know, but still. That’s literally what he said.”

“I know.”

“Then why is he back here? On Earth.”

*If he has this Stone, he can basically go wherever he wants to. It can create portals to anywhere in the universe. It’s how Loki started the Battle of New York.*

Hill shrugs, then shifts on my bed. “Didn’t really say.”

“Oh okay.”

*That’s helpful. Thanks Thor.*

“Fury wanted you in on this though. He told me to tell you this: “I know how teenagers can be with
secrets.” He doesn’t want to keep this from you, keep you in the dark.”

“I appreciate that.” I smile, then glance at the file.

Howard Stark found it in the seventies? Mr. Stark’s father found it initially?

I glance to the glowing blue cube in my left hand, then back to the file. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Hill parrots what I just said, and I nod. She hesitates for a second, then bites the corner of her lip.

“Well, I know what Thor told Fury, who told me to tell you. I know that the Tesseract is nothing but trouble. The Battle of New York wasn’t the first time we’ve fought over it. The Red Skull and Cap fought over it during World War II.”

“Really?” I turn back to her in shock as Hill stands up.

Seriously?

“Yup. There was an old story, about it being “The Jewel of Odin’s treasure room.” Odin, being Thor’s father.”

“Thor’s father?” I repeat, and Hill nods. “And Thor followed an old story his father told him and found this thing. Again.”

That can’t be an accident.

Hill nods again, and I run my hand thru my hair. “That can’t be an accident.”

“I don’t think so either.”

“So the Tesseract has always been in Asgardian hands. First with Thor’s father, and now Thor. So we can assume it’s safe.”

But why? Why was it there, wherever it was? Why’d Thor go looking for it?

“Why would he go looking for it? Thor.” I ask Hill.

Hill pauses, then pulls up a screen. “I don’t think he said. You’ve heard him talk. He’s not exactly Mr. Straight to the point.”

He can be, but he loves to be abstract and funny and not get to the point.

“Yeah, that’s his friend.”

“Valkyrie. Loki was like Thor. Spoke in riddles. His brain was a bag full of cats.”

“A bag full of cats?” I say.

Cats? Why cats?

“He was crazy.”

Clearly, he invaded the planet and wanted to rule it.

“Mr. Stark’s father found it?”
“Yeah. He was looking for Cap, and found the Cube instead.”

Like dropping your phone off under your bed, trying to look for your phone and finding a car instead. Or maybe a spaceship.

“Sounds like he got more than he bargained for.”

Hill shakes her head. “No. he didn’t really want anything to do with it. Howard Stark and Captain Rogers worked together for a little while. Were good friends apparently. It’s why Tony didn’t like him so much, kind of. Tony always resented how much his Dad always revered Cap I think. Wanted that attention for himself.”

I guess that would make sense.

“And Thor’s okay with me knowing this?”

I look back to Hill as she looks away from her research. “Yeah. He wants you to know. You’re an Avenger. He knows how secrets can tear people apart.”

That’s true.

This is a lot to take in.

I sigh, then pace around for a second.

This thing is way too dangerous for any of us to be using it. Only Thor needs access to it. Anyone else really, I vote no. No way.

“I don’t think we should be anywhere near this thing.”

“What do you mean?” She asks.

I shrug and look to her. “I don’t think we can do any good with it. I mean, we only got it stolen from us by Loki. That’s how he invaded us, right?”

“Yeah, after Fury started it. He tried harnessing its energy, which apparently is what tipped Loki off that it was here in the first place.”

Proves my point.

“Does what I say mean anything to anyone?”

“Yeah.” Hill gives me a wary look. “As I said, you’re an Avenger.”

“But I’m also fifteen. Will anyone listen?”

Hill shrugs. “Maybe. I can ask them to.”

Good enough.

“I don’t think we should have anyone near this thing. Secretary Ross, the government, Wakanda, anyone. Nobody but Thor should be able to have access to that thing.”

Hill nods in understanding. “I don’t think Thor would let that happen.”

“That’s not what I mean. I know that we, the Avengers have to answer to some people. They can’t
know about this. Nobody can know anything about this. It’s too tempting to go bad.” I try to explain.

“Okay. I get it.”

“I don’t mean to be giving you orders or anything. Am I making any sense?” I ask her, then walk around in a circle, hand in my hair.

“You’re making sense. You’re better than Stark was. He learned all about the mechanics of all this and thermonuclear astrophysics in a night and was completely insufferable about it.” Hill laughs to herself.

_I need more information._

Out of nowhere, I hear a surge of electricity by the door, then a yelp of pain, causing Hill to leap to the door. “What—” Hill asks, throwing it open.

_It’s probably May._

“—why the hell is the doorknob full of electricity!??!!” Michelle asks loudly, bent over while holding her hand. “Ow! Parker! What the hell!!”

_Oh._

“I—Uh, I’m sorry.” I instantly apologize. “I didn’t know.”

“That’s my fault. I’m sorry.” Hill apologizes, right behind me. “May, grab some ice.”

Michelle winces while shaking her hand, ignoring Hill’s question before looking up and seeing me, then Hill before straightening up, looking astonished.

_Oh, damn. She can see the screens._

I quickly raise my hand up, then clap on top of the virtual Tesseract, which closes all the screens. “Sorry. Work stuff. Hi. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Maria.” Hill smiles warmly at Michelle.

Michelle takes a moment, then looks from Hill to me, to my room. “Yeah, Michelle. Can I borrow him?”

“Work stuff?” I hear Betty say in the background, by the couch as she is standing by Ned.

“Yeah.” Hill answers her, smile vanishing off of her face.

“Great. C’mon.” Michelle takes advantage of Hill looking in Betty’s direction to grab me by my sleeve and yank me towards the living room.

May looks to me, clearly taken by surprise and holding a dish towel and some ice as Michelle drags me to the door. “We’ll be back.”
Michelle keeps pulling on my shirt all the way to the elevator, pulling me inside before hitting the button for the lobby and letting me go.

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t know the door was like that.” I apologize, then look down at the floor.

“What was that for? Security purposes?” Michelle asks, shaking her hand again while wincing. “It’s your house.”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Right.” Michelle frowns and looks right at me. “And I don’t know who that was.”

Yeah, that part didn’t go to plan.

“Nope.” I answer, then laugh nervously.

“Why was she there? She’s famous.”

“Work.”

The elevator door opens with a chime, and Michelle walks right out into the lobby. “Am I actually supposed to believe that?”

“Yeah.” I reply strongly. “It was work.”

Kind of.

“What was the box? It looked like it was glowing.” Michelle asks as my phone suddenly buzzes in my pocket. I shrug while pulling it out and giving it quick glance.

‘Off to a great start. She’s taller than you.’ – Hill

Yeah, yeah. Let’s go with the short jokes.

I haven’t hit my growth spurt. I’m sorry Hill.

“I can’t say. You know that.” I turn back to Michelle as we walk out onto the sidewalk before Michelle takes a left towards Mr. Delmar’s.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t.” I counter, only for her to look back at me with a glare.

“I’m sorry, I can’t!”

“Why not?”

Because I can’t.

An answer doesn’t immediately come to me, creating an awkward pause. Michelle turns back to me again, then snatches up my phone.
“Hey! I need that.” I point out as she slides my phone into her small bag she has draped over her shoulder.

Michelle shakes her head. “Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

I can’t do that.

“Michelle.” I say quietly, then smile when she looks back to me. She immediately rolls her eyes and picks up the pace a little bit.

“Don’t you trust me? You sent me that picture.” She says, lowering her voice as we reach a crosswalk, filled with other people.

Stop…Walk.

“Because they told me that I could.” I point out as we blend into the back of the crowd.

“And you can only do what they tell you to.”

“Yes.” I nod. “I do trust you.”

“If that’s not the problem, then what is?”

“I’ve been told that I can’t tell anyone.” I explain.

Michelle predictably frowns again. “By who? Her?”

Hill.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll talk to her.”

NO.

I quickly shake my head. “No. I think they’re going to send a lawyer after you. Just for seeing her. They’re ruthless, they won’t care that you’re my friend. They’ll just send a lawyer and refuse to leave until you sign something that says that all this never happened.”

“All this did never happen.” Michelle points out, then glances back at me.

Haha.

“I’m serious. May doesn’t even know all that much. It’s that secret.”

“So they don’t trust anybody but you.”

“Yes.” I confirm.

“Then why do they even trust you? Last time I checked the whole school knows you work for Stark Industries as an intern. I know there is something that’s up.”

Because nothing adds up.

“Because I work there.”

“Why do you work there?” She asks.
Because Mr. Stark came to my house and changed my life.

“Because Mr. Stark trusted me. And now that’s been passed down.”

To a ruthless machine, intent on protecting everyone. Information is dangerous. Michelle could get hurt or something.

I’d never forgive myself if that ever happened.

Michelle seems to deflate after a moment, then looks back to me. “Mr. Stark.”

“Yeah.” I nod.

“You knew him?”

I nod again. “Yeah.”

Michelle pauses again before smiling. “So you did meet him. You knew him.”

“Yeah.” I laugh this time.

I’ve got to stop saying ‘Yeah’. I sound stupid.

I hear something vibrate in her purse, and Michelle quickly looks down at her bag. “Geez, what? Can you not have one conversation in private?”

No. I bet they’re listening in thru…wait.

They’re not listening. I’m talking to Michelle. They’d give me that.

Michelle pulls out my phone and looks at it for an instant before frowning. “Oh, Great. Face ID. Here.” She shoves my phone into my chest, but I slip it into my pocket without checking it.

“I’ll check it later. It’s not that I don’t trust you. I don’t have a choice.” I try to explain to her. “I’m sorry.”

“Would you tell me? Even if you could?” She asks, then stops and looks at me.

She wouldn’t ever understand. So no.

“I…” I start then change my answer. “I don’t think that’d ever happen.”

Michelle laughs, then keeps walking.

Great.

I follow her as she keeps picking up the pace down the street. “Where are we going?”

First thing to do when in a hole. Stop digging.

“Here.” She stops across the street from Mr. Delmar’s deli. “If you ordered food for me, I need something to drink.”

“We have drinks.”

“I don’t know if I’ll like what you drink. It might have something that’ll brainwash me.” She says, starting off serious, then turning it into a joke.
“I promise I won’t brainwash you.”

“Good. It wouldn’t work anyway.” She smiles. “The truth is always revealed in the end. It did for your friend.”

_Hill._

“She’s my boss.” I start, then wince.

*That sounds ridiculous._

“She’s not my boss. She’s my boss’s boss’s boss.”

Michelle simply points to a guy in a Spider-Man shirt in front of us. “Him?”

“Kind of.” I laugh.

“So you do know him.”

“I didn’t say that.” I say as the crosswalk changes as we reach the next corner.

“I won’t tell anyone…” Michelle rolls her eyes at me without even looking at me.

“I don’t!” I laugh. “I’m not that important.”

Michelle reaches back and lightly shoves me. “Yeah, right. You’ve got a secret, Spider-Boy.” She smiles as we reach the door.

_Oh, I better grab that or he’s going to kill me._

I quickly snatch up the door handle and pull it open for her, causing Michelle to hesitate, then walk thru.

“Ahh! Mr. Parker!” he calls out at the register while checking somebody out.

“Hey Mr. Delmar!” I call back as Michelle glances back, surprised before turning towards the glass doors holding all the drinks.

“You know him?”

“For years…” I nod, then bite my lip before grabbing something at random.

*I have to beat her to the counter._

Without hesitating, I do just that as Mr. Delmar checks out the only other person inside before I see him glance at me, then look to Michelle.

_Ella es muy hermosa._

“Muy, si.” I respond as I feel Michelle walking up behind me.

Mr. Delmar smirks, then waves at me dismissively as Michelle stands behind me. “$4.60.”

“Hey.” I hear her protest behind me. We both ignore her as I hand him a 5, and he makes change.

“40 cents is the change. Happy Friday kid, go have fun. You’re too responsible.” Mr. Delmar says as I pocket the change, then shake my head.
“Nah!” I reply as I grab the door for Michelle, then follow her back out to the sidewalk. “Thank you!”

I need to change the topic.

“What’d he say?”

I glance away from the street, where there’s a pileup behind a green light before somebody honks obnoxiously. “He said you were pretty.”

“Oh.”

Did she…blush?

“And before you get mad at me, I agreed. Sorry, I know, makes it weird.” I joke light heartedly, then start leading the way back home.

“Uhm, thanks.” I hear a mumbled response.

Change of topics. What May always said, get to know her. Give us something to talk about.

“Sorry, sorry.” I tell her, then go on without taking a breath before somebody else honks.

“HEY!!!! CAN YOU FRICKIN READ??? THERE’S A SIGN!!! NO HONKIN’!!!” Somebody screams at the top of their lungs.

Oh wonderful.

The crowd around us picks up the pace, allowing us to quickly cross a couple of blocks without having to talk as the commotion down near that particular intersection starts to fade away.

Summer.

“Summer plans?” I turn and ask her once its quiet enough to talk again. Michelle quickly turns to me, looking slightly frightened.

“Huh?”

“Doing anything this summer?”

“Oh.” She says quietly, then her shoulders sag. “Uhh, I don’t know. I think my Mom’s going to make me get a job.”

“Can I ask you about your job then?” I joke.

“No.” She briefly scowls before she bites her lip. “I’ll be something boring like a barista or something.”

Sounds awful.

“Sounds fun.”

“Right.” She laughs. “I assume you’ll be with your science nerd friends at the underground lair?”

She can’t say it here. I get it.

“Probably.”
“Yours is way cooler than mine.”

“Nope.” I disagree. “You can talk about yours. Why not draw or teach kids how to draw? Lessons?”

“I don’t have the patience for kids.”

“Then adults. Tons of people want to learn how to draw.” I suggest as my phone goes off again.

*Later. I think I’m onto something.*

“Who’d want to learn about drawing from me?”

“But you’re talented.”

Michelle turns in alarm. “How would you know?”

“Your…sketches? From detention?” I remind her.

*Remember?*

“Oh. Yeah. Well those sucked.” She dismisses me again.

I quickly shake my head. “I thought they were good. Try it. It’s an idea.”

“You’re probably the only one who likes my stuff. Half of my early stuff is absolute hot trash.”

“So? Practice makes perfect. What do you draw?”

“I don’t know.” She immediately shrugs as we stop at a light.

*That’s not true.*

“I won’t make fun of you.”

“I draw stuff I see.” She says, too fast.

“Okay. Like what?”

“Skylines. People at coffee shops. People at subways. Anything.”

“Anything I’d know?”

“I drew you in detention, back when you were all mopey.” She says before starting to smile.

*I was not mopey.*

“I was in detention. What, am I supposed to be all happy and cheerful? No.”

Michelle shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. Anyway, I have to ask you something.”

“Oh yeah.” I nod.

*Peter, shut up.*

*I sound ridiculous right now.*
“What is it?” I turn as we start to cross, three blocks away from my building.

Michelle breaks eye contact with me as soon as I look at her. “Uhm, I need you to let me hold Decathlon practice at your place. If you say yes, nobody else can say no.”

*Wait, that makes NO sense,*

“What?”

Michelle grimaces right away. “Last year you said no, and Liz listened. Well, unless you want Decathlon to die all summer, I need you to say yes. “

*Oh. I get it. If I say yes, nobody else can say no because I couldn’t do it last year. My excuse was pretty good.*

Too much was going on, after Ben and everything. Germany. I spent the entire time being a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.

“Let me ask May. I think she’ll say yes.” I try to explain. “You think everyone else would say no?”

She nods as we cross another street. “Yeah. You give Flash a way out of anything and he’ll take it so he has more time to go do his hair.”

“He has been adding more stuff to it.” I confess.

“I want it to crawl off his head one day. Just walk off.”

I snort out a laugh, then cover my mouth as Michelle laughs at me laughing. “That would be good.”

“If he adds any more crap to it, it’ll be able to stand on its own I think.” She smiles.

*Next time he gives me hell, I need to hit him with something like that. I think she’ll let me do that.*

My phone buzzes incessantly as we walk up to the lobby, and I grab the door again. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Food should be here by now.”

“This place you ordered from better be good. I’m starving. You might have to order more for yourself.”

“What, are you going to just steal mine?”

She nods like it’s no big thing. “Yeah. I’m your guest. And you’re a great host.”

“That’s my aunt.” I disagree. “Not me.”

“But you invited me.”

*Not really? Kind of?*

I open my mouth to correct her, then see Michelle shoot me an increasingly disappointed look. “It was Ned and I’s idea.”

“I’ll just give credit to you. I don’t know how much of them I’m going to be able to stand.”

“Is she that bad around him? Isn’t she still mad at him?”
She’s still mad at me, guaranteed.

Michelle bobs her head. “Yeah, it’s gross. Puppy dog eyes and heart eyes emoji’s and all that. It’s revolting. Maybe I’m not that hungry after all.”

“I think you’ll be able to eat something.” I joke, then hit the button for the seventh floor.

My pocket buzzes loudly again, causing Michelle to glance down. “I didn’t know I was this popular.” I confess.

“It’s my charm and aura. I’m spending too much time with you.”

“I am.”

Immediately I get shoved out of the elevator as it opens. “You weren’t supposed to agree with that. Prick.” She smiles at me.

She doesn’t mean it.

“You said it first. Charm and aura…”

Sound s like horoscopes and stuff Betty believes in. Chakras and cleansing and the stars determining fate. I wish it was that easy.

“That’s not a joke.”

“Oh not you too…that’s a bunch of pseudoscience.” I groan.

Michelle frowns as we reach the door. “Then what happens when it’s right Smart Guy?”

“Broken Clocks.”

“Using a hundred year old analogy to defend your argument. Real modern Mr. Revolutionary. We don’t know everything there is to know.” Michelle argues as I open the door for her then follow her inside.

“But we don’t have to start looking at the newspaper or online to stuff that random people in their 60’s sit at home and just make up.”

Which is what it is.

Michelle makes a face at me. “Not random people. It’s their job to read the signs and come up with the day’s information.”

Job.

“What are you two talking about?” Betty asks, turning on the couch to face us as Ned is mid bite.

Food must be here.

“Horoscopes. Peter thinks they’re worthless.” Michelle explains as I point her to the bags of Chinese that has been set out.

She moves for me to follow her before Betty locks onto me. “Mr. Science and Reason. Open your mind just a little bit!”
“There’s no facts behind it!”

“Astrology.” Michelle says, opening a box up before pushing it to me.

*Yup, my veggies.*

“Thanks.”

“No.” Ned jumps in. “It’s all old and grey ladies playing cards, picking stuff out of a hat.”

“You’re even worse than he is!” Michelle shakes her head.

“Peter’s right.”

Betty frowns at Ned defending me, then looks back to Michelle as she sets her drink down on the counter and starts splitting my pepper chicken onto plates for the two of us. “You got drinks?”

“Yeah.” Michelle nods without looking up.

“And you got a Green line? You’re gonna be up all night.”

“Nah.” She shakes her head. “I need the energy, I was working late last night.”

“On?” Need asks as I glance around the room.

The door to May’s room is 3/4ths closed. Hmm.

I set my drink down, then slide around Michelle as she’s still getting situated and to May’s door frame and glance inside.

*May’s watching TV and drinking wine with Mrs. Roberts. I bet that’s not Mrs. Roberts.*

Silently, she looks up and spots me in the doorway then winks silently at me before continuing their conversation. Nonchalantly, I wave back, then walk back to the kitchen.

“—yeah. I’m still storyboarding it all out.”

Ned sets his fork down in his container. “Sounds like a lot of work for a final in art.”

“Kramer made it terrible.” I defend Michelle as I walk back.

“Have you started on it?” Betty pivots easily.

“No.”

“Better get started.” She smirks.

Michelle adds “I’m not helping you.”

“I’ve got a few ideas.”

Michelle visibly disagrees before silently pushing my portion of my order to me, then slides past, plate in her hand. “Where’d you Aunt go?”

“Her room.” I explain, then smile.

“Yeah, I couldn’t get anything out of Hill. Not even why she was here.” Betty says savagely, then
looks to me blankly for answers.

“Work. Sorry.”

Betty shifts on the couch.

*Preparing to go on the attack.*

“Work. Is work stopping by tonight?”

“Huh?” I play dumb.

“No.” Betty shakes her head. “Where is he?”

I parrot back “Where’s who?”

“Spider-Man.” Michelle adds helpfully.

“I don’t know him.”

Betty scoffs audibly, then takes a bite of some veggie thing mixed into brown rice. “I’m in your house. I’m letting you co-opt Ned. You could at least tell me why.”

“No.” I shift around and cross my arms, leaning on the island. “Ned’s helping me. Voluntarily. I’m not co-opting him.”

“Then tell me. Tell Michelle.”

“No.”

*I need to eat.*

I scoop up the box of Pepper chicken, a significant portion already gone and spear a bite. “Peter.” Betty argues.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Why not?”

“I’ve been told I can’t tell anyone. Ned doesn’t even know. He’s helping me on something else.”

“Yeah.” Ned jumps in.

Betty turns to face him instead. “What?”

“Ned’s helping me on something else.”

“What’s ‘something else’?” Betty presses.

“Something important.” Michelle chimes in by my door.

I turn and glance at her, only for her to look away and peer into my room. “It doesn’t matter if it’s important. I can’t say anything.”

“You’ve been told this.”

*MICHELLE.*
“Obviously.”

“I think we have a right to know.” Betty counters.

“Well that’s great. I don’t.” I shut the topic down.

Betty frowns, then turns around to look at me fully. “You don’t?”

“I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Nobody has the right to know. Only the people who know.” I parrot Romanoff.

*She said it during one of the first meetings I sat in on.*

The World Security Council sent a delegate, along with the President, who sent Ross.

*Because you know, such a friendly face.*

“That’s not how the truth works.”

I shake my head at Betty. “It’s not about truth. Look at what happened in Germany and the Sokovia Accords?”

“You have an opinion on the Sokovia Accords?” Michelle pipes up.

“Not now.” I tell her, keeping my focus on Betty. “Everyone knew too much. Information is dangerous. It could get people hurt.”

“So?”


“You’ve forgiven yourself about Liz, so I’d say you can put aside anything.”

*What?*

I drop my rice, just as I was moving to take a bite, and it hits the island marble with a soft sound. “Excuse me?”

Beside her, Ned goes wooden and I notice his eyes go wide, but ignore it as Betty says “I said it.”

*So we’re going to sling mud.*


“My point stands.”

“Same.” I gesture to her.

Betty rolls her eyes, setting her food aside. “I’d like some answers. I think we’ve earned them.”

“Why? For being here? That’s not how it works. It’s not a participation trophy.”

“Then what is it?”
“Classified.”

“Oh my god.” Betty says obnoxiously.

“Betty.” I say strongly. “You can think all you want. I’m not saying anything.”

“You’re carrying a lot of water for being a busboy.”

Ned tilts his head. “He’s not a busboy.”

“Prove that he’s not.” Michele argues, then takes a bite of her food.

Thanks.

“No.” I say strongly, then feel Michelle look at me.

No. I’m not giving her that. We’ve just had this conversation, and she seemed to accept it. And now she’s taking Betty’s side.

“Can we not be trusted?” Betty asks. “My background is clean.”

“No. You can’t.” I say firmly.

“Why not?” Michelle asks quietly.

“Because I said so, that’s why.” I snap at all of them. “Now did we pick a movie?”

“Don’t change the subject.” Betty says to me.

Okay, that’s it. I’ve had enough.

I set my tea down on the island, then round it, walking right to the couch and grip the back of it. “I’ll do what I want. It’s my house. You have no right to know anything, and that’s final.”

Betty leans back, appearing surprised. “Aggro much?”

“Pushy much?”

“No, I’d just like to know.”

“Great.” I try to smile thinly. “Pick a movie.” Pointedly, I walk back to the island and my food, then take a bite before the silence starts to drag on.

I’m tired of constantly being asked about it. This is the last I’m talking about it, or we can reschedule Movie Night. Your choice Betty.

I don’t think she’ll go full on scorched Earth tactics. She’ll go with the flow.

Betty glances around the room as Ned continues to eat, and I ignore Michelle’s eyes before finally saying “I was thinking a comedy. You need to laugh.”

“We all do.” Michelle jokes.

“Sure.” I shrug, then take another bite. “Whatever you guys want. Your pick.”

Stonegate.
“This you?” Happy asks Michelle, sitting in the back seat.

Michelle nods. “Yes sir.”

“Great. I’m glad that you guys all got together.” He smiles, then claps me on the leg.

“It was fun.” I smile before he glances up into the mirror, back at Michelle to get her reaction.

“When do these finals start again?”

“Monday.” I clarify.

Happy scowls slightly. “From what I heard, it sounds like a gauntlet.”

“That’s the point. Push everybody to the breaking point.”

“Isn’t that counterproductive?” He argues. “I mean, with everything that’s happened. They extend the school calendar by three weeks, only to try and kill you with tests?”

“They were going to anyway.” I shrug. “We got more time.”

*That’s the truth. It might have been cruel and unusual punishment to just go on with the normal schedule. I would have gone back like three days before Finals began.*

We pull around the bend, and Michelle’s house pops up right where it should be. “Well Miss Jones, it was nice meeting you. Hope we can do this again sometime.” Happy says politely before we come to a complete stop.

“Me too. Bye Peter.”

“Night.” I answer, then look back and see her smiling at me, then shut the car door and start up her front sidewalk.

Happy thankfully doesn’t linger, instead pulling away and continuing down the street before taking a right, intending to loop back around.

*That was exhausting.*

“Text her later.” He asks me.

“Not now.” I stretch out in my seat before brushing my hair out of my eyes.

*Like it’s a request.*

Two small beeps sound out, then I hear the mask deactivate. “Oh don’t groan like that.” Hill frowns at me.

“Not helping.”

“I thought it went well.” She argues. “Ignore Betty.”

I shoot off a glance in her direction as Hill navigates our way back to the highway.

*Yeah, because that’s so easy.*

“Everybody wants answers. That’s why we’re casting those directors to put together a version of events. So people can know what happened without the true details getting out.”
It’s propaganda. On our side though.

“Yeah, It’s Fury’s idea.”

Hill turns to look at me. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“No I’m not.”

Again, Hill shoots me a look before turning back to the road. “Listen, you’re just going to have to roll with us on this one. It’ll work out. The details are being hammered out right now. All of the world’s major intelligence agencies are going to be supportive publically. Dissent will sound like the folks who believe the Earth is flat or anti-vaxxers.”

Completely crazy, like the Children of Thanos.

“How is it not propaganda though?”

“It’s more advertising, dressing up the events. Propaganda is lying to people’s faces.”

Like the efforts to support the War in the 40’s. Save gas, sell your car and walk to work. The troops need food, start growing your own vegetables. Europe needs clothing, buy secondhand or mend your own clothes.

Tailored arguments in order to produce a desired outcome.

“Besides, it’ll shut Betty up. I thought you did a good job shutting her down.”

“I was too mean.”

“No you weren’t.” Hill shakes her head. “She was being pushy and tried to bully you into spilling the beans. You stood your ground. I’m proud of you. Everyone’s proud of you.”

She must have gotten with everyone during the last part of “50 First Dates”.

May walked Mrs. Roberts back down to her apartment as things really started to get real.

It’s an okay movie, I guess.

Hill wordlessly looks over at me, then I hear her smile. “Loosen up. It’ll be better next time. I think it went great. You and Michelle clearly had a nice talk. You both wouldn’t stop smiling there for a minute.”

No we weren’t.

“C’mon…what’d you guys talk about?”


“She accepted it?”

I nod, and Hill peeks at me, then smiles and looks at the road. “So she was acting when she got back.”

“Or she was acting with me and her real opinion was at the apartment.” I point out.

“Nah.”
“What makes you so confident?”

“The enormous grins you both had on your faces when you got back. Romanoff said that she kept sneaking peeks at you during the movie.”

*She texted me while we were dropping Betty off, making fun of me for sitting as far from her as I could.*

Betty and Ned sat on the ground in front of the TV, and ended up lying down. Michelle and I took the couch, on opposite ends, with the middle cushion being like the divider.

“If anybody knows human behavior, it’s her.”

“Or you.”

Hill quickly smiles. “Well thank you. But no, she’s probably better.”

“There’s no way she likes me.” I disagree.

“Do you like her?”

“No. I don’t have time anyway.”

“Is it that? Or whoever Liz is?”

*Oh crap.*

I bite my lip, then swallow nervously. “No.”

“No?”

“Yeah. No.”

“What’s no mean?”

“Don’t look into it.”

Hill quickly turns and frowns at me. “Why not?”

“She’s…moved now. She doesn’t matter. She won’t hurt anyone now. Just…don’t look into it. You didn’t hear that.”

Hill pulls to a complete stop at a light and we sit here for a moment, in complete silence for a minute, maybe two.

“Okay. I won’t look into it. Is she okay?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “She’s fine, I assume.”

“You don’t know?”

I shake my head, and look out the window.

*I can’t check. I know I can’t. She has to hate me now. I mean look at how the Book talked about me. I know she has every reason to hate me now. I wouldn’t even blame her. I humiliated her in front of the whole school. Having to move across the country was probably the best outcome for her because people would have never stopped giving her a hard time about me.*
Even though her Dad was a criminal mastermind who tried killing me multiple times.

At least he’s gone. Locked up, even though it’s just a high security prison in a different part of the state.

“Okay. I won’t look into it.” Hill says quietly.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She answers just as quietly before flicking on the radio.
Awakening

_Streetlight. Ledge. Ladder. Water Tower._

With one last tug, I propel myself a few feet above the pyramidal top of the water storage tank on this building, then softly drop onto it. “Karen, deploy the Panels please.”

Immediately, the cooling sensation washed over me, starting at my hands and feet before covering my whole suit.

_And now nobody can see me. I’m a chameleon._

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome Peter. Shall I start scanning radio channels for criminal activity?”

“Yes.” I nod to no one, then adjust my landing stance to crouch down and look around me.

_Another quiet day. I busted up a mugging down by 21st, just off the subway station, but nothing else really._

Quickly, I sneak a glance at the clock at the bottom right of my mask.

_4:08 PM_

Karen doesn’t have anything yet on any wavelengths…

_It’s just quiet._

Off in the distance, I hear the sound of a car horn, before a small window pops up, revealing the offending yellow taxi cab, clearly wanting somebody to move quicker or something.

“Traffic’s not even bad man. Relax.” I mutter, then scroll thru my screens.

_Nothing._

“Anybody have anything?” I ask Hill.

I hear her let out a quiet breath as well as the sound of multiple browsers moving. “Not right now…no.”

“Okay. I’ll hang for a minute.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Hill replies before Karen moves her audio to the background.

_Ow. The suit’s cutting into my shoulder again._

Pivoting on the tank, I rotate my shoulders then sit on the edge to give my legs a break.

_I can’t stay in that stance forever, I’ll be super sore tomorrow anyway. Doesn’t matter what Mr. Stark installed in here, I have to be smart._

Romanoff is still trying to find my limits in training. We can’t use old Hammer Industries robots to swing metal beams at me again, because I hurt my back. It was decent training for stopping a large
object with little warning, but it’s too cruel.

*I don’t know. That’s not the word.*

Bruce says it’s the difference between Superhero and Superhuman. That’s the balance he thinks we’re trying to find. They found it with Wanda by throwing problems at her, like filling a room with gas and telling her ‘deal with it’.

*We’ll find it. And we’re going to have the whole summer to do it here in about a week.*

Mr. Stark didn’t leave any instructions for anyone. Everyone’s been saying that I was clearly his pet project because of all the work he put into me, the time and effort, but he never told me what to do and where to go.

*He just said—*

“Don’t do anything stupid. I’ve seen his cardiogram...all right?”

“Yes.” The words tumble out of my mouth.

“Don’t do anything that I would do. And definitely don’t do anything that I wouldn’t do. There’s a —a little gray area in there and that’s where you operate.”

“What, does that mean that I’m an Avenger?”

I see Mr. Stark lose his patience immediately. “No…” he groans, head drooping, again in annoyance.

The trunk closes, then there’s a knock at my window. “This it?”

“Seventh floor!” Mr. Stark informs Happy.

“I can take that up.” I volunteer. “You don’t have to take...”

“You’re gonna take that up? Good.” He drops it heavily on the street.

“Yeah, I can take that.”

“Thank you.” Happy says before starting back to the driver’s side door.

I turn back to Mr. Stark and ask “So when’s our next ‘retreat’?”

“What, next mission?”

“Yeah. Yeah, the missions.”

“We’ll call you.”

“You have my numbers?”

“No, I mean we’ll call you, Someone will call you.”

“From the team.” Mr. Stark says simply, then leans over.

“That’s not a hug. I’m just grabbing the door for ya. We’re not there yet.”
We…never got there. Kind of.

Captain America did. He flattened me when I came back. I dropped right next to Thanos, blinked and then flew right past him and was on my back with Cap, fully in uniform and drenched in sweat.

“Pete! Peter! You good?” he yells, scrambling to his feet as my ears are ringing with the battle around me.

*Oh my god. Oh my god. I’m back. I’m—*

*TALK!!!*

“Yeah.” I breathe out, and he pulls me to my feet.

“Good. Stark!” He calls out before Thanos moves to grab Cap. Cap however, somehow anticipated this, and absolutely catches him clean with his shield.

*Stark?*

Numbly, I turn to my right and see Mr. Stark in his armor flying right at me.

I don’t know where that battle was. It was super isolated, with nobody around us. It could have been a planet, a ship…

*I just don’t know.*

I don’t know what Mr. Stark thought was the right thing to do. He just dropped me off, and Happy drove away.

I knew that I had to keep being Spider-Man, that was part of the deal of the suit. I had to keep helping the little guy. I had to figure out what the next move was on my own.

*Hang on.*

I feel my head pop up from wherever it had zoned off to as I walked down memory lane, and off towards the Manhattan skyline.

*That’s it.*

“What do you see? Talk to me?” Hill immediately asks.

*No, not now.*


“HEY—” Hill starts before Karen ends the call.

“Any particular reason you hung up on Agent Hill Peter? Did she make you angry?”

“No, no.” I shake my head. “I just need a minute to work something out. Hang on.”

“Okay. I’ll wait for your next word.”

I have to figure out what to do next.
I have to.

It’s on me to make the next move.

Mr. Stark knew that, and did just that.

He drove off, and made me go back to my life. I still haven’t really gone back to my life because of how…

I don’t know. The word I wanna use is violent, but that’s not it.

How bad Thanos was.

And now I’ve come back to school, and Finals, and the Avengers being all over me, controlling every aspect of everything. Which is good, I’m not complaining. But I have no wiggle room.

“Incoming call from Maria Hill.”

“Not now Karen. Ignore. Send her to voicemail. Tell her to give me a second.”

Just…wait.

I think I’m figuring this out for myself. That’s how I have to do this.

Mr. Stark knew that, and just dropped me off and drove away. He made me, MADE me do it.

That’s what I have to do.

“Incoming call from Natasha Romanoff.”

OH COME ON.

“Karen, ignore all calls for now. I’ll tell you when to start letting them thru.” I instruct her, then stand up on the water tank.

Let’s get moving, get my blood going and really work this problem out.

I pull myself to the ledge, land with on foot on the edge, then fling myself off the edge, fall for a moment then fire off a web to a fire escape and start falling forward.

Right. Left. Rhythm. I taught myself that. I knew how to be Spider-Man before I went to Germany. I taught myself, which is partially why all that was so terrifying.

Then everything started flying, and I just started acting on instinct.

I caught the Winter Soldier’s arm, escaped Sam’s kick and Bucky’s throw of a display board before I flung it back at him. Real dick move by him, to just throw it at me. So I threw it back, because he earned it.

“Hey buddy, I think you lost this!”

I laugh to myself at the memory of him running, and at the irony of it all.

He didn’t hesitate or think twice when he did it. But when I turned the tables, he got right out of the way.
I found my footing during that battle. To the point that I chose to go after Captain America when he was making a run for that Quinjet.

I chose to take him on. Yeah, he kicked the crap out of me and dropped that skybridge on me, but he didn’t kill me. Which was nice of him.

And I got to talk to him.

He was a lot more straight laced than I am. The Avengers run everything like he would have I feel like. Too much control.

I need to have some freedom, like Mr. Stark did.

He classified himself as an “Active Duty non-combatant” from Sokovia on. He never changed it after the Snap, he was too busy trying to fix everything.

I…I think I’m more like Mr. Stark. I don’t want them constantly hovering over me. Maybe we could try it at least.

Hang on.

Oh that’s too easy to spot. You’re trying to bust into that building. With a crowbar.

I drop my web mid-swing, then pull his crowbar out of his hand and into mine before knocking him aside with it. “A crowbar? Really? Can’t you use a lock pick?”

The crook groans, slowly picking himself up off the pavement before I pin him to the wall with a burst of web fluid. “Karen.”

“Authorities are already on the way.”

“Thank you.” I smile to myself, then myself up to the next roof and keep swinging.

That was easy.

Yeah…that feels right. I need more control. I can do this.

I just need to relearn how.

Below me, somebody cheers out loudly. “Yeah, Spider-Man!!!”

I spin in midair, wave back at the street below, then turn back and keep swinging.

It’s not a bad thing at all. Everybody does it differently. Like I said, Mr. Stark was different than Romanoff, than Captain America, than Wanda. Rhodey found out his way a long time ago I bet. That’s what I need to do.

“Karen, tell Hill and everyone that I’m going home for the day. I think we’re good here.” I say before checking the time again.

6:51.

HOW?!?

“Karen! It can’t be almost seven can it? No way!!!”
“Yes Peter, it is 6:51 Eastern Standard Time.”

“How long was I on that rooftop?”

Karen replies. “You were standing on that water storage container for 23 minutes and eighteen seconds. Before briefly stopping, you’ve been swinging for almost two hours.”

WHAT?!!?!!

“What? How?!? Where am I?”

_How have I been swinging around for that long?!_

“You’re almost in Times Square Peter. You’ve gone far out of your normal patrol zone. I believe they’re preparing to send Colonel Rhodes in to check in on you.”

“No! No! Call Hill! I’m fine!” I say in a panic.

_Let’s not all freak out, okay?_

“Calling Maria Hill.” Karen says.

“Thank you.” I barely get out before Hill’s face pops up directly in the middle of my vision.

“Okay. What’s going on? What happened at school? May said that you texted her and said that your final today went well.”” She says instantly.

“Nothing!”

“We’re not going to be mad, but you have to talk to us Peter.” I hear Romanoff say before her face appears next to Hill’s on a separate screen.

“Karen reduce their size, I can’t see.” I ask her, then swing around a corner. “I’m fine, really! Just trying to figure something out.”

“What?”

“What are you trying to figure out?” Romanoff asks me.

_I don’t think I should tell them yet._

“I’m…still trying to figure that part out.” I shrug before swinging around another corner.

_If I’m in Times Square…it’s going to take me at least a half hour to get back home in time for dinner. Actually, forget that. I’m going to be late. It’ll be after 7 for sure._

“Tell May I’m going to be late for dinner. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that I as swinging for so long.” I tell Hill and Romanoff.

Romanoff laughs quietly. “No kidding, you’ve covered a ton of ground today.”

“What’d you do, zone out like you were walking or something?”

_Yeah._

“Karen, how much web fluid do I have?” I ask, then look back to Hill. “Yeah, basically.”
“You have 18 percent of your total web fluid remaining.” Karen informs me.

_Oh jeez, I’m running on fumes._

“Karen, start using an economical strand for swinging so that I have enough to get home with. Hill can you guys get some more up here tonight or tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but I’m not so sure…”

“I’m fine!” I counter quickly. “I…just am trying to figure something out for myself. Which is how I think it’s supposed to be.”

“Did you and Michelle get into a fight?” She quickly asks. “You didn’t text her much today, but that makes sense because—”

_Because it’s Finals Week. Week and a half. One Final per day for two hours a day, counting down from seventh period all the way to first, in reverse order._

Our last day is a half day, with the first period final, then some time to pick up our yearbooks and have our friends sign them. Then it’ll be summer time.

_Finally._

“Peter? Hello?”

“No. I haven’t fought with Michelle.” I answer Romanoff’s question.

She asks right away “Is it something we can help with?”

“Let us help Peter. Don’t shut yourself off. Are we being too pushy?”

“Guys…can we breathe? Take a breath? I’m fine. I think I’m figuring something out. I’ll tell you when I have it. But I’m really fine for now. I’m headed home.”

_These strands really are thin. Jeez._

“Karen, can they really not be any thicker?”

“Any thicker and you will dip below five percent before getting home Peter.”

_She’s giving me a margin for error. That’s good I guess._

“Make it a little thicker. I feel like these…might break.” I say, crossing over a raised subway platform, to the cheers of everyone on said platform.

_Hey. That’s an idea._

“Hey Hill?”

“Yeah?” She answers, looking dubiously at me.

“Can you…maybe release some of the footage of me swinging around? I’m getting some weird reactions.”

_It’s like they’re just glad I’m around and still patrolling. It’s like they’re worried about me. Which can’t be right._
“I’ll ask Fury, but yeah. Some. Maybe the footage of you stopping that mugging.”

“Why do you want to do that?” Romanoff asks, sounding curious.

I shrug while switching buildings. “Just give them something to look at. I’m getting just really weird reactions.”

“Like?”

“Like they’re just glad I’m here.”

Hill laughs. “Yeah. Means you’re still working.”

Of course I’m here. I never left.

“Karen, did May reply?”

“Yes, she said that it sounds like a plan to her. She’ll wait to order dinner.”

Thought she was going to cook.

“Oh. I’m headed that way.”

Okay.

I catapult myself across the alleyway to my building, then slip down to the seventh floor and my window, which is blinking.

“Thanks Karen.”

“You’re welcome Peter.”

It’s like she was worried too. I know my own building.

Slowly, I creep down the building before toeing open my window and sliding inside before flipping off the ceiling land onto the solid floor.

Finally.

“May!” I call out. I’m—” Before I can finish, May barges past my mostly closed door and tackles me into a hug. “Hi.” I breathe out.

“Are you okay? You wouldn’t answer anyone for almost two whole hours!!! Hill was almost ready to send in the National Guard!”

I laugh, then pull off my mask. “Yeah. I’m fine. Just…thinking.”

“About what?”

“I’m… not ready to say yet. I’m not done yet. I didn’t know it was that long. Or that I’d swung all the way to Manhattan.”

May gives me a worried look, then gives me another squeeze. “Okay. What’d you do? Zone out?”

“Yeah.” I nod, then hit the center of my chest, and the suit loosens up, allowing me to step out of it.

Oh wait. I never grabbed my backpack.
“Oh, my backpack!” I blurt out. “May, I’m—”

“They had Ned get it.” May smiles. He already brought it by.”

“Really?”

May nods once, then points to my bed.

*Oh hey, there’s my backpack.*

“Oh.”

May laughs, then turns back towards the living room. “Get changed. You’re all over the news. What do you want for dinner? And it doesn’t sound too bad to me. I think Hill kind of freaked out!”

*Actually, yeah. That is exactly what it sounds like happened.*

“I’m all over the news?”

“Yeah! Come look!”

I hop out of the suit, then quickly pull some shorts and leap into them.

“Why am I all over the news?” I ask her as I walk in, pulling a new shirt on at the same time.

May doesn’t respond, instead unmuting the TV.

“And today’s breaking story. Tons of new footage of the Spider-Man came out today, after multiple reports of sightings from all over the island of New York began coming in around five o clock.” The male news anchor reports simply.

His colleague, a woman I don’t recognize picks up where he left off. “Spider-Man, who has been infrequently seen since the Decimation Event and its subsequent reversal, has kept a low profile since the event. Today’s rush of new footage marks a return to the spotlight for the hero.”

The TV cuts to an interview, clearly shot just a few hours ago. “No, it’s great that he’s back man.” A man I don’t recognize says. “He’s been so quiet recently, I think people have been worried really.”


“Yeah man, it’s not like he probably didn’t go thru what we all did with all this—BLEEP—going on.” He says before May laughs.

*Nice censoring guys. Not obvious at all what he said. Nope.*

“I mean, yeah sure he’s working for the Avengers. Or with ‘em, I don’t care. But I’m glad he’s back out there. We need him, man.”

“Well thanks. Man.” I say, copying him, causing May to loudly laugh again.

“Recent polling conducted by the New York Times both on the streets and of New York City residents shows that a whopping 84% polled are concerned about the hero, with the percentage slightly falling when a nationwide poll asked the very same question.”
“Social media has gone ablaze with the wall-crawler’s return, controlling the top seven trends, ranging from his locations, to his stopping of a burglary to an attempted theft near New York’s much maligned subway system.”

Oh it’s not much maligned National News lady. Get your facts straight.

“Oh it works, get your facts straight.” I roll my eyes. The TV cuts to another interview before there’s a knock at the door.

“Are we expecting anyone?” I ask May, who nods before walking over and opening the door.

Oh.

“Hi Colonel Rhodes.” May immediately says, inviting him in.

“Hi. Call me Rhodey, James, whatever May. You don’t have to call me Colonel.” He smiles at her, then turns to me. “Hey Pete.”

“Hi.”

“We good?” He asks. “I think you gave Hill quite the scare.” He smiles, before May laughs behind him and as I shake his outstretched hand.

“Yeah, fine.” I nod. “Just…I thought of something, and I think I’m supposed to figure it out is all.” Rhodey shrugs, seemingly understanding. “Good. Brought you your stuff right here. You called back right before I left so…” He explains, then sets a silver box down near the coffee table.

The TV silently continues playing in the background, showing footage shot from somebody’s phone of me just…swinging at top speed before I round a corner and vanish before quickly cutting to a separate shot, which is more like me flying by in a blur.

“I’m glad you’re good though. It seemed like you were. How’d your final go?” Rhodey says, stepping aside to let everyone keep glancing at the TV.

“Fine.” I shrug. “Another one down.”

“How many more left?”

“Five more.”

He grimaces, and May winces in sympathy. “You’ll crush them, I know you will. Bruce would love to help you in chemistry if you ask.”

“We’re already setting something up for this weekend.” I smile, and Rhodey nods.

“All right.”

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” May offers. “We were just about to decide what to order.” Rhodey quickly smiles, then shifts his stance. “No, thank you though. I have to fly to DC.”

“DC? Why?”

“The White House is being pressured on some stuff. I’m heading down there to see if I can’t head them off.” He shrugs, looking unconcerned.
“On what? The Avengers?”

“No, it’s…” He stops, then sighs. “It’s nothing to worry about, at least right now. “But if there is something, you’ll be the first one to know. Sorry about dinner. Can I take a rain check?” He jokes.

May quickly laughs, breaking the tension in the room. “Absolutely. I think I told everyone, if you’re in the area and want to stop by for dinner, door’s open.”

“I’ll pass it along.” Rhodey smiles, then steps forward to shake my hand. “Text if you need me. I’m always down to be backup.”

“Thank you.” I smile, shaking his hand.

“Have a good night Mrs. Parker.” Rhodey smiles at May, then silently slides out the door, just as soon as he came in.

We’re both quiet for a moment, as May looks to the door, then the briefcase. “He’s way more charming in person than he is on TV.”

“Charming?”

*Oh no. She likes Rhodey.*

“Yeah. He’s really nice to talk to.”

*Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.*

I groan and start back to my room before May calls after me. “Hey! What do you want for dinner? Speak now or I’m ordering!”
Be prepped to head out pretty quick once you’re out of school. – Hill

“Okay. Why?”

Hill’s response bubble pops up right away, and I stare at it a minute before looking around as the room around me is talking feverishly.

I’m really done with this year.

The Art final wasn’t as terrible as I thought it could have been since I have literally no drawing ability. But I did pretty well on the written portion, and actually did really well on the oral presentation in front of the class, so…

Yeah. I’m done for the year. Now we’re just waiting for them to tell us to pick up our yearbooks and go home.

“Hey.” Michelle says quietly behind me.

I can’t help but smile before I turn around to see her peering blankly at me. “Hi. I thought your project was great.”

Best in the class really. She can really draw, and didn’t seem nervous at all when she was speaking in front of the class, unlike a couple of the other girls in here that can draw too.

They fumbled around a little bit. Not Michelle. She crushed it.

“Thanks. Could have been better. I got something for ya.” She says, then stops herself before color creeps into her face.

Is she…blushing again?

“Okay?” I smile at her helpfully.

“Not yet. Did you talk to your Aunt?”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “She said we could hold practice there. Not every week, but yeah.”

Michelle smiles, then grabs a pen and twirls it around once in her hand. “Awesome. Okay. I’ll draw up a schedule and email it to you.”

“Sounds good to me.” I smile back.

Teamwork. Cooperation.

Hopefully this coming year I can help us win it all again. Repeat.

“Yup. Anyway, here ya go. I just kind of doodled it. But it thought you, uhm…might like it.” Michelle says, sounding confident at first before losing it at the end, all while pushing a folded piece of paper to me.

It looks like it came out of her sketchbook. It’s thicker than notebook paper.
“I’m sure it’s awesome. You drew this? With the final today?”

Michelle nods. “It was my distraction.”

Hell of distraction from an art final. Drawing.

“If you say…so.” I say, opening up the piece of paper.

It’s Avengers Tower.

It’s also really good. I think she sketched it out in pencil, then drew most of it in pen, then went back and shaded in the sky.

“Did you shade in the sky?”

“Yeah.” She laughs once. “With chalk. The rest is in pen.”

“Will it come off? I don’t want to ruin it.” I say, quickly folding it back up.

It looks great.

“No. Do you like it?” She asks, voice pitching up slightly before she coughs to clear her throat.

“Yeah. This is awesome.” I smile at the paper then back at her in time to see her smile.

“Great. That’s cool.”

“Thanks for drawing this. I…that’s really awesome. Do you take requests?”

Michelle shrugs. “Not really. Maybe in the future.”

“Well I hope you do. I’ll have to think of some ideas.”

“Attention all students.” The PA system suddenly goes off, silencing the class. “Please make your way down to the gymnasium, where yearbooks are set out, along with signing areas. And on behalf of all the Midtown Staff and faculty, have a great summer!”

The class lets out a cheer before Mrs. Kramer calls out “Have a good summer! Now get out!!!” which causes everyone to laugh as they start getting to their feet and filing out of the class.

We’re done.

“We’re going to take you to lunch to celebrate the end of school.”

Okay then.

I quickly answer “Okay. I’ll be ready.” as Michelle files past me, then pointedly sits on my desk.

“C’mon. Don’t you want to see what lame theme they used to put the year together?”

I shrug as I gather up my backpack then stand beside her. “If I have to.”

May paid for it, so I have to at least pick it up.

Michelle laughs at me, then leads us both out into the hall and to the gym, which is filling up fast. A-E...F-K...L-R...S-V...W-Z
Silently, I break away from Michelle and into the line for L thru R.

“Picking up my yearbook, then I have to say bye to Michelle and Ned, Then I’ll be ready.”

People are staring at me again.

Glancing to my left, I see a couple of junior guys glancing at me, only to look away when I turn their way. When I look to my right, a couple that I don’t know either one does the exact same thing.

I’m fine…Thank you Hill.

The moment my phone vibrates in my pocket, I extract it and see her reply.

“Actually, take your time. We’re stuck in traffic.”

Okay.

I slide my messages app away, then glance at my screen full of apps.

Email, Calendar, Photos, Camera, Maps, Alarm Clock, Weather…

I’m elbowed rudely in the back, propelling me forward, closer to the table where they’re handing out the yearbooks.

C’mon. Give me a distraction. News, Stocks, Health… Stocks. Let’s see how Pepper’s day is going.

I tap on the icon, which looks a little like a EKG machine’s screen before my pre-selected apps pop up.

I don’t even know what’s really on here. I know that May, Pepper, Hill and one of Stark Industries’ many financial geniuses created a portfolio of stocks for me, at the direction of Mr. Stark’s will in addition to the considerable sum her left to May and I.

Stark Industries down -0.108% on the day.

Bad day. Wonder why?

Probably some report came back less than expected. They’ve been killing it recently I know. The news has been alternating between Avengers rumors that are far from the truth, news stories about Spider-Man, who has “mysteriously” been seen only twice since I detoured into Manhattan last week, and the deals Stark Industries has been making.

They closed the deal on Stark Tower, then bought some lab on the lower West side of Manhattan, down by the shipping district. I’m betting that they’re going to be moving some of the old Avengers Tower operations there. I might end up heading there a time or two—

“Here ya go. Bye.” I hear, then glance up from my phone to three Senior girls glaring at me.

“Thanks.” I blurt out quickly, taking my yearbook from them, then give them all a thankful smile before sidling away from the tables and toward center court.

“MSST Class of 2018: Undeterred”

Catchy.
As I’m unzipping my backpack to throw the yearbook in, my phone buzzes again.

“We’re to your left.” –Ned

I turn to my left, and see Ned waving in order to catch my attention, all while Betty looks quite uncomfortable, standing under one of the retracted basketball hoops.

“Hi. Trade?” I volunteer, extending him my yearbook, causing him to do the same. “How’d it go in Chem?”

“Not too bad.” Ned says as we trade yearbooks. “What’d you put on the first open response?”

“The one about the energy transfer? I said it was exothermic.” I say, then pull out my pen and sign Ned’s yearbook.

When I look up to hand him his yearbook back he has a ugly, nervous looking expression. “I said endothermic. I think it was the process of something cooking. The temperature rose two degrees a second for thirty seconds.”

“I thought it was just a chemical reaction.” I shrug as we exchange yearbooks before I see Betty look anxiously over at me. “Where’d Michelle go?”

“To her locker. I think she’s getting something out of there.”

I want her to sign my yearbook. And I need to say goodbye. Plus, Betty will be happier with just Ned around.

Okay, thanks Betty. Have a good summer.” I smile at her, then turn to Ned. Ned only smiles, then gives me a fist bump before I walk behind them and back into the now deserted hallways.

And now…MJ’s locker.

My phone buzzes audibly in the silent halls while the din of the gym starts to fade with every step I take deeper into the school.

“How’d it go?” –May

“Good. Presentation could have been better. I think I did fine. Probably a B.”

There we are.

Michelle has her backpack set down on the ground, yearbook and other notebook poking out as she’s pulled it all of the way open while trying to take out an enormous locker organizer.

“You want some help?” I volunteer, before Michelle jumps in fright and lets out a terrified scream.

Oh geez.

“I’m sorry…Sorry.” I cringe as Michelle turns, sees it’s me, then covers her face with her hands.

“You know…it’s nice to warn somebody before you walk up on them?”

“Sorry. I thought you heard my footsteps.”

Michelle ignores me for the most part and gets back to pulling on her organizer. “No…I can’t get this stupid thing to come…OUT! C’mon!” She says, frustration leaking into her voice before
kicking the locker below her in frustration.

“Can I help?”

“Sure…” She steps back. “Even though it’s so tightly wedged in there I don’t know if you’ll be able to get it.”

I shrug while setting my backpack beside hers “I can at least try. By the way, can you sign?”

*It is wedged in there pretty good.*

“How’d you get this thing in here?” I ask her, taking a step back.

> It looks like she forced it in. It honestly looks too big to even fit. It’s a little warped between the book divider and where her backpack would rest. Except that it’s been flattened out because of the weight of her backpack.

“Determination. Took me like a half hour after I put the pieces together.”

I turn to her as she’s writing something in my yearbook. “Pieces?”

“Well that’s the problem…” I mutter, then pull out my phone, tap on my flashlight and set it on the base of her locker in order to see the vertical pieces that are flush with the metal wall of her locker.

*If I disconnect everything, then it’ll come out for sure. Why she decided to try and pull the whole thing out…I don’t know.*

The wall sections disconnect with a satisfying ‘click’, before I pull on the divider to extract…

“C’mon…”

*Come out now…*

I pull up again on the piece, only for it to not give at all. “Okay. What’s with this thing?”

“That’s what I said!”

“Hah hah.” I roll my eyes at her as she’s still writing, then roll up my sleeves.

*Okay. While she’s distracted, I can throw some of my weight behind it and force it to pop out.*

I let out a quiet breath, then take a firm step and slam my hand into the divider. Instantly, it pops up towards the top of—

“OWW!” I yell, then yank my hand away from her locker.

*I hit the stupid, dumb latch. I didn’t think of that part. Of course my hand is going to keep going.*
As I watch, my hand starts to bleed from the small gash between my ring and middle fingers that I’ve opened up, shaped like the angular latch.

“What’d you do?”

“I got it out. But paid the price in the process.” I say, then shake my hand.

_Doesn’t hurt all that bad. More the shock of it than anything._

I’m smarter than that. I should have gone at it from the other side. Slammed my hand into the side of the locker wall, instead of the latch.

“Let me see it…” Michelle directs me, grabbing my hand and bringing it up for inspection. “Oh. Nice. Good job Smart Guy.”

“At least I got it.”

She shakes her head silently as she tilts my hand back. “Not too deep. I think you’ll live.”

“Yeah.” I laugh, before I look down at her as she is holding my hand. At the same time, we jump away from each other, and I wipe my hand on my jeans. “Sorry.”

“It’s all good…” She dives down for her backpack. “Thanks for getting that…”

Michelle starts pulling her contraption out of her locker as I take back my yearbook and place it back into my backpack. “No problem. I hope you can wash the blood off.”

“Yeah…” She trails off, pulling out the two wall pieces and setting them beside the divider.

_It’s too big for her backpack._

“How’d you get that anyway?”

“Office supply store. I was tired of dealing with not having enough space.” She shakes her head while giving the locker a final glance before shutting it and spinning away her combination.

“Going to miss it?”

Michelle looks back to me, half bent over to grab her stuff. “The locker? No. Just a place. You?”

“Nah. I’m just glad it’s finally over.”

“I bet.” She laughs. “Friendly reception in there?”

“Very.” I joke, and Michelle laughs again.

_Yup._

My phone buzzes again, but I ignore it as Michelle slips her backpack on, then grabs her locker divider before finally turning to look at me.

“You’d better keep that for next year.” I joke.

“Yeah.” She shakes her head at me as we start towards the front entrance. “Next time I’ll just call you for the install.”

“At least I won’t force it in there. I’m not sure it was supposed to fit.”
“No way.” She dismisses me before my phone buzzes again. “It said that it was made to fit any size locker on the box.”

“You remember the box?”

No way.

“Yeah.” She says quickly as my phone buzzes again.

“Oh come on…” I mutter, then pull out my phone.

_Almost there. Hurry up. But not if you’re talking to Michelle. – Hill_

_We’re here!!! Summer!! – Bruce_

“Aww crap.”

_We all say hi to Michelle. Whenever you're ready. – Hill_

“What?” Michelle asks as I pick up the pace.

“Apparently I’ve got a ride.” I say, not knowing how else to phrase it.

Michelle gives me a dubious look. “But you always take the subway home.”

“I have a ride.” I shake my head as she keeps up with me as we loop back around towards the front entrance and the pickup area.

_Great, in front of Flash and everyone. Awesome._

I let out an anxious breath while hustling towards the door. “Surely they can wait?”

“I think they’ve been waiting. I was ignoring their texts. They said…” I trail off as I stop and fire off a text.

“On my way. Got sidetracked.”

“They said they got stuck in traffic.” I shake my head as Michelle gives me an odd look.

“Heading on a trip?”

I shrug. “Don’t think so.”

“Poker?”

“I don’t really think so. I’m betting it’ll be more of a work trip if anything.” I think out loud.

Michelle smiles as we walk into the foyer, where most of the normal crowd of students are lingering outside.

_Enjoying the first of the good weather of the year._

“Have you heard anything about that job?” I ask her as we both descend down the steps.

“Yeah.” Her expression droops. “I have an interview tomorrow.”
“Well good luck. You’ll do great. Eat something that makes you happy. That’s how I got the Stark Internship.”

*Wait, what?*

“What?” Michelle gives me a helpless look, even tilting her head at me.

*Oh man. I had to open up my mouth.*

“I, uhm… my Aunt made me eat something I liked before I interviewed for the internship. And it worked.” I make up a story on the fly.

She clearly doesn’t quite buy it, but instead answers “Sounds like a wives tale.”

“Aren’t all things like that? I’m trying to help. You’ll be fine.”

Reassure her. Confidence!

“I’ve never interviewed for anything before. I have no clue what I’m doing. And all the online sites aren’t really helping. They all say the same generic things.”

I push open the door for her, and the cacophony of the crowd hits me as Michelle slips past me and out into the summer sun. “I think it’ll work out. Maybe this isn’t the job for you for the summer. Try getting an internship?”

“Maybe, I…” She stops, then shrugs as we walk all the way to the curb and the protective barriers that are set up. “I don’t know.”

Michelle leans on one of the barriers, frowning before glancing at me. “It’s your first try doing all of this. You’re not going to do it perfectly.”

“Yeah. Says you.” She laughs at me.

“And look where that’s got me. Most of my mistakes are here. With you guys.” I gesture around us.

*The whole female portion of the senior class hates my guts. Along with a significant part of the rest of the school because everyone loved Liz.*

“True.” She concedes, then looks down and starts consolidating the pile of stuff she’s taking home.

*Well great. That brought everything to a screeching halt.*

“Where’s your ride?”

“I don’t know…” I confess, then glance at my phone.

“I’m outside.”

I twirl my phone in my hand before—

*Oh wait. I need to ask her now.*

“Hey.”

“I—” Michelle starts, before we both stop and wait for the other to keep talking, which ends up in
an awkward silence.

“Go.” I suggest, then smile and take a step back.

Instead, she only shakes her head. “No, you’re about to leave. You go.”

*No. I…Dammit!*

“Okay, uhm, is it, uhm, cool if I text you some this summer? I don’t want to bug you or anything, but…” I say, then wince at how it sounds to my own ears.

“Aren’t you going to be busy all summer?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “But I’m sure I’ll have some down time too.”

She doesn’t immediately reply, instead turning to the carpool lane as cars are cycling thru slowly. “Read what I wrote.”

“In my yearbook?” I blankly blurt out.

_How long was she writing? What’d she write? Oh no._

“No, on Twitter.”

“I don’t have a Twitter.”

This time she laughs audibly. “I know. I assume it’s because of your internship. Protection and all of that.”

“Kind of.” I admit.

*I don’t really care. Half of social media is getting dopamine releases from desired outcomes. It’s dangerously close to more propaganda.*

Propaganda. I’m starting to find evidence of it everywhere.

*Paranoia. First sign of trouble. But Mr. Stark was very paranoid and suspicious. Didn’t turn all bad for him.*

Silently, Michelle puts my bicep in a death grip then straightens up. “Uhh.”

“What?” I turn to her, then turn to where she’s—

*Oh. That’s definitely my ride._

A black Lamborghini audibly approaches, which causes everyone around to turn and look.

_Romanoff’s driving, with Banner beside her. No Hill._

I’ve been texting the wrong person this whole time.

The sports car purrs as the whole carpool lane is cleared out before it comes to a stop smoothly, and the locks audibly disengage.

*Oh wow._

“Good luck.” Michelle laughs, which causes me to laugh as around us, everyone starts trying to
crowd around for a greater look before Romanoff revvs the engine.

She’s showing off.

“Bye.” I say quietly, then smile before I feel her hand on my back briefly as I walk away, towards the car.

This is so not necessary.

“No way!” I hear somebody say in the background before the passenger’s side window rolls down, revealing Dr. Banner, who waves past me.

I hear “Hop in.” before I pull open the door to the back seat in time to see Romanoff peering around Dr. Banner before he rolls up the window, and we pull away from the curb.

“That’s her.”

“Yup.” Bruce smiles, then turns back to face me, “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” I say breathlessly. “Sorry I didn’t text you. I thought Hill was driving.”

“Nah.” Romanoff shakes her head thru the rearview mirror. “She’s picking up your Aunt.”

“We’re going to go eat before heading back upstate.” Bruce explains as we weave in and out of traffic.

And they said they got stuck in traffic.

“I thought you were stuck in traffic.”

Instantly, Romanoff and Bruce both laugh. “We had time to pick up an escort. How’s Michelle? She seemed pretty happy.”

“She’s fine.” I shrug, feeling defensive.

I need to read what it was that she wrote me.

The car continues seamlessly changing lanes and progressing thru traffic as I unzip my backpack, then pull out my yearbook and tilt it up so that they can’t sneak a peek.

Okay, I wonder where she…found it.

On the second page of pages meant for signatures, I see that she’s written something massive from top to bottom.

---

Peter,

I know I can be super weird and awkward in person, so I thought that it might be better if I wrote this down. Thank you for being a really good friend this year. Yeah, sometimes you don’t always succeed, but clearly you have a lot of your plate, especially since the Snap, as you call it. And you try, which I appreciate.

Not everybody here at school hates you. They just have a lot of questions, and thanks to Flash and Betty and the Book, they know you aren’t talking. So they’re just mean. It’s easier this way than to, you know, be nice. They’ll understand in time.
We’ll both be super busy this summer, but you better not go silent on me this summer. It’s really nice to have a friend to talk to. Sorry, awkward I know, but I’m writing this as you mess with my locker, and I only had a pen. Sorry. My point is, you’d better keep in touch with me. And don’t go jet setting off to some foreign planet like your boy did. I’ll kill you if you do.

Betty said that some people came and talked to her and her parents at her house last weekend, after we watched 50 First Dates at your apartment. But nobody came over to talk to me. I assume that’s because you told them not to. Thank you. I know you can’t say much, to anyone, but I hope you know that I won’t tell anybody anything. And that’s a promise. Besides, who would I tell, besides Betty and Ned? And apparently you’re already on top of them in that regard. Phrasing! Jeez! (Sorry)

You just hurt yourself helping me. I better stop writing. Have a great summer.

MJ

Huh. That’s really cool. And very nice of her.

I slip my phone behind the yearbook and quickly pull up my texts to Michelle.

I think she really wants me to call her MJ. She’s mentioned it a few times now. It’s sort of caught on, but not really.

“Thanks for the note. I’ll stay in touch. No promises, I don’t know what I’ll be doing all summer. But I’ll do my best. Have a good summer MJ.”

“What’d she say?”

“Nothing really.” I shrug, not meeting Romanoff’s eyes. “Just told me to have a good summer.”

“That’s nice of her.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, then look up in time to see them exchange a look.

Romanoff answers “Italian place downtown. It’s really good.” As Dr. Banner smiles.

Sounds like a plan to me.
“You want to do what now?” May asks beside me once the waiter shuts the door behind him.

“Rebuild Vision.” Dr. Banner says simply, leaning across the table to look directly at her.

“And what exactly makes you think that is a good idea?”

Romanoff looks back to Banner. “Because we’re down Avengers. And we know a lot more now than we did when we made him.”

“What do you mean?” I ask quietly, causing May to turn to me and give me an annoyed look.

“Princess Shuri, the Wakandan Princess. She’s heading up the project, along with Bruce.” Rhodey volunteers.

“I don’t think I’ve met her.” May counters stubbornly.

“You haven’t.” Bruce turns away from her and instead looks to me. “We could use your help.”

*I have little to no experience in robotics. And definitely not at that level.*

“How can I help?”

Sharon frowns at my question before Rhodey rolls his eyes, then sips his drink. “Nobody else here has more experience with Tony’s AI’s. He designed one for your suit and use as Spider-Man. If we have questions, you could probably answer them.”

“Like how they seem to have a degree of free will, yet also follow your orders without question.”

“I don’t know how he did that.” I confess. “It’s surely in the coding he did.”

*A master override on all commands that I give. Something simple like that, but looks way more complicated on the surface.*

“Friday is still being stubborn on that, claiming she’s ‘not complete’ and missing some of her programming, enabling her to do that.” Bruce tells me.

“What’s missing?” I ask him. “We have everything, don’t we?”

“We think we do.” Rhodey sets his drink down. “But she won’t even let us under the hood to check.”

*And so we’re stuck. Great.*

I glance over at Hill, who is biting her lip and looking over at me before I slump quietly in my seat and reach out for my water.

*I don’t know. She’s not going to let me in.*

“I’ve never really poked around Karen’s protocols. I don’t even know if she’d let me.”

“At what I could tell, her primary directive is your protection, above all others. If you say that you have to check her programming to say, ensure her stability and allow her to keep protecting
you, I think she’ll let you in.”

That’s…very disingenuous.

“And what if she doesn’t believe him?” May throws out there. “You’ve just pissed off an AI that has its hands all over my house, his suit, and God knows what else? Not to be rude, but didn’t you help create Ultron?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then I think this is a terrible idea.” May cuts Dr. Banner off.

Finally, Hill speaks up. “I think that’s a risk we have to take.”

“Why?” May turns around, looking incredulous.

Hill’s disagreeing with her?

Hill straightens up in her seat, “Because Friday herself reported that she’s missing some protocols. She doesn’t know how, or why either. She cannot search for them because you cannot seem to search out your own programming, a defense mechanism Stark invented.”

“We have to get our hands dirty.” Rhodey agrees. “I don’t like it either, and I agree, May, that we don’t want to upset Peter’s AI. It’s his greatest weapon, and tool. We have the reset button if we really need it.”

“What reset button?”

“Shuri found a way to completely reset the AI’s programming if it gets out of control. Locking them out of all physical technology, and restarting the program that runs the AI’s base programming.” Sharon offers up to May.

“Like hitting the restart button on a computer?” I ask Bruce, who smiles and nods energetically.

“Exactly, Or like your phone.”

“Both Friday and Karen?” May asks. Bruce nods, then looks to Hill. I turn to Hill, only for her to already be looking at me.

I’m not so sure. I don’t think I should be poking around this sort of thing without reading into it a little bit.

“Can you give me some time?” I pivot in my seat and look to Bruce. “I don’t know enough at least. And I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, sure.” He nods.

“We don’t want you to make a decision today.” Romanoff says evenly. “We’re just getting everyone on the same page.”

Beside me, May crosses her arms and glances at me.

She’s not on board.

“We don’t think Friday will suffer any performance drop off or degradation, so we have time.” Sharon adds.
“Alright. Then we’ll use that time.” May says strongly. “What’s the plan in the meantime? Once we leave this restaurant. Are you kidnapping him for the summer?” She asks, then nods in my direction.

“No. We have some plans, but we’ll only borrow him for a few days at a time. We want him to keep patrolling when he’s in the city, keep morale up.” Colonel Rhodes answers May.

“Morale?” I ask.

*That’s a news fabrication. It’s not real.*

“The news is actually spot on with that one. Senator Boynton is drafting legislation for the investigation and possible apprehension of Peter.” Sharon says quietly.

“What?!”

“What for?” May leans over and puts her hand on my shoulder as I start to rise out of my chair. Romanoff shakes her head and grabs her drink as Dr. Banner runs his hand over his blazer.

Hill turns to May and says “A lot of people are worried. It’s not Peter’s fault, but us giving him time doesn’t look like that to everyone out there.” She gestures to the closed double doors to the rest of the restaurant, where the general public is dining. “It looks like he’s gone.”

“But I’m right here.” I turn to her.

“Yes.” Romanoff nods as I look to her. “But perception is reality. You’ve only been out in spurts. Last week was really good for perception. It looks like you’re back. People are worried. About you, their safety, another invasion, everything.”

May asks “We’re not being invaded again, are we?”

“Not that we know of.” Rhodey reassures her.

*He’s answering nearly all of her questions. He’s her point man. Hmm.*

“Senator Boynton isn’t privy to who you actually are. And in his own misguided way, he wants to help. So by doing an investigation, he reassures the public, and gets the information he wants.”

Nobody knows who I am. Ross thinks he knows, but my only interaction with him I was wearing the mask, and didn’t talk. I just shook his hand and let Colonel Danvers talk for me.

My pocket suddenly vibrates, causing Hill and May to glance at me, and I quickly stick my hand in my pocket to check who it is.

*I new Message – Michelle*

*Not now. I’ll text her later.*

I silence my phone, then put my phone back into my pocket before seeing Hill’s eyes boring into mine.

*Nope.*

“Sorry.” I apologize quietly, then sip my water.

“And there’s nothing you can do to stop him?” May asks everyone.
“Thor’s coming back in a few days to speak to Secretary Ross personally.” Hill informs her.

He’ll listen to Thor. I’d like to see him try to high and mighty his way out of that.

May laughs, then smiles. “Then we don’t have to worry about that.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Rhodey shakes his head. “Thor can only ask him not to proceed. He’s already done some public blustering, tough talk. It’d be bad for him politically to back down now.”

“He wouldn’t say no to Thor.” I say. “Why’s he coming anyway? Why not ask somebody else?”

Why not Fury? He’s right here with us. Thor’s doing whatever it is that he’s doing for Asgard. Why’s Thor going to bat for me anyway?

“Already tried that. I spoke to him in his office after I left your place Pete. Didn’t work.” Rhodey looks back to me, frustration evident in his expression.

“Oh. Thank you.” I smile, and Rhodey returns it, then shrugs before Bruce speaks.

“We can still win the PR battle long term. Pete, you know how much people want to know the facts. We’re still working on those films to get out some of the basic facts.”

Yeah, I saw that pass thru my email. The briefing at least. Budget is a few hundred million dollars, grabbing some of Hollywood and the world’s top actors and signing them to the toughest NDA’s imaginable.

I nod. “Where are we with that? Still working on a script?”

I know they’re putting together a timeline, to present to potential directors. But they can’t do that because...

Well, because I’m the only person that has access to the fight on Titan with Thanos. There’s a gap. Bruce, Nat, everyone knows there was a fight. Tony told them that, but didn’t really give any details.

And I haven’t been able to bring myself to watch it, so I’m not releasing it yet. I’m not doing it until I look over it and make sure there’s nothing that I can’t cover for, something... I don’t know.

Wait...why’s everyone stopped talking?

I look up to see everyone looking at me. “Yeah? Sorry.”

“You know.” Hill says quietly, behind me.

Oh great.

“You need his version of events.” May speaks up on my behalf. “He’s not ready. He won’t even talk to me about it yet.”

“But we need just the footage, so we can put together a game plan.” Rhodey says patiently.

May lets out a frustrated breath. “You guys keep on saying that he needs time, and that you want to give it to him. But you keep pushing him and pushing him. You’re going to push him too far. He’s barely hanging on as it is!”

“Hey!” I cut May off at the pass, before she can go full Mom Mode for everyone. “I’m feeling
better. I’m close. Okay?”

*That came out harsher than I meant it.*

“Sorry. Too mean.” I smile at May, as she looks to me, clearly just concerned for me before she reaches out and squeezes my hand. “I’m telling you. I’m close. I’m trying to figure this out. I know you guys need me back. I’m working on it.”

“And we appreciate that Pete.” Rhodey says, sounding similar to May. “But at the same time, we need that footage. We can—”

*I know. They’ll cover up anything that is amiss. Wrong. Too gruesome for the public. Nobody, not even these directors will know. Everybody will get our version of things.*

“I…” I start, then groan and instinctively pinch the bridge of my nose before I sense somebody behind the double doors. “I’ll look at it tonight. Food’s here.”

“Food’s what?” Romanoff says quickly, an instant before there’s a knock on the door and it opens. Told you. Food’s here.

“It’s coming, I got it, I got it!!!” I hear my own voice say, pitching up in excitement as before both of my eyes, I see the Gauntlet start to budge off his wrist and come to me.

*I had it.*

“Stop stop stop!!” Mr. Stark keeps yelling at Quill before—

I see myself fly backwards, Mantis get thrown, clearly hard enough to kill her before I leap up in time to catch and save her from certain death, then turn back around in time to see a purple flash hit Quill, Drax and Nebula squarely and knock them down.

*They’re completely lifeless. He could have killed them. That easily.*

About a hundred feet away, I see Mr. Stark charge him, get buffeted to the side before pulling out a massive blue blade, only to get head-butted away.

*And now…for the madness to ensue.*

The whole room shakes as the speakers can’t do the sound justice before I see myself spin around, look up and see the moon in the sky go purple, then break apart, then begin flying down to kill us all.

*I thought I was dead. I knew I was dead. I don’t even remember moving, just that I pulled myself up and…*

I see myself perch on one of the broken structures, maybe fifty feet in the air then spot the Guardians, still being propelled up by one of the moon pieces colliding with the planet. The field becomes completely unrecognizable as the destroyed planet is being pulverized by the moon Thanos just threw. Meanwhile, I keep saving the Guardians, who are still unconscious.

“I got you! I got you!”

*Sorry I can’t remember anybody’s names.*
I laugh as I hear myself say it again, only for it to come out hollow and scared even to my own ears.

And now...the light show.

Once I’ve secured everyone, I look up in time to see Dr. Strange fire off a beam of something, destroying the chunk of rock Thanos was standing on. Thanos leaps out, fires another purple burst, which hits what looks like glass, then starts flying at Thanos.

No clue what that is.

Thanos barely moves his hand, and the glass becomes a swirling black hole I think, which he throws back at Dr. Strange, who turns it all into a bunch of butterflies.

Thanos closes his fist as he’s surrounded by infinite Strange’s, destroying the illusions and leaving the genuine artifact defenseless before Thanos simply pulls him into his grasp and grabs him with the gauntlet.

Then just...tossed the necklace aside. Which was weird.

My field of vision changes as I start charging down, all while Mr. Stark flies back down, briefly engaging Thanos before starting to get pounded. I keep picking up the pace, running as fast as I can, pulling myself down from where I’d saved the others as fast as I can—

“—Gahhhhh!!!!!” I land about twenty feet away, above Mr. Stark as Thanos simply lifts him up, and sets him down, clearly having wounded him.

I was going to wait just a little longer. Wait and see what he was going to do. Then jump down and let Dr. Strange fight back.

He said not to engage him directly, no matter what I did.

“Don’t engage him one on one, no matter what happens. He’s too big and strong for you, kid. This guy won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“You have my respect Stark.” I land in time to hear Thanos say quietly, as Mr. Stark continues gasping for air.

That...sounds way worse now than I remember it.

“When I’m done half of humanity will still be alive.” Thanos says, holding him up by the head with the Gauntlet while forcing Mr. Stark to look at him.

“I hope they remember you.”

“Stop.” I hear Dr. Strange call out hoarsely.

Why?

Why why why why why?

“Spare his life...and I’ll give you the Stone.”

I don’t understand it. I really don’t. He said on the ship that he’d let all of us die to protect the
Stone.

Then he just gave it up to save Mr, Stark.

Before my eyes, I see Dr. Strange reach out and pull the Stone out of thin air, from wherever he had been hiding it.

Huh. It was already glowing. Like all the other ones did when Thanos used them.

“No tricks.”

I see Dr. Strange comply, then watch the stone float to Thanos, who barely blinks while putting the Stone in its slot. “One to go.”

And here comes our savior.

I barely register Quill’s yell of rage as I shake my head then see Quill close the gap on Thanos, only for Thanos to smile, derision obvious before vanishing, sending Quill flying past nothing.

What an idiot.

“WE HAD HIM!!!!” I yell at the machine. “IDIOT!!”

Yeah we’re in space on a foreign planet. Yeah he’s still alive. But I would have had the Gauntlet. We would have had at least a chance!

NOBODY HAD TO DIE. NOBODY. WE’D DONE IT! We all did our jobs like we were supposed to, but he had to stunt around and brag, then just start hitting him.

“Did we just lose?”

Yes.

The footage continues as I pace around.

I...

I can’t do this. But I have to.

I drop down as Mr. Stark is spraying something into a wound he’s picked up along the way, then help him to his feet. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Mr. Stark groans as I look up at him.

He looks awful.

I turn away from him to see the others all getting up as well, with Quill helping Mantis, Drax and Nebula already on their feet.

I was about to turn back to—

“Something’s happening.” Mantis says, sounding awestruck.

That quick.

When I came back, like two days afterward, I asked somebody, I think Hill what happened next. She said that Thanos appeared in Wakanda. I saw that footage before I went back to school. They
didn’t stand a chance.

Thanos played a lot nicer with them. He nearly beat Cap’s brain out of his head, but I don’t think he was trying to kill him. Or anyone. He ripped the Stone out of Vision’s head. Then...

Mantis just vanishes, causing everyone to freeze.

“Steady Quill.” I hear, just before the camera on my own suit starts moving.

It hit me like a wave. Dragging me down. And when I fought it, I…it just hurt more. And more and more.

“Mr. Stark…” I hear myself ask, voice shaking.

Aww man…he knew my voice shook.

“I don’t feel so good.”

“You’re okay—.” Mr. Stark says easily, his expression betraying him though.

He looks terrified.

I panicked.

“I don’t know what’s happening, I—.” I stutter, then my knees go out on me, only for him to catch me.

“I don’t wanna go, I don’t wanna go. Mr. Stark, please. I don’t want to go.”

I’m begging him. I was. I… I didn’t want to go. I thought we could fix everything. We just had to get home somehow.

It would have been okay if it wouldn’t have gotten so cold.

“Please, I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna go. I—” I gasp out, then drop down onto the ground, Mr. Stark leaning over me.

Looking horrified.

“I’m sorry.” I say quietly, before I hear myself say the exact same thing before BARF lets out a loud crackling noise.

The memory’s over.

I move my hands, only to hit the BARF glasses, then roughly toss them aside.

The camera cut out. I...

Feeling my whole body shake, I drop my head into my hands.

Breathe Parker…breathe.

I let out a shaky breath, then inhale as much as I can.

I can’t just go to pieces yet. Everybody else is upstairs, doing something. I don’t know. I came down here to—
Silently, I feel a soft pair of hands pull me into a hug, before somebody leans their head on mine.

Who’s that?

I can’t stop myself from freezing up as I hear whoever it is is breathe quietly then pull me closer to them, cradling my head as I’m still holding my head in my hands. “You’re safe. You’re okay.”

It’s Scarlet Witch.

It’s Wanda.

“Shh…” She says quietly, adjusting her hold on me as I stay still. “Shh…let it out. It’s okay. I’m right here.”

“I know what it’s like…me too okay? Me too.” She whispers to me, holding me as tightly as I can as I can’t stop myself from shaking. “You’re safe. It’s okay.”

“You too?”

Nobody ever said…

“Yeah. Shh…” She says to me, then snifflies and hugs me again. “Me too.”

At some point, I lean into her hug before we stay there for a while. Wanda hugging me. Then I hear Bruce’s voice.

“I’ll clear his schedule. I—”

What?

I pop my head up from Wanda’s shoulder, only to see—

Oh no…

Fury. Hill. Both looking towards Wanda and I. Romanoff has both of her hands over her mouth, pale as a ghost. Rhodey standing behind Fury. And more.

Everyone’s here. They must have heard me.

“It’s okay.” Wanda says behind me, then reaches out and grabs my hand. “Hey. Peter?”

Yeah.

My eyes fall onto the ground, where the tile randomly reflects off the beige tile by the glass doors into Mr. Stark’s and I’s lab where somebody dropped their drink at some point and is now spilling out everywhere, glass and a brown liquid spilling every which way.

Nobody cares because they’re looking at me.

They just watched me die.
'Roller Coaster Ride'

Chapter Notes

My apologies to everyone who read this chapter prior to this note being posted: I overlooked an important break in the chapter, and the switch in time was very muddled. I'm going thru the prior chapters to correct this issue, and will doublecheck for these in the future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why didn’t you save me?”
“I—I tried, I didn’t—”

I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to go.
“I don’t wanna go. I don’t want to go…”

No no no no NO!!

“You walked away. You did!”

I turn back around, breathlessly. “I tri—”

“LIAR!!”

I—

“You left me to DIE!! And I did! Why didn’t you choose to—”

“Peter!” Somebody roughly shakes, causing me to jolt awake then scramble away.

NO!!


No. Not AGAIN.

My eyes look past Romanoff, who is trying to maintain eye contact with me in time to see Dr. Banner and Hill rush in.

Orange.

“I’m here.” I groan, then put my head in my hands. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You have absolutely nothing to apologize for.” She says strongly.

They’re all still dressed. Obviously after they told me to try and go to bed, they all stayed up. Awesome.

“Hey.” I hear Wanda say breathlessly. “Did you get him up?”
Hill immediately drops her voice, but I easily still hear her respond. “Yeah, thanks.”

“He kept on—”

“We know.”

“Hey.” I hear in front of me, then peer out of my hands to see Natasha sitting on the edge of my bed. “You with me?”

“Kind of.” I shrug, then shift to face everyone else.

_I know they’re going to want me to talk about it._

“Same dream?” Hill asks Bruce quietly. He nods silently, then glances back over to me.

_No it wasn’t. I got some Titan and Mr. Stark thrown in this time. On top of the normal lucid disaster._

“I’m sorry. We pushed you too far.” I hear Romanoff say to me quietly before she squeezes my leg. “We…just wanted to help.”

“I know.” I nod into my hands.

_I’m the problem._

Bruce speaks up, voice quietly approaching. “I probably should have seen this coming. He’s obviously fighting PTSD, but has been focusing so much on—”

“Bruce.” Romanoff says sharply, causing me to jump silently.

Bruce and Hill both look to me immediately, and after a half second, Romanoff does the same. “I’m…my fault.” She quickly apologizes.

_Not your fault._

“I’m jumpy. I’m sorry. You don’t have to apologize.”

Can I just be alone?

Feeling everyone’s eyes on me, I pull my head out of my hands and look in Romanoff’s direction. “I didn’t wake anybody up, did I?”

What time is it, anyway? _If everyone is still dressed, it’s probably close to midnight._

“No, you didn’t. I’m going to go ahead and call Dr. Cho. I’m sure she’s still awake,” Hill says, before I look for my alarm clock.

1:47 AM.

I can’t help but groan at the time, then push away my covers causing Romanoff to shift her weight, giving me room to move around.

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up.”

_How can I not? I mean, I keep having these nightmares. At least it’s not every night like they were. But now they’re definitely going to try and prescribe me something for it instead of just giving me_
“You don’t have to wake up Dr. Cho. I’ll be okay.” I reply to Romanoff as my brain finally starts grinding into motion.

_I can feel my mind jumping around._

Romanoff responds “I don’t think she’ll mind. She’d want to know right away.” before moving around again, giving me even more room.

“Send her an email or something I…” I shrug, then glance up in time to see Wanda’s hands glowing red.

_Sh e’s trying to get a feel for what’s bothering me. How about let’s not do that._

Before I can open my mouth to ask her to stop, Wanda drops her hands back down to her sides, and she ducks closer to the door.

_Telekinesis is one of her powers. And I know she can manipulate people. That’s apparently why Hulk went and tried to level Johannesburg. According to their own files. Who knows if that’s actually the truth,_

“I—” I hear her start to speak, then feel a rush of anger.

_H ow about let’s not._

“I’m going to clean up. Sorry. Didn’t mean to worry everyone.” I say to Romanoff quietly, then kick away my covers and move to stand up.

_I feel disgusting. I need a shower._

“You’re okay.” Hill says as everyone backs away from me, towards the door. “We were just planning.”

_Y eah. What to do about me._

_E verybody’s so worried about me breaking. The Avengers, May, apparently the US Government too… Give me time my ass. They need all hands on deck for whatever comes next. They need to show results._

“Hey.” I hear Bruce say, before I feel him gently grab my shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up. You can only heal at your own pace.”


“I know.” I say, voice coming out of my throat flat.

_C rap._

“Tell Dr. Cho I’ll meet her in her office tomorrow morning.” I try to perk up, then smile at Bruce.

_No use in getting everyone riled up this late at night. It’s still the work week. Even though that really doesn’t apply here. Besides, she’s not a psychologist._

Dr. Edwards is the psychologist that they’ve been bringing in to see me. I’m sure for a hefty fee
and all that.

Bruce doesn’t immediately reply, instead giving me a concerned look for a minute. “Okay. Come get somebody if you’re still having trouble.”

“Okay.” I nod. “I’ll take a few more melatonin. That’ll get me to the morning.” I explain, then wave to the others, who are now by the door.

*You almost can’t see Wanda.*

“The glaive doesn’t seem to be a pure metal creation.” Karen observes as I sip my hot tea, then set it back down on the coaster.

“So it’s forged. Like steel.”

“Yes.” Karen affirms. “There are some alloys that I cannot identify.”

*Okay. But that alone tells us something. We know something about it.*

I smile while turning back to the suspended spear that one of Thanos’ goons fought with. “But you can identify some of the metals?”

“Yes. There seems to be a mixture of tungsten, stainless steel and magnesium. I’m compiling a full list.”

“I know. You just started. Thank you Karen.” I smile to the empty lab.

“You’re welcome Peter.”

“Does the spear share any of the same metallic features as any of the armors we’ve found?”

Karen’s voice doesn’t answer immediately, instead creating a tense silence.

*She’s looking for the answer. I don’t think she’d gotten there yet.*

“FRIDAY is still in the process of attempting to recreate the metals that make us Thanos, and his allies’ armors and weapons.”

*So we don’t know.*

Why didn’t Mr. Stark immediately put FRIDAY on this after the Battle of New York six years ago? Instead, Damage Control just took over everything and annexed a bunch of warehouses. Allowing trouble to seep in, like Liz’s dad.

*Good one Mr. Stark. Let’s just kick the can down the road. Mess with powers and things we have no idea how to control instead of looking to the potential answers we have RIGHT in front of us.*

*All those Chitauri space whale guys. Just one of those guys have enough metals to probably distribute amongst any trusted members of the scientific community. We could have gotten as many minds as we could on the problem. But NOPE!*

“Karen, make a note to Dr. Banner. I think we should start to really dive deep on this stuff. Start arming ourselves with this stuff.”

“What do you mean by ‘this stuff’?” She replies patiently.
I run my hand thru my hair then shrug to empty air. “We have all of this alien metal and tech. Let’s devote resources to figuring all of this out for our advantage. Play offense instead of defense.”

The whole reason we won six years ago was pure luck. Mr. Stark’s nuke hit the alien command ship, causing all of the Chitauri to go lifeless. Because they all were operating on a hive mind. One organism, operating in many different places.

Science fiction come to life. Nightmare stuff.

“Send that off Karen, then make another note: Research hive mind intelligence. What information we have on that. Has anybody else encountered this before?”

“Will do Peter. Your mind seems to be quite scattered today.” She observes.

“Been a long day.”

I couldn’t really get back to sleep. I ended up staring up at the ceiling, trying to sleep. Sometimes I found myself looking at Michelle’s drawing of Avenger’s Tower I hung by my desk.

It really is a great drawing. I didn’t notice at the time, but it’s of the old Tower, before Mr. Stark renovated it. You can’t see the damage Loki did to it because it’s a quick sketch, but you can still sort of see the outline of where ‘Stark’ had been before all but the ‘A’ got blown away. And the press ran with the logo. Mr. Stark used that as inspiration, and…

Now we’re the Avengers.

“Shall I look for methods to help you focus?”

“Sure.” I answer Karen, then look around the room for…something.

I don’t know what.

Scanning the room, I settle on my tea, than take another drink from the coffee cup.

I am focusing. It’s just that my answer keeps jumping around. Karen and Friday are looking into the metallic properties. I asked them to talk to Bruce about that as a potential solution.

“Peter.”

“Yes Karen?”

There’s a moment of silence before she speaks up. “Have you noticed an increase in your stress levels since you left school yesterday?”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “I had to look at all that Titan stuff yesterday. Then I had a nightmare and couldn’t get back to sleep. And now I’m here. It hasn’t stopped yet.”

“Perhaps you should retreat back to your room. Text Michelle or May or Ned.”

No, I need to keep working. Stopping is the last thing anybody wants me to do. Dr. Edwards said it herself before I came back. Stopping would allow any potential issues I do have to manifest fully and completely derail me. That’s how PTSD really gets you. Even though I don’t even think I have PTSD. How can I have PTSD if I didn’t even fight Thanos for real the second time until it was basically all over. If anyone should have PTSD or mental issues, it’s everybody who survived. Bruce, Romanoff, Rhodey, Scott Lang.
Dr. Edwards said that nobody is immune to mental issues. It just means that you’re human.

“Peter.”

“No.” I shake my head strongly at the floor. “What did you find on hive mind intelligence?”

“It appears that my records have three known occurrences of hive mind intelligence on a large scale: The Chitauri, the Supreme Intelligence, and Hive.”

“What are ‘The Supreme Intelligence’ and Hive?” I parrot back to her.

Karen throws up a screen with the file instead of replying.

*Supreme Intelligence*. artificial intelligence and the ruler of the Kree Empire who embodies the empire’s greatest minds.

I swipe down, only for the screen to spring back up. “Karen?”

“That is the extent to the file. Colonel Danvers has noted to Director Fury that she will further update the file when she returns from her mission.”

“And who knows when that might be.” I scratch my hair. “Fine then, this Hive guy.”

The screen changes into this Hive’s entry.

*Hive, true name Alveus was a parasitic Inhuman capable of infesting and possessing the bodies of dead humans and controlling other Inhumans through a hive mind.*

Okay. Was?

I swipe down and see a blue, tentacle guy that looks like Lord Voldemort.

*Hive was killed by S.H.I.E.L.D when Agent Lincoln Campbell sacrificed himself by trapping him inside a space faring Quinjet, rigged with a bomb that exploded outside of Earth’s atmosphere.*

“Wait, what?” I shake my head, then read that last line again.

*Trapped himself with a bomb to kill this guy?! Outside of the atmosphere?? If that’s what it takes to kill something like this…no way. Absolutely no way.*

“Let’s go back to the possession part. Karen?”

“It appears that he was a parasite, capable of controlling others and making them do his bidding.”

*And he was an Inhuman. Another lost crisis.*

“How did he take control of them?” I ask Karen.

Karen pauses, then says “It appears that he could deploy a form of his control, in the notes Dr. Fitz called it ‘sway’ which attacked the pleasure centers of the brain, chemically altering their nature to conform to his desires and wills.”

*Sounds like he didn’t take no for an answer.*

This damn S.H.I.E.L.D team again. Again and again. The lab. Chicago and now this guy.

*They sure know how to find trouble. Inhumans isn’t their fault, that just kind of happened. But*
“Karen, pull up this team of S.H.I.E.L.D.” I ask her. 

*They didn’t go down with the ship. They know about the timelines. All roads seem to lead right thru them.*

Once more, the screen changes to the information I’ve asked for.

*Alphonso Mackenzie, Melinda May, Elena Rodriguez, Dr. Jemma Simmons, Daisy Johnson, Deke Shaw, Davis and Piper. Along with at least fifty support staff.*

- Means of operation: unknown.
- Financial capabilities: unknown.
- Base of operations: unknown.
- Current location: unknown.

**Great!**

“We’re the damn Avengers. Can’t we know anything about these guys?” I yell at nothing again. “I can’t fight what I don’t know anything abou—”

“Peter, you have a visitor.” Karen cuts off my tirade.

“Mark this for me to return to it.” I say, then whip towards the door.

*Probably lunch or something…or a woman.*

I’m not expecting guests.

“Unlock the door. Do we know who she is?”

“Dr. Jemma Simmons of S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Of what?!” I yell as the door opens, causing her to freeze up, one foot inside the door.

“Sorry. Maria Hill sent me to observe you. I’m Dr. Jemma Simmons?” She nervously looks at me.

**Great. They’re apparently omnipresent. I dig into them, they appear at my door.**

“Okay.” I say, unsure of myself before she walks in and sets down a bag and a tablet.

“How are you today Peter?”

*Strong accent.*

“Fine.” I shrug, then think twice about it. “Stressed out, but I would imagine you know that if Hill sent you.”

Dr. Simmons smiles thinly at me. “She spoke very highly of you, but mentioned that you seem to be experiencing high levels of stress and symptoms of Post Traumatic—”

“Don’t say that. I’m not crazy.”
You say PTSD, it’s barely a leap of faith to go from that to schizophrenia or something worse.

“I’m…not saying that you’re crazy.” She evens out her tone. “Your reactions are perfectly normal, given the situation.”

“What do you know about my situation?”

What do these guys no have on me? Is this Hydra invading S.H.I.E.L.D all over again?

“I was given a briefing packet by Maria Hill. Would you like to see it?” She volunteers.

Like she’s trying to show she has nothing to hide.

I nod silently, and she quickly pulls out a folder, thick enough to be noticeable.

Hmm. That’s thicker than I want.

Peter Benjamin Parker blah blah blah, basic biographical information—

Parker was involved in the events of the ‘Infinity War’ as well as its concluding events, provisionally named ‘Endgame’. Following these events, Parker has shown increased irritability, stress, anger, inability to sleep, chronic nightmares, avoidance of said events with rare exceptions…

“So you think I’m going crazy.” I snap the file shut, then set it on my desk.

Mine. Dr. Simmons. You’re on my turf.

Dr. Simmons raises her hands defensively. “No. You are, however showing concerning signs. Are you typically this anxious around visitors?”


Karen throws up the file I was just looking at, and she takes a step back, mouth dropping open in surprise before starting to frown. “How’d you find this information?”

“I’m here. I get whatever information I want if I think I need it.” I shrug, then cross my arms.

“Who is this Hive guy?”

“Uhm…I’m going to ask you to please sit down.”

“Sit down? Why? I’m asking a question, not attacking you.” I roll my eyes and start to pace.

I am not going to sit down. This is my lab!

“You’re displaying disturbing signs of paranoia. Maria Hill only asked me to fly in and check on your personal health while she is away.”

“She’s away?”

She said yesterday—

“Yes, she flew to Washington D.C, along with Director Fury and a few others this morning. To answer your next question—”

“You don’t know my next question.” I spit out at her.
“—No, I don’t know why they went to D.C. Now can you please do me a favor and take a breath?”

Breathe. She’s always…

Wait.

I am getting worked up.

I quietly exhale, then feel how tense my arms are. “Thank you.” She smiles. “If you will, please take another one.”

My whole body is tense.

Once again, I breathe in, then out before Dr. Simmons’ smile grows. “You’re working yourself up with all those questions. Feeding your own anxiety. Making it worse. I know you don’t mean to but that’s how it works. See?”

“Yeah.” I say, unsure.

I didn’t even notice.

“Who the hell are you?” I sit down in my chair. “Your whole team. Are they here?”

“I only have one other person with me. What—?” Dr. Simmons replies while reading my screens.

She’s really smart. I can see her mind racing.

“I have questions. You keep popping up where I look. And it’s making me suspicious.”

Dr. Simmons turns to me. “Well that’s certainly not unreasonable. The same group, popping up again and again when you don’t know who they are. I can assure you that I—” She reaches over and grabs her tablet. “—am a friend. I was, along with almost everyone else on your little list there, was with S.H.I.E.L.D when it fell. We’re the good guys, like you.” She finishes, then smiles warmly at me. “Has anyone spoken to you about the dangers of reading too much?”

I shrug at Dr. Simmons. “Yeah, of the general public. The Sokovia Accords were a direct result of the collapse of S.H.I.E.L.D and too much information getting out. They got scared, and we were left defenseless. Leading to what happened.”

“Have you ever considered that the same might apply to you?”

It can’t. I have to protect the public, and know what they can’t. That’s part of being an Avenger.

“No. It’s my job to know.”

Dr. Simmons gently shakes her head. “Not everything. Too much knowledge is dangerous to anyone.”

“And that doesn’t apply to you?” I fire back at her.

Dr. Know It All.

“I don’t know who you actually are.” She patiently smiles. “I do know that we are both here at the most top secret facility in the world. And that you are an Avenger, albeit not which one. And it doesn’t matter. I’m here to help, and nothing more.”
Sure.

I grab my cup of tea and sip it, then set it down and simply look at Dr. Simmons, who looks to me for a moment before looking back to my investigation. “This is very impressive. Very good detective work.”

“I’m just accessing a database.”

She silently shakes her head. “But you dug around and found us.”

“Yes.” She replies evenly before her tablet lights up. “Tell me, have you always felt this anxious? Or just since the events of yesterday?”

“Events?”

“Agent Hill implied in her message in which she requested I come here, that something happened yesterday involving a traumatic memory that may have triggered you into a potential…relapse.”

“Relapse?” I blurt out, furious.

_I am NOT crazy!_

“You can use setback, if you would like.” She takes a literal step back. "Were you able to get back to sleep last night after your nightmare?”

I pop out of my seat. “Okay, stop with the questions. You cannot know all of this from your little folder.”

“Actually, I can.” She smiles at me. “Please answer the questions Mr. Parker.”

“I—”

The lab door suddenly opens to a woman in all black, with silver gauntlets who turns to Dr. Simmons. “Hey. You rang?”

“Actually, now might not be—”

_**She’s Quake.**_

“I know you.” I smile. “You were on TV in L.A. You’re Quake.”

“No.” She stops in her tracks. “I’m Daisy. Hi. You okay?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

Dr. Simmons shakes her head. “No, I’d just gotten him calmed down. He has a lot of questions. And a lot of information.”

“The file said he was…” She starts, then glances at the screens and her eyes widen. “—smart. Who are you?”

“I was just getting to that part.” Dr. Simmons informs her.

“I’m sure the file told you that part.” I roll my eyes then walk back to my seat.
Breathe.

I exhale as the two women exchange a look, then lean over the tablet.

“Okay, they didn’t say he was crazy.”

Dr. Simmons counters “I don’t think he’s crazy. Just extremely worked up.”

“Yeah, but what if he’s—like Fitz. After we came back. He seems awfully well informed. How’d he—”

“I can hear you, by the way.” I call out to them impulsively.

Who do you think I am? Some guy who doesn’t have enhanced hearing or something?

The two instantly look to me. “You can hear us? From across the room?” DaisyQuake asks, looking surprised.

“Yup.”

“So you’re an Inhuman. I am too, I can—”

“I’m not anything.” I cut her off. “I wasn’t caught up in that alien stuff.”

May threw out all of Ben’s fish oil pills. Basically threw out all of our vitamins. It was…weird.

Uncle Ben thought it was all way overblown. He agreed on the fish oil pills though, since the connection to those Inhumans was pretty direct.

“Okay, it’s not alien stuff it’s—”

“Not the point.” Dr. Simmons raises her voice, silencing DaisyQuake. “How about let’s get back to the questions? I frown at her, then look back to DaisyQuake, then gesture aimlessly with my hands.

Might as well go along with it. It’s this, or Hill comes back and has a real meltdown that I wouldn’t talk. Again. Not that I’m going to talk to them.

“Why’d you look into us?” DaisyQuake asks before Dr. Simmons can speak.

“I’m looking for answers.”

“On?”

“Hive mind intelligence. You apparently bumped into that with a dude named Hive.” DaisyQuake takes a small step back before Simmons replaces her with a step forward.

“How—”

“I’m not done yet.” I say evenly to Simmons. “I also found you guys while investigating timelines.”

Both of their faces quickly go slack. “Timelines?”

Dr. Simmons asks “Why would you ask about timelines Like space time?”

“Yes.” I nod. “Because I’m still figuring out how we won. And all we have really, is a
“Which all must seem very suspicious to you.” DaisyQuake concedes, and I nod.

“This is exactly where we were before we got derailed again.” Dr. Simmons mutters under her breath to her, then smiles at me. “Are you taking any medications right now?”

“Basic vitamins. Probably in your report.”

*It’s all on file.*

“How’d you connect these dots?” DaisyQuake asks curiously.

“I’m trying to find out how to win.”

She frowns at me before Dr. Simmons supplies “Information overload. He’s stressing himself out.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I just know that everybody keeps pushing stuff on me. I just left school yesterday.”

“School?” DaisyQuake repeats after me.

I nod. “Is your name actually Daisy?”

“Yeah.”

*Okay.*

“The file says you just completed your sophomore year at Midtown School of Science and Technology.” Dr. Simmons smiles. “And with excellent marks too.”

“I don’t have my grades back.” I disagree with her.

Daisy leans back over to glance at the tablet. “I’d hate to disagree…but I see a 3…something at least. No C’s, mostly A’s…wait what?” She says audibly as Simmons approaches.

“Yeah, those are his grades.”

“Karen.” I say quietly, then as they turn around I see my report card show up. “When’d this come in?”

“Technically, it isn’t out yet. But all grades have been finalized.” She informs me.

Daisy turns to Simmons. “He has an AI?”

“He didn’t build it. Tony Stark did, apparently.”

“You didn’t know that?” I ask Daisy.

She shakes her head. “No, I’m not really here for you. But in the interest of disclosure, we’ve been thru enough that I think she trusts my judgement.”

*So she asked her to come down here and have a look at me.*

I aced all my finals though. I got a B in Art, and a B in Spanish. A’s in everything else.
“Did you have any difficulty studying for your exams?” Dr. Simmons gets back on track.

“No.”

*Focusing isn’t the problem.*

“Any difficulties with classmates? Friends, coworkers?” She presses on.

“Nothing more than normal.” I explain. “My school…”

*Is complicated.*

“Go on.” Dr. Simmons smiles at me, encouragingly.

“They don’t believe that I have anything to do with this.” I gesture around us. “The cover is an internship with Stark, before all this happened. For almost a year. But since they don’t believe it —”

Daisy nods. “They’re merciless.”

“Exactly.”

*Now we’re on the same page.*

“Your file says you do have a small group of close friends?”

“Yes.” I nod. *Michelle’s name better not be in there. Or I’ll… Hill is going to hear it from me. She can’t get hurt by all of this. No way. She’s at arm’s length as it is.*

“Have you had any issues with them since…this past April?”

I shake my head, then reach for my tea. “No. I think we’re probably closer.”

“Do any of them know about your true identity?”

Daisy turns away from Simmons to look at me. “I don’t know who you could be.”

“Ha ha.” I roll my eyes. *If they got this far, I’m sure it’s obvious.*

“No, I’m serious. We’ve never been here before. This is our first rodeo. Right?” Daisy turns to Simmons for validation, and in response she nods. “Right. I don’t care who you are.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“I didn’t.” She smirks. “But I think I know the problem.”

Dr. Simmons’ face falls, and she sets the tablet down. “Well then. Dr. Daisy.”

*She’s annoyed at her getting in the way.*

“No, no.” Daisy reaches out in Dr. Simmons’ direction. “He’s where I was after Lincoln died. He’s messed up and is trying to get thru it. Didn’t that file say something happened yesterday?”
Lincoln? The guy who killed that Hive guy?

“You knew Lincoln Campbell?”

Daisy turns back to me. “I didn’t know him. I loved him.”

OH.

“My bad, I—”

Daisy raises her hand to silence me. “Wait, hang on. That’s the point. I loved him. I hurt him. Then I lost him while we—” She gestures to Simmons and herself. “—we all saved the world. Sound familiar?”

Holy shit.

“Exactly.” She continues. “We saved the world, but I lost him. Hell, we just did it again, and she lost somebody. We all lost, but still won. The world spins on, and we have to figure out how to go on after losing somebody we loved.”

“I didn’t—”

“That’s not true.” She cuts me off again. “You loved Stark. And Rogers, and all of them. You have to love them in order to follow them to a foreign planet, or back in time, or against an unstoppable alien, or whoever! That’s a part of it! You have to love each other and be willing to cross that line and die because that’s how much you care about them! And the world!”

“Our team loves each other. Thru all of the insane, crazy shit we’ve all been thru, we’re a family now.” She claps before continuing. “It’s more than just a team, and I’m sure the Avengers are the same way. You guys were fractured, but came together and somehow, I have no CLUE how, beat this Thanos guy in three days! Because you care, because you love each other, and are willing to fight and scratch and claw and do anything to make things right. And sometimes you have to do whatever it takes.”

Sometimes you have to lose to win.

Daisy takes a few steps forward, and suddenly grabs my hand. “It’s okay that they’re gone. And you’re way too young to go thru all this. You’re still a kid. But here you are, and nobody taught you all of this.” She stops, then smiles at me. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you at all. I think you’re doing great.”

Wait…what?

My brain takes a moment to start spinning again, before I look up and see that she’s positively beaming down at me, holding my right hand in both of her hands. “You’re okay. It sounds like you had a hell of a day.”

Blankly, I turn to Dr. Simmons, who is wiping away tears.

That was a hell of a speech.

Not knowing, what else to do, I clear my throat, then try to swallow the sudden lump in it.

What do we do now?
S/O to the AOS fans reading this. Had to get them in here some how. Thanks to everyone for reading. More coming, it's just getting good!
“Access Granted.” Friday tells me, before the hand scanner lights up green, indicating a confirmation of my prints before the large metal doors inside this warehouse loudly start to open.

“Thanks Friday.”

“You’re welcome Mr. Parker. Maria Hill and the others should be back momentarily. I’ll inform you of their arrival.”

I nod as the door continues opening, large metal boxes like the ones from the plane crash on Coney Island stacked on both sides, all the way to the wall, with an alleyway in between to walk thru.

_Huh. It is just storage back here in these warehouses. I though there were labs or other quarters or something back here too. But nope, just boxes and boxes._

Hill and everyone had to have gone to D.C to throw their bodies in front of Senator Boynton’s investigation. Probably because of how bad yesterday went. I mean, they sent Simmons after me, which…

_That actually went okay._

She and Daisy aren’t all that bad. I think I sort of lost it on them for a minute. In my defense, it’s been a really bad day.

_I just want to do this, then eat, then try and sleep. I'm exhausted._

The next set of steel doors open without any further identification and the layout is completely different.

_White Avengers suits? What are those for?_

I grab the one closest to me, while all the others are placed on mannequins and feel the fabric, only for it to be extremely soft and flexible.

_Kind of reminds me of Ant-Man’s suit._

“Friday, should this suit be out?” I ask aloud.

“Yes, Dr. Banner was investigating it last week before being called away. There should be a place set for it to be stored it away in that box directly underneath.”

_Okay. I’ll do that._

I slip the suit over my shoulder, then pull on the latch, causing the box to let out a hiss of compressed air, before I see some Arc Reactor cores, some even smaller versions of the arc reactor core that look like they can be slipped onto your hand or wrists, then two slots for something to be folded.

_There’s already another suit right there._

Wordlessly, I set the suit down on the crate beside it, then fold it up as neatly as I can, then set it back inside the crate and close it.
Looking up from the crate, I immediately see a glint of polished gold, and for the breath to go right out of me.

There it is.

My footsteps echo all around me as I numbly walk up to a case, where it’s set up for display, already on a stand and everything.

It’s busted alright. The slots for the Stones are completely broken open and out of place, all tilted at angles. There’s residue of every color of each of the Stones, bleeding into the next one, with a raw looking film where the metal of the glove has broken apart.

That’s probably his skin. Gross.

Purple into blue into red into orange into…well, more orange. Green and purple on the thumb, and a lot of raw metal that looks like it’s chapped or rubbed raw around the center stone compartment, which is completely bent out of place.

It was broken. Like the files said.

When Thor initially found him his whole left arm was sort of dead and useless. He could raise it, use the Gauntlet, but it wasn’t much practical use.

I hope they didn’t have to peel it off of him. I don’t remember if it was on him when we all snapped back or not. I know the stones were already gone and all that but…

I don’t know.

Silently, I pop open the container, then exhale to myself and grab the smooth edge making up the bottom of the Gauntlet.

So close. We had it. We. Had. It. Yeah, I don’t know if it would have worked. Nebula would have exploded with that amount of power anyway. I would have exploded too, I can’t handle the power of this thing with even one of those Stones on it.

So I probably was about to die the moment we got it off. I wonder if that happened in one of the 14,600,005 possible outcomes.

Explosion by Infinite Power and Infinity Gauntlet.

That would have been hard to explain to May.

“You see, he tried saving the universe. But it was too much, and he blew up.” I say to myself while closing up the case holding the Infinity Gauntlet. “I’m really sorry for your loss Mrs. Parker.”

Weird that the Gauntlet is cold though. This whole warehouse is climate controlled, and it’s in that case. But even though it’s all protected, it’s just cold metal, like a metal pipe or something. It’s just a thing I guess. Like everything else. Winter gloves or a baseball glove doesn’t attack you or feel any different, except for lack of use or temperature. It’s dependent on climate.

Wonder if Thanos ever properly broke in the Gauntlet.

I exhale again, then take a few more steps before I start to hear a quiet hiss penetrate the flat air.
He’s close.

Turning to my left, I don’t see anything before turning to my—

There he is. Set back against the wall.

Quickly, I vault three stacked crates, then land right in front of the pod and look up.

Wow. That wound is enormous. Thor cracked him open like…I don’t know. Almost like roadkill or something.

Thanos’ head is drooped to the left, surrounded by a blue liquid which I assume is preserving him for us to study.

Man…he’s bigger than I remember him being. He has to be at least ten feet tall. Completely shredded Titan-ian muscle. He probably didn’t need the Gauntlet to do a ton of damage to the galaxy. Give him some armor and just let him loose like the Hulk. He’d take a planet or two for sure. We would have been screwed if he had decided to come down to New York.

We didn’t have Wanda or Danvers or any of the Guardians or anything. We got so lucky. We shouldn’t have won.

My eyes fall onto his left arm, which looks charred and blackened like a bad piece of barbecue before extending all the way up his shoulder towards his chest as well.

I know that we won because he was crippled too. He was limping, one arm, and still killed five Avengers.

Cap, Drax, Mr. Pym, Mr. Stark and Nebula.

For a minute, I silently just let myself stand here and look up at Thanos, imposing and menacing even in death before running my hand thru my hair.

Time to go back. They probably wouldn’t want me—

“Ahh!” I yelp as soon as I turn, sensing that there’s somebody right in front of me, causing me to leap up into the air and fire off some webbing.

WALL!

I land on the wall then look back for—

“Hey, hey! Whoa. Easy.” I hear the voice say.

No way. That’s—

She steps out from some other crates and raises her hands before smiling at me. “Didn’t mean to scare you Peter. I was just about to speak up.”

“Aren’t you like…in space?” I ask numbly while dropping off the wall.

She gives me a smile before shaking her head. “Hill didn’t tell you, did she?”

“No, she just left to go to D.C today without telling me.”

“Clearly you figured that out though.” Colonel Danvers tilts an eyebrow at me.
I shrug. “Well, yeah. Why are you here?”

“I can’t come back to my home planet from time to time?”

“No, I, that’s not what I meant. I thought you were on a mission.” I shake my head and try to clarify my point.

Come on now.

“I was. And I’ll go back. But today they thought I needed to be here.”

“Doing what?”

Danvers gives me another look, then smiles. “We went to talk to that Senator. The one who wants to cause trouble.”

“That’s not necessary, I—”

She immediately shakes her head in disagreement. “He didn’t listen to anyone else. Until he had five Avengers, plus Fury in his office. Then he kind of had to.”

He what?

“You talked him out of it?”

Danvers nods her head silently. “Yup. He won’t be in your neighborhood any time soon.”

Good.

“C’mon. I think everyone’s about to have dinner. I heard you’re not bad at poker.” She waves me towards her with a smile.

“I’m alright.” I smile nervously. “Only played once.”

Together, we start walking back towards the front door. “You’ll get better with practice. And it’s good for team chemistry, which is good after everything you all have been thru.”

“You? You went thru it too.” I counter.

She did. We couldn’t have won without her.

“Eh.” She barely shakes her head in an attempt to dismiss my concern. “Once you’ve been blasted by an all-powerful space rock, it’s kind of hard to scare me.”

“What?” I blurt out, almost laughing.

She smiles, then looks over to me. “Read my file. It’ll explain everything. Goose!” I look away from Colonel Danvers only to see a cat trotting away from— “Did you play nice with Thor? Did you? You’re a good girl.” She asks dotingly to the cat while bending down and scratching her behind the ears.

“Ahh.” I hear in front of me, then look and see the God of Thunder himself smiling down at me. “Found him.”

“Yeah.” Danvers laughs while rising back up to her full height. “Found him looking at Thanos. Could you have cracked him open more?”
Thor frowns and shakes his head. “Not if you’d wanted him to live.”

“Of course not, but it’s still grisly.”

“He needed to die. So he died.” Thor says matter of factly before the two of them start towards the front door.

_They even called Thor in. Oh God... They must really think I’m losing it._

“How did it go with your healer? The doctor?” Thor asks, turning back to look at me before Danvers waves for me to catch up to them.

_Right._

“It was okay.” I shrug while hustling to catch up.

“She said that they all think he’s okay. Just to take it slower with him. Restrict his online time a little bit so he can’t overwhelm himself. Full report will be complete in a day or two.”

Thor casts another quick look at me before looking back to Danvers. “Alright. Will someone pass it along to me when it comes?”

“Or we could send it to you?” She looks back at him with a amused expression.

“I don’t have, what do you call it, an electronic message.” He says, then snaps his fingers. “Ahh. E-Mail?”

“What?” I blurt out.

Danvers glances at me with a expression similar to how I feel. “We’ll set you one up.”

“This is similar to a game we play on Asgard.” Thor says, taking his next round of cards as Sharon walks back into the room with Hill holding drinks for themselves. “is it popular?”

“Yeah.” Rhodey shrugs before I hear Romanoff laugh.

Silently, I fiddle with my half-filled glass before glancing around at our setup.

Thor is sitting beside Bruce, who is helping him out. Sharon is keeping track of chips and dealing beside him. Romanoff, Colonel Danvers then Rhodey, Sam, who is back in town from some mission still in progress, a brunette woman whose name I don’t know that works here with Dr. Selvig, then Wanda, Hill and me.

_I’m more comfortable playing this time. But Romanoff keeps baiting me. Everytime I call she just starts staring right into my soul._

First time I didn’t fold and she beat my straight with a flush. Next time I folded, and I would have won. Then this last time it was closer, but I still would have lost.

_Straight beats pairs._

“Okay.” Danvers says, jogging back in from the kitchen carrying a bowl of snacks. “I’m back.”

“Thor?” The unknown woman speaks up as Sharon passes me cards.
“—heard from Jane that she was trying to get ahold of you.”

“Is she now?” Thor says without looking away from his cards before Bruce leans closer and starts whispering something to him.

“Who is Jane?” Wanda asks curiously, leaning over Sam to grab some chips.

“She’s a friend.” Thor answers. “And no, I haven’t heard from her.”

“Do you have a new number that works out in space? Because I think—” Thor cuts her off. “I don’t believe I’ll have time for silly correspondence like that. Sorry Darcy.”

Darcy? Ouch.

I brush my hair out of my eyes before silently pulling a screen to me and make a note.

Look up who this “Jane” is.

Once I’m finished typing out the mental note to myself, I move to swipe away the screen before something pops up.

1 new message – Michelle - 6:16 PM

It’s past 9 now.Oops.

“Hey. Sorry. Been super busy. What’s up?”

“—not silly if she just wants to say hello.” Rhodey reasons with Thor as I set my phone on my leg, out of sight from Hill.

“I’m sure that’s all she wants.” Romanoff quips, causing Thor to frown.

“I’m sure she just would like to check her calculations on the mathematics regarding the Convergence. Or the Bifrost.”

“The Bifrost is your glowing bridge to space. Right?” I ask.

I’ve been meaning to look that up. Last time I saw him, he vanished by lifting his axe and was engulfed in a flash of light which shook everything, then he was just gone.

“Precisely.” Thor nods, then smiles at me. “I can use it to connect to all Nine Realms.”

“She’s working on the math on that?” Bruce asks as the hand keeps going. I toss my hand towards the middle of the table then glance down.

1 new message.

“Hey! Been trying to reach you. I got the job. But who cares about that. Did you see who came into D.C today?!”

Uh oh.

“What do you mean?”
I play dumb in my response then set the screen to vibrate slightly, that way I’ll know when she responds before sipping the drink Sam made me. “Yeah, she deserves the Nobel Prize if she can figure that out. And you’ve been working with her on that?” Bruce looks to this Darcy girl.

*I think he’s getting the hang of it.*

Darcy nods. “Yup. All because Jane hit him with our car.”

“No, no.” Thor laughs. “You give yourselves too little credit. I only told you the story. You’re the ones putting in the work. It’s very impressive.”

“Then why don’t you talk to her?” Hill nails Thor to the wall.

OUCH!

I wince, then my leg vibrates.

“Don’t play dumb. That glowing girl and Thor, plus your friends and War Machine were spotted in D.C. Everybody thinks they were talking about your boy. Can you talk about it?”

“You know I can’t. I didn’t even know they were in town until a few hours ago. I’ve been working this whole time basically.”

*That sounds believable enough.*

“—too many loose ends to be worrying about personal relationships. And besides…I’m too old.” Thor finishes with a sigh, then discards his hand.


“How old are you anyway?”

Thor turns to me and smiles. “I’m over fifteen hundred years old. And if I’m lucky I’ll have several thousand more years in front of me like my father and his fathers. So you view me as young? No, I am…quite old.” He finishes heavily, then reaches for his flask.

**FIFTEEN HUNDRED??**

“So when they say God—that’s what they mean.” Sharon asks as she begins dealing the next hand out.

“No actually.” Thor shakes his head. “Asgardians naturally have much longer life spans than humans do. It’s another reasons why when my father came down to Earth last, and established what you know to be Norse mythology, you viewed us as Gods.”

“Then what makes you a God? Not that I don’t believe you, but…” Wanda shrugs, looking around before asking Thor.

“I have been blessed by the Allfathers, and by fate. My father, thru his powers and abilities as King of Asgard, imbibed Loki and I with special powers and abilities, which we trained for thousands of years to hone. I believe you all would call it luck.”

“Huh.” Is all Darcy says before everyone else seems to accept Thor’s answers.

*He’s a lot more talkative tonight.*
My leg vibrates a few times, and I push my hair back again then glance down.

“Can you tell me who she is then? I just know that she looks cool and glows. I know Thor, we all know Thor. Who is she?”

“Are you working now? Playing poker?”

“Poker. “I could use the help. If I didn’t keep getting such crappy cards.”

I can’t say anything about Danvers.

“For what it’s worth, the Kree always are fearful of Asgard. You guys always seemed way more powerful than the rest of us.” She says, right on cue.

Thor shrugs. “Who am I to say? I, for the most part, have waged wars. Prevented massacres. I’m no wise King yet.”

“Real humble of you to say, God of Thunder.” Sam smiles, causing me, Wanda, Hill, Darcy and Thor himself to laugh.

“That’s far too much talk about me. I am actually, quite boring.” Thor turns to Danvers. “Did the Nova Corps decide on when to hold the ceremony yet?”

“Ceremony?” Wanda asks before Danvers replies.

“Early July. They’re nailing down a date, I’ll know it soon. But for sure early July.”

“I’ll pass it along, so we can start making up excuses for people to be gone.” Hill smiles, then elbows me before my leg vibrates again.

I ignore her and glance at what Michelle has to say.

“Don’t always fold if you have a bad hand. You’re tipping everyone off when you do. You have to lie in poker. Keep me posted.”

“Are you sure you can’t tell me anything?”

She’s awfully pushy. She’s never this obviously curious.

“I’m getting a few questions over here.” I tell Hill, feeling her eyes straying toward me as the conversation continues.

“—celebration of our defeat of Thanos. It looks like they’ll be holding the ceremony on Nova Prime with dignitaries from every corner of the galaxy attending, more than for the funerals here.” Danvers explains to Wanda.

Hill silently picks up my screen and glances at the final message. “Just give her a name.”


“Michelle is asking about Carol.” Hill explains.

Sam immediately laughs loudly and claps his hands before I feel everyone else look at me.

Oh no.
“Who is Michelle?” Darcy asks. “You mean you have a girlfriend too?!”

“No.” I groan, then shake my head, causing my hair to drop into my eyes again. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Yet.” Romanoff smiles.

“She likes him?” Wanda asks.

“Oh yeah.” Hill laughs. “On their movie night, when they came back they both were grinning like idiots.” The room starts laughing again, and I self-consciously grab a few pretzels.

_Help me._

“I win.” Rhodey says simply before gathering the chips towards himself.

“Nobody cares right now.” Hill teases me.

“You can tell her about me. I don’t care. Doesn’t everyone already know about me?” Danvers shrugs to me, then looks around for confirmation.

Romanoff shakes her head in the negative. “No. We’re tightly controlling all information, in case of an emergency.”

“I don’t care. Tell them. They can’t beat me. I’d like to see them try.”

“Okay. Thank you.” I smile then pull up my screen and start typing.

“Her name is Colonel Danvers. I don’t know much about her except that she used to be in the Air Force, then got powers somehow. I don’t know. But now she glows and is a badass.”

_She and Thanos had a BRAWL. They just keep hitting each other harder and harder and harder. It was like a closed loop. No matter how hard Thanos hit her, she just got back up and hit him back even harder. Not going to lie, it was pretty awesome._

“Really?! That’s amazing!! Please say thank you to whoever said yes. I won’t say anything, you know that. Why was she here?”

I glance up in time for Sharon to be dealing cards, and for most everyone else to be looking at me.

“What?”

“What’d she say?” Hill asks for everyone else.

“Nothing. Just said thank you to whoever told me that I could talk about her.” I say then brush my hair back again.

_I need a haircut._

“Okay.” Romanoff smiles, then mock brushes back her hair, causing Rhodey and Thor to laugh.

“That’s not funny!”

Hill laughs along with them. “I think we need to buy you some gel or some paste or something.”

“Get some of that product in your hair. Then she won’t be able to resist.” Sam laughs, then winks at me.
Ahh jeez.

“You’ve got good hair. You really don’t put anything in it?” Darcy asks.

“No. I don’t want it to get up and walk away on me.” I smile, then laugh to try and take some of the attention off of me.

Sharon silently gets to her feet. “I’ll be right back.”

*Cards. Oh. I’ve actually got something to work with.*

“Two 9’s. Asking for more cards.”

“Good.”

“—kept us waiting when we went to go pick him up after school. We took a couple of laps around the block.” I hear Bruce explain.

*Oh come on now!*

I groan as I tap for more cards, and for Romanoff to smirk right before she does the same. “Stop copying me.”

“Stop being so obvious Spidey.”

“Obvious about what?”

“Just admit that you like her.”

Danvers asks for more cards, then smiles at Romanoff. “Maybe he doesn’t know.”

“No. I think he does.”

“No. I don’t.” I shake my head.

“How so?” Wanda comes to my defense.

Hill shakes her head, folds her hand and pulls up a screen.

*I don’t like where this is going.*

“He’s got a small circle of friends. But he’s always texting her.” Sharon smirks, walking back towards us holding a small circular container in her hands.

“Not always.” I defend myself. “I haven’t texted her much in the last two weeks.”

*Because of Finals. We’ve all been too busy.*

Rhodey smiles, then speaks up. “Because of Finals.”

“Oh come on.” I groan.

Sam takes the container from Sharon and smiles. “This is more like it! Where’d you get this?”

“It was Steve’s. I had it stored back in the back.”

*Oh, no—*
“No, that’s okay, I don’t want to—” I start before Hill stand up and throws something up for everyone to see.

“Give me that.” She claps before Sharon tosses her the container.

**OH NO.**

It’s a still of Movie Night.

_I was grabbing some extra soy sauce for Betty out of the fridge. And May keeps it at the bottom, so I had to bend over to pick it up. And Michelle is looking dead at me._

The room erupts into raucous laughter. “YUP!” Sam says loudly, then claps.

“**Cards?**”

**Oh yeah.**

I glance down at my cards and see that I’ve picked up the other 9 I need, along with a Queen.

“9, Q.”

“Stay still.” I hear as Hill stands behind me and puts her hand in my hair.

“No!” I yelp. “Don’t—no!” Hill ignores me and starts moving my hair around, something clearly in between her fingers.

“Help me. They’re messing with my hair.”

“Maybe coif it a little to the right. But get it to stand up. Big hair is in right now.” Natasha instructs Hill.

Danvers turns to her. “Isn’t it always?”

“No.” Bruce laughs. “It hasn’t been big for years. It’s just now coming back.”

“Oh. I thought it was.”

My leg vibrates as I see Thor glance in my direction.

**Nope.**

“**Your hair? Why? Win! Are you playing with your science friends? Did you play with your hair too much?**”

Hill instantly stops messing with my hair and starts laughing like mad. “What?”

“She knows about his hair—.” She breathes, then waves my texts up for all to see before starting to laugh again.

Everyone starts dying of laughter again, even Thor, before I snatch my texts back.

“Maybe. It keeps getting in my way. I need a haircut. And yes.”

“I can’t believe that you asked about Jane. This is far more interesting.” Thor tells Darcy, who is beaming.
“Can we just play cards?”

“No. We play cards until we get distracted.” Rhodey smiles at me.

_He agrees._

“I didn’t know about this!” Darcy says defensively.

Hill keeps messing with my hair. “You’re right. Let’s focus on the cards. You go first.” She motions to me.

“No, you go first.” I point to Natasha.

She shrugs, then tosses out…

_Three of a Kind. Three 2’s and that’s it._

I toss out my cards, and Romanoff immediately frowns while Sam laughs. “And you thought you had him!”

“It’s a tie.”

“No it’s not.” Rhodey shakes his head, then points to my hand. “9’s beat 2’s. And besides—.” He tosses his cards out. “I win.”

_He had a flush of spades._

“Colonel?” Sharon asks her, and she shrugs, then displays a straight, but with all different suits.

“I got nothing.”

Behind me, I hear “There.” then watch Hill turn my screen into a mirror.

_That’s…actually kind of okay? It’s going to be out of my eyes at least. And it’s not all piled up to the ceiling._

Quickly, there’s a flash, then Hill swipes the screen and gives it back to me. “What’d you just do?” I ask her.

_I think she just took a picture and sent it to her._

“Sent it off for approval.”

“To May?” I ask, and for Hill to shake her head. I ignore everyone’s laughter as Sharon gives me a sympathetic smile while dealing out more cards.

“I like what she did.” Thor says kindly. “You do look more attractive.”

_What?_

I hear Romanoff cough loudly before Rhodey and Sam start laughing at her now before I shrug at Thor. “Thanks?”

_I don’t know if that’s a compliment._

My leg vibrates as Thor smiles sincerely back at me. “You’re certainly welcome. Now…to our cards.”
He’s trying to help.

“I like it! It looks like your hair before you cut it. Like on the MOMA trip. Did Hill do it? I can see her in the background.”

“You’re busted.” I call out as I text her back.

“Yeah, she did. I don’t know what to think. Garbage hand. I’ll keep playing it.”

“She noticed?” Darcy asks.

“I thought I cut myself out of the picture.” Hill says as she sits back down. I shake my head as I see Michelle reply.

“Nope. She noticed.”

“Did she like it?” Wanda asks.

I’m not answering that.

“Yeah, keep playing. Are they giving you a hard time? Is Dr. Banner there?”

She really has a lot of questions today.

“How are you going to justify being in the picture?” Romanoff asks while I type.

“He is. We’re not focusing much on the cards. More on my stupid hair.”

Hill proclaims “I don’t have to.” Before she takes my screen from me.

“Hey.” I reach for it back.

Hill barely touches the screen an hands it back to me. “Sorry, had to turn off picture mode.”

I don’t believe her.

When I look back, a new response is sitting below my response to Michelle.

“And who I’m texting.”

“HILL!” I turn and cross my arms.

I won’t text her anymore! I get it!

“Okay! Okay!” She raises her hands in apology. I toss the screen away with a frown before Michelle can respond and disguise my frustration by asking for more cards.

I was actually enjoying talking to her.

“What’d you do?” Bruce asks her.

“Trying to move things along.” Hill says before I shake my head and roll my eyes.

I was having a decent time. I can handle them giving me a hard time. They did it last time, and I know it’s because I’m the easiest target. I’m the baby of the group. I’m the youngest. Comes with the territory.
Romanoff folds and glances up at me. “Bring the screen back. She won’t give you a hard time anymore.”

“Or look at my texts?”

“That’s my job.” Hill interjects before I lean onto her leg with my elbow.

“OW!”

“Nope.” I smile.

“Good! Cards.” Sharon diffuses the situation with a smile and throws my screen back to me.

2 new messages.

“Are they asking about me? After they saw us at school together? Do they know about me?”

“I don’t want to get in the way. You’re supposed to be having fun.”

I ask for more cards, then start typing again.

“I am having fun. And kind of. They know about you from Decathlon mostly. And from Dr. Banner. Have since you yelled at Flash.”

“You are right.” I hear Thor say, then glance up. “He is smiling a lot.”

Man! Give me a break here.

Romanoff smiles back at me. “Told you. Now if you’d only ask her out.”

“What’s she doing this summer?” Wanda asks curiously.

“Working. That’s why she initially texted me, you know. Just being friendly.” I frown at Natasha, who smiles wider.

“Where at?” Bruce asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“I’m on it.” Sharon volunteers as Michelle texts me back.

“Oh. Well then yeah. Sounds good to me. I’ve got to go. First day tomorrow. Night.”

Aww.

“Night. Good luck!”

I wanted to talk more. Now I’ll really have to focus on my cards.

“Don’t say that yet. Saying it early is bad luck. Loser. Good luck with poker.”

“Sharon?” I hear Sam ask.

Digging for more information.

“I’m not finding…anything.” She says, frustration bleeding into her voice.
“Probably not in any major database yet. Or maybe it’s a small place.” Natasha theorizes.
Darcy smiles while leaning over to take some pretzels. “She seems nice. What’s she good at?”

“Math, mostly.” I shrug, then raise a chip blindly.

*I’m not really playing the hand. I’m doing what she asked me to do, play thru a bad hand. I might win with high card, I do have the Ace of Spades but that’s it. The rest is trash cards.*

“I thought she drew too.” Bruce speaks up. “You took her notebook to her, right?”

“Oh.” Hill says, like she’s realized something. “The drawing. In your room.”

“Oh.” Rhodey suddenly lights up, then smiles. “That sounds…”

“Sounds?” Thor turns to him, clearly expecting him to finish his sentence.
Rhodey instead shrugs. “I don’t know. I thought I had the word, but I think I lost it.”

“How can you lose it? It’s a word.”

“Friendly.” Sam says, then smirks.
Darcy laughs. “Yeah. If she drew something for him, during Finals? She likes him.”

“Sounds like it to me.” I hear Wanda say, then turns and see her smile.

*Oh whatever. They all think they have the answers.*

“Okay. Show ’em.” Sharon says to everyone, and I toss my hand out.

“Why’d you stay in?” Bruce asks as Colonel Danvers displays four of a kind, in the case, all 5’s.
I silently point to Romanoff, who only smirks. “It’s your chips.”

*And you’re the one hunting me all night.*

“Next round. Sam?” Sharon turns to him.

“Just getting him more to drink.” He says as he stands, then takes my glass.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Colonel Danvers calls out. “We don’t want him saying something dumb! He is a boy!”

“And what does being a boy have to do with it?” I quickly ask her.

*I feel fine.*

“Boys are idiots. One second you’re normal, then you’re all macho and tough.” She says, starting out her normal self, then pretending to bulk out and flex. At the same time, Hill, Darcy, Sharon and Romanoff all either laugh, lean back, or both.

“So true.” Hill smiles at me.

*Haha. Very funny.*

“Karen, keep a closer eye on Peter’s texts. We don’t want him saying something dumb.”
“I’m fine!” I counter.

“You just played a completely dead hand and surrendered $600 in chips for no reason. That’s not fine.” Rhodey smiles at me.

*SIX HUNDRED DOLLARS?!!*

“Fine by me.” Colonel Danvers comments before Karen speaks up.

“Miss Jones last texted Peter eleven minutes ago and is logged off of all her devices, excluding the alarm clock on her phone. I believe she is out for the night.”

I hear Sam behind me before he speaks up. “That’s a shame. I really liked how this one came out.”
“All set?” I hear Wanda say at my door, before I turn away from my mostly packed bag and see her leaning on my doorframe.

“Yeah.”

“Check under your bed?” She asks before being unable to hold back a laugh.

I laugh along with her, then nod. “Yeah.”

“I always find that whatever it is that I’m looking for, it’s always under my bed. Worth a shot at least.” She rambles, then smiles before it quickly fades.

Oh.

I turn back to my bag and grab my 10 foot long phone charger and start rolling it up. “Listen, I… I’m sorry for what happened—”

“No, it’s fine.” I cut her off, turning back to face her.

“—you were just worried about everyone else, and I thought I was—”

“Wanda.” I try to cut her off again, only for her eyes to pop up from the floor.

“No, listen—”

“I would but—”

“—same thing happening to me too, and I just wanted to help, I—”

I roll my eyes at her, then turn back to my bag.

“I…I’m doing a bad job explaining it.” She finishes lamely, then I hear her sniffle quietly.

Wait, she’s not—

I turn back to see her wiping her nose. “Sorry. Allergies.” She says, looking clearly embarrassed before darting past me and grabbing the tissue box off my dresser. “They kill me every year.”

“How long have you been here?”

“About three years.” She smiles. “Every year around this time I become a sniffly mess. I hate it.” She says before shaking her head and looking out my window.

We both fall silent for a moment before I speak up. “I know you were just trying to help. And I know you know how I snapped. I’m sorry.”

Wanda laughs before shaking her head. “You’re fine. You’d just been thru another traumatic dream. It understandable for your anger to leak out. It didn’t hurt anybody.”

Her anger has gotten people hurt. I know it has had to at some point.

“How much did you get?” I ask out of curiosity.
Wanda shrugs, then looks at the floor. “It’s your uncle.”

Yeah. It is.

“It’s always orange for you too. It is for me. Vis, always asking me why I hesitated.” Wanda says before walking over and gently sitting beside me on my bed. “Why I didn’t destroy the Stone faster. He always says that he told me to, and that I couldn’t hurt him.”

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes to mind, so I end up just gaping at Wanda before she glances up at me and smiles weakly. “I…don’t know what it is. But with those Stones. We know what they all do except for the one that they called the Soul Stone. I think…that’s what it is. It’s haunting everyone who got Snapped.”

That would make a lot of sense. Because that’s the one that apparently was the hardest to find. Nobody knew where to find it. Thor said that he didn’t know how Thanos got it. Apparently it’d been lost for millennia. Nobody’s really thought about it all that much. The other Stones are more attention grabbing.

“I think you’re right.” I say blankly. “It even sounds right.”

Wanda laughs throatily, then blows her nose. “Ugh, sorry.”

“You’re fine.” I laugh, which causes her to laugh. “When’d you figure all this out?”

“Just now.” She says before gesturing to my room. “I’ve been thinking about it since I first had the nightmares. It’s not just us either.”

“Yeah.” I nod.

The suicide rates are thru the roof. It’s awful. Awful isn’t even the word.

I don’t know if the US government or the UN or whoever is going to want to put out a number. I just know that it’s gotten better. But it hasn’t stopped.

Some people have been saying that if you accept the dream head on, face them, that they go away. I don’t even know if I can do that with mine. It’s just me getting accusations hurled at me.

I could have saved him. I didn’t. I froze up. I let him die.

I let him and Mr. Stark die.

“Text me. If you have another one. I’ll probably be up.” She smiles at me, then squeezes my arm. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now get packed. I think Maria Hill’s waiting. Even though she’s going to miss you when you’re gone.”

“Nah.” I shake my head, then throw my tablet charger on top of my bag and zip it shut.

“Nah? She’s always working on something except when you’re here. She loves you.”

Why does everyone always say that? Hill’s Hill. She’s constantly on me about something. Just like she is with everyone else. The only time I’ve seen her loosen up are on weekends that I’m here and we’re playing cards or something.
“I don’t think so.” I smile as we walk out towards the main stairwell.

Wanda laughs, then shakes her head again. “So confident.”

“Well yeah. I would know.” I say truthfully, then smile at her, only to get another head shake.

*Whatever.*

Together, we walk down the stairs, where Hill, Colonel Danvers, Bruce and Romanoff are all talking near the door before Bruce glances over and sees us, causing the others to do the same.

“Hurry up! Or I’ll leave your ass and you’ll walk!”

“No, you won’t…” I laugh as I take the last three steps at once, then land heavily and smile at everyone.

“You’re right. But still wrong.” Romanoff shrugs, getting everyone to either laugh or smile.

Bruce only smiles before punching my shoulder awkwardly. “I’ll be up at the lab sometime next week. We’ll have to get lunch.”

*Sounds like a plan to me.*

“Yeah, absolutely.” I smile, then watch as Bruce awkwardly punches me again. “Ow.”

This time everyone laughs before Bruce steps aside and Romanoff smiles at me. “Be good. Text if you need us. Even though you probably won’t.”

“I will…” I groan as she hugs me around the shoulders. “Maybe.”

“Finally. We’re getting somewhere.” She retorts quietly, then ruffles my hair. “Good. You used the paste.”

Yeah, *I think Hill would have tied me down and put it in my hair if I didn’t. I’m not sure I did it right, but oh well.*

“Bye.” I smile, then wave to them before I begin to follow Hill and Danvers out the door, towards the waiting car.

“Bye!” Bruce calls out as Romanoff simply waves, then leans over and says something to him before ducking her head.

*I think she’s laughing.*

“Toss your bag in the trunk Pete.” Hill instructs me, just before the trunk opens. Obediently, I do just that, then slide into the back seat behind Danvers.

“Got enough room back there?” She glances back as Hill silently starts to pull towards the front gates.

“Yeah, thanks.” I nod, then stretch my legs across the middle console and behind the driver’s seat. The car is silent as we pull out of the compound, and Hill begins navigating our way thru the woods surrounding the Compound.

*I think I’ll throw on a podcast this time down. Maybe play a game on my phone. I did just ace all of my finals after all. I deserve to relax a little.*
“So how far is this drive?” I hear Danvers ask Hill as I pull my headphones out of my jacket pocket and slip them into my ears.

Okay… Daily Briefing, no… Today’s Top Stories no… Let’s listen to “Ten Stories You Missed Today”.

Silently, I pull one headphone out of my ear in time to hear “Peter.”

“Yeah?” I smile at Hill.

“Movie Night tonight?”

Huh? There’s not one tonight.

“What do you mean?” I ask blankly.

“Have you thought of asking everyone over?”

“It’s a Thursday though.” I counter.

Hill rolls her eyes thru the mirror. “Yeah, but its summer. Celebrate. Text Ned and Michelle.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

“You sure? It’s a good excuse to see Michelle again.” Hill suggests, then smiles deviously as Danvers laughs.

“Yeah, that sounds fun.” She comments.

I shrug silently, then put my other headphone back into my ear, hit play and lean into the beam of light that’s slipping thru the window.

And it’s really warm.

“Ten Stories you might have missed today. I’m Jessica Marisa. Today’s show is brought to you by…”

Michelle POV

“Hey. We’re doing Movie Night again. Can you come over?” – Peter

“Yeah! I’m off today.”

“Awesome. Stop by whenever. I’ll be there shortly.”

“That’ll be $26.90.” The Uber driver says obnoxiously, turning around with a greedy expression on his face.

UGH. And you’ll want a tip after being surly the whole drive. Sure. Whatever.

“Here’s $28. Thanks.” I slap a few bills onto the center console, then bail out of his car in front of Peter’s building and shut the door behind me before the guy can protest.

Should have given him a knuckle sandwich, but that wouldn’t have paid for shit, so… At least I’m here now.
He said stop by whenever. And he texted me about an hour and a half ago. He’d better be here, or at least appreciate that I got out of bed on my day off to come see him.

Seventh floor, right? I think that’s it.

I walk thru the lobby, ignoring the look from the lady behind the front desk, then hit the button for the seventh floor and wait for the elevator to creak shut.

New-ish building. Old elevator. If you renovated wouldn’t you renovate the elevator too?

The elevator chimes, and I follow my memory to the right, past the first two doors then knock on the third and step back.

“It’s open!!” I hear Peter’s Aunt yell.

Okay?

“I’m not Peter.” I quickly say as I crack open the door and see that Mrs. Parker is vacuuming.

So we are having Movie Night.

“Michelle?” She blurts out, then quickly covers with a huge smile. “Hi! Come on in, I was just cleaning. Peter’s not home yet. He should be in a few minutes.”

“He told me he’d be back soon like an hour ago.” I frown as Mrs. Parker shuts off the vacuum, and the apartment goes silent.

“Oh.” She says, going slightly stiff then smiling. “Well it can’t be too much longer then. You can set your bag down in his room while you wait if you want.”

“Thanks.” I smile before she turns to the refrigerator.

I never really got a good look at his room last time. Just a quick peek.

I kick the door, which is already propped open, fully and glance around.

Toy Iron Man helmet…you’ve got a problem Parker.

That’s probably why he’s so messed up right now. He idolized Tony Stark. He and Ned couldn’t hide it, love everything about him. Then Flash’s buddy Bryson dug up that old news story about Iron Man saved him at the Stark Expo when those drones went haywire.

Now that I think of it, that’s probably why Stark picked him. Kept an eye on him, plucked him up when he showed an inkling of natural talent. Probably for the loyalty.

Lazily, I lob my purse onto his bed and glance around at the Commemorative Mets paper that he’s gotten framed, then back to a corkboard with ideas pinned to it.

Laundry basket is empty. Smells decent, which is a change from—

No, let’s not go there. Peter’s good.

Peter’s a good guy.

“So Michelle, what do you parents do?” I hear Mrs. Parker call out to me.
Oh crap.

“Uhm,” I start as I hurry back to the door. “My Dad works at the port, and my Mom’s a nurse.”

“That sounds interesting. Any brothers or sisters?” She smiles while pulling out some glasses for drinks.

“No.”

Mrs. Parker’s face falls. “Aww. I know how that is. Life gets boring. Never lonely though.”

Your parents must not have worked all the time. I’ve had to occupy myself ever since I can remember.

“Is Peter coming back from helping the Avengers?” I change topics on her.

Instantly, she turns towards the fridge and laughs too much. “The Avengers? Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Besides your fake reaction? It’s obvious. And Hulk and Black Widow picked him up from school.” I say flatly.

It’s so obvious. He’s even gotten bad at hiding that he’s working for the Avengers. Either that or they don’t care.

Mrs. Parker turns around, frowning slightly. “It was not a fake reaction. Peter has an internship with Tony Stark.”

“Did. Tony Stark’s dead.”

Again I get an instant reaction out of her, this time a furrowed brow and almost a scowl. “You really think you have it all figured out don’t you.”

“No.” I disagree. “But he’s told me that he’s been playing poker somewhere with some scientist friends, somewhere. I assume when he’s working with the Avengers.

Mrs. Parker keeps frowning at me. “He’s not. He was working with Stark. Started here, in this apartment. Scared the hell out of me.” She laughs. “Iron Man, in my living room.”

That didn’t happen No way. Tony Stark doesn’t do house calls.

“Do Peter’s parents work for the Avengers? Or are the across the country or something, he never talks about them.”

And he lives here with his Aunt. I know his uncle died in a carjacking gone wrong right after we both started at Midtown. He was a mess forever. He can’t be a mess forever, not now.

“If he hasn’t told you, then I don’t think I should.” Mrs. Parker’s tone changes completely.

Oh. Crap.

“I didn’t mean to intrude.” I quickly apologize. “He just never talks about it, just that he lives here with you.”

“It’s a long story. There’s drinks in the fridge if you want something.”
“Sure.” I smile in thanks, then take the glass that she set out for me and walk to the fridge and open it.

Orange Juice, tea, lemonade, cranberry juice—

“We’re home!” I hear somebody call out, and I quickly turn around to see Maria Hill, a chick with a blonde bob haircut and piercing eyes, along with Peter.

Who looks barely awake.

“Imgnnashowbellbebk.” He mumbles, eyes basically shut before walking right into his room and into his bathroom before shutting the door.

“Michelle’s here. Say hi.” Mrs. Parker says as I’m still by the fridge.

Why’s she here? He WAS with the Avengers! She’s his go between!

“Oh. Hello! Nice to see you again.” Maria Hill smiles.

I smile back then grab a drink at random and shut the door behind me. “Hi.”

“He fell asleep right after we left. Passed right out.” Hill tells Mrs. Parker, who smiles.

“Good. He needs the sleep.”

“Agreed. We didn’t give him anything this time, did you get my email?”

Mrs. Parker nods. “What that doctor said was interesting.”

“What’d the doctor say?” I ask quietly as I set my glass down to Mrs. Parker’s left.

“That it was none of your business.” Hill immediately frowns at me.

I return the frown. “It is if you said it in front of me, which you did.”

Hill stares me down for a moment, then looks to Mrs. Parker. “She’s been like this since she got here.”

“When’d she get here?”

“A few minutes ago.” I answer.

They’re talking around me.

The blonde chick smiles at the exchange between everyone before glancing at me.

Oh jeez. Her eyes look like they’re looking thru me.

“—see what Ned meant now.”

“What’d he tell you?” I quickly ask, getting Hill and Blondie’s attention.

What’d he say?!


“I just want to help.” I defend myself.
“Real helpful, that attitude.” Blondie says.

I turn to face her. “And you are again?”

“Veers.” She smiles, seemingly genuine before extending her hand to me. “You are?”

Veer can’t be her name. That’s not a name.

“Michelle.” I say, just before she crushes my hand in a handshake.

JEEZ.

“Thanks, don’t need that hand at all.” I roll my eyes, causing Hill to laugh and Mrs. Parker to cover her nose.

Hill turns to me. “Do you have a comment for everything?”

“No, I’m just very observant.”

“Observant?” Hill’s eyebrows raise.

They’re running me around in circles.

“So what’s he do for you guys anyway?” I move off the topic entirely. “Get you coffee?”

Veers gives Hill and Mrs. Parker a look—“He works for us. That’s all we can say.” She says simply, then returns to looking right thru me.

“All you can say.” I parrot her. “How am I supposed to believe you if I know that’s not true?”

“It is true.” Hill backs Veers up.

Veers. More like veering off of a cliff. She’s got to be foreign.

“Prove it. I think I deserve some proof.”

“Why?” Hill asks while walking around me towards the cabinets. “Because you text Peter all the time?”

“I don’t text him all the time.” I quickly say.

I don’t.

“You know, I monitor most of his communications. He’s sent six times as many messages to you as anyone else.”

They’re monitoring him?

“Why are you monitoring him? He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Part of the job.” Hill answers without looking at me, instead grabbing a glass. “May, do you have more tea?”

Mrs. Parker nods, and Hill turns to Veers. “Drink?”

“Sure.”
Why are they here anyway? Couldn’t they just drop Parker off? Why stop and chat?

“Why’d you stop by anyway? You could have dumped Parker.”

“And what, have him walk into another apartment in a sleepy haze?” Mrs. Parker laughs. “No.”

“We don’t have to answer that.” Hill says to Veers, who nods in acceptance.

I quickly jump in and say. “Yes you do.”

“It’s nothing to worry about. Can’t we just be friendly? Keep good relationships with everyone’s families? Without their cooperation and trust, all this falls apart—” Hill walks back over with two glasses of tea. “—real quick.”

Yeah, that’s it.

“He’s going on a trip soon.” Veers ignores Hill and smiles at me. “Don’t worry. He’ll be safe.”

“Where to?”

Veers simply smiles at me, and I look to Hill, who frowns. “Where to?” I ask again.

“What do you want?” Hill asks. “Why so many questions? What are you looking for?”


“I want the truth. And I want to help him.” I glance away from Mrs. Parker, then feel myself start to blush.

NO NO NO NO NO NOT NOW.

“Help him.” Hill repeats after me. “The truth is a matter of circumstance. It’s not the same for everyone. The best way you can help him is to accept that.”

“Yeah, because that worked so well last time.” I roll my eyes.

“Excuse you?” Mrs. Parker frowns, dropping her glass on the counter pointedly.

“The last time we trusted her, all of S.H.I.E.L.D went down. And nobody knew what to think. Now I’m just supposed to blindly follow everything she said? Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” I point to Hill. “I’m just worried about Peter.”

I need to stop talking so much. They’re going to pick up that...I care so much.

“I can tell.” Veers says calmly, before I turn to her, causing her to smile. “It’s cute.”

“What’s cute? I’m just worried about him.”

Behind me, I hear May snort quietly, then Hill laughs. “And you’re very observant.” Hill repeats.

Morons.

“Listen.” Hill says, then sets her glass, now empty down. “You want to know why we trust Peter?”

I nod strongly once. “Yes.”

“Because Tony trusted him. He didn’t exactly trust many people. Besides, you were there on the
MOMA trip. Right Miss Jones?”

“Yeah?”

**What does this have to do with MOMA? Other than him vanishing into thin air. Wait. To go to work for them.**

“Well…” Hill stalls for time before pulling up a camera still of—

*That’s the bus. I’m right there in the back, reading my book, preparing for the tour.*

“That’s you.” Hill points out for Mrs. Parker and Veers. “Here’s Peter. Now…watch.” Hill hits the virtual screen projecting out of her phone, which starts to play for a moment.

*Everyone’s acting normally. Peter’s on his phone, Ned’s doing whatever, Flash is hitting on Susan —*

All of a sudden, Peter looks up from his phone, then whips around and sees the Donut Ship hovering over the skyline. He freezes for just an instant, then says something, then Ned yells, and everyone rushes to the back of the bus.

*Knocking my book over.*

“Peter was the one who raised the alarm.” Hill says, pausing the screen just as Peter is reaching for his backpack. “And I know exactly what you did.”

*I tried calling him. I called him 57 times before finally giving up. Then the Decimation happened, and I called him every chance I could.*

And he never answered. Couldn’t even be bothered to pick up once and say that he was okay.

“What’d she do?” Veers asks.

*What?*

I turn to her before Hill smiles and continues. “Called him as many times as she could, then caused her teacher to panic, who called May, who panicked. Who called me, and didn’t panic.”

“So he was with you?”

**THAT’S WHAT HAPPENED?! He’s been telling the truth this whole time?!?**


“I—” I start, then stop myself. “That’s not fair!”


Mrs., Parker lights up. “Ooh, I am.”

“I’ll go too.” Veers smiles at me, then slides off her seat.

“I seriously can’t tell anyone?” I blurt out as they all walk towards the door. “You’re just going to leave?”
That’s it?!

“Yeah.” Hill nods, then pulls the front door open. “Nice seeing you Michelle.”

“Hang on!” I call out as they’re all walking thru the door.

Wait a second!

I force myself into motion and dart toward the door, only to barely stop Hill from closing it on me. “Let me help.”

“It’s too dangerous.” Hill dismisses me and moves to close the door again.

I throw my weight behind it and wedge myself in between the door and the frame. “I don’t care. He’s not the same as he was. Let me help him.”

Behind Hill, I see Mrs., Parker and Veers turn back and look at me, Mrs. Parker smiling just a little bit. “You really want to help?” Hill says after a moment.

“Yes.” I say strongly. “He can’t do this alone. And no offense, you’re doing a crappy job if he’s been like this.”

Veers snaps “That’s not us. He’s healing.”

“Healing from what?” I quickly ask.

“That’s enough.” Hill jumps in, pushing Veers toward the elevator. “Maybe I’ll think about it. Good night. Miss Jones.”

Peter POV

“—speech to the United Nations expected as soon as Tuesday. In the speech, King T’Challa is expected to reverse the country’s surprise decision to end its policy of isolation that stood for over 80 years.”

Jeez. No wonder T’Challa isn’t really saying much to anyone.

“—I expect it’s because of all the trouble that followed that decision.” A man in a suit and tie says as he’s being interviewed by the moderator. “We know that those spaceships few directly into his kingdom, like they were tracked. I believe King T’Challa sees the error of his ways, and is being forced to reconsider his position in an effort to protect his people.”

He’s right. How many of his people died protecting Earth? What did we ever do for them?

Bruce says that they’re way more advanced than us.

“Pause.” I tell Karen, then hit the lever to shut off the shower and grab my towel.

C’mon Peter. Wake up.

I really didn’t mean to fall asleep. And I slept thru the whole ride home. Only woke up because Hill shook me awake and told me to grab my stuff.
“Okay Peter. Michelle’s in the living room, by the way. Colonel Danvers, Maria Hill and May all just left.” Karen reports to me.

*Wait, what?*

“Michelle’s not here.” I shake my head as I start drying off.

*I never texted anyone above Movie Night. I fell asleep too fast.*

Karen answers “I’m afraid she is Peter. Her purse is in your room right now.”

“No it’s not…” I shake my head, then tie my towel around my waist.

*I didn’t even grab clean clothes when I came in here. Just went right to shower.*

I step out of the shower, walk to the door and pull it open before taking a few—

*Wait…whose bag is that on my bed?*

I threw my duffel bag at my bed as I walked in. “Karen?” I ask quietly.

“I told you. Michelle’s here.” Karen reports happily.

“WHAT?!” I yelp, then look aro—

*OH.*

To my left, Michelle’s just in the living room. Just standing there. Looking right at me.

*Oh god. I—*

“Sorry!” I yelp, then dash past the door and quickly shut it.

*Oh god. Oh god. Man this is embarrassing. AWW MAN!!!*

Getting dressed as fast as I can, I also hobble over to my phone and text Hill. “What did you do?!” I demand of her, then look thru my texts.

*Oh god. She texted everyone for me. Ned, Betty and Michelle.*

*Michelle’s the only one that’s replied so far.*

Blankly, I turn to my clock, which read 6:03 PM.

*Oh no. I need to get dressed.*

As fast as I can, I finish throwing on my jeans, then grab a shirt at random and—

*My suit. It’s right in my duffel bag.*

Halfway to my door, I jump back to my bed, where Michelle’s purse is just sitting there by my pillow. “Excelsior!!”

*WHEN’D SHE EVEN GET HERE?! HOW’D I MISS THAT?!!*

I throw my suit into my drawer, then kick it shut with my foot. “Karen, incognito mode.”
Michelle can’t know about Karen. I know that.

My phone vibrates helpfully as I pull open the door, then glance back.

Not now!

“Sorry. I didn’t know you were here.” I quickly apologize to Michelle, who jumps at the sound of my voice and turns to me near the balcony.

“Oh. Yeah. Hi.” She says weirdly, then smiles.

Softly?

“Hi.” I nervously laugh. “Sorry for slamming the door in your face.”

Michelle tucks her hair behind her ear while still smiling. “It’s okay. You kind of just walked past me like a zombie earlier.” She says with a laugh.

She sounds nervous too.

“I fell asleep.” I say.

Why am I smiling?

I stop myself from blindly smiling before Michelle keeps smiling. “I could tell. Your eyes weren’t even open. Are you always like that when you wake up?”

“Sometimes yeah?”

Michelle shakes her head. “I feel bad for your Aunt.”

“Why?”

“Because you must be a joy waking up in the mornings on school days.”

“You know me, I’m never late to school.” I say defensively, then let Michelle past as she walks into my room. “When’d you get here?”

I wake up to my alarm. Most days.

“About 20 minutes before you did. Talked to your Aunt. And Maria Hill. They like you.” Michelle says, before sitting on my bed and grabbing her purse without looking up at me.

“About what?” I ask, then grab my phone off the desk.

“I texted everyone for you. Should have just texted Michelle. She really likes you, by the way.”

NO SHE DOESN'T!!!

“No! Not helping!”

“Huh?” I hear Michelle say, then glance up to see her on my bed, phone in her lap before she glances up at me.

“You said you talked to Hill again?” I reply, then glance back to my phone.

Nothing.
Michelle blankly looks at me, then jumps. “Oh! Yeah. She won’t let me help.”

*Yeah. Duh.*

“Yeah.” I laugh. “Good luck with that.”

“Don’t give me attitude Parker.” She barks at me.

“I’m not.” I raise my hands defensively. “But they’re not going to trust you, if I can’t even tell you anything about anything.”

Michelle’s expression brightens. “You want to tell me?”

*No. It’ll hurt you.*

“Some stuff.” I lie. “I can’t say everything. You know that.”

“I…” Michelle suddenly stands up, then walks over and smiles down at me. “I know.”

“Yeah, and—” I start then stop.

*What is she doing?*

I freeze up for a moment, before Michelle laughs. “It’s called a hug Parker. You’re supposed to hug me back.”

“I…can do that?” I sputter out, reflexively slipping my arms around her to return the hug.

“Yeah. Just stop being so weird about it.” She says quietly, then lays her head on my shoulder.

*She smells really good. Some mix of fruity something and a stronger, more aggressive smell. It’s awesome.*

“Thanks. For wanting to trust me.” She whispers, then tightens the hug. “I know you can’t…but I just want to help. You’re not okay.”

“I’m fine.” I blankly say, then give her a soft squeeze. “I just don’t want to hurt you.”

*I’m hugging Michelle. And it’s a really good hug too.*

“You won’t.” She answers me, then barely leans back and smirks at me.

*She’s wearing a lot of makeup. She actually looks really nice. Really nice.*

I blink, then find that I’m smiling like an idiot at her, then let her go. “My bad, sorry. Food? Are you hungry?” I blurt out. “Have you heard from Ned or Betty?”

“No.” Michelle’s face falls before she turns away from me, back to her purse. “I am hungry though. I didn’t eat before I came here.”

“Let’s do that then.” I smile at her, only for her to look up, face even, then for it to turn into a smile.

*Yes! More smiles. Let’s go for more smiles.*
“Thanks. You too.” I tell the delivery guy, then shut the door behind me while balancing our food before it’s deftly taken from me silently from behind.

Michelle.

“Plates and stuff are in the kitchen. By the fridge on the right. Second level.” I tell her as she takes my pizza as well as her pasta and garlic twists over to the island and sets it down.

“Thanks. I have a question. Of which you do not have to answer.” She says while walking to the cabinet I pointed out to her. “But I feel like by not answering, you’ve answered it.”

“What?” I ask while walking over to my pizza.

“Do you work much with Dr. Banner?” I glance over at her in time to see her reaching for a plate, her shirt barely peeking up over her jeans, revealing—

She usually doesn’t wear jeans like that.

“Peter.”

I glance back to Michelle. “Yeah?”

“I asked you a question dork.”

“I know. Can you repeat it?” I smile at her.

“Do you work much with Dr. Banner?”

Oh.

“Some. I, uhm…I’ve inherited some projects. And he’s helping me, at least until I get my feet under me.”

Michelle’s face remains neutral before she asks “What’s he like?”

“Brilliant.” I laugh, causing her to laugh as well.

“I assumed that.”

“Yeah, but he’s…” I stop, then fiddle with my hair. “He sees thru the smokescreens. He is really good at getting right to the point.”

“You’ve got to find a new nervous tick. That’s not so obvious.”

Huh?

“What?” Michelle points to me with her fork, and I glance around.

Oh damn. My stupid hair.

I quickly take my hand out of my hair and wipe it on my jeans. “Sorry.”

“Did you bring that stuff they put in your hair?” She asks, turning away from me. “I kind of liked
“Yeah. I need to learn how to do it.” I admit, before my phone buzzes.

2 new messages

“Hey. Danvers is leaving here in a few minutes. About headed home. But she wanted to tell you something, but doesn’t have a phone. So what’s next isn’t me. It’s her.” – Hill

“Hey Spidey. I’m glad I saw you before I have to jet off again. Don’t worry about getting better quickly. Take your time. Do it right. Next time there’s a fight, I want you in it. And if you get right the day before, or months before, as long as you’re ready when we need you then it’s all worth it. Don’t mention me coming down to talk to those dumb politicians. It’s most of what I’m doing anyway, but on turf that I actually know.

Your friend’s nice. Cute too. Take her to dinner sometime. I think Hill’s going to bring her in to help. Make your life easier, less questions. Plus I think she likes you.

See you in a few weeks.

Carol”

I smile down at my phone before Michelle says “What’s got you smiling like an idiot?”

“Nothing…” I wave at her, then turn towards the window. “Gimme a second.”

“Thank you. She doesn’t like me. I just think she’s worried about me. I appreciate you coming to fight on my behalf. Good luck out in space with those politicians.”

I send the text off off before I see a streak of light emits from a rooftop, straight up into the air faster than I can track it.

And there she goes. She’s gone.

That’s how it was last time I saw her too. She was talking to Fury at the Compound, then he took a step back before she just started glowing and vanished in a beam of light.

Must be pretty awesome to just fly any time you want.

“Sorry.” I turn back around to see that I’m alone in the kitchen. “Where’d you go?” I call out.

“Here.” I hear her say in my room before I walk back there.

She’s digging in my bag. Uh oh.

“Hey, not all that’s…safe to read. You’ll get into trouble.” I say, grabbing the stack of papers and setting them on my desk.

“I asked Hill if I could help. NASA?” Michelle ignores me before stepping around me to get a better look at the massive report.

“Joint Dark Energy Mission”

The NASA and S.H.I.E.L.D. project that focused on learning more about the Tesseract.

I place my hand on the report and pivot to block her. “Sorry.”
“No, move.” She frowns and tries shoving me out of the way. I dig my heels in slightly, and she basically bounces off me before stepping back and glaring at me. “Move.”

“No.” I shake my head.

Michelle simply frowns, sets her food down angrily, then throws her shoulder at my chest before I catch her and let her bounce off me again. “Move!”

“No. I can’t let you read this. I’m sorry.”

“Why not?”

“It’s one of my projects. I’m trying to catch up on years of research.”

“On?” She frowns at me before shoving me in an attempt to get me to move.

“No. I can’t let you read this. I’m sorry.”

“Why not?”

“It’s one of my projects. I’m trying to catch up on years of research.”

“On?” She frowns at me before shoving me in an attempt to get me to move.

“No.” I laugh, then set the report back on my desk, near the ‘router’ and smile at her. “Dr. Banner’s helping me on it. It’s hard to wrap my head around.”

“Then what is it?” Michelle presses, spearing another bite of pasta.

I give her a look, then keep moving. “Besides, the stated mission wasn’t exactly the real goal. Everybody has secret agendas. Which is why, it’s hard to know who to trust.”

Michelle hesitates, fork in her mouth. “Is this about the Accords again? He wasn’t here for that. Where was he, by the way?”

“I don’t know. I’m not asking.” I tell her as my stomach rumbles.

Oh yeah, my food.

Michelle quietly laughs and I ignore her then walk into the kitchen, grab a couple slices of pizza, and walk back in time to see Michelle checking her phone.

As soon as I walk back in, she hastily tucks her phone away, looking embarrassed. “I can leave if you need to make a call or something.”

“It’s your room.” She points out.

“Yeah.” I nod. “But if you need the space, I can share. Briefly.”

Michelle laughs, then coughs to clear her throat. “Well thank you, But no. It was Betty.”

“What’d she say?”

“She’s mad at me for being here.” She glances down at the floor before picking at her pasta. “I came too fast and now she and Ned are already eating together and can’t or won’t come over tonight.”
“Oh. Uhm, well, if you want to go or something, I don’t know if—”

“No.” She cuts me off, then looks embarrassed. “My parents both work tonight, so I don’t have anything else going on. If you don’t mind.” She stops and smiles at me.

_**She looks embarrassed again.**_

“No, it’s fine.” I smile. “We can watch whatever, whenever you want. Just let me know.”

Michelle smiles, then nods. “I actually have a few more questions. I know it’s work for you, but it’s important.” She stops walking and looks at me directly.

_**Uh oh.**_

“Yes.”

“You said it’s hard to know who to trust.” She starts, starting to walk around again holding her pasta in her hand while her fork is in the air like a conductor’s baton. “Right?” I give her a noncommittal shrug, and she continues. “Is that why Thor and Danvers came down? To shut Senator Boynton up about digging into your boy?”

“He’s not my boy.” I shake my head at her strongly.

Michelle rolls her eyes. “Good luck selling that one. Seriously though. Do they think he’s dirty?”

_**The thought’s come up.**_

“I don’t know. They don’t tell me anything.”

Okay, but still. Think thru it logically.” Michelle motions for me to think, tapping her head with the other end of her fork. “Hydra infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D, or whatever. Over 25 members of Congress were arrested, not to mention all the military officers that were exposed, sent into hiding. Alexander Pierce, dead. They wanted influence, to gain control. They want to know about who your guy is.” Michelle looks to me for confirmation.

“I’m telling you, I don’t know.”

“Fine. But that means that Senator Boynton would want to dig into everything. He’d find out about anything weird happening. Like the MOMA trip, and…” She continues before the air comes out of her. “That’s why you’re trying to protect everyone. Ned too. Everyone’s questions aren’t helping.”

“I have to protect all of you. That’s why I left.” I smile at her. “Sometimes it means vanishing to go do my job.”

“And sometimes you have to take shit from Betty and Ned and everyone else.”

_**The entire departed Senior Class.**_

I smile, then change gears “You said Betty isn’t coming?”

“She might be. Phrasing, Parker.”

_**Oh Jesus.**_
I feel myself go red. “MJ…”

She giggles at me, then glances over and starts smiling. “You said it.”

“I meant coming over here.”

“No.” She giggles.

“Help me out here. I’m trying not to be awkward.”

“You’re Peter Parker. That’s your brand. I don’t think Ned’s like that though. Even though Betty is…”

I turn back to Michelle just before she glances at me, looking uncomfortable. “Even though Betty’s what?”

“Experienced?”

I whip around to look away from her and feel myself go red. “Why do I ask these questions?”

*How would she have experience? And how would MJ know?*

Has Michelle had sex with a guy and I wouldn’t know? I mean, I wouldn’t because I know nothing about her personal life. Even though if I had to guess, there isn’t much of one. She’s always reading or something. Meaning that she’s probably hooked up with somebody at a party that I wasn’t at…

*I’m going to have to go to more parties.*

“You’re Peter Parker, human catastrophe.” I hear Michelle say before walking past me.

*Yeah…she’s gotten some. She’s got the hips that say “I’m young and beautiful and flexible and—*

What?

*What am I THINKING?!?*

I shake my head strongly, then try to ignore the way my pants are fitting me now before pulling out my hair paste out of my bag.

*Distraction Peter. Distract yourself.*

Michelle’s never been…bad to look at. She’s always wearing baggy stuff, so it’s hard to get a good look at her. Liz and Betty and most of the upperclassmen girls wear tighter clothes to show off their…

*Assets.*

“Focus Parker…” I mutter to myself before flicking on the water and washing my hands.

*Focus. Think of something else.*

I wonder how Thor’s rebuilding Asgard here on Earth. I saw a memo go about a potential ship visiting that would start bringing materials and supplies to Thor’s new territory.

*I bet that’s probably part of the deal Thor gets to bring in whatever he wants, whenever he wants*
from wherever. That reminds me, I need to check and see if I can find the actual location of the old Asgard. Bruce said it was completely blown apart by some Fire God guy. Thor called it Ragnarok, some old Asgardian prophecy come true.

All that Asgardian stuff is really ridiculous, except for the fact that it’s totally real. Thor has that massive axe, Stormbreaker and is an actual God.

Like how’d that happen?! Less than four months ago I would have said magic was from Harry Potter. Then I chased a wizard into space and next thing I know, magic’s just kind of accepted by everyone.

Dr. Strange clearly is a wizard, or as he said is ‘Master of the Mystic Arts’, but…

“How man?” I say to myself, before I scoop out two fingers worth of paste and start parting my hair up and kind of to the right. But mostly up.

“Don’t put too much stuff in, or you’ll look like Flash.” I hear Michelle say behind me, and I glance back in time to see her appear in the doorway before leaning on it and smirking at me.

She does look nice. Dammit.

I look away from her and back to my hair. “I’m barely using any…and I’m not good at it yet.”

“Really? I thought all guys went to a class about putting crap in their hair.”

“Haha.” I say flatly, then let out a breath and make a few more adjustments to the part, then step back. “Looks kind of okay, doesn’t it?”

Michelle makes a noncommittal voice before scratching my back and leaning closer to me. “Kind of. Here.” She says, then sets her drink down on my vanity and slightly adjusts my hair, causing her—

No. No. NO.

“There.” She says quietly, then turns to me as her breath tickles my ear. “Not so Southern and douchey. Now you look classy.”

“Classy?” I repeat her, before she laughs.

“Yeah.” Michelle smiles at me in the mirror, then steps away from me and back into my room.

Change topics.

“When’s the first decathlon meeting?”

“Next week.” She replies without turning back to me. “It’s at Cindy’s. I’m sending an email with the address for everyone over the weekend.”

Cool.

I nod, then take a bite of pizza before I hear voices in the living room, then turn back and see the back of Hill’s head before a light tinkle.

More wine.

“I’ll be right back.” I turn back and smile at MJ, then pivot back to my door and stride right into
the living room.

“Hey dear.” May greets me with a smile. “Good trip?”

I shrug as I make my way around the island to give her a hug, which she immediately reciprocates. “Alright I guess.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad to me.” May says before Hill silently pushes a glass to May and looks to me.

“I don’t know. Still figuring it out.”

“That’s why we’re giving you time. You’ll need it.” Hill jumps in. “Why are you here?”

_Huh?_

“It’s my house. Why not? And why’d you text her?”

May turns to Hill in surprise before she starts to smile. “It is not your house.”

“Go in there.” Hill waves me away, then raises her glass and turns away from me.

“Oh whatever.” I shake my head at them as they both ignore me, leaving me to walk back to my room.

“Show her the screens.”

“And _nothing_ else!!” May adds.

The ending credits minimize as the episode ends before the ten second ad starts to play. Above me on my bed, I hear Michelle move around before her legs swing down to my left.

“I’m getting a drink. You want one?”

“Sure.” I shrug, then glance over in time to—

_Nope._

I quickly look away at my phone before Michelle stops and turns back to me. “You would think that you’d be better around women after successfully asking the hottest Senior girl out. But nope…” She shakes her head and walks towards the kitchen.

_Do I say sorry? Uhh… I don’t think I should. That’d be even more awkward. But she did basically stand up right into my face, so it’s not totally my fault._

“You really should have come over tonight. She’s being ridiculous.”

Sending the quick text to Ned, I set my phone down and then see the time.

9:31. _Almost time for her to go home._

“I think it was a great idea to trap you two together.” – Betty

I did not text Betty.

May’s voice causes me to turn to the kitchen. “What time do you need to be home dear?”

“Any time.” I hear Michelle answer as my phone buzzes again.

“No. She’s not texting me. Must be going well.” Betty responds before adding a winking emoji.

“I know what that emoji means. We’re watching that new Prime show about the girl that grows up in the forest with assassins.”

*Movie Night turned into TV night. Neither of us saw a movie we wanted to watch. And between us, I think we have every streaming service covered.*

“—time do you work tomorrow?”

“Noon. So any time before that would be great.”

May replies “Okay, I’ll tell Hill. You guys enjoying the movie?”

“We actually ended up switching to TV. Neither of us could find something we liked. Where are the popcorn bowls?”

“Up above the vanity. Well, we’re in the other room if you guys need anything…” I hear May say, then her footsteps drift this way.

I turn and smile at her before she’s arrived at the door. “Hi.”

“Hey.” She smiles back, before the smile turns devious. “Can you behave?”

“Yeah…?”

“Good. Hill’s staying here for the night. Michelle too. So behave. You up there—” She points to my bed. “And her down there—” She points to the pallet I’ve made out of a blanket and pillow that I set out on my floor. “Or vice versa. No bullshit Peter Parker. You hear me?”

“Wait—” I prop myself up on my elbow. “What?”

“You hear me?”

“Yeah?” I croak out and May immediately smiles then walks away.

“Good. Night. Love you Peter.”

*What?*

“Love you too May!” I call after her, only for her to not respond, leaving me to check my phone again and see another devious emoji added on at the end.

“Good. She likes popcorn with her movies. Make some and she’ll warm right up to you.”

*Wait…it is taking her longer than just getting drinks in there.*

“Very funny. Save those emojis for you and Ned. Is he trapped under something?” I type out as I stand, then walk to my door.

“Finding everything oh—kay?” I ask, catching Michelle right as she’s pouring the wine discreetly while keeping an eye out for May.
“Yeah!” She says brightly. “I’m making some popcorn for us.” She gives me a nice fake smile, then a death glare as the popcorn starts popping behind her.

*I need to stall for her. Buy time, make loud noises so she can do…that.*

Yeah!

“Okay.” I say, then walk past her and loudly open up the fridge then grab my leftover pizza and move it to the other side of the fridge.

“Oh my god. We just ate!”

“I’m hungry!”

“I’m making—” Michelle says angrily before I hear the wine bottle quietly get set back down on the counter. “—popcorn and you’re digging back after your pizza.”

“I don’t want to eat all of it. You’re making it for you I’m assuming.”

“I can share.”

“You can?” I blurt out before I hear May loudly laugh before—

“OWW!!”

*She smacked me in the back of the head!!*

“Play nice now!!” Hill calls back to us.

“We are!!” Michelle answers her call as I turn back to her, grabbing my head and seeing Michelle surreptitiously slip the wine glasses below the counter and behind her before she…

*Sticks her tongue out thru her teeth…then walks towards my room.*

I stand there for a second, mind completely blank before the microwave beeps behind me, causing me to jump out of my skin then see that she’s set out one of May’s favorite popcorn bowls.

*I think it’s older than me. She’s always had it for as long as I can remember.*

Taking a steadying breath, I pull out the popcorn and start pouring it into the bowl then turn to MJ as she walks back to me. “Do you want any extra butter or anything?”

“Nope.” She says, then smiles and takes the bowl from me, then walks back to my room, leaving me with the empty bag.

*She’s in a weird mood tonight. Playful, add in the touchy feely side she’s shown a couple of times at school, and she’s opening up a little bit. I think that means that she’s having a good time.*

I walk back into my room, then half crack the door, leaving it open enough for May to see, but closed enough to give Michelle the illusion of privacy. “Thanks.” I hear her say quietly, then glance up and see her sitting in my spot on the floor.

“Hey.”
She frowns at me. “I said share. And I don’t want to get your bed all messy.”

“Oh.” I say mindlessly, then smile. “Okay. I’ll—”

I start to move towards my bed before MJ shakes her head. “No, sit. Next episode is ready.” Silently, she sets the bowl down, points to the spot next to her then stares at me for a second.

Fine…

“Don’t sigh. I know you don’t mean it.” She says flatly as I sit down before she slips my glass of wine to me.

I take it, then set it behind the leg of my bed, out of sight. “Yeah, where’d you get that idea?”

“They’re stupid enough to leave it out. I’m smart enough to sneak it past them.” She replies, sounding proud before reaching behind her and patting around for my remote before finding it and hitting play on the next episode.

“Last time on…” The screen changes immediately as Michelle reaches for the popcorn before brushing her feet up against mine.

COLD!!

I shift my feet away from her, only for her to laugh. “Your feet are cold.”

“You’re just a baby.”

“No.” I turn and frown at her as she stuffs a fistful of popcorn into her mouth, then bulges her eyes out at me, breaking my concentration and causing me to laugh. Causing her to laugh and turn away from me.

“You’re weird.” I shake my head, still laughing.

Michelle chews the popcorn for a minute, only waving my insult down before answering “Shut up dork.”

“You’re making the faces.”

“You’re the one with the ice cold feet!”

The video file continues on the screen to my right while the screen beside it displays all the data from the monitors.

Project Pegasus. Joint Dark Energy Division.

Back when it was easy for the government to work with us.

At least we’re trying to do that again. We can’t really do much in the grand scheme of things with one hand tied behind our backs.

“Doctors, energy levels are spiking again.” The female lab assistant says, clearly concerned as Dr. Selvig hustles to her side to look at her monitor.

Gamma Radiation levels rising at over 60% of what they were just two minutes previously.
“Peter, Ned’s here for your lunch.” I hear Karen say.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” I wave her away as the video continues and the Tesseract starts… sparking, releasing flares of blue material like it’s activating, then a blast of bright blue right dives straight for the platform and heat collectors that have been set up for the facility’s protection.

*And it’s a portal. Wow.*

The beam lasts for maybe 10 seconds tops, before it cuts off, and Loki is left standing there.

*Breathing very heavily. I bet being squeezed thru space hurts a bit.*

“How’d he do it?” I mutter aloud. “He didn’t even have the Tesseract. How’d he even use it?”

“I don’t know Peter.” Karen responds to my query.

“I know we don’t. Just talking to myself.” I scratch my neck then hear Ned.

“Whoa.”

I pause the video, then glance over to see that his eyes are in danger of falling out of his head.

“Yeah.”

“Is that…Loki?”

“Yup.” I nod.

“Is that how he got here? When he invaded New York?”

I nod silently before pressing play and turning the volume down slightly, just before Loki starts blasting thru the entire security detail.

*Wearing multiple AR bullets like they came from a airsoft gun or something.*

“How’s he—what’s that he’s carrying?”

“Scepter. The glowing blue part?” I say, then point it out to him as Loki apprehends Hawkeye.

“Yeah?”

“That was holding the Mind Stone. The one that was in Vision’s head.” I explain.

*Two Infinity Stones within twenty feet of each other. And about to get so much closer together.*

“Don’t.” Loki says calmly. “I still need that.”

“Wow.” Ned says before Fury replies.

“This doesn’t have to get any messier.”

*But it did.*

I press pause, then mark my place to glance at it later, then wave it away, then the file Mr. Stark was looking at on Stark Tower, complete with his notes and a video file from later on the helicarrier. “You here for lunch?”

“Huh?” Ned blinks at me,
“Lunch?”

“Oh. Yeah. If you want. I didn’t know you were busy up here. Nobody knows what you do up here after all.” He says, sounding serious before he laughs.

“Yeah.” I smile.

I’m the silent boy Genius with access to this floor. It’s restricted mostly to Level 5 clearance and above. Ned is a Level 1, but he’s a special case so he can come up here sometimes.

“Does everyone wonder what I’m doing up here?” I ask, then start scooping up my wallet, keys and key card and stuffing it all into my pockets.

Ned nods. “Yeah. Wondering how a kid like you has clearance like this.”

“Makes sense.” I smile, which causes Ned to laugh.

“So Betty told me about you and Michelle last night.”

I turn to Ned in time to see him smile. “Yeah?”

Uh oh.

“She slept over?”

Quickly, I turn away from him, and he laughs quietly. “No.”

“No what?”

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“Thinking what?” He parrots me.

I roll my eyes and hit the button for the elevator. “You’re all conspiring against me. You and Betty and May and Hill.”

“May and Hill?” Ned blurts out loudly, then covers his mouth.

“Yeah…” I groan. “You’re all terrible.”

“Doesn’t sound terrible.”

“Did you kiss her yet?” I turn the tables on Ned.

He instantly goes very red. “Well, I, uhm, uh—”

“Sounds like a no to me.”

“No, I have. But I’m not—”

NO.

I stick my hand up to stop him. “Stop. I’m just giving you a hard time.”

“Whew.” He lets out a sigh of relief. “That’s good because—”

“What’d you watch?” I change topics on him again, causing him to look at me in fright briefly.
“Oh. Uhm, she decided to watch some dumb old movie. Julia Roberts was in it. Super awkward, the lady was a hooker and—”

“Pretty Woman?” I cut him off. “That’s a good movie. She kills in that movie.”

“You’ve seen it before?” Ned asks as the elevator door opens.

“Yeah, it’s a classic rom-com.”

“It is?” Ned repeats himself, then gives me a skeptical look as I nod. “Oh.”

*I don’t think he paid much attention to it.*

“What’d you guys watch?”

“Hannah. That new series on Prime. Betty didn’t tell you?”

Ned shakes his head. “Betty took my phone away. Said I need to focus on a singular thing.” He ends with a frown. “Any clue what that means by the way?”

Two. *Peter, get your mind out of the gutter.*

Having MJ over last night was a bad idea. We ended up lying down on that pallet for the last three episodes, with her using my shoulder as what must have been an uncomfortable pillow before I made her take my bed and go to sleep at 3 AM.

Waking up to my alarm this morning sucked, but I got to share a silent breakfast with three women before Hill shuttled Michelle home for work today. It’s been a weird day and it’s barely noon.

*I am hungry for lunch though.*

“Peter?” I hear Ned ask as the elevator door open up to the lobby.

I blankly motion for Ned to lead the way. “Yeah?”

*Lunch, right? Where are we going?*

“Any idea what Betty meant?”

“No.” I shake my head quickly. “Any clue where you want to go for lunch?”


“My treat.” I counter. “Your pick.”

“Maybe we can walk and see what grabs us.” Ned throws out there.

*Sure.*

I nod and smile, then Ned starts us out the glass doors and out into Manhattan. “Plans this weekend?” Ned turns back to me after a few seconds as the chaos of New York is all around us.

“Quiet weekend.” I smile. “May and I are going to those botanical gardens in Virginia then seeing an old friend of hers in DC.”

*I really have needed to spend more time with May. So...*
“Sounds boring.”

“It probably will be. But I need to be with May. All that.”

Ned nods. “Yeah, you probably do.”

“Probably?” I laugh, causing Ned to laugh.

“You know what I mean.”

I nod along with him as the crosswalk changes from stop to walk. “Yeah. You?”

“I think Betty has plans for us. But so does my Mom. And I don’t know how to make them both work.”

_Hah._

“Tell your Mom.” I laugh. “Have you told them about Betty?”

“Kind of. She didn’t really seem all that excited. You really think so?”

*I think his mom was trying to hide her excitement.*

“Yeah. If she’s anything like May.” I smile. Ned immediately smiles, then groans.

“I’m doomed.”
'Newsflash'

Chapter Notes

One note: I do use some pretty harsh language at one brief point late in this chapter. Career military person using harsh language doesn't faze me but if you have an issue with that sort of thing, heads up.

“We’ll return after this…” The newscaster says before the camera shot zooms out silently, revealing her as she shuffles her papers before the news program cuts to break.

Courtney Nolan. She’s not too bad. Seems fair at least. She calls out a lot of people on their BS. There’s a ton of YouTube clips of her getting into shouting matches with her guests, but she’s still on the air. And she still gets whoever is the hot topic of the moment, so she has real power.

As soon as the ad starts, Karen silently mutes the TV and I grab the Pyrex dish May cooked the chicken in.

It was one of her better meals. Basic, chicken, rice, veggies, small thing of potatoes. I made the salad, which I guess was okay.

Fancy salads seem to be all the rage right now and mine was mostly lettuce.

“Oh, I was about to come and start that.” I hear May say, then glance up to see her walking back into the living room,

“I’ve got it.” I smile as I reach for the dish soap and squirt some into the dish.

“And the leftovers?”

“Already wrapped up.”

Feeling May smile, I flick on the water then glance up in time for her to walk over and hug me around the shoulders. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I lean into the hug while also scrubbing the dish.

“Bummer that the Gardens were so boring.”

“Eh.” I shrug.

Not everything can be exciting.

“I know you were bored. You don’t have to just be ‘eh.’” She makes a wimpy motion out of the corner of my eye.

“Not everything has to be exciting.” I glance over at her. “I had a nice weekend.”

I got to sleep, read a whole bunch of files, catch up on emails and all that. Productive, I guess.

“Boring.”
I flip over the dish and continue scrubbing, not quite sure how to respond before Karen unmutes the TV. “Last week’s incident involving the Russian Air Force and Asgard’s Thor, God of Thunder continues to heat up, with Secretary Ross’ latest statement:

The No-Fly Zone that was approved by the United Nations unilaterally following April’s events must be held up as the law of the land, and—”

Those idiots decided to try and send a F-22 over Asgard at over 50,000 feet, I assume to try and see what he’s doing, only for Thor to go right up there, rip the plane apart, grab the poor pilot and fly right to Moscow and drop him at the steps of the Kremlin.

“President—but word out of the Kremlin indicates that they do not intend to use disciplinary action on the pilot in question—”

“Do they just not get it?” I ask May, who turns to me, ice cubes in a glass but before she’s added the water.

“No, they’ve always seemed to be stirring the pot.”

Not what we need right now.

“—continues to refuse press access to any section of his newly acquired territory, including drones flight by the united States as well as any foreign countries.”

“Yeah, because he wants to work in peace. Can’t you guys get that?” I ask the television. May laughs as the newscaster continues on before I set the dish aside onto the drying rack and grab May’s dinner plate.

He’s undertaking a massive project. How about you let him breathe? Maybe work in peace? He just lost his home and is trying to rebuild. Not like that’s traumatic at all or anything. Blah blah blah, cannot go on blindly trust him, even if he’s the God of Thunder, blah blah.

They’ve turned to playing this card in the last week.

Why’s he being so secretive? Why’s he randomly popping up in Washington?

He’s Thor! How about you do your jobs, take him at word and just accept that?

I don’t think they’d have anything to talk about on the news then. Actually, that’s not true. They’ll always find something.

I set May’s plate aside and grab the protective gloves before I turn on the hot water, but not before casting another glance at the TV in time to see the Stark Industries logo.

And that’s how they transition. I wonder how they rephrase it this time.

The UN and Department of Defense just placed an order with us to make five new Helicarriers, to be used to protect the planet as a first line of defense sort of thing. But it’s caught up in multiple nations’ legislative houses and all that fun bureaucracy.

They don’t want another Potomac situation, and I get that. Nobody wants the wrong people in charge. Which is why we’re going to be staffing them. And since we’re at least a decade out from the Helicarriers taking flight, we have time. But they have to trust us. And that’s really hard when the UN, Germany, a bunch of Middle Eastern Nations, and a coalition of South American nations all want to know where the Helicarrier and Quinjets that flew into Chicago is. And we cannot do
that. I get their concern, but we’re not going to just fly in and decide to take over. That’s not the point.

Besides, that’s not us. That’s S.H.I.E.L.D and Daisy and Simmons and that Mack guy that I haven’t met yet.

It’s almost like the entire world doesn’t understand that we have to put this behind us. The world’s changed. We cannot start being petty and emphasizing our differences when there are guys like Thanos out there that would love nothing more than to come and invade us. How can I get that, but seemingly everyone in charge doesn’t? Not the UN Security Council, not Secretary Ross, nobody.

Everything’s changed. Accept that and move on. The world is in danger. We have a lot bigger concerns.

“—continued negotiations over Tony Stark’s Arc reactor technology—”

Wait WHAT?! No. NO. He never, ever, EVER cleared that to be anywhere near on the table. We’ve seen what can happen with that Whiplash lunatic. No way in hell.

“Karen, what’d they just say?” I ask her before she pops a screen up to my right, behind the sink as I continue doing the dishes.

“Talks continued between Stark Industries on the specifics of the Helicarriers capabilities, including use of repulsor technology, invoking the continued negotiations on Tony Stark’s Arc reactor technology between the estate of Tony Stark, as well as the Avengers.” The transcript reads before I feel hot water slip under my gloves, lightly burning my skin.

EXCUSE ME?!? Are you kidding me? This has to be a joke. They cannot be serious. How thick do you have to be presented with verified intelligence that giving that sort of tech over to companies or individuals is unacceptably dangerous?! I nearly died as a kid to Hammer Drones!!! Plus that crazy guy that Rhodey and Mr. Stark had to fight!! The definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and expecting a different result!

“OWW!!!” I yelp, then snatch my hands back from underneath the running water before slapping the lever to shut the water off entirely as May glances back to me. “How many times do we have to see tech like that—” I mutter while shaking out my hand to get some of the water off.

WAIT…Hold on.

“Like that?” May prompts me to continue.

Wait a second.

I glance back to the TV as it continues on.

“—we cannot be left to clean up the damage, to pick up the pieces after every single new issue.”

Pick up the pieces.

“Yeah.” I laugh, then web Mr. Toomes’ hand to his workbench, causing him to let out a heavy sigh.

“Peter. You’re young. You don’t understand how the world works.”
“Yeah, but I know that selling weapons to criminals is wrong!”

Instantly, he fires back “How do you think your buddy Stark paid for that tower? Or all of his other little toys? Those people up there, the rich and the powerful, they do whatever they want. Guys like us? They don’t care about us. Yeah, we build their roads, and we fight all their wars and everything. But they don’t care about us. We have to pick up after them, we have to eat their table scraps…That’s how it is.”

“I know you know what I’m talking about Peter.”

“Peter?” I hear May say. I blink and glance up at her, only for May to be up off the couch and already walking to me. “I don’t like that look.”

“Nothing.” I shake my head, then grab May’s plate again before she grabs my shoulder. “No, don’t ‘nothing’ me. Spit it out.” She frowns at me before crossing her arms. I roughly drop the plate into the sink then copy her. “That’s a terrible idea!”

I…I can’t believe it. Liz’s Dad might have actually might have been right. A little bit.

“Maybe, we don’t know.” May shrugs. “How are we to know?”

“I know!” I answer. “I…"

I can’t explode on May. That’s…no.

“Sorry, it’s just…” I apologize to her, then walk around her and put my hands behind my head. We can’t trust them. Who knows what subcontractors have a grudge and a guy with enough know how like Liz’s Dad did. We’d be creating our own enemies. We can’t be doing that. We have enough out there in pace that Danvers is out there having to reassure them that the Avengers, the group that took down Thanos, isn’t coming for them next!!

“You think you should talk to Hill?” May suggests.

That’s a great idea.

“You’re a genius.” I give May a huge smile, and her worried expression vanishes. “Karen?”

“Maria Hill is currently overseeing an operation in China involving the Children of Thanos.” Karen reports.

OF COURSE SHE IS.

“Right.” I laugh sarcastically then roll my eyes. May frowns at me before saying “When will she be available?”

“I’m not sure. I can find out. In the meantime, would you like me to contact somebody else?”

“Sure.” May nods. “Who else is free?”

“Miss Carter is available—.”
“—as well as Romanoff—.” Karen continues before May cuts her off.

“Ask her if we can talk. I think Peter has some high level questions for her.”

_Not for her. For Hill. Hill will have all the right answers. Romanoff is going to bring a different perspective in, and she won’t understand my point._

“Don’t pout over there.” May calls out to me. “Maria has a job to do too. She’s not solely yours.”

“I know that! But of course she’s running an operation on a Sunday.”

_Who runs a major operation on a Sunday?_

The flash of a screen cuts us both off before Romanoff says “Okay, sounds like I’m not the invited guest. What’s wrong?”

_Very funny._

I walk away from the screen, back towards the kitchen as May says “Sorry, Peter wanted to talk to Maria Hill.”

“Why?”

“Well, we were just watching the news after dinner and—”

Romanoff interrupts her with a laugh. “Well that was his first mistake. He knows that the news on there is outdated already.”

“Then why was I not brought into the loop on selling off the Arc Reactor?” I snap as I grab the brush again and get back to my dishes.

The screen rotates, and Romanoff frowns at me. “We’re not doing that. Fury’s more concerned about the viability of the Helicarriers over a long span of time. Hence we’re debating using repulsor technology.”

“And you really think that tech won’t fall into the wrong hands? It already has one before!”

“What do you mean?”

_Wait, twice before! The plane!!_

“Twice! I take that back. Sorry. Those Hammer drones and that Russian Whiplash guy. Then with the Vulture. We can’t let them get ahold of the repulsor tech. Or Mr. Stark’s Arc Reactor.”

Romanoff looks confused for a second. “I think we’re on different pages here. Slow down.”

“I…” I start, then stop myself and see both May and Romanoff waiting for me to continue.

_Okay. I need to breathe, and…I need to wait. Think this thru. Say it right, and not worry everyone more like I almost did last week with Simmons._

“I’ll call you back.” I wipe away the screen and grab the next dish that needs to be washed.

“Hey!” I hear May protest. “What was that?”
“I need more time. I want to explain it right, and I can’t do that right now. I need to think about it.”

May frowns “Or you could be open and honest, and just tell everyone.” She walks next to me and crosses her arms, silently demanding my attention.

“Yeah, and everybody worries about me when I do that.” I counter. “I don’t want to get mad at you, or Romanoff, or Hill or anyone. So I’m going to do these dishes and try to think of how to say it. Calmly.”

“I don’t care! Yell at me, I can take it! What’s gotten into you?”

DAMMIT!!

“This is exactly what I’m talking about!” I fire back. “I’m trying to figure everything out, and when I do, everyone says I’ve got a temper, or mood swings, or whatever!”

May makes a face then answers “This is a mood swing! What are you talking about? You can’t always just go get what you want, Avenger or not Peter. You have to be patient. Work with me!”

“I’m trying to! But nobody is listening to me!” I turn to May. “I…”

I’m doing a terrible job explaining this.

“You know what? It can wait.” I say off the top of my head.

“No it can’t!” May shakes her head before I slip past her toward my room. “Hey, where are you going?”

“I’m going to get ready for tomorrow, maybe take a shower.”

Think it over in the water. That should help.

Before May can respond, I shut my door behind me, then start to the bathroom before I hear her footsteps. “Peter! Hey—”

“Karen, lock the door.”

I hear the door lock multiple times before—

“HEY! No. You unlock this door right now Peter!”

Okay, I feel much better.

I—

Uh oh.

“Okay.” Hill starts off sounding angry, as May is sitting on my bed, both her arms and legs crossed. “What’s the problem Peter? Your little temper tantrum has pulled me out of an active mission, so this better be good.”

I turn to May, only to get an expectant look before I turn back to Hill, who looks like she’s in uniform. “It’s not a temper tantrum. I took a shower to clear my head and not yell at May.”

We just had a good weekend! The whole point was for me to spend more time with her!
“Okay, talk. The Arc Reactor, the repulsors, everything.” Hill orders me.

“Okay.” I say, then walk over to my hamper and throw my dirty clothes inside. “Why wasn’t I informed about you guys negotiating over Mr. Stark’s Arc Reactor and repulsor technology? There’s no way that ends up going well!”

“You don’t know that. And we’re far from actually doing it. Besides, we would have brought you in at some point.”

“Why are you even debating it at all?” I ask her. “Mr. Stark went in front of Congress and told them that they couldn’t have his technology. You’re expressly going against his wishes!”

“No.” Hill says with a smile. “Fury believes, and I agree, that it’s time for us to put that aside and move forward.”

I repeat “Move forward?” then walk back to my bathroom door. “And just go repeating the same mistakes we just made? Are you crazy?”

“No.” Hill says with a laugh.

“Sounds like it to me!” I say before she can continue. “It honestly sounds like you’re trying to get people hurt or killed.”

“How so?” May asks.

Thanks May.

“How so?” I repeat after her. “How about we look at the plane I had to crash to stop that Vulture guy from stealing the whole plane’s worth of Damage Control tech! You know how that happened?”

“No.” May says.

“Yes.” Hill nods. “But that was—”

“What, a unique case of a contractor getting angry, finding some Chitauri tech and using it for illegal purposes?” I complete her sentence for her. “No way!”

“Yes way!” Hill fires back. “That guy clearly was destined to step off the right side of the tracks Peter. He had a wife and a family that—”

“I know he had a wife and a family!” I cut Hill off. “He did it for them!”

May asks “How would you know?”

“Because he told me! Before he dropped a building down on top of my head!!” I explain, then walk around in a circle. “Now you cannot tell me, that if you do things the way they’ve always been done, with contractors, and people that we cannot trust, that the same thing won’t happen. You can’t!”

“We’re a long ways from that Peter. And besides, we’ve had some psychological tests run on that guy you caught. He’s got some pretty major issues that caused him to go nuts and try to becomes a super villain.”

“NO!” I fire back. “He was fine! He was driven to crime by us! Like how Stark created Hammer’s drones by humiliating him. And that Whiplash guy! We’re handing over our tech, and creating our
own issues!"

Hill gives me a slightly exasperated look. “No, you want crazy, you want Ivan Vanko. That guy is, pardon me May, nuts. He is completely fucking out of his mind nuts. Now we’re going to be doing things differently this time. More checks and balances, psychological tests, more hands on control of the process. All that is still being decided. And we’ll bring you in on that.” She explains patiently. “Okay?”

“Then why is Fury doing all this? Mr. Stark said specifically not to hand over the Arc Reactor. It shouldn’t even be on the table!”

“It’s not.” Hill shakes her head. “Everybody likes to think it is, but it’s not. Absolutely not. It’s part of negotiating. Aim high, meet in the middle.”

“We shouldn’t be negotiating!” I fire back. “We’re trying to protect the world!”

“But we can’t do that alone!” Hill points out. “We just tried that, and look what happened! We have to negotiate Peter, that’s how the world works. You’re young, you don’t get that yet and that’s fine but—”

“My age shouldn’t have anything to do with it!” I shout over Hill. “Now you sound like him! That’s almost exactly what—”

Hill raises her voice. “Don’t cut me off again Peter. You understand me? Because no, you don’t get it. If we want to protect the world, we have to work in the real world, not in the world we’d like it to be. We have to take it how it is and go from there.”

“No, then we have to change the world.” I reason with her. “Otherwise we’ll just continue to make the same mistakes over and over again.”

“We can’t change the world!” Hill counters hotly. “That’s not how all this works!”

“Yes it is! It’s already changed!” I point out. “Thanos came down and snapped half of everybody away! We had to go back and fight him just to fix everything! I fell straight from space, everybody died! The world’s changed!!! We have to act that way!”

*We cannot just go on like nothing happened! Everything did happen! The situation has changed!!!*

Hill takes a breath then pauses to let everything sink in. “Okay. So…you can’t be watching the news anymore.”

“Why not?” I ask, as May looks surprised.

“Because you’re getting all worked up on old information that isn’t accurate anymore. You have a wealth of up to the *second* knowledge at your fingertips. But you’re focusing on the wrong battles. And—”

“I’m trying to—” I start before Hill yells at me.

“I don’t care! I told you not to interrupt me again! And there you did! Okay?” She pauses briefly, then glares at me. “You’re going to lie down. Go to bed. You’re going to wake your ass up early, and get to the lab. And when you do, you need to *focus* on what is in front of you Peter. We can’t have you going off the reservation like this! That’s not how this works! We’re giving you unrestricted access right now, and trusting you, and it’s proving to be a terrible idea! Now prove me wrong by listening, by going to bed, and putting together a good week? Okay?”
“Okay. Good night.” Hill barks out, then ends the call, leaving me gaping at an empty screen.
“Verified that one of the elements that is contained in the alloys of the glaive is a variation of Tungsten.” – Karen

“Great. Try running a Vickers test on it to see how it tests. Thank you Karen.”

I glance up to see Ned and Happy still in the middle of a conversation.

“Any time. Shall I update you while you’re at Decathlon practice?”

Sure, why not?

“Yes, that would be great.” I reply, then swipe back to the report I was reading.

Updated totals on that botched Children of Thanos Operation is up to 15. No further arrests have been made. Turns out I screwed that up too. Romanoff informed Hill of my concerns on the ARC Reactor and repulsor technology, and Hill transferred command briefly over so that she could talk to me.

And we know how that went.

When she got back, everything was about to go to hell in a handbasket. Doesn’t matter that apparently Sergeant Barnes had been tracking those guys for weeks, or that we had a two block perimeter. A majority of the cell vanished into the Shenzhen streets and alleyways. A few others took some crazy cyanide like pill that instantly killed them. The little that put up a fight were either wounded or ended up fleeing as well.

Guerilla tactics put to good use.

Nobody’s really spoken to me yesterday, or yet today. I know they’re mad. I don’t feel like I should apologize, but the change in command didn’t help things. So I’m fully expecting to be called upstate and get reamed out. People died because I watched the news. Nothing I can do now of course, except wait for the reprimand, and do exactly as Hill instructed me to do: Make it a good week.

“So Peter.” Happy says, encouraging me to glance up from my phone. “Heard you’re putting in a lot of hours down at the lab.”

I shrug. “Lot of work to do.”

There is. Years’ worth.

“You liking it down there?”

It’s not about liking it. It’s my job, my responsibility. It’s a legacy thing. Mr. Stark clearly went into fighting Thanos with everything he had, and left everything else on the back burner. Now his back burner is on my desk, piled to the ceiling. I inherited a lot of resources, power and money from Mr. Stark. I also inherited a complicated legacy, trouble and all of the remaining problems.

I glance away from the window and shrug at Happy. “It’s work, so I guess so.”

“Sounds to me like you’re pushing yourself too hard.”
“What am I supposed to do? Ignore it?” I counter simply, then look to Happy for an answer. He immediately breaks eye contact with me and continues driving.

*I’m really trying not to be in a bad mood, but it’s hard not to be. I was left with all these problems. As long as they entrust me to continue working to solve them, it’s my job to do just that. Right now it’s summer. I can do twelve hour days at the lab. I can understand what all the gamma readings mean, and I’m close to understanding, with Karen’s help, what Dr. Banner was working on in regards to anti-electron collisions.*

He’s the world’s foremost expert. Even Mr. Stark deferred to him on the subject.

“Thank you Mr. Hogan.” Ned says before I glance back up front and see that we’ve arrived at an unfamiliar apartment building.

“No problem. Have a good practice.” Happy smiles at Ned, then turns to me. “Call if you need me. Okay?”

I nod, then try to give him an confident smile then pile out of the car and follow Ned into the lobby, then the elevator and all the way to——

“Pinhead Parker!!”

*Flash. I do not want to deal with you today.*

Wearily, I smile in his general direction before turning to Cindy. “Thanks for having us Cindy.”

“You’re welcome!” She says enthusiastically before pointing to the kitchen. “Drinks are in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.” I smile again, then walk past her as she walks towards the others in the living room.

*I can do this. It’ll be like 10 minutes of abuse and harassment, then we’ll start working. And I can escape right when we’re done. I can do this.*

When I turn back around, I see that along with Cindy and Flash, Charles, Abe, Tiny, Betty and Jason are already here. “We were just looking at your boy Parker. Come take a look!” Flash beckons me to come over then tells Tiny “Start it again. I want to see what he thinks of this.”

“What I think of what?”

Charles pivots on the arm of a loveseat. “Somebody made a supercut of those aliens coming down from all the footage.”

“What?”

*How? All that footage, a lot of it was confiscated and—*

My pocket vibrates as Tiny rewinds the YouTube video with a PlayStation controller, then stops it with a massive red canopy flying down the street with…

*The Q-Ship.*

“Play it. Where were you Parker?”

I ignore Flash and fish my phone out of my pocket, then set it face down on my leg and perch myself on the couch beside Ned, causing Betty to give me a slightly dirty look.
Oh come off it. Not like there’s any other place to sit.

Tiny presses play, and screams instantly start ringing out as people are running everywhere, completely blind due to panic as—

There they are.

Mr. Stark, Dr. Strange, Wong, his buddy, and Bruce all coming running up from nowhere on the left side of the screen before—

“That’s pretty badass. You can’t know him. What is he, a magician?”

I ignore Flash as Mr. Stark shakes his head, they all take a few steps down the street—

Who is really texting me right now? Seriously?

“Whoa.” Cindy says in awe.

“That’s like some Star Trek shit right there.” Tiny comments as I flip my phone over.

7 New Messages

“I don’t know how this is online without me catching it. Do you want me to take it down?” – Hill

“Hey. Answer your texts. I know you have it on vibrate.”

“Now it’s on vibrate.”

In the background, I hear Squidward start to speak “Hear me…and rejoice.”

You are about to die at the hands of the Children of Thanos.

“I know you’re mad at me, but this isn’t healthy for you to see right now. Text me back, or I’ll just take it down.”

“And before you ask, no, I don’t know how this got past all of our censors.”

“—be grateful, that your meaningless lives—”

“Earth is closed bitch!” Flash says like a hype man would, brashly and less like a yell, more like a bark before I roll my eyes and glance back down to my phone.

“Don’t take it down.”

I type the massage out, then throw my phone back into my pocket and—

SERIOUSLY?!?

I pause and glare at the center of the TV’s frame, where I know there’s a camera installed, then roll my eyes and glance back toward the footage.

“That looks painful.” Betty comments as Bruce is green all the way up to his neck, looking like he’s in agony before it drains away and Mr. Stark turns around and shoves his hand into Dr. Banner’s chest.

Okay, if you’re going to continually text me, I’ll just shut my phone off.
I pull my phone back out in time to see Hill’s next text.

“This isn’t healthy for you to see right now. Dr. Simmons said, and I know you know this—”

Oh forget what Simmons said.

Maybe I do have to take all this head on and attack it.

I shake my head and hold my lock button down, causing the screen to go dark, except for the indicator for me to swipe and shut it down, which I do blindly before Mr. Stark pulls down on his athleisure shirt, activating the nanobots and in turn, his suit.

“Tell me you worked on that at least.” Flash turns to me, before I smile at him.

“Maybe.” I shrug, then adjust my left wristband and stop it from cutting into my wrist.

Charles shakes his head as a few others groan. “No way Parker.”

“Yeah, that’s beyond cutting edge right there.”

You’re right. It’s Bleeding Edge. It is the line right now. It’s the best we’ve got.

Patrick is squared up by the repulsor blast and goes flying at Squidward, who waves his hand and discards him into a series of parked cars to the left.

“How the hell’d he do that?!” Betty blurts out.

Ned shrugs “I dunno.” Before I feel everyone looks to me.

“We’ve got theories.”

Flash instantly blurts out “Which are?”

The action on the TV continues before I say “Levitation, telepathy, something that kind of seems like metal bending.”

He’s the only one that isn’t dead. We don’t know where he is.

“Like on Avatar: The Last Airbender and Toph?” Ned turns to me, looking awed.

“Yup.”

Mr. Stark promptly goes flying thru that building, caught in Patrick’s flying plier attack before careening into a tree.

“He moved fifty tons of concrete and steel like it’s nothing!!” Flash comments, clearly amazed before the camera shifts to somebody clearly running after Mr. Stark.

I thought that there was an evacuation order put out? Either it wasn’t fully completed, or these guys disobeyed the direct order and stayed, putting their own lives at risk.

The shot hastily changes back to Dr. Strange and Wong just as Squidward creates a bunch of arrows using bricks, then fires them at Strange and Wong, only for them to create a portal and redirect them at—

“Hah!” Abe cheers before Squidward reaches out and the entire room groans.
Ned complains. “Metal bending sucks man.”

Yeah, good thing it’s not all around us or any—oh wait.

“Gotta give it up to him. They sent the exact right guys.” I tell him, causing Flash, Abe, Cindy and Betty all to look at me.

“The right guys?” Flash asks, irritated. “You rooting for us to lose Parker?”

I shake my head as Dr. Strange grabs Squidward and pulls him, only for it to backfire. “No, I—”

*Wait a second. Thanos did that exact move and didn’t hurt him at all.*

Squidward winces in pain and looks at his hand before roughly throwing—

*OH!*

“Hey Michelle!” I hear Cindy greet her as the wires start wrapping around Dr. Strange.

“Hi, what are you guys watching?”

_He was going to use the Time Stone. I’ve seen him do that before. Both hands extending at his waist, the green glow, everything. And Squidward stopped him and bound him—_

“No!!” He yells before the camera cuts again to Mr. Stark and Patrick duking it out.

“I thought that YouTube took down all this stuff.” Michelle says as I feel her move behind me. 

*She’s worried.*

I briefly glance back to her, only for her to smile down at me, then put her hand on my back before I turn—

*Oh hey, it’s me.*

“That late?!” Jason yelps as I catch the flying pliers and stop them from crushing Mr. Stark.

“What took your boy so long Penis?!” Flash demands.

“Got caught in traffic.”

“Traffic?” Betty asks as Michelle moves to sit beside me as I get thrown bodily by Patrick, then catch the half of a taxi that he throws, and smash it on top of his head as everyone lets out a cheer. The camera roughly shifts to a group of kids loudly yammering on—“C’mon c’mon, they’re right this—WHOOSH!!!” just before Dr. Strange and his magic cloak whizz right past them, then us, towards Union Square.

“—wizard, get on it!”

“On it!!!”

Squidward barrels past as I get up to speed as fast as I can.

*I had this timed too! I purposefully looped around so that I could get the drop on that guy, toss him away and grab Dr. Strange.*

“Get him Spider-Man!” Flash cheers me on as I loop right—
Michelle jumps and nearly falls off the couch before I reach back blindly and catch her leg, then gently heave her back into place behind me as everyone else groans. “He got ploughed!!” Abe complains.

“Cheap shot!!” Betty adds, arms extended in indignation.

Flash looks back to me. “Parker! Why didn’t you warn him?”

“I was busy! With that!” I point back to the TV as the tractor beam grabs Dr. Strange and pulls him towards the ship as I try to stop him by grabbing onto the streetlight just before it gives—

*It didn’t give way?! Squidward!!*

“Huh.” I mutter to myself quietly as the base of the light sparks just before I’m pulled up to the base of the ship and vanish from view.

*I was worried that Squidward was going to start coming after me, and I didn’t know how to handle him. So I hid and tried breaking into the ship and well…that didn’t work.*

The camera shifts back to those stupid kids as they’re commentating and cheering on Iron Man. “Oh my god, shut up.” Michelle complains. Abe makes a noise of agreement and Flash nods, then glances back and smirks at me.

*Stop that.*

I glare at him for a moment before he looks away as Mr. Stark gets caught in another weapon, this time something that immobilizes—

The whole room starts yelling just before Patrick vanishes, Mr. Stark breaks free, then rockets off to save me.

*And that’s where it—oh, nope.*

“Parker?” Flash asks me, but doesn’t ask me as the point of view changes again.

“—we are still in pursuit, but will not be able to continue it for long,. This ship in question is far faster than we can go, and are about to exceed—”

*Yeah, local news helicopters can’t chase spaceships.*

The camera changes from the local news to a military feed. “—inbound on the bogey’s position.”

“Do not engage. Repeat, do NOT engage.” An unfamiliar voice orders the pilot.

Abe asks “Why not?”


“Yeah Abe, you trying to kill Spider-Man?” Michelle asks before leaning closer to me.

*Thanks Abe.*

“Don’t you dare touch Spidey.” Flash tells off Abe as the fighter jet continues his pursuit before Iron Man blows right past him.

*You can just barely see me climbing up.*
The ticker on the lower left continues flying up and up and up. “135,000 feet, 136,000 feet…”

Jeez, I didn’t know I was that high up. Then, at least. I hadn’t stopped looking down yet to find Mr. Stark.

“Tower, I’m losing them.” The pilot relays as the flying donut keeps picking up speed, trying to exit the atmosphere as Mr. Stark is somehow gaining on the flying do—

Whoa. Already?

A large white parachute deploys, yanking me violently off the ship.

Before I webbed onto the side of the ship, and just before the parachute got torn out of my suit.

“Deploy long distance lensing. Keep your eyes on them for as long as you can.” The camera shifts to a longer lens, and a shot that looks kind of like one they use for the Space Shuttle pop up, with the donut continually speeding away.

200,000 feet and still climbing.

“Is he still on that thing?!” Betty asks me, encouraging me to glance over at her.

I don’t think I can say.

Wordlessly, I look away as the donut just keeps going and going—

“Ooh!” Abe says excitedly.

Hold on. That looked like… The Bifrost. It…honestly looked like when that ship went into slippspace or whatever it did, it flashed the same color light that the Bifrost is when Thor uses it. Interesting.

Well, at least I’ve picked up a couple of things from this, like how Dr. Strange was going to—

“Wait, no, hang on. There’s more!” Flash yells at Tiny as he pauses it, clearly thinking that it’s over.

Because it was over. Well, from the Earth perspective. It was definitely not over.

“Play it.” Abe says.

Michelle jumps in and says “I don’t think so, and besides—”

“It’s summer!” Betty cuts her off. “Live a little!”

“That’s it.” I say aloud, silencing everyone else. “I don’t understand…”

Flash looks back at me. “Don’t understand what Parker?”

How is there more?

“—oh god, hands to yourself you two! PDA! Jeez Parker!” Betty yells, then slaps at my left hand that’s on Michelle’s leg—

No, that’s her thigh, oh—

I take my hand off her as Michelle leaps away from me. “Okay, my bad, Sorry, she just about fell
and—” I apologize to Betty, showing her my hands before I’m cut off by screams.

“OH GOD OH GOD!!!”

“What’s happening!?!?” Somebody in the foreground yells as people are running everywhere just before the earth shakes violently. Then a roar rings out, and I feel the air come right out of my lungs.

That’s the Hulk.

I know what this is.

“Holy shit!!” Flash yells out.

Oh god.

Right on cue, the camera runs blindly away, right to where Danvers is literally glowing and Thor is standing over Thanos, with the axe right in his chest.

“What the hell is this?!” Cindy asks everyone.

“It’s—” I start before I’m cut off by more screams as Thor yanks out Stormbreaker, twirls the axe to the blunt, flat end and tees off on the defenseless Mad Titan, causing a deafening crack to ring out as all around them, people are running and screaming for their lives just before—

“BOOM!”

“BOOM!”

“BOOM BOOM BOOM!!”

Bodies.

Didn’t know where from at the time. I still don’t know. Maybe from an airplane, or from a helicopter that got snapped.

That’s probably the last place I would have wanted to be. Or driving down the highway at 70 MPH before getting snapped.

“—see what you’ve done?!” Thor rages at Thanos, electricity crackling and eyes glowing just before Danvers rears back and—

“Ouch!!” Flash groans, yet sounds ecstatic as I stand up and start towards the kitchen.

Any second now.

“—everywhere!!!” I hear Thor yells as my back is to the TV. “And you—” Behind me, everyone makes a cringeful noise just before Hulk roars again.

“Oh my god look!!!” Somebody yells and I turn back to see the camera change and pitch towards the sky. Ned turns back to me, color fading from his face, and I nod, then motion for him to turn back around as I fall at terminal velocity. “Is that Iron Man?”

Not quite.

“Why isn’t he—?” We both collide with the first building at top speed, and Mr. Stark goes
careening off into the distance before I’m sent another direction as more screams start ringing out. The camera turns around in time to see a parked car completely cave in and for a—

Tiny claps his hands over his mouth as Jason bends over, looking like he’s about to hurl before the camera violently turns at the sound of me hitting the second building as people keep on screaming.

*It never seemed to stop.*

“Cap!!”

Behind the camera, somebody lets out an inhuman scream as it pitches again to the sight of his shield, busted into two pieces as Widow and Scarlet Witch dive onto Cap to block him from everyone’s view.

Somewhere, Hulk lets out another roar of fury.

*How is this online? This is going to get multiple people fired. I never root for that, but….*

The screaming continues as in front of me, the room is completely silent, transfixed at the horror show in front of them.

*Yeah, You all thought it was all some big game or joke. No. It was a nightmare. We dropped right into Manhattan. Just ‘POOF!’ We’re back!*

Sirens start ringing out in the background as finally, somebody with the NYPD has gotten a clue before I hear the Hulk let out a roar, then lands so heavily the concrete splinters, sending debris flying everywhere.

*And there’s Mr. Stark.*

“This is horrible.” Abe says, voice very quiet.

“It’s a nightmare.” Betty says, before I see that she’s watching thru her fingers, practically in Ned’s lap. I barely even hear the sound of myself webbing in, skidding to a halt before Flash and a few others make audible noises, and I crumple, first grabbing onto a random car, then to my knees before finally I crawl to Mr. Stark.

*And the picture.*

The camera shifts after a moment of lingering on me, to a different view of the whole scene, with Gamora finally turning around to see Thanos, mortally wounded as behind her, Quill has his hands on her while looking around cluelessly like he’s trying to identify what planet he’s even on. Danvers wordlessly rears back on one foot, then punches Stormbreaker, causing Thanos to make a terrible wheezing cough of a sound before he coughs up blood.

The camera sees his mouth move, but between the oncoming sirens, screams and complete chaos all around, it’s completely lost. “Move move move!!!” Somebody yells before a police officer runs into view, right into Danvers, who turns, eyes still glowing. The officer however, doesn’t see it, instead slipping and falling onto his back at the sight of Thanos with the axe.

The sirens start outweighing all the other noises, and more officers come running before I see Romanoff start talking to one of them as off in the background, I see Dr. Strange pop up out of nowhere.

*I didn’t even know he was there.*
The camera shifts back to show a mob of officers running, along with a few men in army fatigues carrying assault rifles toward the scene. “Okay, stop that—” An officer says to the cameraman, out of sight before the camera is shaken violently.

“Hey man! You can’t do that! I have a right to—”

The officer snaps “I don’t give a damn what your rights are right now! MOVE!!!!”

“But—”

“MOVE!!”

Finally, Abe pauses the video, causing the title to pop up on the TV.

“Second Battle of New York Full + Full Re-Decimation”

*Re-Decimation? Terrible name.*

Abe silently exits the full screen view, and the name of the channel pops up in foreign characters.

“Hang on.” I say, then quickly step towards the TV. Everyone jumps at the sound of my voice, then turn to me. I ignore them all and look at the channel name.

*Fournisseurs de véritéCOT.*

*Children of Thanos. Dammit. Again.*

“What?” Flash asks, me, and I turn back to see everyone looking at me.

I point to the channel name. “I can’t read French, but I’m willing to bet I know what ‘COT’ means.”

“What do you think it means?” Ned asks.

“Children of Thanos.” The room is silent for a moment, and I reflexively look back to Michelle, who looks paler than usual, and very concerned.

“Those maniacs that are posting online?” Jason asks me.

I nod and turn back around, then Tiny says “They’re killing people now. Fifteen just the other day. I forget where.”

“China right?” Flash interjects.

“You don’t think—” Michelle starts before I cut her off.

“No, I can say that.” I laugh, which causes a few people to laugh, breaking the tension in the room a little before I see that everyone is looking at me. “I…My boss told me that they’re sadists. Looking to cause chaos and dressing it up in reason, making it look acceptable.”

“Killing people is not acceptable!” Cindy protests.

“I didn’t say it was right.” I point out.

“So they’re not aliens.” Cindy asks.

I shake my head. “There’s no evidence that I’ve heard, or seen that they are. Just a bunch of
lunatics with a goal.”

“What goal?” Jason asks me derisively. “They sound completely nuts.”

Flash counters him, “Even crazies have a goal in mind. Probably like that Thanos guy. What was it, half of the world’s population gone? Poof?”

“What?” I nod, and everyone looks to me again.

“I thought that was a guess.”

I shake my head at Abe. “No. That’s the math. Not just here either.”

“That’s why all those aliens came down for Cap and Stark’s funerals.” Flash says.

_He gets it._

“I would guess they don’t like being called aliens.” I joke, getting everyone to laugh.

“Alright.” Michelle finally says, then standing up. “Avengers play time is over. C’mon.”

“No.” Flash says loudly. “Your boyfriend was about to—”

“He’s not my boyfriend!”

“I’m not, no.” I shake my head at Flash before I see Betty smirk.

_Not funny._

Flash laughs. “You can say that all you want. Can’t make me believe it.”

“Go close your dick in a door Flash. Everybody else, split off into teams.” Michelle orders everyone before Ned, Jason, Cindy and I all laugh at Flash, who goes slightly red, then sits back down as everyone starts splitting off into teams.
"Arms Length"

“Thanks again Cindy.” I smile at her by the front door.

She returns the smile. “You’re welcome Peter. You’ll be here next week?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

“It’s Peter’s turn in two weeks.” Betty reminds Cindy before she and Ned slip past me at the door with a casual wave, which Cindy returns.

“Looking forward to that.” She smiles at me.

*I’m the one whose place they didn’t get to see last year. Well, that and Jason and Abe’s. But Abe’s next week.*

Behind her, Michelle heaves her bag over her shoulder. “Okay. All yours again.” She smiles at Cindy.

“Finally.” She jokes, and I can’t help but laugh as Michelle smirks. “Next week at Abe’s?”

Michelle nods. “Yup. Thanks Cindy.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiles while also pushing us out the door, using the door as her leverage. “Bye!”

“Bye.” I smile before she shuts the door on us. Instinctively, I turn to Michelle.

“Where to next for you?”

“Back to work.” She frowns, then gestures at her outfit.

*White collared shirt, black pants, economical shoes.*

I frown. “I’m sorry.”

Michelle laughs. “It’s okay I guess. Do you have a minute?”

“Uhh, sure.”

*I’m supposed to go back to the lab, but I bet that can wait a little bit.*

“Okay. You mind walking for a second before I call for somebody?” She asks me.

“Sure.” I nod, then pull my phone out and hold the lock button to turn my phone back on.

“You turned your phone off?”

I turn back to see Michelle looking lost. “Long story.”

“How’s it a long story?” Michelle asks before I hit the button for the elevator.

“Some people at work are mad at me. I…”

*How do I put this in a way that she can hear it?*
“I don’t think we should do something, and they’re telling me no. And I’m going to be in trouble for it.”


“Hill.” I shrug.

“Hill’s mad at you?”

I nod. “I can’t say why. But it’s kind of my fault. And the thing is, I don’t think I’m wrong.”

“Kind of like how—” She starts, then the elevator door pops open for us. We both walk inside, then she hits the button for the lobby. “Kind of like how you’ve never said anything about how bad it was when everyone came back?”

“That isn’t supposed to be well known.” I inform her. “I don’t know how it got out.”

“But you knew.”

I turn and frown at her. “It’s my job to know.”

“Not if it’s got you like this. You can lie and say whatever you want. Last time I saw you, you were loose and energetic and happy and laughing. You barely smiled that whole time!” Michelle points to the elevator door emphatically before crossing her arms.

“It’s been a long week.”

“It’s been four days!!!” Michelle raises her voice.

“Well then, it’s been a long four days.” I counter.

Michelle closes her eyes just before the doors pop open. “How do you think it’s out?”

“I don’t know why.”

She silently leads the way out the door and onto the sidewalk. “I’m changing my mind. Let’s call an Uber now, and I’ll have them drop us early.”

“Sure.” I shrug. “Whatever you want to do.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

*Yeah I did.*

I turn back to her in time for her to point out “I asked how it got out, not why.”

*Oh.*

“That might be easy.” I laugh. “The French YouTube censors might have just had it get by them.”

Michelle lets out a quiet, sarcastic laugh. “Yeah, easy to miss with that title.”

“Or maybe it’s intentional.” I also theorize.

*Like the Russians and their “ignorance” of Thor’s no-fly zone.*

“If you’re right about that ‘COT’ thing.” She says while tapping away at her phone. “And I bet
you are, then maybe it’s worse.”

“Maybe it’s a hack.”

“Maybe.” She shrugs, then puts her phone away. “You don’t think it is.”

I glance over at her to see her already smirking at me. “Not funny.”

“It’s not funny. It’s written all over your face.”

“I’ve got a good poker face.”

Michelle laughs. “Yeah? Then why can everybody always read it?”

“Maybe I’m throwing you off the scent.”

“Scent of what?” She asks, then glances over at me as I pull out my phone.

0 New Messages.

That’s even more obvious than leaving 50 new messages.

The drink behind my backpack slides away, replaced by a refill, which causes me to glance up.

Michelle.

“Thanks.” I smile.

She returns it just before a coworker of hers calls out “Bye!!”

“Bye! Have a good night!!” She turns to the door, then back to me.

“Do I need to go?” I ask her, then glance at the clock by the register.

It’s almost 9. I ended up just kind of hanging out here. Initially It was because I had a light lunch and was hungry, but then, well…

May’s texted me a few times but I said that Ned and I decided to catch a movie after Decathlon.

“No.” She tells me before reaching over and grabbing a broom that’s leaning against the wall opposite me. “I’ve just got to clean up, sweep and all that junk.”

“You sure?” I ask, then spot her boss, a clean cut guy with black hair behind her.

“Hey Jones!”

Michelle turns around. “Yes sir?”

“Let me know when you’re done. Take your time, do it right, all that.”

“I will.” Michelle nods in understanding, before her boss smiles and turns to walk back to his office.

They definitely like her. She’s good at the job, running the cash register, waiting tables, all of that. She is making it look like it’s not her first few weeks on the job.
“I’ve gotta work. Grab me if you need me.” MJ smiles at me, then starts back up front. I nod, then let Michelle get back to what she’s doing before and glancing at my phone before swiping over to my messages and type out a message to Ned.

“Hey man. I have an idea.”

Immediately his response pops up.

“What’s the idea?”

“I’m going to send you the last three COT attacks. And you see if there are any similarities, things they seem to like to do, etc.? Sound like a plan?”

My eyes glance back to MJ as she sweeps by the front door, a decent amount of dust and debris accumulating before my phone lightly vibrates.

“Yeah, sure. Isn’t that Hill’s job though?”

Focus.

“Yeah.” I type out, then bite my lip and glance to the TV playing on mute by the register. The broadcaster continues on, before the feed cuts to footage of T’Challa speaking behind a podium.

I forgot why Hill isn’t responding. Or why nobody else is texting me today. T’Challa was at the UN today. He said exactly what everybody in the press thought he would say: Wakanda is returning to its policy of isolation. Any attempts to assimilate them to the rest of the world will be met with hostile force and no mercy. The outreach centers will be sold, with the profits going to organizations that need them in the rest of the world like the WHO, The Gates Family Foundation and outfits like Johns Hopkins Medical Hospital and M.D Anderson Cancer Center.

I go back and erase what I’ve just typed then start again.

“I think Hill’s been focusing too much on me. I think they all are.”

She said that I need to focus. And I know that I need to make an impact in the greatest way that nobody else can. And that’s being Spider-Man. I think I’ve already kind of figured this out but...I don’t know. I got distracted, caught up in everything else. I’m still the friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, but I haven’t been doing that. And...I don’t know.

Nothing bad has happened yet. But the next thing that does, if I miss it, that’s on me. Everyone’s on my side right now, but that’ll change eventually. Hill’s already mad at me.

So I’m going to go back to what I was doing: Using Ned as my guy in the chair and letting Hill and everyone upstate focus on bigger things. I have to stay close to the ground, helping the little guy.

I wish I’d had this clarity earlier, but I thought of something that Dr. Edwards said, before I returned to school.

“Healing and progress aren’t linear. You’ll have ups and downs. What matters is how you manage them.”

I haven’t been managing them right. I keep on opening my mouth when everyone else is more
informed than me. Leading to me picking bad fights. And I know better than that. That was one of the first lessons I learned as Spider-Man.

Don’t fight uphill. Use what I have to my advantage. Get more information, and use it. Tactics. Strategy. Hill said it herself, I’ve got all this information, I need to use it to my advantage.

Grabbing my drink, I sip it, then set it back down then see that Ned’s already responded.

“I thought that was the point though. Prevent a lack of communication so that we can’t get disconnected again.”

“I think we can work in their framework, but our own way.”

The bell by the front door tinkles, as the final customer files out. “Have a good night.” Michelle says to him, then continues finishing her sweeping, broom and dustpan in tow.

“Sounds like a plan to me. And you’re sure that I won’t get in trouble?”

No. But there’s only one way to find out. Besides, Hill isn’t going to notice right now. Not that she’d care anyway, she’s juggling five other things right now.

“Nah, I’m asking you to help me. If anyone will get yelled at, it’s me.”

I hope that reassures him.

In front of me, Michelle starts back towards me, cleaner in one hand, a few old rags in the other. “You don’t have to stay, if your Aunt needs you back at home.” She smiles, sliding the supplies behind her and perching on the table in front of me.

I shake my head then smile back at her. “I’m fine. I told May I’d be home late. Besides, I want to make sure you’ll get home okay.”

“I’ll be fine. I don’t need you to babysit me.” She immediately frowns.

“I’m not babysitting. Just want you to be safe.” I counter.

Michelle turns her back to me while shaking her head, hair falling out of its ponytail. “I can protect myself you know.”

“I know.” I smile at her back. “I’m here though, so I figured that I could have your back so you wouldn’t have to worry.”

“I’m not worried. I’m fine. I can take care of myself.”

I already said that you could.

“I know.” I smile, only for her to turn back to me, looking frustrated.

Okay, what’d I do? Did I overstay my welcome? Am I being too protective? Invading her space? I know she likes her space.

“But if you really don’t want me to, I won’t.” I concede, then nonchalantly pull my backpack off the table, into the seat beside me. Michelle freezes for a brief moment, then nods, and continues wiping down the tables.

I think I need to talk to Ned. Not just by text.
“Hey. If you can, find a way to slip away to your room or something. I’m about to go home, and I’ll call you. That cool?”

I text Ned, then double check my phone.

Plenty of battery…I need to handle my check.

“Yeah.”

I throw my backpack over my shoulder, reading Ned’s succinct reply and slip past MJ as she’s bent over a table two rows over, scrubbing away. “Headed home man?” I hear in front of me, then turn and see that her boss is near the register.

I smile at him and shrug. “Yeah. Mom wants me home.”

“Better get home then.” He smiles while also grabbing my ticket from the stand beside the register and starts punching in my totals. “Total is 24.97. Cash, card?”

“Card.” I say, then pull out my wallet and card, then hand it over for him to run it.

“Nice card.” He comments, then hands it back.

I laugh, then smile to throw him off. “My parents used their rewards to get me that. I’m not that important.”

“Not many kids I see with a black card though.” He counters.

“True. Thanks for letting me stay.” I smile again. “I know she likes people in and out of tables.”

Every place does. More money the more people they get in and out.

The register starts printing up my receipt, and he extends it to me. “Yeah, but I can tell she likes you.”

“She’s good.” I tell him. “I know she’s new and learning, but she is. She’ll be good.”

He smiles and laughs. “Oh I know. She’s already better than some of the help I’ve had since I’ve opened.”

Doesn’t surprise me.

“Have a good night.” I tell him then slip the receipt into my pocket before feeling my phone vibrate.

“You too. What’s your name?”

“Peter.” I say, then glance up and extend my hand to him over the counter.

He shakes my hand and nods. “Nice to meet you kid. See you later.” I nod, then pull out my phone as I walk to the door, then glance back to where Michelle is just as I grab the door, only for her to already be looking at me before she waves goodbye.

“Bye.” I say to myself quietly as I return the wave, then slip into the flow of traffic down the street, Alley. Alley. I need a good…
This’ll do.

Quickly, I leap into a four way, then start changing as fast as I can before throwing my mask on, slapping the logo on my chest and feeling the suit mold itself to me reassuringly.

“Hello Peter.” Karen immediately greets me. “This is rather late for you to be suiting up. Is there an issue?”

“No. No issue. Call Ned.” I ask her, then web up to the nearest rooftop.

“Calling Ned Leeds.”

I perch myself on the nearest water tower as I briefly hear the phone ring twice, then the call connects. “Hello?”

“It’s me.”

“Hey. You good?”

“Yeah, just left MJ’s job.”

“You found it? Betty said that she’s being super stingy about where it is. I don’t even think that she knows.”

Pulling myself to a ledge before leaping off, I counter “After Decathlon she walked with me outside, then basically told me to follow her. I don’t know.”

“Aww.”

“Don’t ‘aww’ me. It’s not that serious. You and Betty are serious. How is that, by the way?”

“Fine. I guess. I can’t tell if her parents liked me or not. I’m not good at fine dining and those types of manners.”

“You met her parents and went fine dining?” I ask as I continue swinging.

_Not a bad night._

“Yeah, I wasn’t even dressed right for it. I just wore a nice shirt and jeans.”

“Did they tell you to dress nice?”

“No.” He replies.

“Then I bet you were fine.” I reassure him.

Ned waits a moment, then asks “Why are you leaving now? It’s dark, wouldn’t you want to take her home?”

“She didn’t want that.”

_That reminds me._

“Karen, map out the most likely route for MJ to take home. I think she takes the subway. I don’t know which line.”

Karen replies “Activating database.”
I bet she’ll reverse engineer it.

“Didn’t want that?” Ned asks.

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “That was my plan, but she really pushed back on that. So I backed off.”

Karen interjects “Optimal route home identified. Would you like me to monitor her progress?”

“Yeah Karen, thank you.”

She’s getting way better at anticipating my thoughts. Installing her at home was a stroke of genius.

“That’s weird. You guys were basically attached at the hip today.”

“No we weren’t.” I disagree with Ned. “We sat apart the whole time we were practicing.”

“Yeah, but she kept on working around you. You’d make a point, and she’d pivot around it.”

“Betty told you this.”

He never notices this stuff.

“Maybe.” He says, voice dropping down anxiously.

“She didn’t even ask me questions most of the time.”

“But when you did speak up, she changed the conversation to fit your point.” Ned debates me.

“Okay Betty.” I roll my eyes. “Karen, where’s she at?”

“Still at work.”

Ned laughs “You’ll laugh, she accidentally called me Peter the other day. I think she and Michelle are always talking about you.”

“Nah.”


“Why?” I argue. “I think you’re wrong, but make your point.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Ned!” I say before rounding 6th Avenue.

This is going to be an easy ride home by the looks of it. Everything’s lit up, and none of the scanners are throwing up anything crazy.

“Okay, fine.” He sighs. “Betty’s said a few times how Michelle is always alone. And how cool that it is that she’s at least talking to you. And she and Betty are best friends so—”

At least as best of friends as you can be with Michelle. She likes to—

“Wait, what do you mean that she’s always alone?”
“Apparently her parents schedules don’t line up with normal schedules at all.” Ned tells me before Karen silently throws up a security camera shot. “

*She’s leaving.*

“Keep me posted.” I tell Karen then flip back to Ned. “Why?”

“I dunno.” I can almost hear Ned’s shrug.

“I guess somebody has to work those shifts though.” I think aloud. “Sucks that it leaves her alone. Is she over at Betty’s a lot?”

_Maybe that’s why she told me to stay in touch. Maybe she’s lonely._

“No, betty’s over there a lot though.” Ned reveals.

I shrug, then catapult over a billboard. “Same thing.”

“Maybe. Hey, have you sent those files yet? I haven’t gotten anything.”

_Oh crap._

“I think I forgot. My bad. Karen!”

“Yes? Michelle’s at the 86 Street Station.”

“Great. Can you pick out the last five Children of Thanos Incident Reports and send them to Ned?”

Immediately she replies “Ned doesn’t have the required clearance to—”

“I’m clearing him. Override, Parker, Peter Benjamin.”

“Override accepted.” Karen answers.

“Wow.” I hear Ned say in the background.

Karen then asks “Would you like me to include the active incident reports?”

“Yes. We’re trying to find a pattern between them.”

“I believe that Maria Hill, among others is working that angle.”

“More eyes on it the better.” I tell Karen. “Plus, real life training.”

Ned jumps in. “Thank you Karen.”

“You’re welcome Ned.”

I laugh at the exchange, then whip around Lexington in time to see the Queensboro Bridge appear in front of me.

_I think I’ll take a bus to get across. That’ll be a lot easier than swinging across the underside of the bridge._

“Got them all.” Ned reports. “These…are dense. It’s going to take me a minute to get thru them.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.” I nod. “Take your time. Maybe look for key words.”
Ned’s line goes silent before he says “Maybe I can make an algorithm to pick out any parallels…”

*Like anticipate it?*

I stay silent and let Ned think as I steadily start dropping down towards street level, then locate a bus that clearly is intending to cross. “Perfect.” I say to myself.

“Incoming call from Maria Hill.” Karen says suddenly.

**NOPE!**

“Decline call.”


“Call declined.” Says Karen.

I shake my head as I drop down onto the bus. “She’s busy with T’Challa and everybody else. She’s busy all day today.”

*She doesn’t need to worry about me. I’m just going home and talking to Ned.*

“I’m noticing a deviation from my expected route from Michelle.”

*What?*

“How so?” I ask her.

“She’s on a westbound route, but not the closest one to her home.”

“That’s weird. Ned?”

“I dunno. Give me a second, I’m working on something.”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “I’ll let you go, work in peace. Text me if you get something or need help. Karen?”

“I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks Karen.”

“Okay.” Ned replies. “Don’t be surprised if I do need help. This is…wow.”

*Sink or swim. I know he’ll swim.*

I laugh then glance around at the traffic all around us as we speed down the bridge. “It’s not so much to take it after a while.”

“If you say—oh crap. That’s my Mom.”

“Bye.” I say, then motion for Karen to end the call, which she does.

*I’m making the right call. I’m sure of it. He immediately tackled it instead of waverer or showing his nerves.*

“How far off course is she?” I ask Karen.
Getting closer to my exit.

“Depends on what unit of measurement—.”

“No Karen.” I cut her off. “How far off route in comparison is she? Is she headed toward any landmarks?”

Where could she be going?

Karen answers “No, the area she’s heading to is primarily residential or commercial. The primary employer in that area is a hospital—”

That’s it.

“That’s it.” I cut Karen off again. “Do we know where Michelle’s mom works?”

“I believe at a hospital.”

I laugh. “What hospital?”

“St. Edwards General Hospital.”

“Let me guess—”

“Her current route does indeed include a stop less than a mile from St. Edwards General Hospital. Would you like me to adjust her projected route?”

“Yes. What’s she looking like right now?” I ask, then rise up out of my crouch.

Time to go.

I leap off the bus, then let myself fall for two seconds, then latch onto an apartment building overlooking the river. Once I’ve leveled out, Karen throws up a live feed of the subway thru a security camera, with Michelle sitting by herself on the left hand side, tapping away on her phone.

I think she has headphones in too.

“Keep that up Karen. And text May that I’m almost home.”
"The gamma readings are definitely consistent with Selvig's reports on the Tesseract. But it's gonna take weeks to process."

Mr. Stark shakes his head dismissively. "If we bypass their mainframe and direct a reroute to the Homer cluster, we can clock this around six hundred teraflops."

"All I packed was a tooth brush."

Mr. Stark smiles before walking over to Banner. "You know, you should come by Stark Tower sometime. Top ten floors, all R&D. You'd love it, it's candy land."

"Thanks, but the last time I was in New York I kind of broke...Harlem."

Well, I promise a stress free environment. No tension. No surprises." Mr. Stark says before—

"OW!" Dr. Banner jumps away from Mr. Stark.

"Nothing?"

"Are you nuts?" I hear behind the camera shot, just before it shifts to see Cap walking, not looking pleased.

*Great.*

"You really have got a lid on it, haven't you? What's your secret? Mellow jazz? Bongo drums? Huge bag of weed?"

I shake my head and try not to laugh while sipping my drink before the footage continues. "Is everything a joke to you?"

"Funny things are."

Cap doesn't look amused before answering "Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn't funny. No offense, Doctor."

"No, it's alright." Dr. Banner answers. "I wouldn't have come aboard if I couldn't handle pointy... things."

"You're tiptoeing, big man. You need to strut."

"And you need to focus on the problem Mr. Stark." Cap snaps at him.

*The problem?*

"You think I'm not? Why did Fury call us, why now? Why not before? What isn't he telling us? I can't do the equation unless I have all the variables." Mr. Stark counters.

"You think Fury’s hiding something?"
“He's a spy. Captain, he's the spy.” Mr. Stark says, scooping up a silver package and tossing something dismissively into his mouth. “His secrets have secrets. It's bugging him too, isn't it?”

Mr. Stark turns back to Dr. Banner, who starts stammering. “Uh...I just wanna finish my work here and...”

*He doesn’t like the way this is going.*

“Doctor.” Cap cuts to the chase.

Dr. Banner takes his glasses off, then closes them, taking a moment before saying. “‘A warm light for all mankind,’ Loki's jab at Fury about the cube.”

*The Tesseract?*

“I think that was meant for you.” Banner points to Mr. Stark. “Even if Barton didn't post that, it was still all over the news.”

“The Stark Tower? That big ugly...building in New York?” Cap hesitates, then asks Banner.

*Cap and Mr. Stark didn’t get along, even then.*

Huh.

“It's powered by an Arc Reactor, self-sustaining energy source. That building will run itself for what, a year?”

Mr. Stark nods, still chewing his snack. “That’s just the prototype.” He frowns, taking a moment to consider something then turn back to Cap. “I’m kind of the only name in clean energy right now. That’s what he’s getting at.”

*Hang on. Then why—*

“So, why didn't SHIELD bring him in on the Tesseract project?” Dr. Banner asks. “I mean, what are they doing in the energy business in the first place?”

*To corner a market for themselves, profit off it. And to prevent their enemies from doing just that. Two birds, one stone.*

“I should probably look into that once my decryption program finishes breaking into all of SHIELD's secure files.”

“I'm sorry, did you say...?” Cap starts before Mr. Stark cuts him off.

“Jarvis has been running it since I hit the bridge. In a few hours we'll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide. Blueberry?” Mr. Stark offers Cap some of his snack.

*Blueberries.*

“C’mon man…” I mutter, then spin around, only to see Dr. Banner leaning on the railway by my lab door.

*OH.*

“Yet you're confused about why they didn't want you around?”
In front of me, Bruce gestures for me to turn back around as I hear “An intelligence organization that fears intelligence? Historically, not great.”

“I think Loki’s trying to wind us up. This is a man who means to start a war, and if don’t stay focused, he’ll succeed. We have orders, we should follow them.”

*By the book. Straight of out the manual. He and Hill probably got along great.*

“Following’s not really my style.”

“Pause.” Bruce says quietly behind me, causing me to turn back in time for him to straighten up off the railing. “That’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“It sounds bad.” I counter.

He nods, then slips past me and sets a bag over by my desk. “You think Fury’s dirty?”

I...

“The proof’s right there.” I point at the screen. “And Hill told me that she thought Fury started the whole Loki thing by poking around with the Tesseract.”

“Hill told you that?” I nod, and Bruce bites his lip then waits for me to continue.

“Hydra was right under his nose! How do we know—?”

“Fury’s not Hydra.” Bruce laughs. “But sometimes you have to get your hands dirty in order to get stuff done.”

“But is that right?” I mean…” I stop myself, then glance at the still of Cap and Mr. Stark with Bruce in the background.

“Right is all about perspective.” Bruce points out. “Point of view.”

“Is there more to this?”

He nods. “It’s resolved later. Fury was trying to protect us, really. Karen?”

“Yes. Dr. Banner?”

“Cue up Natasha’s talk with Loki, followed by the conversation just before Barton’s attack for Peter.”

“Barton’s—”

Bruce smirks at me as Karen says “Of course, Doctor.”

“Thank you.” He smiles, then smiles at me. “Lunch? I’m sure you’re hungry.”

“I brought food.” I counter.

“But one of the many benefits of living and working down here in the city is all the incredible food.” He dismisses me, then clasps my shoulder. “‘C’mon.”

*Fine…*

I follow Dr. Banner obediently as he walks to the elevator, which begins descending before he
speaks again. “I heard about this nice place on the Upper East Side. Figured it was worth a shot.”

“Fine with me.” I smile at him, then check my phone.

No new messages.

“Long week?” I shrug silently while slipping my phone back into my pocket.

I know that he knows how things have been with Hill.

“Nobody’s mad at you, you know.”

“They have a right to be.”

“Is that why you’ve worked so hard all week?” He asks as the elevator reaches the lobby.

“No.” I frown at him before he leads the way towards the front door. “Just doing my job.”

“Digging into five separate projects here, and doing even more at home?” He responds while grabbing the door and stepping aside for me.

“I didn’t feel like doing my side job this week.”

He’ll understand that.

He nods before gesturing to a car that’s waiting for us, and I grab the rear door and slip inside.

That’s not Happy.

“Hi!” Dr. Banner smiles at the driver, before the two of them get into a conversation and we pull away from the curb. I quickly type out a text to Michelle as Dr. Banner is relaying an address to our driver.

“My plans changed. Being abducted to lunch. I’ll text you when I head that way.”

Feeling his eyes creeping over, I tuck my phone away and turn back to Bruce and smile. “What was the name of this place?”

“Don’t know, just have the address from this list. Like I said, it’s supposed to be one of the hottest lunch spots in the city.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Hopefully.” He laughs before I feel my phone buzz.

I’ll check that later.

I thought I might swing by her work for a late lunch. I know she went in early today to help prep for the Thursday rush and is probably sick of the place already. She likes it enough, the people just wear on her. Not a surprise really, she’s not big on people.

I silently glance up and see that we’re still in traffic, with our driver fiddling with his aux cord, and Bruce is tapping away on his phone with a pair of reading glasses on.

Oh come on. You’re not that old.

Screw it, I’ll check when Michelle said now.
“Cool. Madhouse here. GTG.”

No surprise. At least she’s getting paid extra for coming in early I suppose.

“Everything good over there?” Bruce asks me, and I glance over to see him peering over the frame of his glasses at me.

“Yeah.” I nod, and he makes a noncommittal noise, then returns to looking at his phone with a slight smirk on his face.

_I know he and Romanoff are sort of a thing, but they’re acting more and more like each other every time I see them. Thinking they know everything._

We talked a little bit last night. She got off late and went right home then decided to text me right away.

“What’s up?” – Michelle

“Working.” I look at my replies. “Home from work?”

“Yeah. Drawing the stress away.”

Below is a picture of a half-finished drawing of a scene she clearly saw earlier in the day of a family of five, all five looking at their phones instead of talking to each other.

“I’m no art expert but I feel like you’re trying to say something there.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t take an art major to tell that the human element is lost. Sucks the magic out of life.”

_I hate to admit it, but she’s right. My best memories at the Compound are Poker nights when everybody is together, talking, laughing. That might be part of the point, the other is to build teamwork and camaraderie. I can’t read Romanoff obviously, or Rhodey or even Sharon. But I can kid of tell when Hill has a decent hand by how she holds her shoulders._

Her face is no good there. She’s a blank slate.

Our car comes to a sudden halt, jolting me back to reality before I look back and see Bruce strike his conversation back up with our driver.

_Better get out._

Without speaking, I smile at our driver, then open up my door as they haggle out the cost of the ride, before Dr. Banner emerges with a smile on his face. “Thanks Pete.”

“You’re welcome. Don’t you need a mask or something?”

_We are in the dead center of the city, and he’s just here._

“Way ahead of ya pal.” He smiles, then pulls on a…

“Is that a fedora?”

He gives me a smirk adjusting it on his head. “You like it?”

_Not really, you look like an old golfer._
I shrug. “Where is this place?”

“Oh c’mon. You don’t like it?”

“I was more thinking a mask.”

Bruce shakes his head, then gestures forward. “Those things are addictive. A hat and sunglasses are the next best thing. People can tell so much by your haircut. Hide that, and most folks are like ‘I think I know that guy…””

Immediately, a guy walking in the opposite direction gives him an awkward look as he passes, before I laugh. “You talked to Hill yet?”

_Ouch._

“I’m working. Everybody knows where I am.” I counter as we start down the unknown street. _Looks vaguely familiar, but everything’s on a grid. So places completely across town can look alike. Gets you turned around easily._

“But you’re not exactly talking.”

I roll my eyes and try not to audibly sigh before I answer “Last time I checked she yelled at me. I’m trying to process everything over here, and she yelled at me. Why am I the one that has to reach out to her?”

“You don’t.” He confesses. “But the raw footage leaked out online, and she texted you right before T’Challa went to speak.”

“She shouldn’t have done that. I can handle it. I was there.”

_You were too._

“Because she cares. That’s all that was. You know she was military all of her life right?” I nod, and Bruce continues. “It’s literally in her blood. Her Dad was a career military man. She was on the same path before Fury found her.”

_I thought Coulson found her…?_”

“Anyway, point is that I don’t think she meant to be so harsh. There was a lot going on, and she thought she had to be firm with you. Tough love sort of thing.”

“I can deal with tough love.” I tell him.

_I can. I have, multiple times in the past. This was different._

“Well, maybe cut her a little slack.” He volunteers as we stop at a light. “Her week was a nightmare. She got called up in that disaster earlier—”

_Yeah, that fiasco._

“—having to answer for that, plus T’Challa coming into town, plus that video, plus you asking some very pointed questions—”

“Which seem even more valid now.” I cut him off. “Do you trust him?”
“The Director?” he asks, before we start walking and I nod in affirmation.

“I trust his instincts. They’ve turned out to be right more often than not. And when he’s wrong, it comes from a good place.”

*I don’t think I trust him to not sell off Mr. Stark’s tech like it’s a high tech garage sale.*

“You don’t buy it.”

I concede the point with a shrug. “He started all this. You saw what I was watching. I know there’s things that he knows that he’s not telling me.”

*Hill too, but I know Hill will tell me eventually. Even though her whole “we have to take the world as it is’ thing didn’t exactly reassure me.*

“There’s a lot you don’t know. On purpose. You’re only being given like thirty percent of the information.”

**WAIT WHAT?!**

“What?” I stop dead and turn to him as he takes two steps past me, then stops, turns back and frowns.

“C’mon, we’re going to be in the middle of the lunch rush. I can explain over lunch.” He says, then reaches forward and starts pushing me forward once more.

“Thirty percent.”

“The basics.” He immediately responds.

“Then why am I even looking at it?”

Bruce gives me a concerned look before answering “So that you have a foundation. You know the basics of the ‘how’. But the ‘why’ and the ‘when’ and the ‘where’, that’s important too. And Fury doesn’t want to overwhelm you. He thinks you know too much as it is.”

“Too much as it is?” I repeat.

“Yeah.” He nods. “Hill’s been trying to get you more, so that you can understand. She’s been fighting for you this whole time.”

*Man…*

I turn back to Bruce in time for him to smile. “She likes you man. That’s why she’s tough on you. She believes in you, why she and May have hit it off so well. That was her main concern when she first talked to us at the compound: ‘Why should you even bother with this until you’ve finished school?’”

“And?”

“I don’t remember exactly what Hill said. But it was something to the effect of “Even if you save one person, you never know if that person has a husband or a wife or a family. And that’s worth it, worth all of this.” Bruce gestures around us. “Right?”

“Yeah.” I nod.
“She’s totally right. And that hit a chord with May. I know it did.”

“She’s totally right. And that hit a chord with May. I know it did.”

“Now c’mon. We’re here. Let’s get some food and I can explain more.”

Yeah.

“We’re here?” I ask, then glance—

“Yeah, I think this is the place.” Bruce says, then double checks his phone as I look thru the large pane of glass where all the employees are. As I watch, MJ ducks down below the counter, then reappears with a cup and a smile before she hands the cup over to the customer and—

“Yeah. You like it?”

I turn to him. “You set this up.”

“Set what up?”

He’s playing dumb.

Silently, I point towards the glass, where everyone’s working, getting the customer’s orders ready. “What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“Fine…” I grumble then step forward and grab the door. “After you.”

“No.” he counters, grabbing the door right after me. “What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“A friendly face?” I tell him, just before a businessman barrels past us before I turn to lead us to the back of the line. “Not sure your plan worked.”

It’s packed.

“We’re not in a rush.” I hear Bruce say, voice distant as he checks back towards the counter again.

I squeeze in between a table and the line, then dodge a waitress before I see a well-dressed man slip away from a table. “Peter!”

Oh. It’s Michelle’s boss.

“Hi.” I smile, then take the man’s handshake.

“Good to see you again.” He claps me on the arm. “There’s a table that’s about to open up in the back. I’ll tell Teresa to hold it for you.”

“Thanks.” I smile again, then MJ’s boss vanishes.

“The boss?” Bruce asks, and I nod silently and slip into the back of the line.

I’m surprised he recognized me.

“Who’s here?”

I frown and fiddle with my phone in my pocket. “Same person as always.”

“Michelle? I thought you said she was a barista or a waitress or something.” Bruce says beside me, then starts scanning the people behind the counter. “Ahh.”
Yup. Hair up in a bun, going ninety miles a minute.

As I watch, she gives somebody their card back as well as their cups all in one go, then smiling and moving on to the next customer. “She’s good at this.”

“She’s good at everything.” I tell him. “You really didn’t set this up?”

I know that they know where she works. They have a file on her.

Bruce shakes his head as the line slides forward one person. “No, not that I know. I know Sharon’s been poking around, putting together a dossier on her.”

“Why?”

She hasn’t done anything.

“When you came back from…work a few weeks ago—” He glances around, measuring his words carefully. “She got the drop on Hill apparently. And kept on saying that she wanted in the loop. So I think they’re putting together a report.”

No.

“No. I’ve already…she doesn’t know what she’s doing.” I groan.

“She keeps on asking and pushing and poking.” I see him smile out of the corner of his eye as we move up again. “I’m telling you man…”

Michelle again.

“No.”

“You sure?” He turns and smiles at me.

I nod, and otherwise ignore the subtext. “Anyway, back to the topic at hand?”

“Right.” Bruce’s tone drops in disappointment.

“Thirty percent?”

He nods as we move up another spot. “The plan has been to break it gently until your trip.”

Three more people in front of us.

“Right. And when is that again?”

“The week after your decathlon comes by your place. There’s a plan for that too.”

“Of course there is.” I nod. “How’s this trip looking?”

“Long, but good.” Bruce smiles. “After that, we’ll finally be able to move forward. Right now we’ve got one eye looking ahead and one eye looking back.” He explains. “After this trip, we’ll know what we’re doing, and what we need to do.”

To move forward.

“Sounds like there’s a plan.”
“There is.” He nods. “We’re meeting up with your friends Daisy and Simmons. That’s how we’re getting out there.”

I return the nod with one of my own. “On the Zephyr.”

“Exactly. Fury saw it the other day. Said it was very impressive. We’re killing two birds with one stone too. I don’t know exactly, something about a lost scientist way out there somewhere.”

Hmm.

“Don’t worry though. You won’t have to do anything or worry about it beforehand. Just pack up and be ready to go and we’ll go.”

“You’re coming?” I turn and ask as the line advances.

She’s going to win.

“Everybody is. Most everybody.” He nods, then wavers. “You can guess who doesn’t want to go on a road trip.”

Bucky. Rhodey. Maybe Romanoff. Maybe Sam. I think Scott and Hope would want to go. I don’t know besides that. Thor kind of has to go, same for Carol.

“Do I have to go?”

Bruce suddenly beams and nods. “Yeah. May said you’ve always wanted to be an astronaut. Well, we can’t do that but this is the next best thing.”

A interplanetary road trip.

“Last time I went on a road trip I got sick.” I point out.

It didn’t go well.

“This time you won’t be alone. Well, mostly alone.” He concedes. “I’m coming, if that helps.”

I smile before I see the line move up to the right.

It does, actually. And she’s definitely going to win.

“Like we planned it.” He laughs quietly beside me. “Help me, what should I get?”

“I don’t know.” I reply, then glance up at the massive menu. “What do you like?”

“I can help you over here.” I hear Michelle say before he starts drifting over towards her register.

I slip behind Bruce a step, then smile at her just before she recognizes me. “Peter! Hi.”

“Hi.” I laugh and step beside Bruce, who is still looking at the menu.

“What do you want? What you had last time? And I thought you had other lunch plans.”

“They kind of changed.” I laugh as Michelle is already writing furiously.

She glances back up. “Turkey, Ham and Salami, Extra veggies and mayo, smushed. Right?”

“Right.” I nod. “Thanks.”
“No problem.” She beams back at me, then turns to Dr. Banner. “Hi. What can I get for you?”

“Hi Michelle.” Bruce says absently, still eying the menu.

Michelle shoots me a look before asking “You know me?”

“Name tag.” Bruce glances at her, then points to her name tag, just before I see Michelle’s face flash.

She knows who it is.

“I—” He starts just before MJ gives me a livid look for an instant before smiling at Dr. Banner.

“ Toasted?”

“No thanks.”


“Yes please.” Bruce smiles politely.

I hand over my card out of habit, and MJ takes it, swipes it then pulls her ‘hand back the card with our cups’ trick, then smiles once again. “Receipt.” She hands it to me as I hand one of the cups to Dr. Banner. “See you soon?”

“Yeah.” I nod, then smile just before she shoots me a disbelieving look.

She’s mad I didn’t give her a warning.

I hear Bruce laughing quietly when I catch up to him. “Why’s she mad?”

“No warning.” I admit. “I think she’s nervous to meet you.”

Every time we talk about my work, she brings him up. Granted, he’s kind of all she really knows about. But still.

“I’ve already met her.”

“Nah.” I shake my head as Bruce grabs ice.

“Now where’s this table at?”

“Should be in the back. Brunette girl, blonde highlights.” He nods silently, then starts off that way. I’m definitely in trouble. I’ve never gotten that look before.

Quickly, I fill up my drink up, then glance back to Michelle as she’s helping out another customer, completely ignoring me.

I probably deserve that.

Sliding behind the next person in line, I ease into the alley between the lines and the tables, only for Teresa to pop out. “Hey. Showed your uncle your table.”

“Thanks.” I smile gratefully to her.
Uncle?

“By the way, there’s a big party this weekend. We already invited Michelle, but I don’t think she’s coming. Maybe if you do she’ll go?”

“Sure. I’ll go.”

Why not? It’s not a school related party, maybe that’ll help things. And I’m actually being invited for once.

“Great.” Teresa smiles at me. “I’ll tell her. Gotta go. Nice seeing you!” She smiles jovially at me, then waves and turns back towards the front.

When I arrive at our table, Dr. Banner already has his phone out and is sliding past something on the screen. “You’re popular.”

“No, I’m not.” I disagree with him, sitting with my back to the counter.

So that I can’t get caught looking at her by him. He’ll tell everyone, and then it’ll be another huge mess.

Bruce silently looks past my shoulder for a moment, then smirks. “I think you’re wrong.”

Always thinking they have all the answers.

Chapter End Notes

Endgame Week. So. HYPED.

Thanks for reading.
“And I have to go?”

Bruce nods, then takes an enormous bite of his sandwich, leaving me to my silence as all around us, people continue on with their lunch. “Mandatory.”

“Says who?” I fire back, then take a bite of my sandwich and fix him with a determined look.

“Nobody, but it’s a once in a lifetime sort of thing. Plus it’s putting a bow on everything. Why don’t you want to go?”

Because I only have a limited summer here and going off for two and a half weeks is going to cut it basically to nothing. Add in prep time and getting back into the swing of things once I’m back, and it’s a month.

“I’m working with a limited summer here.”

Bruce nods, then sips his drink. “I understand that. But you won’t regret this. I know Thor is thinking of taking us all on a detour somewhere.”

“Detour?”

“I dunno. He hasn’t said anything.” He shrugs. “And it definitely doesn’t have anything to do with…?”

He’s setting me up.

“No.” I shake my head, then grab my tea. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh I’m not the one you’re disappointing.”

I roll my eyes then slosh my drink around. “Oh I know you think she likes me.”

“Well yeah.” Bruce laughs. “It’s obvious to us. She clearly cares about you, trying to help. Putting in a major effort. She wouldn’t do that unless she had a reason. You said it yourself that she doesn’t do that for everyone. So…?” He gestures to me with an inquisitive look on his face.

Fine. I admit that’s a fair point. But it doesn’t matter anyway.

I don’t have time as Spider-Man. No girlfriends. Can’t happen. Too much danger.

Feeling self-conscious, I take another bite of my sandwich and take my time chewing, forcing Bruce to keep talking. “What’d her friend have to say?”

“Nothing, invited me to a party.”

“Where at?”

“Dunno. Party’s tomorrow.”

“Ahh.” Bruce makes a sympathetic face. “I think you were supposed to come up this weekend. Start prep for the—the trip.” He winces, then rubs his arm.
His right arm.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He waves away my concern. “Slept on it wrong.”

“Slept on your arm wrong?”

He laughs, then starts trying to shake feeling into his hand I think. “It happens when you get old. Enjoy being young while it lasts.”

“I am.” I smile.

“Anyway, yeah, I’ll reschedule. And I’ll pass along the note about your shortened summer. I agree, you should have a little bit of a break.”

No, no no no.

“Not a break. Just maybe…slow everything down a little?” I reword it then smile at him.

“We’ll see.” He replies, then looks past me and smiles. “Coming in hot, literally and—OW!”

He bends down to grab where I kicked him in the shins as I turn back and see Michelle carrying a basket, bag of chips and a drink towards us.

“Hi.”

God that sounded lame.

MJ laughs for a second, then slips past me and sits beside me. “Thanks for coming, my boss switched up our break schedules because you showed up.”

“That’s nice of him.”

A little better.

“Yeah.” She shrugs indifferently, then looks to Dr. Banner. “Nice fedora.”

“Thanks.” He smiles at her. “It’s nice to meet you. Peter’s said a lot of nice things about you.”

Michelle freezes as she’s looking down at her sandwich, just about to pick it up before she shoots me a look. “He did?”


“Oh really.” Michelle answers. “I got nominated is all.”

“Still though, that’s a lot of responsibility and you seem to be doing well enough.”

“Peter’s been helping me a lot with that. It’s not all me.”

I grab my drink nervously and swirl it around as MJ digs into her lunch before Bruce grabs a chip.

It’s true, but it’s nice of her to say that.

“I think I’m in the mood for some dessert.” Bruce says suddenly, then moves to stand up. “And a
refill. Pete, refill?"

“Uhh, sure.” I fumble out before he snatches up my drink.

“Be right back.” I hear him say as he walks away, leaving Michelle and I.

Sandwich.

Grabbing half of my sandwich, I take a bite just before Michelle says “Dude.”

Yeah…

“No warning? Like at all?”

“I didn’t know we were coming here. He just said ‘oh hey, let’s go have lunch.’ I had no clue it was the plan to come here.”

Michelle looks over quickly. “This was his plan?”

“Yeah, this place is highly rated online or something.”

“Yeah.” She huffs out a breath. “Are they keeping an eye on me?”

I shrug at her helplessly. “I don’t know. If I had to guess? Probably yeah. But you volunteered for that by talking to Hill.”

“You swear this isn’t a plan?”

“Nope.” I reply, then take a bite of my sandwich. After a moment of shared silence, she lets out a quiet breath.

“And you volunteered me for that party.”

“I thought it’d be nice.”

She frowns and shakes her head before responding “I vote that we say that we’re going, then go to your house and watch TV. I’m more down for a Friday night in.”

And I want to go to that party. I’m never invited anywhere, especially with a new group of people.

“I want to go.” I counter. “You could just ditch me and I’ll go alone.”

“Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Go ahead.”

She won’t.

“Fine.”

I nod back at her. “Fine.”

“I will.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”
She gives me an annoyed look before my drink slides back in front of me. “And I’ll be right back with dessert.”

“Excuse me.” The guy by the drinks says as he slides by, four drinks in his hand.

*All good.*

“—you play along, long long, let her lead you on on on…”

Damn song is stupid catchy.

“Apricot gum kind of crazy, yet kind of tasty, her people say run don’t walk away…” I sing along while grabbing a clear cup and filling it up three quarters of the way with some kind of punch, then turn back toward the party.

*Where’s Michelle?*

I briefly glance up, then lean up against the wall and type out a text to Michelle.

“Are you here? Or did you ditch me?”

*If she’s at home… Well, I don’t know what I’m going to do.*

May told me to have fun, call if I needed her. Try not to think about being super for a night, just enjoy myself.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

*Great.*

“Cool. I’m by the ping pong table.”

As coolly as I can, I slip to the far wall by the ping pong table and lean against it, then sip my drink and watch the two teams trying to toss ping pong balls into red cups, filled partially with I think water.

The next shot misses with a soft ‘clink’, and a chorus of laughter rings out. “Nice shot dick.”

“Sorry.” The guy says, then throws back some of his drink.

“I’m gonna be drunk by the end of this game if you keep missing.” His girlfriend I assume chides him.

“I’m not trying to miss.”

“Then don’t!” One of his buddies tells him.

*Helpful.*

In the background, I hear the song change to a harsher, more techno beat with a lot more base in it. Meanwhile, between drinks, both teams miss again and begin bickering—

*Hey.*

“Hi.” I say.
You’re not Michelle.

Instead, a cute, black haired girl with silver highlights sips her drink, then smiles up at me. “Hey tough guy. Why ya standing over here all by yourself?”

“You’re not Michelle.” I shrug, then sip my drink.

*I don’t think she could find a tighter shirt if she tried.*

“I can tell. I’m Felicia.”

“Peter.” I smile, then wave awkwardly.

The girl, Felicia sidles up closer, leaning her arm against mine then takes a massive gulp of her drink. “So what’s your story? Girlfriend ditched you?”

*I need to throw her off the scent. She’s got a little crazy eyes.*

“No, no girlfriend.” I laugh, then keep watching the game as somebody finally makes one.

“Really? You look a little young to be here…”

“Nope.” I shake my head then sip my drink again.

“What are you? A junior?”

“Sure, yeah.”

The guy in front of us clanks another shot and his friends keep teasing him mercilessly.

“Sure, yeah he says.” Felicia says before I feel her nails brush up against my ribcage, causing me to shiver.

I whisper “Stop.” As quietly as I can, then shoot her a harsh look.

*Seriously.*

“I think you liked it.” She smiles at me. I break eye contact with her and look back to the pong game, which seems like it’s finally winding down.

*One side only has two cups left, while the other has like eight.*

“Looking for somebody?”

*MJ.*

“Nope.” I shake my head, then turn and smile at Felicia, who returns it.

“I’m bored.” She proclaims, then slips her hands inside mine before pulling me towards the garage door. “Let’s go inside and—”

*There she is.*

Off to my right, by the pool I spot Michelle, only for her to already be staring at me.

“No, I think I’m okay.” I tell Felicia, then turn back and start freeing my hand from her.
Help.

She instead grabs onto my hand with both of hers. “Let’s go inside.”

“I’m okay.” I turn back and smile at her. “Really.”

“Girls like it when you play their game.” She smirks at me. “Whoever you’re here with will like
the chase of it.”

“No.” I say bluntly. “She won’t.”

Crap.

“And I’m not here for anyone either.” I add on, then look back in time to see her eyes flash.

“Let’s go upstairs to the theater room. They’re watching a movie, and I think…” Felicia presses up
against me, then runs her nails over my ribs again. “—we should go up there. See what’s up.”

She can’t take the hint.

“How about I grab us some drinks, and I’ll meet you up there.” I volunteer, then glance around.

Crap, she’s gone.

“Sure thing Tiger. Meet you there.” She beams up at me, before grabbing my hand, squeezing it
and sauntering away.

“Name’s Peter.” I call after her.

That sounded lame.

“I know.” She counters, then flips her hair and starts toward the house.

She’s… Really, really, really pushy. And super hot.

Why’d she come and basically attack me? I wasn’t bothering anybody, just—

Drinks Parker. Drinks.

“Right.” I mutter to myself, then walk over to the line for the drinks as my heart is pounding before
pulling out my phone and to text Michelle.

“Hey. Where’d you go?”

C’mon.

I flip my phone around in my hand and glance around before I see a familiar brunette wave at me.

Teresa.

I wave back at her before the line moves forward a little, and I check my phone again.

Nothing. Damn it.

“That wasn’t what it looked like. She attacked me.”

My hearts keep pounding in my chest as I twirl my phone again.
Breathe. Slow your heart down. That won’t help anything.

I let out a breath, then try and let go of all my tension before the line moves up again and I notice I’ve still got a little bit of my drink left.

And Michelle needs to answer. C’mon MJ.

Throwing the rest of my drink back, the line parts for me to grab another red cup and start filling both up. “Excuse me.” I apologize to the couple behind me, then duck in front of them and glance around.

Don’t see her. Okay. If I wanted to hide here, where would I go?

Easy. A secluded place where I could be alone and nobody would bother me.

The alley on the far side of the house. By the pool.

“Yeah.” I smile to myself, then start down the driveway before taking a right.

Makes total sense. Nobody’s there, the pool is hiding you. Nobody would notice anyone slipping away—

A loud splash sounds out and I dive to the fence closest to the pool, only to get splashed all down the front of my shirt.

Man…

“Haha.” I hear down the alley and glance up. Michelle immediately notices that it’s me, and her face changes from laughter, to anger before she turns away pointedly.

“Hey.” I call after her, then start towards her.

Michelle totally ignores me, then tosses a red cup aside and turns farther away from me.

Okay...Be nice. It is technically my fault.

“Brought you another drink.” I say, then set it beside her, then take a step back.

“Great. Go away now.”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Why not?” She snaps, turning to look at me furiously. “You’ve already found some other floozy…”

“No.” I shake my head again. “I came here for you. And now I found you. Here I am.”

Michelle shoots me another angry look, then grabs the drink I set beside her and takes a huge gulp of it. “Here you are. Congratulations.”

“Yeah.” I laugh, then sit across from her.

I don’t want to continue standing up. She’ll have to look up at me, and I bet that’d be a bad look.

“I don’t know who that was. She just kind of attacked me.”

“Sure.” Michelle rolls her eyes.
“It’s the truth.” I tell her. “You see her here? No.”

“Where is she then?”

“Upstairs, waiting for me in the theater room.”

Michelle makes another face, then takes another gulp of the drink. “Then you’d better get going.”

“Nah, I’d rather be right here.” I smile over at her, only for Michelle to roll her eyes then look around.

*There’s red cups all around her. At least I know they’re not all hers. That’d be impossible.*

“How many of these are yours?” I joke, then smile at her encouragingly.

“Three or four…or five.” She mutters, then gives an unconvincing shrug before glancing back at me.

“I’m sorry.”

“You are.” She laughs, causing me to laugh as well.

“I guess I deserved that.”

“You did.”

“Why’d you immediately come and hide. You could have come and saved me.”

Michelle shrugs, then tilts her cup up, finishing it off. “Didn’t look like you needed saving.”

“Well, I did. She basically came over and tried getting all handsy.”

“I thought guys liked that.”

*Hah.*

“I’m not Flash.” I joke, causing Michelle to laugh, then dig around in her pocket, pull something out and extend it to me.

“What’s this?” Silently, she points it towards me, and I stand up enough to take it from her, then sit back down on my spot across from her against the wall.

“I’ve been trying to give that to you for like a month now. But I haven’t gotten the time or I chickened out or…whatever.” I hear her say as I read the small note.

>*Together with their families*

*Paige Kimberly Jones*

* &

*Joseph Wyatt Murray*

*Request the pleasure of your company and companionship*

*As they celebrate the completion and celebration of their marriage*
August 8 2018

At 6:00 in the evening

Reception to follow”

Wait…

WHAT??!

“Huh?” I say to myself, then glance up and see MJ looking at me for my reaction. “What is this?”

“My cousin’s getting married. And I can’t go alone, I need a date.” Michelle explains, then laughs. “At least that’s what everybody’s been telling me.”

Yeah, you can’t go alone to your own family’s wedding. That’d be super lame and sad.

“And you’re asking…me?”

Michelle suddenly, out of nowhere, frowns at me. “No, I’m just showing you the invitation.”

So yeah. She’s inviting me. As her date.

Man…that’s close to when I think I’ll be getting back from the space trip. I think I can make it though.

“Yes.” I breathe out, then look away from the invitation, back to Michelle, who suddenly smiles. “Really?” She asks, like she can’t believe it. “You can do it?”

“I’ll make sure I can. I’ll…”

I’ll have to tell Hill and everybody. They’re gonna go nuts over this—

“I’ll…?” Michelle prompts me. “Use your words.”

“I’ll have to ask off.” I say all in one breath, then stop.

Man my heart’s pounding again.

I strongly exhale, then smile at MJ. “But I’m sure they’ll let me off. It’ll be fun.”

“Yeah.” She smiles back, then laughs. “Whew.”

“Glad that’s over with?” I assume.

Michelle shakes her head while smiling. “You have no idea. My folks have been—”

Out of nowhere, the hairs on my arms both stand up suddenly, before Michelle’s voice gets blocked out by white noise before I strain to hear—

Sirens. Cops.

They’re busting this party.

“Peter?” Instinctively, I look down at my wristbands for confirmation, only for them to already be flashing at me.
Great. We’ve got to go. Now.

“C’mon.” I order her as I scramble to my feet, already holding two fingers to my wristband.

I need an earpiece.

On command, the nanotech forms itself into an earpiece, which I snatch up once it’s complete and stick it into my ear. “What the hell is—?”

“Sirens, the cops are coming.” I tell her, then pull her to her feet and shove her deeper into the alley. “We’ve got to go.”

“But then why are we going this way? The street’s—”

“That’s where they’ll be coming.” I cut her off. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

“Okay.” Michelle falls into step beside me. “How’d you know that they’re coming?”

“I heard them.”

Michelle gives me a skeptical look before countering “I can’t hear them.”

I know that. That’s why I had to tell you about it.

I know that. That’s why I had to tell you about it.

“You will, give them a minute.”

“Shouldn’t we be running?” Michelle adds helpfully.

“No.” I shake my head. “First rule of going on the run is don’t run, walk.”

“We’re not going on the run, I don’t even know if—” Michelle argues with me before the sirens audibly starts up, close enough for her to hear them.

“Oh sh—” She yelps, then moves to run before I grab her wrist and pull her to me.

“No!” I tell her, just before somebody shouts.

“COPS! RUN!”

Screams of terrified teens and party goers break out all around us before I pull Michelle farther down our alley, then take a left in between two garages.

Okay. Okay okay. Stay calm. I’ve got everything I need to get us out of this here with me. I know how to escape people, know how to hide.

I need a way out.

“C’mon.” I smile at Michelle, who is looking all around, terrified before finally locking onto me.

“You sure?”

“Sure of what?” I ask, then start farther down this new alley.

Michelle drags her feet, giving me a worried look. “You sure about this? It could be a trap?”

“Yeah.” I laugh away her concern.
My ear should be talking by now.

“Hello?” I reach up and hit the manual ‘push to talk’ button. “Could really use some help here.”

“Hill’s already on the horn. Happy should be coming to get you.” Romanoff instantly informs me. “Hi, by the way. Sorry about the party.”

“Wasn’t that fun anyway.” I shrug, then look back to Michelle.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Some friends. C’mon.” I smile at her. “Ride’s already on its way.”

“Really? How?”

I smile at Michelle to reassure her as we keep walking. “Called ahead.”

“Okay. I’m off the phone with Happy.” Hill announces herself authoritatively. “He’s coming to get you, but you’re going to have to work your way to him a little bit.”

“Okay.” I nod and Michelle leans closer to me. “Tell me how.”

“Stay in the shadows, in the alleys.” Romanoff instructs me. “Keep your head down and don’t run. Don’t act guilty.”

I nod, then smile back at Michelle, who is leaning dangerously close to my face. “Okay.”

“Maybe have her hold your hand or something. Make it look like you’re a couple on a nighttime stroll.” Hill volunteers. Michelle instantly darts away from me, looking alarmed.

She heard that.

“Can you hear through my earpiece?”

“Kind of.” Michelle confesses before I glance around us.

Kids are still running about fifty feet away, vaulting the fence.

“Don’t worry about them.” I tell Michelle, then smile. “They’re helping.”

“But if it—” She starts, sounding panicked.


Michelle instantly shakes her head. “There’s no way, I mean, there’s bound to be cops all around, looking for us and—”

“No.” I stop dead in front of her and grab both of her hands. “Easy. Calm down. Okay? I need you to stay calm with me. Okay?”

Michelle looks down at her hands before I say “Copy me, do what I do okay? Deep breath in…” She inhales, then I exhale. “And out.”

“In…And out.”

Good.
“Now we’re gonna be fine. I’ve been in way worse spots, and I only got out because I was calm. How else do you think I got away from those stupid aliens down near Union Square?”

Michelle shrugs before I pull her into motion again. “I don’t know. You’ve never said.”


“Nice, holding her hand.” Romanoff quips, before I turn around and spot a security camera attached to a garage.

“Shut up.” I bark, before Michelle looks past me, spots the camera and immediately gives it the finger.

“I like her attitude.” Hill adds.

“Glad somebody does…” I roll my eyes, then tilts my head for us to keep walking.

*I need more information.*

“Karen, give me locations of all the squad cars around us. And mark Happy’s position please.” I say, then press my right wristband, causing a 3-D map to appear.

“Holy shit…” I hear Michelle beside me as I decipher the information.

This isn’t too bad. Most of the cards are spread out to Michelle and I’s right. And we’re slowly going left. We can avoid the one or two cars that’re over here by us.

“Who is Karen?”

“Who I’m talking to.” I lie to MJ, then refocus.

*If we go another two blocks, then cut left three blocks, then…I think we’ll make it.*

I mark a spot on the map, then deactivate it. “You get that?” I ask Hill.

“Yeah.”

Romanoff adds “You thinking about cutting across?”

“Yup.”

“I’ll tell Happy to park down by where you marked.” Hill volunteers.

“Thank you.”

“Say Karen again. Throw her off.” Romanoff orders me.

“Thank you Karen.” I smile, then look back to Michelle, who looks stunned.

“Yeah.” I laugh. “You can’t talk about this.”

Michelle blinks at me for an instant, then nods. “Yeah, I figured. Where are we going?”

“Up here for two blocks, then cutting over three, then straight down to our ride.” I explain, then smile.

“And you’re sure that’s safe?”
“Yeah.” I nod.

“That’s what your fancy map said?” I nod again, only for her to give me a skeptical look. “You’d better be right.”

I smile at her reassuringly. “I will be. Now c’mon.” Together we start off again, Michelle holding my hand in hers.

“Aww.”

*Romanoff.*

I ignore her and continue walking for a few more steps before I hear somebody coming at a run behind us.

“Behind you, to your left.” Hill barks out. Easily, I sidestep, bringing MJ with me, allowing the kid to sprint right past us at a dead run before he careens into some garbage cans.

“Idiot.” I mutter, then pull her across the way.

*Anybody that’s around us had to have heard that.*

“Why?”

“We’re improvising.” I explain, turning left just a little early.

*I was going to keep going, but now I’m sure—*

“I heard one this way, he must have hit some garbage cans or something!” An authoritative voice calls out, before I see terror flash across MJ’s face.

“We’re good. We’re—” I keep reassuring her, taking the turn blindly and—

*Oh shit. Brick wall. It’s a dead end.*

“O…kay,” I finish my sentence lamely.

*Think.*

Vault over it?

*I can easily, but not MJ.*

This wall is like ten feet tall. With some recycling bins in front of it.

*Great.*

“Peter?” MJ looks to me for an answer.

*I got it.*

“You got a plan?” Hill asks sarcastically. “Or do I need to come up with one?”

“Peter, just vault the damn wall!” Romanoff barks out. “We can explain that shit later!”

“Nothing!” I tell both of them, stepping forward and pushing the bins back.
Laser.

“Karen.”

“Ready! Right hand.” She tells me instantly.

“Thank you…step back.” I step in front of Michelle.

“What are you doing?”

Forcibly, I stick my wrist out, and a small laser pointer pops out of my wrist, then fires right where I’m pointing.

C’mon.

The brick sizzles ominously, but cuts through it like butter as I quickly make an escape for us about five feet off the ground, then step forward and tentatively push the cut brick back, only for it to comply easily.

Empty alley. PERFECT!

“C’mon…” I tell Michelle, who is rooted where she’s standing, mouth agape. “Michelle!” Calling her name stirs her into action and she darts past me, giving me enough time to reset the brick just before—

“This way!!!” The same voice calls out as their footsteps approach us on the other side of the wall, then race right past us.

“Oh my god.” I hear MJ say, sounding awed, then glance back to see her clinging to my shirt.

“We’re okay.” I give her another reassuring smile. “I told you.”

She lets out another shallow breath, then glances up at me. “What the hell is that?”

“Nanotech. Mr. Stark and I worked on it together. He gave me these as a reward. Can do almost anything I need them to.” I explain, then shoot MJ a smile before starting off again.

“You worked on the Iron Man suit? The one he used with all those gadgets?”

“I never said that.” I laugh, then pull her into an empty opening.

Now we can just walk down this hill.

“But you just used a freaking laser! That cut through that brick like it was nothing!!” Michelle hisses loudly, clearly in disbelief. “And it somehow became an earpiece for you to talk to people. How in the—”

TOO LOUD!!

“Hey.” I pull her close to me, which instantly shuts her up. “Breathe. Okay. In…” Michelle immediately obeys, inhaling, then letting out the breath. “Out. In…Out…” I encourage her, then squeeze her hand reassuringly. “We’re almost there, then we’ll get you home. C’mon.”

“I…” She starts, then stops herself and nods at me strongly. “How much further?”

“Not very far.” I answer, then peek out to the empty side street. “Foot of this hill.”
Double checking one more time, I wave for MJ to follow me, then keep to the shadowy side of the street and start descending the hill. A few steps in, she decides to grab my wrist unprompted, but doesn’t actually say anything while we keep walking down.

“Karen, give me that map again.”

While Karen loads up the map, Hill adds “Happy is within a mile Peter. It looks like there is a large storage building just before the street that you can use for cover until he pulls up.”

“Copy.” I nod, then look at my map again.

*Everything to the right. Not to tell them how to do their job, but they’re doing a lousy job of covering a perimeter on this side.*

“Is it me, or are they not covering one side of things?” Michelle pipes up behind me just as I deactivate the map.

Her face falls as I nod. “No, you’re right.”

“Why though?”

“Dunno.” I shrug, then pull her along behind me. “I think they’re betting they got the drop on most of the people.”

*Even though a lot of people ran.*

Together, we make it down the hill, and I spot the storage shed Hill is talking about just as an unmarked black car pulls up to the curb just ahead to the right.

“That’s him. C’mon.”

As I glance back to her, she gives me an insecure look before asking “You sure?”

“Yeah. It’s all part of the plan.”

“You first.”

Okay.

I nod, then smile and lead the way, first to the sidewalk, then pull open the backdoor and hold it open for her.

“Oh wow, Hill said you might—” Happy starts just before he spots Michelle, then quickly stops talking.

“Hi. Thank you.” MJ says earnestly before smiling at Happy.

“No problem. I wasn’t doing anything. Just binging Cake Wars.” He answers, then turns and gives me a significant look while I hop in and Michelle slides directly behind him.

*Cake Wars?*

“Cake Wars? Sounds fun.”
“Pepper loves HGTV.” He explains as I shut the door and he pulls away from the curb. “Nice little escape plan you hatched. How’d you get out?”

“Heard them coming. Ducked behind some recycling bins to avoid a rent-a-cop. Wasn’t bad.” Happy makes a face in the mirror as he pulls a U-turn to avoid to police blockade that’s surely waiting for us up ahead.

*If he goes down a few blocks, I bet he can avoid all of it.*

“Rent-A-Cop?”

“Yeah. He just ran right past us.”

“Hmm. You didn’t have to use any of Tony’s tech?”

Tony.

Michelle’s head instantly snaps to me as I reply “The map. And earpiece. Nothing too fancy.”

“Yeah.” He says as I reach up and pull out my earpiece. “Good story though.”

“And it’s always good to know that when you’re all alone, and your friends are in trouble, what you’re going to do. A lot of people freeze up.” Happy’s expression suddenly turns serious before he fixes me with a glance in the mirror.

*Why’s he keep looking at me like that? Stop it Happy. You’re making it super awkward.*

I shift in my seat and answer “I’ve seen worse. Just a rent-a-cop.”

“True. Tony’d be proud of you. Probably make some comment about being a teenage delinquent, like he wasn’t one himself…”

“Yeah, probably.” I laugh.

*At least it’s not a one way ticket or raising puppies.*

The three of us fall into an awkward silence, broken up by Happy strumming the steering wheel and Michelle’s sporadic texting.

*Probably talking to Betty or her Mom and Dad—*

Speaking of texting.

> “*Her parents aren’t home. Both are working. Home is deserted.*” – Hill

That’s…weird. *Explains why she came out tonight, or at least why she wanted to leave the house and watch TV.*

But it’s a Friday.

> “Thanks. I’ll tell Happy to take her home, then drop me. Thanks for all your help.”

Setting my phone in my lap, I glance out and see off in the distance, red and blue lights flash off the sides of the buildings, just before Happy takes the entrance onto the highway. “Okay. Where am I going?”
“New—”

**OH JEEZ.**

Michelle fixes me with a death glare and starts violently shaking her head. “—There’s a new roadway construction this way Happy. I think. Going to my place.”

*Oh that sounded stupid.*

“Really?” Happy fires back. “I came over this bridge on the way down. You sure?”

“Kind of, my ride took a weird route. So I assumed so.”

Happy frowns for an instant. “So Queens?”

“Yeah.” I smile, then glance at Michelle and see her smile and nod subtly just before my phone lights up. “Thanks Happy.”

“No problem. Like I said I—”

“*What part of ‘I’ll tell Happy to take her home, then drop me.’ Just changed?!*”

“I got a lethal look and improvised.”

*I need to text May.*

Before I can swipe over, Hill’s already replied.

“*Already on with May. She says it’s fine. Already told her about Michelle’s house being empty. She volunteered as you blabbed on.*”

“I kind of blabbed.”

*He bought it.*

“You totally blabbed. If Happy was smarter he wouldn’t have fallen for it. Lucky.”

Yeah, well…lucky me I guess.

“How’s your aunt?” I hear Happy say, and I glance up from my phone, into the mirror, only for Happy to already be waiting for me.

“She’s fine.” I shrug. “Same as always.”

“Still trying to find a place to volunteer?”

*How’d he…?*

“Yeah? How’d you know that?”

Happy replies “She told me.”

“When?”

“When I’ve talked to her.”

“When’s that been?”
He hasn’t seen May since Happy dropped me off a few weeks ago. When May hid from him.

“I’m not detailing my whereabouts to a couple of teenagers.” Happy defies me.

“I think I should know who my Aunt’s talking to.”

“I don’t.” Happy snaps back, then blindly flips on the radio.

AHHH!!!!!

The radio comes to life, blaring some heavy rock music, causing MJ and I to clap our hands over our ears before Happy scrambles to turn it down. “My bad my bad…”

Michelle quickly retorts “Yeah, I know your ears are bad.”

“Hey.” Happy snaps back. “Metallica is meant to be played loud.”

“Not loud enough for the dead to hear.”

I laugh, and Happy quickly turns back to me. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll understand one day. Good cover music.”

Cover music??

I glance at Michelle, who gives me a confused look before Happy settles in on a classic rock station on satellite radio.

“I think he likes your Aunt.” – Michelle

Not you too…

I flip my phone over and glance at the window, watching as we cross the bridge, then navigate side streets all the way home, where Happy pulls into the visitor’s parking spot on the curb before following us as we hop out of the car. “I think he knows where we’re going.” Michelle tells Happy, who turns and glances down at Michelle.

“I know.”

Michelle replies “Then why are you following us?”

“It’s my job to make sure you two get home safe. Missy.”

“It’s Michelle.”

Happy rolls his eyes as the elevator arrives and we all pile in. “Yeah, I know that.”

Okay you two, that’s enough.

I squeeze in between the two of them just before Michelle presses ‘7’ and for the door to close.

“You know which floor?” Happy gives her a surprised look.

Michelle turns around to retort, looking frustrated before I cut her off. “Okay, okay. Enough.”
“Yeah.” Happy says behind me. “Enough.”

“No.” I whip around and frown at him. “Both of you. C’mon…”

_It’s been a long night. Don’t make this worse._

“You can’t ‘c’mon’ me, I’m the adult here. It’s my job to—”

“Your job? You mean flirting with Peter’s aunt?”

_Oh jeez._

The instant the elevator door opens, I shove MJ in front, then hold Happy behind me for three steps, then follow behind her as MJ leads the three of us to my door. “Thanks Happy.” I say, trying to make peace before reaching out and knocking twice on the door while making sure Happy and Michelle can’t try and kill each other.

“Oh good, you made it.” May says, throwing open the door. “C’mon in dear.”

Michelle slides past May and I quickly follow. “I think I picked up my room…”

_I know I made my bed at least. New-ish sheets too._

“Don’t worry about it.” Michelle laughs. “You should see my room right now. It’s a mess.”

She lightly pushes my door open, revealing my mostly clean room, except with a couple of shirts, along with a stray sock and my pajama pants near the bathroom door. “My bad, sorry…”

Again, Michelle laughs at me, then tosses her purse at my bed. “At least it smells decent. You do laundry enough to prevent the boy smell.”

“Boy smell?” I repeat her.

_What’s that mean?_

Michelle laughs, then points me toward the door. “You might wanna…”

“Right.” I nod quickly. “You hungry?”

“Nah. I’ll make popcorn.”

_Looks like she’s getting what she wants after all._

“Right.” I nod, then grab the edge of my door and peer out at where May and Happy are talking, just before May bends over, giggling.

_Oh no._

I leap out into the living room in time to hear “—well let me know, I’d love to show you the place. Prices aren’t bad either.”

“I’d love to.” May says, her voice a slightly higher pitch than normal.

“Just text me and let me know when. I love where you threw up the new painting by the way.” Happy says flirtatiously before smiling at May.

May returns the smile just before Happy sees me over her shoulder, and his smile disappears,
causing May to turn back to me. “Thanks Happy.”

“No problem.” He answers, not even giving me a second of his time before looking back to May. “I —”

“Bye.” I grab the front door and start to close it on Happy.

“No, no bye—HEY!” He protests before I shut the door, then lock the deadbolt and turn back to May.

“What just happened?”

May gives me an offended look. “Nothing. None of your business Mr. ‘I just brought my girlfriend over at midnight giving your Aunt no warning or time to change her clothes’!”

“I don’t think he minded all that much.” I counter to May, who crosses her arms, still wearing a strapped shirt and baggy pants. “And she’s not my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. You can’t tell me who to talk to Peter Parker.” May stalks away from me. “I was just saying thank you to the man who bailed your ass out!”

“I bet!” I call after May, just before she slams her bedroom door shut angrily, causing Michelle to laugh behind me in the kitchen.

“She totally likes him.” I can’t stop a groan before I glance up at the ceiling helplessly.

Why? Why does it have to be me?

I’d better go grab the stuff for my bed from the office.

Before I really give May a reason to kill me.
The elevator chimes, stopping at the seventh floor before opening up, revealing the hallway outside my apartment, with everybody still sleeping.

*Lazy Sunday.*

I smile and walk towards the front door before it helpfully pops open for me, allowing me to open it with my foot.

“Thank you Karen.” I say quietly before I hear May call out.

“Peter?”

“It’s me.” I smile and duck inside, making sure to hide what I’m carrying.

“Where’d you go? Your note didn’t say where—.” She demands before suddenly stopping, leaving me to smile as May covers her mouth while also looking ready to cry.

“Surprise.” I laugh, then fully unveil the flowers I bought for her down the street, along with the box of chocolates and card. “Couldn’t really tell you where I was going.”

May chokes out a laugh that kind of sounds like a sob before I set the flowers down and May rounds the island in time to pull me into a hug.

“You’re gonna crush your chocolates…” I complain as May hugs me as tightly as she can.

“Don’t care.” She gives me another squeeze. “They’ll still taste great.”

*Yeah, that is true.*

“Happy Mother’s Day May. Love you.”

May lifts her head off my shoulder, tears spilling down her cheeks before hugging me again. “Love you too.”

“Your Belgian waffles ma’am, our fruit bar is just behind you to the right…” The waiter informs May as he deposits May’s order of waffles, eggs and two strips of bacon in front of her. “Would you like a refill on your mimosa?”

“Oh no, that’s fine—”

“Yes she would.” I smile at our waiter, cutting May off.

The waiter smiles while May gives me a stern look, which we both ignore. “Alright, I’ll get you that refill. Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you all.”

“Thanks.” I smile our waiter.

May does the same, adding “Thanks.” Before he nods and walks away.

“I’ll be back.”
I nod at May as she grabs her plate and starts towards the fruit bar, then glance down and start arranging my pancakes, eggs and sausages.

This place is ridiculous. Some quick research online said this was the best brunch place in Queens, but still…

It’s sort of a new age-y place, light strung down from the ceiling, open floor plan sort of thing. And it’s completely packed.

I snag a portion of butter from the small container that they gave me, then spread it evenly throughout my pancake stack before glancing up to see May as she is working her way through the fruit bar line.

Good. She’s taking her time. Not just getting in and out, grabbing two blueberries and three strawberries before dashing back to get out of the way.

“Her mimosa…” The waiter flashes by, setting May’s refill at her place before I smile at him in thanks, then make my first slice in the pancakes and take a bite.

Oh this is good.

May parks back at her seat, complete with a mountain of fruit and whipped cream before looking up and smiling at me. “What do you think?”

“Looks great.” I laugh, mouth partially full.

“Yeah, I thought so too.” She laughs, before we both dig into our brunch.

This is turning out as good as I could have expected. No snags, staff is nice, weather’s good…

Giving the restaurant a casual glance around before turning back to my eggs and smiling at May, who is eying me.

“What?”

“I can’t believe you pulled this off.”

I laugh, then set my fork down. “Why?”

“I didn’t notice.” She explains, then leans forward. “Every year on my birthday I always notice you trying to hide my present.”

True.

“Watch out this year then.” I joke, and May laughs before covering her mouth with her napkin.

She takes a moment to tuck herself back in, then smiles at me again. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks.” I smile, then focus in on my plate.

“No, I’m serious. We’ve come so far in the last couple of years.” She says earnestly. “Just barely making it, getting by, figuring everything out with Ben, you never complained. Then you applied for that internship and…”

Plate.
“—now look where we are.” May finishes her soliloquy with a huge smile. “You’ve got a big job, doing well in school…I’m just really proud of you.”

“Thanks.” I glance up again, then right back down. “Happy said you were thinking about doing more volunteering?”

May nods heartily, then takes a bite of her waffle. “Yeah. It’ll probably be after your trip. Maybe with the Untied Way, Salvation Army or something like that. Pepper wants me to come down to… talk about maybe doing something for her.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” May nods. “She didn’t mention it to you?”

I shake my head, then take another bite of pancake. “Haven’t talked to her since …everything.”

*I figure she’s too busy.*

“She probably wants to talk to me before she talks to you about it.”

*Yeah, probably.*

“Yeah.” I nod, then keep it moving. “How about when I’m on my trip?”

“Actually, I was thinking of going up to the coast with Annie, Jen and Carol.”

*Her best friends from college.*

“That sounds great.” I light up and smile again. “How long?”

“Week and a half.” She shrugs, then sips her mimosa. “Then come back down here, put the house back together, then come up and greet you when you get back.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

*I really didn’t want her rattling around the house worrying about me as I’m out in space.*

May nods before I continue working through my pancakes. “Any news on that?”

“Not really.” I shake my head. “You know I was supposed to head up there this weekend, but my party plans kind of ruined that idea.”

“Sure. ‘Ruined’.” May teases me, using air quotes around ‘ruined’, then laughs and sets her silverware aside. “You guys seem to be doing okay.”

“That’s because you missed her getting mad at me.”

“For what?” May’s eyes drop down sternly.

I shrug, then nervously grab my napkin. “Some random chick tried grabbing me and Michelle kind of thought it was a thing.”

“Was it? A thing, I mean.”

I shake my head strongly. “No, no.”

“So she got jealous.”
I drop my napkin into my lap and give May quick look before she laughs at me. “Not like that.”

“Sounds to me like that.”

“It’s really not.” I insist.

“Don’t believe him, the video totally makes her look jealous.” I hear behind me, then see May react before I turn back and see Romanoff and Bruce as they pull up chairs beside us.

“Sorry to barge in. But we figured that we’d let you guys enjoy at least part of your brunch in peace.” Bruce smiles at both of us while Romanoff gives May a hug around the shoulder, then squeezes past her to sit down. “Happy Mother’s Day May.”

“Thank you…” May says, looking a little overwhelmed before composing herself and asking “Did you all plan this?”

“No, this was all Peter.” Romanoff smiles at me. “We just saw his reservations and decided to tag along.”

Tag along?

Before I can ask what she means, our waiter pop back by, and Bruce easily orders two coffees for the two of them before he turns to me.

“Does May need another refill?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Already got her one.”

“No, I…no.” May says strongly before blushing. “I’m not that bad.”

“I know.” Bruce smiles at her while Widow nods to our waiter that our order is complete. “Just asking.”

“What do you mean tag along, by the way?” I turn and ask as May takes another bite of waffle.

“Nothing really. Just wanted to pass along something from Fury to May.” Romanoff explains.

Huh?

“The new plan, at least for this week is to pick up Peter after he gets out of Decathlon on Tuesday.” Bruce begins, then pauses as the coffee arrives for them. Once the waiter’s gone, he continues.

“After we pick up Peter, Fury wanted us to swing by and pick you up.”

May blinks at him before asking “Pick me up?”

“He thought you’d want some concrete details about this trip. We’re having a meeting that night with some of the power players and he wants to invite you. Ease some of your concerns.”

“I’m not really all that concerned.” May laughs, only for it to come out hollow. “You’re all going with him right?”

“Most of us.” Romanoff concedes. “We’re bringing along some other friends that have some
business to take care of out in space too.”

*So Fury wants everyone in on the same page.*

And he’s staying in May’s good graces. Smart move.

“Other friends?” May asks.

“You’ll meet them. Peter’s already met a couple of them. They’re good, right Peter?”

*I don’t know who they’re talking about.*

“Yeah.” I smile. “They’re cool.”

“You’ll like them. Plus Mack, the guy in charge wants to make sure you aren’t concerned.” Bruce reveals, then smiles at May.

*They don’t believe that she’s not worried.*

“Anyway though, that’s for Tuesday.” Romanoff laughs as Bruce sips his coffee, then winces. “Today…we have tickets to go down to Broadway and see any show you want.”

*WHAT?!!*

May quickly looks taken aback as she pulls out four tickets, ink printed on them and everything. “When’d you—?” She turns to me.

“Not him.” Bruce laughs as he takes one of my napkins for his coffee. “This is from Nat and I. We guessed you hadn’t seen a show in awhile.”

May quickly looks overwhelmed again before Romanoff smiles and gives her another hug. “Happy Mother’s Day.”

“—not really a schedule. There’s been an increase with everything Thor’s bringing in to help rebuild Asgard…” Happy tells May as they walk, doors in front of us opening for them.

My phone lights up in my hand, and I quickly swipe to the message.

“I’m surprised you didn’t even tell Ned you were going somewhere. How far is this flight again?” - Michelle

*Can’t tell you that. Otherwise you’ll be able to pinpoint where the base is.*

“Never told you that. Sorry. Gotta go, we’re about to take off.”

Sending off the text, I slip my phone back into my pocket as May and Happy drift off to the glass wall on the right where—

*Whoa. That’s gotta be the biggest ship I…*

Actually, I take that back. The Flying Donut was bigger, I guess.

*But what is that?*

I hear a laugh behind me, then turn to see Hill walking this way. “Spotted it already?”
“Whose ship is that?”

“Ours.” Hill comes up even with me as I turn back to the window, where the massive black ship is parked in the center of the tarmac. “It’s S.H.I.E.L.D’s.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D built that?” I glance back to Hill.

Hill nods. “Yup. They’re working on it now. It’s how you’re getting out to space.”

*Guess that makes sense.*

“How’s Michelle?”

“Fine.” I shrug.

*Didn’t like me just bolting after practice today. I think she might have had something planned.*

“Just fine?” Hill asks before I glance over to see her glancing at me.

“Yeah.” I dismiss the idea with a nod. “Practice was fine, I left to come here. Didn’t tell her that, though, you know. Because—”

Quick, throw her off the idea that Michelle thinks that I’m coming up here…

“I read your texts. You remember that right?” Hill laughs at me. “I saw you guys talk the whole ride up here.”

Yeah, well…

Hill kindly redirects me to a sliding door out towards the tarmac.

“Okay. I won’t tell you to fly safe then. Talk later?” – MJ

“Yeah, sure. Meetings and stuff. But I’ll text you. Hope work doesn’t suck too much.”

The closer we get to the enormous black ship, the louder the construction sounds become, with drills and metal saws and workers.

*That don’t look…human?*

“Uhm.” I start, then stop.

*I’m gonna sound ridiculous.*

“No, you’re right. They’re aliens. Some friends from the Nova Corps. They’re installing an interstellar drive on the *Zephyr* so you guys can get there on time without having to take weeks to get there.”

“So they’re on our side?” I ask, and Hill nods.

“Yup. And word has gotten out.”

“How?” I reply, then glance back to see a group of three, stopped and staring at me.

*Uhh.*

“Hi.” I speak up, unsure if I even should, before the three all scurry away.
I turn back to Hill, looking amused. “Everyone they’ve seen is in uniform.”

“So they thought I was weird.”

“We’re all weird to them.” Hill shakes her head. “C’mon, they all should be right in here.”

Hill takes point, and I follow her around the plane to where the loading bay door is down, and multiple people are maneuvering around. “Hey hey hey.” A man jumps in between us and the rest of the ship. “No kids. Sorry ma’am.”

“This isn’t a kid. Where’s Agent Johnson?”

“Daisy’s…busy.” The man clearly lies. “Who are you?”

“I’m Hill.”

The man’s eyes bulge before he takes a step back. “Oh, uhm…okay. I’ll…give me a second.” He blabs, then dashes over to a console and starts tapping away on a screen while grabbing an old school style phone.

“Daisy’s here?”

“This is her plane.” Hill confirms.

“Okay, then why’d he freak out like that?”

“Well.” Hill makes a face, then turns to me. “They all kind of hate me.”

HATE HILL?!

“Why?”

“Miscommunication years back. Nearly lead to one of their team members dying because of it. Big long story. But they still don’t totally trust me.” Hill explains while the shifty guy glances back at us for an instant, then turns away when he sees us looking at him, all while talking into the phone.

Okay, makes sense I guess.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter now. But I understand why they don’t totally trust me, so it’s fine. I guess.” Hill looks away, not looking fine. “I’m going to head back in. Meeting’s in an hour. I’ll text you.”

Hill smiles before I reply “okay, sounds good.” And Hill leaves me in the hanger bay just before the guy hangs up the phone.

“Where’d your Mom go?” Shady Guy asks me.

My MOM?!?

“She’s not my Mom.”

“Then why’d she bring you up here?”
Because I know Daisy.

“Who are you, again? I must have missed your name.” I change topics, then turn and smile at the man.

“Oh, yeah.” He laughs, then extends his hand to me. “Deke Shaw. I’m... well, it’s hard to explain.”

That’s a theme with these guys.

“Who are you?” He follows up.

“I’m nobody.” I answer. “A technician that wanted to check up on how everything’s going.”

“Oh.” Deke’s face goes slack. “I think you’ll want to talk to Simmons about that, she knows this place better than anybody really.”

He knows Simmons too?

Again, before I can think of something to say, he speaks up again. “Oh, here she is.” before raising his hand helpfully to flag her down.

Yup, it’s her.

Daisy slips through a doorway, then down a few stairs before smiling at me. “Hey, didn’t know you were coming so soon. I heard something about some school thing? I thought you were out of school.”

“I am, it’s with my school. Academic Decathlon.” I explain.

“What’s that?” Deke asks before Daisy waves him down.

“Google it. And keep an eye on things out here. C’mon Peter.” Daisy orders him then waves for me to follow her.

“Oh, yeah.” Deke says suddenly. “He needs to talk to Simmons. He’s some kind of technician...?”

Daisy’s eyebrows furrow before she responds “Thanks Deke.” and leads me deeper into the ship.

What a idiot.

“Who is that guy again?”

“He’s...a old friend.” Daisy shakes her head. “And you’re not exactly a technician.”

Wait. Does she know who I am?

“It’s the first thing that popped into my head. You don’t know who I am.” I counter.

Daisy nods. “That is true. But you are important, and a good kid. So don’t make me regret bringing you in here on faith. I kind of have a guess though.”

“What’s the guess?”

“Well, it’s not really a guess. More like a girl. Brunette, lives in New Jersey?”

Michelle.
“Yeah…?”

Daisy laughs, then flashes a badge, allowing us deeper into the ship. “Relax, I don’t really care. It’s just that a couple members of our team got assigned to keep an eye on and evaluate this girl we don’t know.”

So they’re the ones doing the evaluation…

“And?”

“She’s fine.” She shrugs. “Boring. Works, listens to music. Talks to somebody on her phone through text all the time. Probably a boyfriend. You know anything about that?”

“Boyfriend?” I ask. “No, I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.

She’s always talking…to me.

“Interesting.” Daisy muses. “What’s her name?”

“If your friends are evaluating her, you already know her name.” I counter.

She just wants me to talk.

“Yeah, but maybe you’ll…loosen up.” Daisy smiles, then shakes my shoulders. “I don’t know what you and Stark got into together, but it’s got you more tightly wound than.” She hesitates, then sighs. “I don’t even know.”

“Sorry.” I apologize. “Kind of hard to trust people with all…this.” I gesture around us.

“The Avengers? Yeah, I bet. Whole big secret, probably winds you up tight.”

“Yeah.” I laugh before a large man turns away from another conversation, spots the two of us then lets out a huge smile.

“Daisy…you know who that is?”

Daisy turns to look at the man, a surprised expression, before giving me a skeptical look. “Maybe not.”

“It’s an honor. Alphonso Mackenzie. Everybody around here calls me Mack.” The large man says, moving to shake my hand.

I return the gesture and smile.

He’s the S.H.I.E.L.D Director. He’s the boss.

“Yeah, Hill’s mentioned you. She likes you guys, said you guys sort of do your own thing.” I divert the conversation.

Mack shrugs then leads us towards a hallway. “Only because we’ve been forced to. Any attempts to reintegrate with the larger picture has turned up…messy.”

Like robots floating in the ocean.

“I’ve read.” I nod.
“So. Who is he? Genius with a ton of intel. Very close to Tony Freaking Stark.” Daisy says, emphatically.

“And super fast reflexes, a adaptable suit by the looks of it and a passport that has ‘Space’ stamped on it.” Mack says, then smirks at me.

Ahh. He knows. Makes sense, S.H.I.E.L.D Director would need to know if he spotted me one day.

Daisy doesn’t say anything for a moment, then turns to me with a stunned look. “No way.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re…Spider-Man?” She says quietly, then peeks around us to ensure nobody heard her.

I nod, then smile. “That’s me.”

“See. And you guys are already friends. Nice to have friends in high places.” Mack chides Daisy, who rolls her eyes at him.

“Shut up.” She retorts before looking back to me. “I…well now it makes a lot more sense. No wonder you were so damn paranoid last time I saw you.”

“But I’m better now.” I quickly add.

I am.

“I can tell.” She replies, then gently pushes my arm. “So, what’s the deal? You’re not an Inhuman?”

Nope.

I shake my head before Mack adds. “Then what is it?”

“A lame story. Bit by a spider on a field trip. Got sick, stayed home from school, slept. Woke up as…this.”

Mack and Daisy exchange a look. “That is kind of lame.” Mack brutally monotones.

“How long’d it take you to figure everything out?” Daisy peppers me.

I can’t stop a smile while I answer “Still kind of am. Juggling.”

“Not really, if you can beat a purple alien in three days.”

I didn’t do that.

Feeling helpless, I shrug. “So.” Mack helpfully chooses the moment to jump in. “What brings you here? What can we do for you?”

“Just seeing what’s going on. What the plan is.”

Daisy brightens up then takes the lead. “The plan? Get this bad boy space worthy in the next 9 days so we all can go to space.”

“You’re coming?” I smile.

I didn’t know that. I don’t know who all is coming.
“Yeah.” Mack nods. “We’ll be with you for the first leg of the journey, but after that we have a little mission of our own to handle.”

“Other mission?”

This time, Daisy answers. “Yeah. We…sort of lost a teammate. One of our best people. He’s somewhere out in space. Been working with some outer space contacts given to us to pinpoint where he is. And I think we’ve got it nailed down.”

So a rescue mission.

Last time Daisy said that it’s not like a team. Their team is a family. So it makes sense that they’re willing to go all the way out into space to bring him home.

“That’s awesome. Sounds promising.”

“It is.” Mack smiles. “Gonna take some work but we’ve got a good feeling about it.”

“And we’re due some luck.” Daisy adds as my phone vibrates in my pocket.

“Upside to my job: No meetings. Never boring.” –Michelle

That’s not true. She’s complained about the slow days, when it rains and nobody comes in.

“Is that her?” Daisy asks, sounding happy before I turn my phone over to hide the screen from her.

“Her?” Mack asks.

“The girl that Hunter and Bobbi are following? I think that’s his girl.”

“She’s not my girl.” I frown.

Daisy gives me a look. “Then why’s she texting you here at the Avengers compound? Does she know?”

“No, of course not. What are you crazy?”

They’re crazy.

“Well, if you do like her.” Mack laughs. “Being a superhero is a really good card to play.”

No. I wouldn’t want it like that. That’d be super cheap and….

No.

I shake my head and slip my phone back into my pocket. “Are you guys coming to this meeting?”

“Yeah.” Mack nods, then checks a clock on the wall. “Speaking of that, we’d better get going.”

He leads the way back towards the loading bay before Daisy laughs. “You know, most people would think having superpowers would help you get the girl.”

“Stop.” I request, continue following Mack all the way out of the ship.

“Any idea what this is supposed to be about by chance?” Mack turns back and asks. “I just know time and place and that we’re supposed to be there.”
I shrug. “Some details apparently. We, uhm…”

*I don’t think I should say that.*

I can trust these guys, but I can’t just tell them about May.

“Yes?” Daisy helpfully adds.

“I brought some people along with me. Assure them while we go off into space.”

“Your mom’s here?” She instantly beams.

“No.”

Mack hums his assent then adds “Yeah, you’d probably want to know what’s going on. Help you sleep better.”

*Exactly.*

We walk off the plane, towards the smooth glass before slowly they start to slow down.

“Where’s the door?” Daisy turns to me.

I smile, already pulling out my phone. “Karen, can you let us in?”

“Who is—?” Mack starts before the glass in front of us parts, allowing us inside.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome Peter. Director Fury is awaiting you all on the 4th floor, in his office.”

I nod as we walk in, then let the glass slide shut behind us. “We’re on our way.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see Mack and Daisy lean conspiratorily together.

“Did you know about…this?” He asks her.

“No.” She hisses back. “He’s totally different now.”
“Hey, May.” I watch myself call out as I walk past the kitchen table and drop my seat by my chair.

*Oh jeez I still had my headphones in my ears. I forgot about that.*

May makes a muffled comment before adding “Hey. How was school today?”

“Okay. This crazy car’s parked outside…”

May turns around fully on the couch, giving me an expectant look before “Oh, Mr. Parker.”

“What- What are you doing…? Hey! Uh, I'm-I'm-I'm Peter.”

“Tony.” Mr. Stark nods simply.

“What are… What are you— What are you— What are you doing here?” I stutter out.

“It's about time we met. You've been getting my e-mails, right?”

“Yeah.” I pause, then answer more confidently.

“Right?”

“Yeah. Regarding the…” I lead him on.

“You didn't tell me about the grant.” May questions me.

“About the grant.”

*About that grant May…*

“The September Foundation.” Stark supplies.

“Right.”

“Yeah. Remember when you applied?”

*No.*

“Yeah.” I play along before Mr. Stark nods.

“I approved, so now we're in business.”

“You didn't tell me anything. What's up with that? You keeping secrets from me now?” May hurls the question at me, not looking pleased at all.

“Why, I just, I just… I just know how much you love surprises, so I thought I would let you know… wh… Anyway, what did I apply for?”

“That's what I'm here to hash out.” Mr. Stark helps me out.

“Okay. Hash, hash out, okay.” I fumble out.

*I am such a bad negotiator.*
“It’s so hard for me to believe that she's someone's aunt.” Mr. Stark comments suavely, then smiles at May.

May gives him her nervous laugh before replying “Yeah, well, we come in all shapes and sizes, you know?”

“This walnut date loaf is exceptional.”

No it’s not you said it was trash five minutes later.

“Let me just stop you there.” I interject.

“ Yeah?” Mr. Stark turns back to me.

“Is this grant, like, got money involved or whatever? No?”

Behind me, I hear a laugh, prompting me to glance back and see May smiling at the scene.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” I parrot him.

“It’s pretty well funded. Look who you're talking to.” Mr. Stark quips before I glance away from the machine.

“Karen, pause it.”

The scene pauses, and May looks away from BARF, back to me. “This is…incredible.”

“Yeah.” I smile at her. “Mr. Stark invented it to help clear traumatic memories and events. Been trying to use it a bit. Help me out, you know?”

“Mhmm.” She nods, then looks back to the scene of the three of us in the living room, over two years ago. “Why’d you pull this up?”

I...

“I just…Miss him.” I swallow the lump in my throat as I lie.

He sounded genuine. Not quite as I remembered it. The whole thing was madness at first, too fast for it to sink in.

I was in Germany 24 hours later fighting Captain America, thinking I knew what was up.

Now everybody is so bitter about that. Romanoff never wants to talk about it, she almost always walks out of the room when it’s brought up. Hill hates it too. Won’t really tell me why, but I bet she thinks she could have helped diffuse the situation. I don’t know if she could have. In the moment, the bombing, the Vienna accident with Wanda...

Things were bad.

“You okay?” I hear May ask me, and I glance back to her giving me a concerned look.

I quickly nod emphatically. “Yeah. Just got a lot on my mind. Before this trip you know.”

Decathlon is coming home on Tuesday, then we’re leaving on Thursday for space.
“You think you’re ready for this?” May asks.

“Yeah.” I smile. “I’ll be fine by Thursday.”

May gives me a skeptical look before gently touching my arm while turning away, looking back at the lab. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

Yeah.

“Not bad.” I joke, getting May to laugh as off to the left, in my area my suit is laid out, being poked and prodded by a number of mechanical arms run by Karen as she runs the full systems diagnostic.

“Whose office is that?” May turns to the right and points to the walled off glass enclosure with a holotable in the middle, bookcase on the far wall with a staircase leading up to a small private porch.

“Mr. Stark’s.” May’s face freezes for a moment, then she looks back to me.

She thinks she hurt me again.

“I’m fine.”

She silently nods. “I’m gonna go check it out. You okay with that?”

Sure.

I return the nod. “Don’t mess with too much though. Please.”

I want it to be there when Morgan’s old enough to look at it. Everything in there is rightfully hers. It’s unrealistic to have it go untouched, I know Bruce and Natasha have been in there briefly because I’ve seen them do it.

I just can’t go in there yet.

Blinking, I watch May walk away before looking back to the scene in front of me.

That’s really it. Then the talk we had in my room. I think I’ll hold off on that until May leaves. It’s almost 9, so she should be going to bed—

A sudden sizzling sound emerges, causing me to whip back around.

OH! I need my webshooters.

As the portal opens, I feel my nanotech form around my wrists and into my hands, just as he walks out of the portal. Without hesitating, I fire off a warning web which flies right past him, congealing onto the floor.

Silently, Dr. Strange turns to me. “Well hello to you too.”

HOW.

“You do know that people have wanted to talk to you here right?” I answer right back. “If you don’t want to talk, then this is a bad idea.”

“This isn’t a bad idea.” He smiles at me, then strides over and extends his hand. “Mr. Parker.”
Formally.

I shake his hand, then smile nervously. “Doctor. Why are you here then?”

“I’m here to right a wrong. A wrong I don’t regret, but it’s still probably a wrong. Let’s wait for your Aunt though.”

*How does he know that—*

On cue, May glances up from a sheet of paper, to where Dr. Strange and I are standing together, before she tenses up. “Knew she’d figure out quickly.” Strange comments.

May runs out of Mr. Stark’s office. “What the hell? Who are you? Peter, get away from—”

“May, no, it’s alright. It’s fine.” I cut her off then give her a big smile.

“Answering your question, my name is Dr. Stephen Strange.” He says politely, smiling thinly.

“You’re not a doctor. You look like a TV character.” May dismisses the idea before frowning. “Is that a…cape?”

“It’s actually a cloak.” Dr. Strange clarifies for her.

*A levitating cloak that he can control with his mind.*

May looks from it, to me, then back to Dr. Strange. “I don’t believe…any of this.”

“Well I certainly understand why. It’s not normal.”

“You know this guy?” May wheels around to me.

I nod quickly. “Yeah May.”

“Without Mr. Parker, I would have died on a space ship a long ways away from here, or in space after a failed rescue plan.”

*Nearly blasting him into space.*

I laugh involuntarily, causing Dr. Strange to smirk at me before turning back to May. “To answer your next question, and the one Peter’s already asked, it’s going to take a moment to explain. Can I grab you a seat?”

“I—” May begins to say before she blips away.

*WHAT?!*

I turn feverishly to my office, where May is suddenly seated by my desk, gripping onto the chair tightly. “WHAT THE HELL!!?” She yells.

“After you.” Dr. Strange gestures, allowing me to lead the way back to my office, and I sit beside May who is clearly bewildered.

“Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Dr. Stephen Strange.” He explains as he sidles up to my desk, then leans up against it. “I was a Doctor in New York, before my horizons were…expanded, you could say.”
“And what is all…this?” May asks.

“The best way for me to describe it to you is magic. I’m harnessing energy from other dimensions.” He explains.

Yeah. I’ll say so.

“You do magic.” May states, then gives him a look. “Prove it.”

“I just did.” He counters. “But I can give you a more practical demonstration.” Dr. Strange then makes a small motion with his hands, before multiple copies of himself appear all around May, encircling the both of us.

I’ve already seen this. And somehow Thanos beat it. I don’t see how though. They all look exactly the same.

All the Dr’s Strange snap, and in the blink of an eye the original Dr. Strange is standing by my desk, a smile on his face. “Energy. Or magic.”

May just stares at him for a moment, then turns to me. “This is the wizard guy.”

I laugh anxiously, then smile at her.

How can I get this across in a way that she won’t fly off the handle...

“I’ve already seen him do this. And more. Not just cool tricks.”

“I can do those too.” Dr. Strange quips before I turn back to him and frown.

Thanks.

“Hold on, how come you just disappeared after everybody came back?” May asks him pointedly. “The world’s coming apart at the seams, nobody knows what’s going on, and you just disappeared.”

Strange thinly smiles at her. “I’ve got a lot more to protect than just Earth.”

“Awfully convenient.” May fires back at him.

May...

“Okay. What’s up then? Why here, why now?” I ask Strange.

Strange begins to reply before being cut off. “He’s here to stir the pot. When that’s the last thing we need.” I whip around and—

Hill. Stir the pot. She knows something.

“Stir the pot on what?” I ask both of them, as May looks lost.

Hill doesn’t make eye contact with me as I vaguely hear more footsteps up above us. “You know he’s going to space in a week.”

“Which gives him time to properly process all the information.” Strange contends. “Quiet too.”
“All of what information?” May says loudly.

“He put a spell on Peter.” Hill points strongly to me. “Without asking anyone. Just did it.”

**WHAT?**

“When?” May yells before the door upstairs opens, revealing Romanoff, Banner and Wanda as they all jog in, then simultaneously hit the brakes.

“What’s going…” Natasha trails off.

*On. Good question.*

“I enacted the spell as soon as I could reach him when we all came back to New York. I saw what would come next, and acted against it.”

**Wait what?**

“What happened?” I ask, causing Romanoff, May, and Hill to all turn to me. Dr. Strange meanwhile is eying Romanoff warily.

“I’m not here to debate you all Agent Romanoff. I’m here to take off the spell, then I’ll be off.” Strange says matter of factly.

“No.” She shakes her head. “That’s not how it works. We have questions for you.”

“About Morgan Stark? I don’t know, this is a completely new timeline. I don’t know what happens.” Strange replies.

Hill counters Strange. “But you just said—”

“I only had time to see glimpses of the timeline. He knows this.” Dr. Strange points to me. “I went through millions of outcomes to find this one. And what I saw required a very particular set of events, and even then, I took action to protect him.”

“Why?” May asks him.

Dr. Strange lets out a frustrated sigh. “Because. What I saw, Peter, after coming back, took off his mask and the entire planet saw his face. Whole life, gone. Secret identity, regular life? Gone.”

*Oh. I…did?*

The room is silent for a moment, which Strange capitalizes on. “Like I said earlier. I did what I did to protect him. I know it’s taken some maneuvering on your part, but this is the only way that his identity and his life could remain secret and as close to normal as possible. If you have a problem with that, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

“It wasn’t your call to make!” Hill fires back. “We—”

“Are trying to get on the same page and act as one. I know, I get it.” Dr. Strange rolls his eyes viciously. “One problem: There is no ‘we’. You? Me? Two separate things.”

“Doesn’t have to be.” Romanoff tells him.

“I’m the Master of the Mystic Arts. I can help you guys every now and then. But for the most part? I have bigger fish to fry.”
Yeah. He probably does. Another reason we can’t find him.

“You don’t just have unilateral authority—” Hill starts before Strange huffs out another breath then turns to me and—

A blinding flash blots out my vision, and I can’t help but to stumble back a few steps before I grab my desk for support.

Whoa.

**WHOA WHOA WHOA NOW.**

Hold…

_Hang on now._

All of a sudden, the earth rattling explosions all around me stop, before a bright light pops up in front of me.

_As a…person?_

“Hi…I’m Peter Parker.” I fumble out.

_It’s a woman. Short haircut. Smirking at me?_

“Hey Peter Parker. You got something for me?_

I force myself to my feet and look out to where a stampede of aliens is coming straight for us before I glance down at the glove in my arms, Stones planted inside. “I don’t know how you’re gonna get it through all of that.”

“—See? He’s been a wreck for weeks!” I vaguely hear Hill nearly yelling at Strange. “You didn’t even give him anything so that he could understand—”

“Understand?” Strange fires back. “He chased after an alien spaceship without being told. He went to a foreign planet! You’re not giving him enough credit.”

“Forget credit!” Romanoff hotly contests. “This whole thing—”

_I’m not doing this right now…_

I turn away from the arguments in front of me and start off in the other direction.

_Focus Parker. C’mon. Focus Spider-Man._

“Hey.” A voice off in the distance says.

_What happened? That really hurt. What’d he do?_

What’d Thanos do now?

“Hey!” I hear Dr. Strange more clearly this time. “Parker! C’mon!”

“What’s going on?” I hear off to my left, then turn and see Quill. Star-Lord. And Mantis and Drax.

_Wait, where’s—?_
“It’s been five years. Stark and the others have been trying to figure out a way to bring us back. It worked. Now c’mon.” Strange says shortly, before turning away from all of us.

**WHAT? Five years?**

“Five years?” Mantis asks.

“Where we goin’?” Quill asks.

Dr. Strange doesn’t reply before a portal opens up and he floats through it. Drax runs after him without hesitation, knives out, followed by Mantis.

*I guess we—*

Quill activates his rocket boots and jets off, leaving me to quickly swing around a pillar of debris and through the portal before landing.

**Whoa. That’s Captain America.**

**With an army behind him?**

Cap eyes us for a moment before off to my left, somebody begins yelling something, followed by a booming war chant.

**There’s portals everywhere.**

“What in the hell…” I hear Quill mutter behind me as ships begin popping out from every direction, as well as a enormous white horse with wings.

**Mr. Stark!**

His face barely flashes before someone heavily lands in front of him, then pops open their helmet as the yells continue building.

**The battle to end all battles. The one we would have had if we hadn’t separated and gotten split up. But we got it anyway.**

“—excuse me! I don’t give a damn. Nobody gets to make unilateral shots around here! Not me, not you, not Romanoff, or Thor, or anyone!” Fury declares heatedly behind me. “The only person who I might, *might!* Let make a unilateral call is off in space right now!”

**This…**

This is unbelievable.

“You backed us into a corner where we had no choice but to lie!” Romanoff’s voice breaks through my thoughts.

“You could have told him that I was protecting him. You knew that. I told Danvers that when she found me.” Dr. Strange coolly counters both of their points.

“She found you?” Fury asks.

“That’s not the point.” Dr. Strange replies.

“The point is that you forced our hand. And now you’re trying to get out of here before the
blowback comes.” Hill speaks up, sounding…

_Cold._

“If there’s blowback then fine, I’ll take it. But I did what I did out of what I know of his best interests and happiness are. The girl, his school, his work with you, his status as a superhero.” Dr. Strange silences all of them. “All four of them would be gone, warped beyond recognition if I hadn’t acted. I’m not asking for understanding but you must _at least_ understand that.”

“You made us build a house of cards!” Hill replies. “And then you just waltz right back in and pull your card, causing the whole thing to fall.”

“It wasn’t your call to make! We could have—” Bruce starts before Dr. Strange cuts him off.

“How many times do I have to tell all of you that is no ‘we’ here. Just you. I’m something entirely separate.”

“We were going to tell him! He even knows that!” Bruce points out. “I told him that last week at lunch together. More time than the two of you have spent together I’m sure. He knows that he didn’t know everything, only about—”

“Thirty percent.” Everyone in the room looks back to me, including Fury and Dr. Strange. For a brief moment, the room is silent before Dr. Strange scoffs. “Thirty percent? I wish. How about three percent? A third of a percent! I wish he could have known thirty percent. And how were you going to explain it to him? Load it onto a file and say ‘Here! Read this and we’re here for all of your questions?”’

“Uhh.” Dr. Banner stumbles.

_Wait._

“You were going to just give me a file?!” I say, louder than I intend to. In chorus, Romanoff, Hill and Wanda all whip around to face me.

_A FILE?!?

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE JOKING—

“Nobody should ever have the power to control someone’s information or memories.” Dr. Strange states.

Fury claps back at him. “Oh yeah? Then what is it that you’ve been doing exactly?”

“Caring about him.”

_Oh._

Once more, everyone’s heads leave their spot, and whip around.

_To May._

May, who is still seated but pale and looks livid. “I…I want to say this calmly.” She gets out shakily, then clears her throat.

“I was told when I met with you—” May turns to Fury. “—in your office that I would allow peter
to help the world and be an Avenger. If you, all of you. Watched out for him. That you’d put your right hand man—” May points to Hill, still looking to Fury. “—with one goal in mind: his protection!”

**Uh oh.**

May’s gonna go off.

“And!” May’s voice rise again before anyone can take advantage of the silence. “You told me that you would be completely open and honest with me. And Peter. But if you couldn’t be honest with him, then always with ME!”

Yeah. That clearly hasn’t happened.

Around the room, Dr. Strange is standing stoically, while most of the others, Mack, Rhodey, Sharon, Bruce and Wanda all have their heads down, looking mortified. Before May continues, I feel a twinge somewhere near where my stomach used to be.

Before my world has suddenly been turned upside down.

“I…want.” May starts, then stops to steady her voice. “You—” She points to Fury. “—And you—” She points to Maria Hill. “I wanna know everything. What you’ve told me, what you haven’t told me, what you’ve lied about, all of it.”

Yeah, she’s gonna get that. Or—

She’s going to pull the plug on all of this.

“Well?” May says, after another moment of complete silence and stillness. The whole room jumps when she claps her hands once. “Let’s go!”

Fury is the first to move. “Alright Mrs. Parker. Follow me please.”

The whole room watches May gets to her feet, followed by Hill as they walk through the door, up the stairs and out of sight in silence before everyone seems to begin to breathe again.

I…

May’s right. They lied to me.

*Everything they’ve said about being open and honest. Telling them everything. Being honest with them about my nightmares, facing Titan head on, and it being okay to grieve, and hurt and…*

And…

In an instant, all I see is red before I grab the nearest throwable object and throw it as hard as I can away from everyone, leaving it to fly through the glass in my lab, then the glass outside before whatever it is sparks and pieces fly off into the darkness.

“Peter, I’ve lost connection with your phone, is—”

“I KNOW YOU’VE LOST CONNECTION KAREN!!”

**SHUT UP!!!**

“Okay…” Karen quickly says in a much quieter voice. “Sorry.”
They told me to focus on what’s in front of me. Hill told me to trust what they’re telling me, what I was fed, in this carefully constructed bubble. Dr. Banner probably wasn’t even supposed to tell me about how I didn’t even know anything. Or thirty percent or whatever.

Instead they fattened me up like a pig or something, planning to slaughter me out in space with...I can’t breathe.

I take a desperate gasp for air, and thankfully the air comes to me, causing me to feel slightly lightheaded before I throw myself down into a sitting position.

_Breathe...Just like you told Michelle. In..._

_Michelle._

_That’s why they’ve been so focused on her. Keep my mind on her instead of the glaring holes directly in front of my face that I can’t see or am afraid to look for. Their story, the whole thing is like Swiss cheese._

It makes sense now. I can’t remember exactly what happened after I landed with Mr. Stark because of whatever spell Dr. Strange put on me. And they had Scott, Ant-Man, the guy whose has kids and knows how to handle kids, take me to whatever that tent was.

_I wonder if his whole reaction was like scripted or something. If they told him to trip over that instrument stand._

I need to call and ask him that. What he knows. Because he knows exactly where all this started before Fury and Hill got involved and twisted everything up.

“Hey, what—?” I ask, then turn back around—

_Time...is it where...he’s at. Nevermind._

Behind me, the first pane of broken glass lies shattered into a thousand pieces with the pieces all around me while behind that, the room where Rhodey, Dr. Strange and the others were all just at is now completely deserted and empty. Off to the right is the frozen image of Mr. Stark looking to me, as May is looking to him.

_And I’m all alone._
“Adjustments to the left exterior pylons complete.” Karen informs me as I tweak a superconductor on my pylon.

“Okay Karen, thanks.”

C’mon now…

Ever so slightly I take a sliver of the wire’s protective coating off, then hear the chime of my laptop.

I think it worked.

“Adjustments to the right exterior pylon complete.” Karen calls out.

“Perfect.” I smile, then pull off my glasses, set my tweezers and glove down and jog over to my laptop.

All the settings that Friday calculated are now inputted. Should be ready.

“Karen, everything’s connected right? I didn’t cross any wires, mess up the voltage…”

I almost did that this morning, working on the holographic bulbs. Nearly lit millions on fire, but instead I redid my math and fixed it.

“All BARF systems and protocols are functioning normally Peter.”

Great.

“And you have all of the old protocols and settings saved back, so that when we’re done here we can turn it back?”

Karen is silent for a moment, checking on the file status or something before replying “That is the fourth time you have inquired about the save status of Mr. Stark’s original BARF settings. Would you like me to set a reminder for 8:00 AM tomorrow to revert the settings back?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” I reply with a nod then look around.

Everything’s clean except for my toolbox. Chairs are already out…No water within 10 feet of the entire BARF platform…

I think we’re set.

“Karen?”

“Yes Peter?” She replies, in a tone I don’t quite recognize.

“Tell Hill that I’m done down here. Whenever the directors and their writers arrive, we can get going.”

“On it.” She replies loyally, then clicks off to execute the task. Leaving me to look at the room I’ve spent all day tearing apart.
BARF moved all the way across the lab with the new setup as a projector for all of our footage of Infinity War and whatever we’re calling life post-Snap…

Just as I hang my head to try and clear my mind, voices start floating to me through the long hallway, and I snap out of it.

I guess they’re here already.

Quickly, I start throwing everything into my toolbox as the group comes closer. By the time I’m setting my pliers down, I hear “Hey.”

It’s Sharon.

“Hi. Just finished up. You’re all set.” I smile at her as the five visitors, clear as day file in behind us.

Sharon smiles before replying “Awesome, thanks. Was it as hard as you thought?”

“No really.” I shrug. “Fury made it sound a lot more daunting that what he had in mind.”

The drawings he sent really helped out.

“That happens.” She laughs, then smiles again as finally our visitors turn to our conversation, then freeze.

Keep moving, keep going, don’t make it weird.

“I’ll be upstairs if you guys have any trouble. And Karen’s going to monitor too.” I explain to Sharon, trying to be casual.

“Okay, sounds good.” She nods, then starts directing the Directors to a seat while I walk to the duo in the back.

They did show up. I thought Mack might come instead.

“Hey.” Daisy says cheerfully, while beside her Simmons smiles softly at me.

“Hi.” I return their smiles as Simmons looks around.

“That’s it huh.”

I glance to my left, where the first projector pylons are extending out. “Yeah. That’s it.”

“And its primary usage is still involving the hippocampus?” Simmons rattles off, then looks to me.

“I…I’m pretty sure so.”

“Fascinating.” She replies, then slides past me to approach the machine, leaving Daisy and I.

She smiles at Simmons, then glances back to me. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I nod easily, only for her to frown.

“No you’re not.”

“You just asked me that.” I counter.
Daisy shrugs, then leans against the wall. “I know I did. And your tone didn’t cover it. And you said it too fast. You rehearsed it.”

Well yeah. Because I’m fine. I’m just going to have to deal with…everything as it comes to me.

“You’ll see.” I say, then glance back to Sharon, who is talking to one of the writers.

A moment passes before Daisy replies “The truth isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Sometimes…sometimes the lie is easier.”

The only reason why they lied is because they cared about me. They wanted to protect me from what Dr. Strange did for me.

And the lie was easier to process, accept and move on from.

But they were going to tell me anyway. It seems like, out in space where there’s plenty of room to scream.

“Let me know if something messes up. I’ll be upstairs.” I tell Daisy, then waggle my phone in my hand.

“You got a new phone already? Damn.”

Yeah. I guess so yeah.

I shrug, then finally walk out of my lab and out into the far hallway and start toward the living room.

I finally went to bed late on Thursday night, after Hill told everyone else that May asked Happy to take her back to Queens after her meeting with Fury and Hill. Didn’t say anything, just asked to leave, and Fury let her.

Thought I’d wake up yesterday and think it’s all a bad dream but nope. New phone sitting out, waiting for me to grab it, preloaded and ready to go.

Haven’t used it much, with the BARF project and dropping everything else for now. Been too busy.

I like the case they grabbed for it though.

Glancing down at the phone as I round the corner, Romanoff’s voice drifts through the hall, followed by a small clink.

Oh yeah. It’s poker night. I’ll just slip by, grab a snack from the kitchen and go to my room. Pack, maybe. I don’t know.

I calmly round the corner as Romanoff hands something to Rhodey, then smile at Wanda as she slides away from the fridge, orange juice in her hands.

“Hey.” She smiles in surprise.

I throw open the fridge, then turn back return the smile. “Hi. Excuse me.”

What kind of leftovers…?

“Hey Pete.” I hear behind the door. “We got pizza over here too.”
I poke my head out and see Scott Lang, smiling behind the fridge door. “When’d you get here?”

“Just before the pizza. C’mon.” He waves me forward, closing the fridge behind me.

“I’ll just grab a slice and keep moving. I just wanted a snack.” I tell Scott as I see most everybody already circled up, Barton talking to Rhodey and Romanoff.

“I’m not sure that’s an option. Apparently this is a normal thing for you guys?” Scott says, unsure of something before I spot the pizza boxes off to the right, then dodge over and grab a plate.

“C’mon. I just want to grab a snack, then hang out in my room for a night.

As soon as I turn away from the pizza, someone raises their voice. “And now everyone’s here, so we can get going.”

“I’ll make drinks.” Sam’s voice answers as I mess with the pizza box.

“Stupid thing won’t…close.

“Hi Peter.” Romanoff calls out to me, cheerful tone evident before I turn and see her smiling at me.

“Hi.” I wave at everyone assembled in a semi-circle, like always for poker. “I’m just grabbing a snack then going back to—”

Barton, who was sitting by Romanoff, pops to his feet. “Nah nah nah. We’re not doing that.”

“Oh really? News to me.

Silently, I smile, then grab a couple of napkins then move to walk away from everyone before my pizza is stolen out of my hand. “I’ll take that…”

“No.” I snap at Barton as he sets my pizza on the main table.

“I get it, you don’t want to talk.” He says reasonably, then leans on the back of the couch as everyone else is…

“They don’t matter. I need my food and then I’m going to my room.”

“No.” I say once more. “I’m tired, I just worked all day and I just want some pizza and to sit down.”

“Then sit here!” He points to the couch. “Sam’s already making drinks for you guys.”

“Me too.

“I’m okay, thanks. I kind of just want—”

“Some peace and quiet?” Barton finishes my sentence, then laughs. “Well if that’s what you want, you chased after the wrong spaceship.”

“This doesn’t have to do with anything Avengers. I just want to sit down and relax.”

“I don’t feel like that’s asking for too much here.

Barton lets out a breath, then settles more on the back of the couch. “Let me ask you a question. A
They have all the answers to the Avengers questions. And I’m not going to look at them until Earth is way in the rearview mirror.

“You know everything, why ask me?” I dismiss him.

Bruce quickly speaks up. “We don’t know everything.”

In terms of Avengers stuff. Mr. Stark invited me but I said no.

“That’s my point!” He says emphatically. “What happened, was that all us losers, Wanda, Me, Scott, Sam, we all got arrested! Cap and Stark had their big fight—”

Wait what fight?

“—came to bust everyone out. But we couldn’t go because of our families. While you stopped a flying bird man. Nobody talked, nobody moved, nobody did shit! And then look what happened! Everything, gone, reduced to ash.”

Funny. Ash. You didn’t get snapped. You wouldn’t know.

“Clint.” Romanoff says gently, eyes darting from me to Barton.

“I don’t care!” Barton loudly counters Romanoff. “He’s talking. And if I need to be the bad guy, then fine. But we’re not moping. We’re not grabbing our goddamn pizza and hiding in our rooms. We’re sitting out here, we’re playing cards, we’re talking about you guys going to space, and laughing, and having fun because we’re Avengers. Okay?”

I’m not moping.

“Right.” Scott adds in support of Barton.

“I’m not moping. I’m just tired.” I speak up.

Barton waves my words down without hesitating. “Wanda, is he moping?”

“I’m not—nope. Not getting into this one.” Wanda tells him as I turn and see her tucked into a corner of the couch.

“He is a little mopey.” Sam’s voice.

I AM NOT MOPING.

I whip around to look at Sam as he strides in then sets my drink beside my pizza and turns to me.
“You like what you’re seeing? Because I charge people who just stand there and glare at me.”

Very funny.

I don’t change my expression, only for Sam to brighten and chuckle before adding “You look ready to pop off and start yelling at everybody. Go ahead. We can take it. Can’t say nothin’ I haven’t heard before.”

“Or worse.” Rhodey laughs, getting Sam to laugh as well. “The stuff my CO used to say at 5 AM…”

Hill groans in sympathy before Sam adds “C’mon. Sit. Drink. Yell at us if you want. Now you have the basics for everything.”

They won’t let me yell at them.

“Got something for you too.” Romanoff adds, raising a tablet and wiggling it slightly.

A file.

“C’mon…” Barton encourages me, half serious, half tone already wavering.

Fine. I guess.

“Yeah!” He lets out a cheer as I round the couch and sit down next to Hill, who shifts over to give me room but doesn’t say anything.

“Much better.” Sam comments while I grab my pizza back and take a bite.

A little cold.

“So.” Barton snaps his fingers, then beings counting. “One, two, three…five six seven.”

“Maybe eight.” Romanoff adds. Barton silently nods while starting to count out chips and pass them around.

As everyone else takes their chips, I finish my two slices of pizza, then sip the drink Sam gets me.

That’s different.

“You made it different?” I turn and ask him.

He nods while setting his drink down. “It’s a 7&7. Not an old fashioned.”

I kind of like it. There’s a sweetness to it.

“You like it?” Romanoff asks, and I nod.

“Good.” She smiles.

“I’m limiting you to three.” Sam adds.

Okay.


“I’m trying not to kill him.”
“But isn’t there a girlfriend we want him to drunk text?”

*Girlfriend?!*

“No.” Wanda laughs.

“Drunk text!” I say, almost outraged.

*If I start feeling these drinks, I’m telling Karen to block every text I want to send out.*

“Yeah. Have a couple of those, text your girl, then maybe you won’t be able to come up some weekend because you have a date.”

*I already have a date though. Oh wait. I haven’t told them. I need to do that.*

“Karen?” I speak up, causing everyone to look in my direction. “Show them what MJ gave me last weekend.”

*No better time than now I guess.*

Grabbing my drink as Karen flashes up a screen for all to—

“What?!” Hill yelps, leaping off the couch, then pulls up a duplicate screen. Romanoff meanwhile, has pulled the main screen to her.

“Hey!” Barton protests. “I didn’t get to read all of it!”

“Does this look like what I think it looks like to you?” Romanoff fires at Dr. Banner.

“Yeah but—”

“I thought you said that they were all super awkward when you saw them!”

Bruce counters “They were! She was nervous and he, well, Pete—”

*I couldn’t think of anything safe to say.*

Hill silently flashes up multiple copies of the screen for everyone to read, which silences the discussion for the most part. “It looks like a wedding invitation.” Scott finally says after a moment.

*Because that’s what it is.*

“When’d you get this?” Hill asks me quietly.

“Last weekend, before the party got busted up.”

Romanoff suddenly smirks. “So that’s why she was so—”

“No.” I cut her off.

“So what? What was she?” Sam demands.

Romanoff laughs before tucking her hair back. “She couldn’t hide it for a minute there. Holding his hand, ducking close when the cops came.”

Everyone laughs loudly before Sam changes his voice to a higher pitch, sounding an awful lot like a damsel in distress. “Oh help me Peter, help me! Don’t let me get arrested!” I can’t help but start
laughing at Sam’s impression, and before I can stop, everybody else has joined in,

I’ll admit. That’s funny. And she did get all touchy there. Did again at home after she snuck another glass of wine away from May, binging another two or three episodes before going to sleep.

“Okay, okay, let’s get started.” Clint waves everyone off, then starts dealing out cards. Sam meanwhile, grabs my glass away from me.

“Be back!”

“Get me more too!!” Wanda calls after him.

“On it!”

“That’ll be fun.” Bruce says cheerfully, before I turn back to him. “August…8th. He’ll be back by then right?”

Romanoff nods. “A few days at least. Time to get him fitted, get a gift—”

“A gift?” I blurt out.

“It’s customary.” Barton says simply. “You’re invited to their party of a lifetime, you bring something to say thank you and congratulations. Doesn’t have to be big or anything. Nat, what’d you get us for our…”

Romanoff, meanwhile is glaring pointedly at him before Barton laughs, adding “Oh yeah. Forgot about that.”

“I absolutely would have bought something if I had known you then. And I bought you guys stuff you needed for all three of your brats.” She fires off at him.

“They’re not brats. They’re heathens I thought.” Barton smirks back.

“They’re my heathens.”

Scott gently nudges my elbow as Barton and Romanoff continue arguing. “Don’t worry about it. Doesn’t have to be big, probably shouldn’t be, since you’re a date to the whole thing.”

Oh good.

“What’d you get for wedding gifts?” I reply.


“In the end?” I parrot him as Scott looks slightly pained.

“Don’t worry about it.” He claps me on the shoulder, then takes two cards from Rhodey.

“Yeah Pete.” Rhodey smiles. “ One of us will talk to May about it. She’ll love buying it.”

She’ll be busy but…

Barton tosses two cards in my direction before I take them. “Okay.”

“Don’t start without me!!” Sam calls out from the other room.
“Too late!” Wanda calls back before hurried footsteps follow, then slide to a halt.

“Knew it. I’m the life of this party.” He adds, then slides my new drink in front of me. Casually, I sip it then check out my new cards.

_Oh. Oh no. 3,5. Opposite suits._

I fold and flick my cards away in disgust before Barton says “No. No. When we say play—” He pushes my cards back to me. “You play. You don’t just fold. You’re an Avenger, not a cheap accordion.”

“There are cheap accordions?” Scott asks the room.

“Bad cards. I fold.” I counter Barton.

“Not that fast you don’t.”

“You want my cards?” I offer.

Barton gives me a look, then glances around as Rhodey has started the betting at $20, Romanoff and Banner have both matched him, along with Scott while Hill…

“Fine. Give me those.” Barton extends his two cards, and we swap.

_Eh. Not much better. 9 and a 6 of clubs. Matching suit at least._

“Are you not playing?” I turn to Hill, who looks back to me.

_She looks tired._

“Not really feeling it. I’m just relaxing.” She says simply, then smiles thinly before turning away. “Barton?”

“Well, at least we taught you right. These cards do suck.” He chuckles, before everyone laughs.

“He told you!” Wanda teases him before Barton folds my cards face up, revealing them to everyone.

Romanoff winces. “Ooh. That is bad.”

_Told you._

“It’s a start.” Hill reasons.

“A bad one.” Barton pops back. “Okay, let’s see the turn.”

Hill turns over a King of hearts, Jack of spades and a 7 of diamonds.

_Nothing. I’m out._

I fold, along with Bruce and Wanda. The other raise their bets before Romanoff hands off the tablet to Bruce. “While you’re waiting…”

_Oh right._

“Thank you.” I say once the tablet is passed from Bruce to Hill then to me. As soon as I pull it into my lap, the screen unlocks and the file begins to load.
I forcibly blink twice to make sure I’m reading the screen in front of me right.

Complete Assessment and Evaluation:

Michelle Angela Jones
96415 Oakwood Road
Englewood, NJ 07631
Subdivision: Stonegate

“What is this?” I ask quietly, causing Hill to lean over, then point at the title.
‘Complete Assessment and Evaluation’

They...She said it like it was a joke! They actually....

“You actually did it?” I ask Hill.

Instead, Romanoff answers, looking puzzled. “Well, yeah.”

“Why?”

“She asked Hill and said she wanted to help.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s asking!” I quickly counter.

Rhodey answers “She kind of does. She knows you have Stark Tech. She knows you were involved in Thanos’ invasion. She knows you are hiding things from her for her own safety and protection.”

“And she still did it.” Romanoff smirks.

Not the point right now.

Biography:

Jones is the only child of Tiffany Banks and Andrew Jones, born March 15, 2002 in Chicago, Illinois at—

MJ WAS BORN IN CHICAGO??

How the heck did she end up here in New York? I never knew her before I transferred into Midtown but—

I shouldn’t be reading this.

I push the tablet away as my stomach suddenly churns. “Hey, did you start the next game without me?”
I think they did.

“You’re got reading to do.” Barton gestures with his cards.

I quickly shake my head. “No.”

“No?” He parrots me, as the others all turn to me.

“Why not?” Bruce asks.

“This is…a complete file on her.”

If they did it right, which I know they did because she’s important to me, then they have LITERALLY everything on her.

My file is ridiculous. They have my birth records, full profiles of my parents and May and Ben, a note of the plane crash, those records, old school enrollment forms, detention notices from back before I met Mr. Stark…

Everything.

And if they got everything on MJ, which I know they did, then I can’t read it.

“And?” Scott motions for me to continue.

“It’s wrong! I can’t read it!”

“Why not?” Barton counters. “Think of it like you’re scouting her parents! You’re gonna meet them at this wedding!”

“It’s all private information! Hers to give out, and—”

“She volunteered.” Hill turns to me.

“She didn’t know she meant this!” I point to the tablet. “I’m not reading it.”

“It’s just the basics. We didn’t do a full psych profile, just a general one.” Rhodey speaks up in his reassuring voice. “Nothing too invasive. You don’t have to read it all if you don’t want to.”

Good.

“What do I have to read?”

Rhodey smiles before Romanoff adds “Karen, direct him to the evaluation page.”

The tablet lights back up, with a new heading.

Evaluation:

Taking the entire scope of Ms. Jones’ history, actions witnessed via various forms of surveillance and personal testimonials, I, Bobbi Morse, along with Agent Lance Hunter of S.H.I.E.L.D recommend allowing Ms. Jones to be given provisional access and temporary status with Level 1 security clearance.

The clear dedication and care that Jones shows in—
“She’s…in?”

“What does recommendation mean?” I ask everyone.

“Well.” Bruce sighs. “If she’d failed, we would have told you to shut up. And there’d be lawyers at her house right now.”

Oh.

“But she didn’t. So she’s in. Kind of.”

“What does level 1 security clearance even get you?”

Hill answers “Not much really.”

All I know is my Level 7 clearance. And that gets me access to everything.

Well, actually, I take that back.

I thought.

“Why are you giving me this anyway?” I push my frustration aside once more.

Romanoff smiles. “So you can give it to her on Tuesday.”

No.

“Right before I leave?”

That’ll go great.

“She’ll have plenty of time to read it and understand.” Sam comments.

“And what if I don’t give it to her?”

Sam gives me an odd look before Wanda says “You really are this anxious aren’t you?”

“Yeah!” I reply. “Because she’s my responsibility to keep safe. Like all my friends are. Right now, they’re perfectly fine. No problems.”

“We’re not going to throwing her into live combat or anything.” Romanoff replies. “It’s really nothing, just a ceremonial piece of paper.”

A piece of paper that they had agents following her and look into her ENTIRE HISTORY FOR.

“Man, at my age, I would have killed for something like this on the girl I liked.” Scott comments, then reaches for the tablet.

I tuck the tablet farther from him while answering “I don’t like her.”

“Yeah you do.”

“No.” I frown at Scott.

“You can say that as much as you—” I wheel the tablet around as he’s getting a hand on it to wrench it from my grip and crack him on the head with it. “—OWW!! I…probably deserved that.”

Quickly, everyone starts laughing, even Hill, who ducks her head before shifting away from me.
“Well.” Rhodie says heavily. “That was fun.”

“Another successful night Widow.” Bruce smiles at her, only for her to glance away from him.

“Yeah. Maybe I’m not so good at Poker after all though.” Scott comments.

Yeah…

He mentioned later on in the night that he learned how to play while he was in prison. Whoever taught him either taught him wrong or he learned the wrong things because he was awful.

Worse than me. I cleaned him out. He only has about 400 bucks left out of the two thousand that he started with.

“You think?” Sam quips, then smiles as Scott turns to him. Behind them, Wanda waves to me.

“Night everyone.”

“Night Wanda.” Barton turns back to her.

“Night!” Romanoff calls after her before she disappears down the hallway.

Yeah, it’s probably that time.

“Thanks.” I speak up, causing everyone to turn to me. “That was…fun.”

Barton was right. Everyone was exactly who they’ve been this whole time. I had fun, everybody did, the time flew, I learned a few things…

It was fun.

“Good.” Sam smiles. “Next time I’m coming for your neck. Took it easy this time.”

Sure he did.

“Don’t give me that look!” Sam chastises me. “I know that look. That ‘you didn’t take it easy, get outta here…’ look.”

Rhodie jumps in “You folded with pocket Queens,”

“Because I thought Nat had a flush!”

She didn’t. She scared everyone off.

Rhodie and Sam keep debating strongly while behind them, Romanoff waves to me, indicating that they’re headed to bed.

Yeah I probably should too.

I scoop up my glass, then turn towards the kitchen and—

Where’s Hill going?

As the party breaks up in the living room, Hill is walking away behind Banner and Romanoff.
She looks down. And she shouldn’t be, she loves poker nights.

I slide my glass onto the counter, then dodge the couches and hustle after Hill.

“Hill.” I call out causally, trying to make it sound normal. In front, Romanoff turns back but Hill continues walking, taking a left.

I don’t know where her room here actually is.

“Hill, hey—” I start before the chime of the elevator doors closing silences me, but not before I see a flash of Hill’s expression.

I don’t like that. At all. She looks…not like herself.

She’s always strong and fierce and determined. Nothing gets past her, she’s basically god when it comes to me, nobody except Fury can overrule her. I mean, even when I mess things up she still answers me.

And now she ignored me. While looking, I don’t know. Vulnerable.

In a whim, I turn and find the stairs, then take them four at a time, beating the elevator to the third —

Nope.

Fourth—

Not this one.

Fifth floor, which opens to Hill looking even worse before stuttering to a stop when she sees me.

“Are you okay?” I ask nervously.

She almost looks ready to cry. If she could cry.

“Yeah.” She says thickly, then smiles. “I’m tired.”

I counter softly. “You were quiet all night.”

“It’s been a long week. Haven’t slept much. Just tired. You’re noticing the wrong things. You never even asked why Scott came by.” She answers, then walks to where she’s even with me,

Hey.

“I don’t think I’m noticing the wrong things.” I reply, then smile when Hill stops and glances back at me.

Oh. Something’s definitely wro—

All of a sudden Hill’s face buckles, and she engulfs me into a hug, stuffing her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine. It’s okay—”

Hill cuts me off, shaking her head before sobbing. “No, I know you’re mad.”

Kind of, yeah. But there wasn’t really anything else they could have done.
I guess. Nothing else has changed.

_Their hand got forced. I wish they’d said it different, yeah. But—_

“—I shouldn’t have said that about Scott. You didn’t deserve it.” She finishes blurting out.

_Barton’s right._

“I shouldn’t have hid. Holed up in the lab.” I smile in embarrassment.

Hill’s face morphs again, this time into frustration. “You should be mad at me.”

_Not really._

“Everybody was trying to protect me.” I smile at Hill, who lets out a breath and frowns. “That’s why everybody got so mad when he came back.”

_They were trying to protect me like Dr. Strange did. But how he did it made it impossible for them to get off to the right foot._

But they’re still here. They chose to work with it.

“We tried to—” Hill starts, before her voice starts to choke up and she has to clear her throat. “Sorry.”

_It’s ok._

“We tried to just go with it. Everyone wanted to tell you, but we couldn’t.”

“You were in too deep.”

_Because they all love me. And now I have to go from here._

Before Hill can do more than clear her throat, I instinctively hug her, which instantly turns into her crying into my shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying that.” I laugh, which gets her to laugh as well.

“I think I liked your hugs better when you were shorter.” Hill mumbles after a moment.

“Really?”

_We only hugged once before. Right after we came back._

After the doctors figured out that my suit wasn’t lying and that I was okay, despite Karen being very uncooperative and denying the doctors access to my suit’s vitals. Hill came in and basically took charge.

_Explained that she was with the Avengers. And that their only priority right now was to get May here, and then get us to their base._

Hill nods.

_The very last thing she did, after standing up and saying that we were leaving, was turn to me, and give me a hug._
“You might have to get used to it.” I joke, and she laughs before hanging her head even further.

“That’s not funny.” She groans, then gives me a little squeeze before letting go and sniffling.

She’s still—

“You good?”

She sniffs even louder before shaking her head and turning away. “Yeah. Allergies.”

Allergies.

“So this is you huh?” I joke, then gesture around to the barren hallway.

Doors here and there, but for the most part empty.

“I’m down the way. Have you ever been down here?”

I shake my head. Before Hill smirks. “Oh. Well c’mon then.”
“Alright…” May mutters, and I drop the bottle of disinfectant onto the kitchen counter.

“All set?”

May glances back to me behind the counter. “Yup.”

She dressed up. A little.

But since she didn’t have this lunch until 15 minutes after Hill and Bruce showed up at the front door…

I have a hunch.

“How about you? All set here. Snacks, drinks, decathlon stuff?” May finally turns to me fully.


I was planning on picking up all the snacks and stuff after I came back from Upstate yesterday afternoon.

Until May came back about 20 minutes after I arrived, laden with groceries.

“I hope I got the right kind of quinoa.” She frowns.

I can’t help but laugh. “It’ll work. They’re not picky.”

“Anything from Michelle?”

“Coming straight from work.” I shrug.

May gives me a funny look. “It’s almost 1. That place opens at what, 10:30? Long train ride in just to work for three hours, then come here.”

I don’t know. She just texted me and said she might be a few minutes late. And she called me a huge dork.

At least I know she doesn’t totally mean it.

“What about them?” May hisses, causing me to turn my attention back to her. Behind her, Hill is sitting on my bed with some sort of bag out, while Bruce is looking at a screen.

“It’ll be fine.”

May gives me a look. “And you didn’t know they were coming.”

I think that all this goofed up their planning and this is about my packing.

“They’re being weird about my bags I think. Being extra cautious.”

“And you’re really just completely okay?” May blurts out suddenly.

She wasn’t listening to what I said. This is what she’s wanted to say the whole time.
May quickly looks flush. “Yeah.” I nod.

“But they lied—”

“May.” I cut her off. “I haven’t read the details. I’m still mixed up about what’s real or not. I—”

*I’m not doing a good job explaining this.*

“They haven’t changed. They just care about me.”

“I care about you too!” May hotly counters.

“Then that’s why they did it.” I close down the argument. “I’ll read the details somewhere out in space.”

Quietly, May’s phone begins ringing in her bag. “Oh, I’m late…”

“Bye.” I smile at May as she runs to the door while also grabbing her phone and opening the door. She smiles before

“Hello—”

*Door.*

I turn to my door as Hill is opening it. “Was that her?” She asks.

*Yup.*

“That wasn’t planned.” Bruce says, right behind her.

“I knew she was still pissed.” Hill adds.

I get back to wiping off the kitchen island before Hill snatches up my paper towel. “Hey!”

“Hi.” Hill says flatly then slightly breaks and smirks before adding “We’ll be in your room.”

“Why’d you come in? I followed the baggage guidelines you gave me!”

*No toothpaste, water bottles, nothing carbonated…*

Both Hill and Banner give me a puzzled look before there is a knock at the door.

“All you!” Hill leaps for my bedroom door.

“Good luck!” Bruce adds before shutting my door tight.

*Thanks.*

“—pretty easy trip.” Cindy smiles at me.

I return the smile while shutting the door. “Good. Snacks and stuff are in the kitchen.”

“Thank you!” She replies.

“You’re welcome.” I say, only for it to be ignored as Betty rapidly approaches her.
Okay.

I walk back to my tea on the kitchen island and glance around to see Flash, Abe and Jason all by May’s records, Tiny looking at his phone while Betty is catching Cindy up.

Still no MJ. And it’s—

I flip my phone out of my pocket enough for the time to flash up at me.

1:33.

“Dude.”

I glance at Ned, who has appeared directly in front of me. “Betty’s head might explode.”

“It won’t…” I laugh, then push my cup around.

“She came here early because she just assumed Michelle would be here.”

Which led to her helping me set up food and drinks for everyone.

“I appreciated her help. Why weren’t you first?” I counter.

Ned briefly comes up empty, then frowns. “I was third.”

“Kind of.”

“I was in the elevator before they showed up.” He explains himself emphatically.

Yeah.

“Likely story.” I smirk.


“You guys good?”

Ned nods, lingering for an instant before turning back to me. “Oh yeah. We’re great. We—uh, did dinner again.”

“Where at?”

“Another restaurant.” He replies. “I liked it—”

There’s a but coming.

“—but like, aren’t you supposed to go to her house? Hang out, dinner there? You’d know.” Ned blinks, looking for help.

“How would I know?” I counter.

“You dated Liz and—.”

“No.” I cut him off.
“Michelle’s always here.”

No she’s not.

I fix him with a frown. “No she isn’t.”

“Betty said she was.” Ned counters.

We never talked to Betty.

“Betty?” I ask.

“Betty got a text from Michelle’s mom saying thank you for having her over. But Betty wasn’t back until late because—”

“—were on the date.” We say simultaneously.

And the logical jump is that Michelle is here. But she was here. And that’s not what happened!

“Did she say something about a party?” I ask Ned.

Ned quickly looks lost. “A party? No.”

“If this is your idea of a party…” MJ’s voice says before I glance past Ned and see her appear, still in work clothes. “Then I might reschedule your week Ned.”

“I—” He starts before Michelle turns to me.

“Sorry I’m late. The line here had some sensor trip that almost derailed it. Had to call a car.”

“Almost what?” I blurt out.

Michelle gives me a tired look before sliding around me, heading for the cabinet to grab a glass. “I wasn’t on the train. I was waiting, then changed plans.”

“Excuse me.” I hear to my right, turn and see Abe, plate in his hands.

“My bad.” I jump out of the way of the snack platter May bought so Abe can grab some more.

They probably surge priced her, taking advantage of the whole thing too.

“How much did—”

Michelle cuts me off. “Betty said everything was in the office?” before walking around me and disappearing down the hall.

Great.

2:15 PM

“What is the most reactive metal.”

Mine.

I swat the bell simultaneously as somebody on the other team does the same.
“Peter.” Michelle says evenly.

“Caesium.”

*It’s in the glaive. Karen was comparing atomic structures in the unknown metals and it looks similar.*

It’s not all caesium, that’d be crazy but…

“Oh c’mon.” Flash says, passing the bell to Charles.

Michelle ignores him and asks “Where is the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts?”

*Huh?*

Charles stutters on his way to hitting the bell. “New York.”

“Nope.” Michelle shakes her head than looks to Jason. “Chance to steal the question.”

Jason inhales then looks back to the rest of us on his team. “Los Angeles?”

*I don’t know.*

“No.” Michelle flagrantly flips her notecard away. “Washington D.C. Does anyone watch the Kennedy Center Honors?”

“No?” Abe counters.

“The opera show?” Flash asks, sounding indecisive.

Michelle shakes her head, throwing another card aside. “The Eiffel Tower.” She stops, allowing Jason and Charles to pass their bells down. “Was built for what world event?”

Ned beats Cindy to the bell. “World’s Fair. 1890.”

“1889.” Michele laughs once, then smirks.

*Oh man. That’s…ouch.*

“My point.” Cindy lights up. “1889 World’s Fair.”

“Hey!” Flash protests again.

Michelle cuts Flash off, saying “Ned’s point. I didn’t ask for the year.”

“Hah!” Flash celebrates.

“If you say I’m biased I’m kicking you out into the hall.” Michelle scowls at him. Instantly, Betty ducks her head into Ned’s shoulder while Abe laughs and Ned covers his mouth.

*Don’t laugh, it’ll just piss him off more.*

Michelle shuffles her cards, then gives everyone a blank look. “Focus.”

“We are focused.” Jason says, the laughter in his voice.
“No, you’re not.”

“Because you—” Flash cuts MJ off this time before I hear a door open behind me.

*Hang on, that’s—*

**UH OH.**

I whip around in time to see Bruce step out, then gingerly smile at me, then look out toward everyone else in our little semi-circle.

“Hi, sorry to interrupt.” He starts, silencing Flash before turning to Michelle. “I’m really sorry, I need him.”

*Why’s he pointing at me?*


“Thanks.” He smiles as I stand up and give him a look.

*This can’t be good.*

“You’ll see. I got out here.” Bruce tells me, then tilts his head.

“Got out here?”

Bruce smiles then pushes me toward my room. “I’ve got a plan.”

*A PLAN?!!*

Reflexively, I slide inside my door then shake my head.

*What is going on?!!*

“Hey. Friday? Focus. Okay? Actually, I got him.” Hill says quickly, five screens in front of her, then spots me and throws two of them at me.

**FRIDAY? What do—oh.**

*Processing speed down 26 percent and falling, RAM inaccessible, flash memory inaccessible.*

“What’s going on?” I turn to Hill, who grabs my wrist and starts forming an earpiece.

*I don’t understand how something could be attacking Friday, she’s ahead of the curve handling malware and brute force attacks.*

Once the earpiece is fully formed, I stuff it into my ears. “Preserving the arch files as well as the Rose Hill slate, the Edwards highland—” Friday continues rattling off her actions.

“Can you locate a source for the issue?” Hill asks.

“I can’t, I can’t lose the data! Mr. Stark wouldn’t want me to, and Ms. Potts needs the data!” Friday says frantically.

*Like she’s in overload.*

“Karen.” I say, scrolling through one of Hill’s diagnostics pages. “You seeing this?”
“Yes, from a distance.”

“Take some stuff off her plate. Make sure her OS is handled, and start making a landing spot for all this data.” I ask Karen, who doesn’t respond, instead leaping into action.

*It’ll probably be all jumbled together.*

“protocols being assisted by—” Friday says in a panic.

“Friday! Hey! That’s Karen.”

Friday’s endless chatter in my ear stops for a split second. “Mr. Parker?”

“What’s going on Friday?”

I look to Hill before Friday says “I don’t know, I—”

“Something caused her to crash. Her performance was dragging, Bruce was looking into it, then it spiked.”

“I don’t know why, or how it’s even possible—I was operating at an acceptable level and then—”

*She’s barely finishing thoughts. Just getting through…*

“Protocols.” I figure it out. “Karen?”

“Friday’s operating system is leveling out, starting data defragmentation.” She replies.

*So that she can figure out what goes where and how.*

“Friday?” I ask politely before Hill pulls her earpiece out and starts to the door. “Look at your protocol list. Let’s start there.”

“Checking protocols…” Friday replies.

“Where are you going?” I ask Hill just as she puts her hand on the doorknob.

Hill smirks. “Saving Banner.” Before ducking out the door.

*Yeah he probably could use it, they’ve probably got him buried under a ton of questions.*

“I’m missing hundreds of protocols here Peter.” Karen speaks up.

2:50 PM

*System degradation.*

“—And send it up the ladder.” I ask Karen.

“Got it.”

I turn back to Friday. “Are we stable?”

“As stable as new ground can be.” She replies helpfully.

“Good. I’ll be right back. It’ll take five seconds.” I tell her, then glance at her system information.
All nominal again.

“Okay boss.”

Boss?

I slip past my door, making sure to close it behind me before spotting Flash, Cindy, Betty—

Why does everybody have tablets?

“Uhh?”

Hill and Banner turn to me, and Bruce beckons me over. “It’s a survey.” He whispers.

“Free market research.” Hill adds.

Except that she knew who was coming.

“What survey?”

“You’ll see. Go do whatever.” Hill dismisses me.

Hey!

I open my mouth to protest, but Michelle glances up from her tablet and gives me an odd look before turning away.


Decisively, I walk into the kitchen, pull out the tea and ice before my arm is grabbed while I’m turned to the counter.

HEY!

Turning on my heel, I spin into MJ, who is holding her tablet with the screen facing me. “37.” She barely hisses.

Okay.

37. The assembling of the Avengers should fall to:

A.) An Avenger

B.) The Head of the United Nations Security Council

C.) A vote by the Avengers

D.) The President of the United States

Easy.

I tap ‘A’ before Michelle spins the tablet around to see my answer. “No warning. Again?” She quietly reaches around me and grabs the tea.

“I…”

I thought about it. And was hoping she’d get here early. But she got here late. Nobody’s fault.
Michelle makes a move to step past me, and I instinctively slide to the other side. Only for Michelle to still end up right beside me.

“My bad, sorry…” I blurt out, then move aside so she can grab her glass.

“My fault.” She replies, then reaches past me and grabs the closest glass, which has various flowers painted onto it.

“No—” I start before MJ turns into me, dropping the glass reflexively before I save it with an instinctive swipe. “Got it.” Looking back to Michelle, she quickly takes the glass before pouring the tea for herself.

*She’s embarrassed. In front of Hill and everyone in Decathlon.*

Space.

*She probably wants space. I need to get away from her, give her room to relax.*

Quietly, I walk around the island to the couch where Ned and Betty are both furtively looking at their tablets. Beyond them, a picture frame is sitting face down.

*Why’s there a picture frame out? Everybody kind of looked at all the pictures when they first came in.*

Reaching past both of them, I scoop the frame up and flip it over, quickly before my stomach flips.

*Mr. Stark.*

In the picture, Mr. Stark and I are holding the certificate saying that I graduated from the Stark Internship. Except for the fact that the certificate is upside down and we’re giving each other bunny ears.

*He’d have fixed this mess with Friday weeks or months ago. And now I’m trying to solve a problem because he never really made an instruction manual on how to fix his own AI. I’m not even good at computers like Ned is—*

Ned.

“Yeah?” He says, voice breaking through my thoughts, causing me to turn to him.

*He can help.*

“C’mere.” I scoop up the picture then wave him back towards my room.

---

3:15 PM

“And do you have a baseline of performance?” Ned asks Friday.

“Yes.”

“Operate around the missing protocols as best you can for right now. Karen?” Ned continues.

“Anything on that server farm situation?”
“Data intake is normalizing. Once it is stable I will begin to look for Friday’s missing protocols.”

She’ll find them. She didn’t destroy the data. She just lost it.

At least that’s what Ned said.

“Thanks man.” I smile over at him as he looks slightly stressed out.

Ned’s expression clears into a smile. “No problem dude. So she just crashed?”

“Kind of. That’s what Hill said. And I should have thought about you first—”

Karen cuts me off with an update. “Peter, your order and request have been granted. It will take me around two hours to fully integrate them into secure servers, than I can begin work on the issue.”

Great.

“And now we have plenty of secure server space.” I smile at Ned, who is staring at me.

“Dude. You just…you just bought a server farm.”

“So?” I ask.

We needed it. We have to have Friday. And if we need more computing power for her to work, then I’m going to do it.

And clearly somebody else high up agrees with me.

“That’s—” He starts before putting his hands on his head. “Today is incredible.”

“Incredible?” I repeat after him, causing him to turn back.

“You don’t…Hill didn’t tell you?”

“No!” I counter quickly. “They were supposed to be in here the whole time!”

Wait, what’d they do?

“Really? Because they acted like they knew exactly like it was a plan.” Ned admits.

I nod. “They do that.”

Make it up as we go along.

“Well first it was Dr. Banner. He calmly explained that everything was okay, but didn’t answer anybody’s questions. Then Hill came in and—”

My door swings open slightly, and Dr. Banner pokes his head out. “Sorry to interrupt again. Ned?”

“Yes sir?” Ned replies, nerves in his voice.

“You don’t have to call me sir. ‘Dr.’ works perfectly fine. That’s not the point, that point is, your mom’s here to pick you up.” He informs us, then smiles sheepishly at me.

Ned nods quickly. “Okay. I’ll be right there,”

The door shuts before Ned turns to me again. “He…mentioned Tony Stark. Brought out that
picture of you guys.” He says, pointing to the picture, face down on my desk. “Shut up everybody’s questions about how you knew him or if you really did know Tony Stark.”

_Because I did._

“I bet.” I can’t hold back a smirk.

“Yeah.” Ned laughs, scooping his phone up off my desk. “Then Hill dunked Flash and talked to us, kind of threatened everyone, then gave us those surveys. Which—”

_Market research. What are they looking for?_

Personality data? More data for their files?

_Making files? I don’t know._

“But since they said they might be in touch…” Ned finishes weakly, then shrugs. “I’d better go. Mom’s on a tight schedule today.”

“Go.” I push him towards my door. “I’ll text you before I leave.”

“Oh!” He lights up. “You didn’t say you were going to Europe with May.”

“Last minute thing.” I say on the fly, then smile. “Got some really good deals on flights.”

“Where are you going?”

_Uhh…_

“Paris, Prague, May wants to check out some flower place in the Netherlands. And I think we’re going to Italy.”

Ned’s expression turns to confusion. “Flowers? In the Netherlands?”


Ned and I both laugh before falling back into our handshake. “Take care man.” He smiles at me.

“I will. Don’t do anything dumb while I’m in Europe.” I joke.

“Bachelor in Europe!” Ned smiles as he opens the door. “Europeans love Americans.”

_Yeah, or it could be their tourism money._

I smile and wave before Ned turns to the front door and exits before Dr. Banner approaches me at my door.

“Did you by chance say that I’m going to Europe?” I ask when he leans on my doorframe.

“Hill did, yeah. That way nobody will think it’s weird that you’re gone for three weeks. You’re on vacation. A much needed vacation.” Bruce says with a smile.

_Yeah, because space sounds so relaxing._

“At least May will actually relax.” I comment before glancing over to Hill and seeing both her and Michelle talking.
Uh oh.

I turn to Bruce. “And?”

“Oh. Hill and Michelle?” He lowers his voice. “They’re good. I know Hill feels bad about stepping all over the meeting. Sounded really interesting on this end. She’s good.”

“Yeah.” I nod, keeping my eyes on MJ and Hill as Hill continues to do most of the talking.

\textit{Keeps us on track and focused.}

“She mentioned that the old leader of Decathlon got a full ride to NYU?”

“No. She didn’t.” I shake my head at Bruce.

\textit{Liz went off to Oregon. She’s not coming back.}

She’s gone. Gone gone.

\textit{Like Mr. Stark gone.}

“Really? Because—” Bruce continues before I see Hill hand Michelle a tablet, which instantly boots up for her, throwing her own face up onto the screen.

\textit{Hold up.}

“Hang on.” I cut him off. “I thought that you gave me the file on Michelle.”

\textit{They did. It’s my option to give it to her. And I’m not going to. Not right now at least.}

As I watch, Hill continues talking as MJ swipes a finger on the screen and—

\textit{Yeah, that’s definitely her file.}

“You gave it to her?” I blurt out and whip around to look at Bruce.

Bruce, who looks slightly uncomfortable but still smiling replies. “We…were giving it to her anyway. We just thought you might want to have the chance first.”

“Why?”

“Because she could be legitimately useful to us. Not just because she knows you, her test scores are —”

\textit{Yeah, I know about her tests scores and how damn brilliant she is! She’s MJ! That’s already been established!}

She’s great! Known fact!

“I know that! Why’d you just give it to her?”

\textit{She’s going to freak out. She’s already asked me if they’re getting more information on her, and she saw what my bracelets can do. Now she’s going to think I’m super stalking her or something.}

\textit{This is a disaster.}

Feeling sick, I turn back into my room and crack the door behind me. “Friday? How are we
“Uhm.” She responds tentatively. “Okay I suppose.”

“Karen?”

“I believe that a full system reboot might help.” Karen informs me.

“Will we lose anything?”

“No.” Karen adds. “I think that a full reset would do some good.”

Makes sense. She definitely panicked when she began losing data and protocols. Maybe a nap will help.

“How long will that take?” I ask Karen.

“About five minutes.”

I nod, then turn back to Friday’s screen. “Are you okay with that Friday? Full reset, clean slate. We can pick up where we are now and keep fixing everything.”

“Yes. I believe that Mr. Stark would advise this course of action. I will begin initiation of restart procedures.”

“Okay. Thank you Friday.” I smile, then turn back to my window.

Can an AI be, I don’t know...dependent on its programmer? Karen works fine with everyone else. But Friday continues going back to what Mr. Stark would have done.

While Ned was asking her question, she kept throwing it back at him.

Mr. Stark, Mr. Stark, boss, boss.

While I’m in space I’m going to need to find some time to really dig into the permission sequences for Friday and—

Instantly, I freeze where I stand by the window and my bed.

Oh no. MJ.

Michelle, one hand on my door is staring at the poster above my desk. Below it, are the ARC reactor, Mr. Stark’s helmet…

We never turned on the cloaking.

Oh shit.

Methodically, after a moment, Michelle looks down at my desk, then turns in my direction. “I can explain.” I quickly smile at her.

More secrets. She’s going to kill me.

Michelle nods weakly, then looks back to my desk. “Yeah. I don’t understand…”

“Karen?”
“Yes Peter?” She replies, using the speakers set up around the room instead of talking into my earpiece.

Immediately Michelle jumps out of her skin and screams. “Who? Where—?”

“Hello Michelle. I am a natural language AI created by Mr. Stark in order to help Peter complete any tasks delegated to him following graduation from the rigorous Training Wheels Protocol.” Karen says calmly. “Peter named me Karen. You can call me that as well, if you would like.”

**TRAINING WHEELS PROTOCOL? Why’d you mention that Karen!**

Michelle quickly scrunches up her face before looking to me. “Training Wheels Protocol?”

“Mr. Stark named it, not me.” I admit with a wave. “Karen, can you show Michelle the cloaking?”

“Sure.” Karen replies cheerfully.

“Cloaking?” I barely hear Michelle’s voice before my room begins changing, starting with a blue wave near my closet then watch as the suit design ideas I’ve tacked up on my bulletin board get erased, replaced by graded papers. My pennant stays up, but the poster, my whole desk basically…”

“Cloaking complete. I thought the whole idea of cloaking was to prevent Michelle from seeing it?” Karen asks.

“Yeah, that’s what Hill said.”

“Shall I keep the cloak active then?”

*I…guess not?*

“No.” I shrug, then run my hand through my hair.

“Deactivating cloak.” Karen informs us. “Friday’s system restart will finish momentarily. Would you like me to connect you once she’s functioning?”

“Yeah.” I nod, then add. “Please.”

*This is not going as I was hoping it would.*

“So Karen’s…not a person.” Michelle says slowly behind me, causing me to turn back to her.

“Yeah.” I confess, then subconsciously laugh nervously. “Couldn’t really say that in the moment.”

Michelle nods, then takes a deep breath. “Lots of questions.”

Yeah.

“Something like that. And the cops were chasing us remember?”

“Yeah. But you—and her, I guess carved open that wall and all that.”

“Oh that wasn’t me. Peter thought of all that. I just executed his actions.” Karen says modestly.

“Karen.” I blurt out.

*Don’t go around telling her that!!!*
“Sorry. Bringing Friday back online now.” Karen informs us.

A new screen pops up, and a flash lights up the screen. “Hello boss. Full systems reboot currently in progress.”

Good.

“Awesome.” I clap my hands together. “Karen, make sure she loads up clean. Clean slate. That’s what we’re after.”

“What—?” Michelle begins to ask, before finishing the question with a look to me.

She’s completely lost.

“Long story. Karen’s helping me out. Had a minor emergency, fixing it now.”

“And her name’s…Friday? Why’d you name her that? Did you create the program on a Friday or something—”

Unauthorized user detected.” Friday suddenly reports.

“No, Friday it’s—.”

Friday cuts me off. “Foreign data files identified. Initiating Barn Door Protocol.”

NO!

“No! Karen!” I appeal for help while pulling Friday’s access screen up.

Do NOT initiate Barn Door Protocol!

“She’s locking me out of the system! Barn Door Protocol is in full effect all around the Compound as well as—”

“Great!” I smack my desk, then throw open my door and look for Hill.

“What happened?” Bruce instantly asks me as Hill is already five screens deep.

“I, uhm, we accidentally initiated Barn Door Protocol.”

They’re going to freak out upstate. One minute everything’s calm. Next thing you know the whole base is going on lock down, emergency lights only…

“What?” Bruce blurts out.
"—systems reboot complete." Friday reports.

Karen adds on top "Operation protocols still missing over 1500 entries."

1500?

"Find them Karen. Friday?" Ms. Potts says,

"Yes boss." Friday reports in.

"Find out what each missing protocol does. Do not execute any protocols that are missing. You understand? That's your only task. Only operate what you need."

"Don't over exert yourself Friday. Your CPU shouldn't move at all." Bruce adds.

One task? For Friday? Trivial.

Friday pauses for a moment then relays "Beginning operations search."

Good.

In front of me, Friday's diagnostics begin flashing all across the screen in various different graphs and monitors.

"Everything looks normal." Ms. Potts speaks up.

"Barn Door Protocol is fully deactivated on this side." Romanoff replies. "We're clear."

Hill barely registers this before nodding. "Good."

"So." Ms. Potts begins, then stops.

I guess that's that then.

"How's she handling it?"

"Huh?" I blurt out, then glance at her screen. She however, is looking to Hill.

"Quite well. Didn't seem phased at all."

Ms. Potts frowns, then looks to me. "Did you tell her?"

"I didn't know about it. So, no. She put together that you had an eye on her though."

"When?" Bruce asks.

"While they were at that party that got crashed." Romanoff replies.

"Oh."

Ms. Potts however turns to Romanoff. "They went together?"

"Kind of. Not really."
"Oh." She frowns.

"You...know about Michelle?" I nervously ask.

*No way. Mr. Stark never had a clue about Liz and—*

"Of course I do." She turns back to me. "We immediately get you home, and immediately it's all about her. Every status update."

"Status update?!" I blurt out.

*Hill makes those for Thor, Danvers and Fury. Part of 'keeping everyone in the loop'.*

"Yeah." She laughs at me, then looks back to Hill. "And the trip?"

"All laid out. Told Michelle and everyone else why he'll be gone."

"And the bill?"

Romanoff laughs. "She gave it to him."

"Gave what bill to who?"

Hill turns to me. "Flash, for dunking your school supplies."

"What?"

*That was months ago!*

"Yeah. He has the means to pay for it." Ms. Potts says strongly. "So he will. Or he won't be in any of this, which would be a shame but...oh well."

*Hill dunked on Flash.*

I glance back at Hill in time to see a clear smirk on her face intended for me before Romanoff speaks up quietly. "Still just looking around."

"Get out of here." Hill suddenly, but gently pushes me toward my cracked door. "You've got some explaining to do."

"You didn't disable Karen!" I counter.

Hill and Bruce looks lost, then glance at each other, then back to me. "Karen's fine."

*No she's not! Level 1 clearance does NOT get you access to my AI.*

"How did he take that literally?" Pepper asks the room.

"I don't know but I'm impressed." Romanoff says, laughter clear in her voice.

I frown back. "How'd I take that literally?"

*I do have some explaining to do. About Karen! And my room!*

"I don't know how I'm going to deal with teenage boys." Ms. Potts says, sounding weary at just the idea.
"You've got time." Romanoff jokes.

Bruce meanwhile, glances at her screen before pointing me to my room. "We've got this here."

"Yeah." Hill says, swiping away her screen. "Michelle's your territory."

"I am so doomed." Ms. Potts proclaims.

"MJ's not my territory. She's my friend." I tell everyone.

"Which." Hill shifts in her seat. "Means you have to go talk to her. Go."

I...Fine.

I turn back to my door, then roll my eyes as I walk back into my room, shutting the door behind me. Michelle, who is sitting on the edge of my bed turns to me.

"Did you fix it?"

Fix what—OH!

"Yeah, oh yeah. Just had to make a quick call." I smile. "All fixed."

Michelle seems to relax a bit, then hang her head. "Great, I was afraid that—"

"No." I cut her off and smile. "You're fine. Don't worry about it."

"But the Avengers, and I..." She trails off.

"Don't worry about it." I try to give her a reassuring grin before she sees it and falters.

That's not good.

"You, uhm, you really knew him. Huh." Michelle says jerkily after a moment.

Yeah.

"Yeah." I nod, then laugh to myself. "I did."

Michelle smiles, then shakes her head. "I mean, you kind of already told me, but..." She runs through her hair. "That's crazy."

"Yeah." I laugh again. "It is."

"And that." She continues. "Got you this." She gestures to the living room, then between us.

The Avengers, Karen, all that.

I nod, then walk over to my desk and scoop out a pen so that I have something to do with my hands.

Just keep my hands out of my hair.

"How much did you do when Squidward and Patrick came down?" Michelle asks.

I turn away from her slightly so my face can't break. "Some stuff. You'll see here in a couple of weeks."
Week and a half I think.

"Couple of weeks?" She asks. "You know something."

"I know a lot of things."

Michelle gives me a dirty look before stalking past me towards my bathroom. "You're not gonna tell me?"

"No." I shake my head.

"Why?" She hotly asks.

"So that your reaction can't give it away." I explain off the top of my head.

Michelle's textbook scowl flies to her defense. "I have a poker face."

"I know." I smile at her, only for her to not react. "Can't say."

"They gave me a file ya know." MJ says, suddenly looking angry. "Hill apparently knows everything about me. Level 1 clearance."

And the topic in discussion is a Level 4 clearance issue.

"I know." I counter. "They showed it to me."

I barely see Michelle hesitate before she asks. "And?"

"I thought that they did that so that I could give the file to you. But I was wrong." I answer, then give MJ a smile.

They do what they want to do to a certain extent.

"What it means." I continue. "Is that Hill and a couple of others like you. More than the others at least."

That whole thing is…weird.

Michelle lights up a bit, then drifts back to my desk and looks at the helmet. "Is this like—" She turns around and points to my wrist.

"Kinda. Similar stuff, but that's inert." I nod, then point to Mr. Stark's helmet, just before Michelle gently picks it up.

"It's light." Michelle says, seemingly getting a feel for the helmet's weight.

"One of nano-tech's biggest advantages? Lightweight."


"Not quite."

I shake my head as Michelle skeptically glances over. "That and your friend."

Spider-Man.

"I didn't say anything." I shrug.
"Has to be." Michelle reasons. "Otherwise, this little shrine…thing would be creepy. Which, I don't know."

"It's not creepy."

Michelle whips her hair before replying. "It kind of is! But everybody already knew you loved him, so…"

"He invented—so much." I fumble the words out, earning another confused look. "What's not to like?"

I almost said that he invented time travel.

"A lot of things." Michelle deadpans. "Would you like a list?"

"No." Pointedly, I walk over to my bed and fiddle with my suitcase, which is leaning against the wall half opened.

"He wasn't perfect." MJ reminds me.

I know that.

"And he's not here to defend himself."

Michelle gestures to the ARC reactor, helmet and shrine. "Kind of seems like he is."

"Michelle." I snap before I can stop myself.

Something is under her skin.

"What?" She looks to me for answers.

"Just…" I start, then change my point. "I get where you're coming from. Okay?"

I know she thinks that I'm obsessed with Mr. Stark, or whatever. But she's wrong. I've just got to remember what happened, what I did during the whole thing, and be better next time.

Besides, the frame is the only addition I made. Ms. Potts gave me the helmet and reactor.

It'd be rude to just throw it into a box and not display it.

"Peter." I hear vaguely.

"Yeah." I answer, turning back to MJ, only for her to be looking at her phone instead.

Huh?

"Incoming message from Agent Johnson, of S.H.I.E.L.D. Shall I route it to your heads-up display?" Karen asks me.

"No." I quickly reply, as MJ's heads pops right up as the screen Karen began to throw up vanishes. "My phone's fine. Thank you Karen."

"You're welcome." She replies.

"So…that was you?" – Daisy
Feeling Michelle's eyes on me, I turn back and reply.
"It was an accident. Hope everybody didn't freak out."

"S.H.I.E.L.D?"

"Friend from work." I ease MJ's concern, evident by her voice. "She's asking about earlier."

"Oh."

"It was more sudden than anything. What happened?" — Daisy

"Programming mishap. Karen heard a different voice and enacted lockdown." I text back.

Behind me, Michelle asks "Johnson? Like Daisy Johnson?"

Seriously?

"Karen? Give me the security clearance on that information." I bark out. "Please."

Karen quickly answers. "The clearance level on Agent Johnson's file is Level 4."

There ya go.

I motion back in MJ's direction as my phone lights up again.

"Whose voice? Your girl's?" — Daisy

COME. ON.

Can I just get a break from everybody constantly being all over me all the time about everything!?

I toss my phone aside, then run my hands over my face before hearing "Okay. Point taken."

"What point." I turn back and ask.

Michelle quickly looks frustrated. "Your—" She starts, then motions sarcastically to Karen. "I don't have the clearance. Okay."

"Awesome." I smile. "Feel free to spread that around."

Now that you know how that works.

"That's not necessary."

"What isn't?" I ask.

Michelle gestures to me again, sarcastically. "The tone. The motion. All of it. Whatever happened with Friday, the other AI—"

"It's not about Friday." I cut her off.

"Then why are you so frustrated?"

"I'm not frustrated." I answer.

Michelle literally starts towards my bathroom before making a circle. "You are so frustrated. Don't
give me that bullshit. You can talk to me, I—"

"Not really, unless they say so." I gesture outside my door.

"They gave me clearance."

"Not for what you're asking." I counter, voice louder than I intended.

Michelle makes another face. "Don't yell at me."

"I'm not. Didn't mean to say that as loud."

"I don't believe you." She fires back. "Peter."

_She wants me to trust her._

"MJ." I turn away, then find my hand in my hair again before quickly pulling it out. "Please stop."

"No." She shakes her head strongly. "Tell me why you're so frustrated."

"I'm not frustrated! I—" I begin before my door flies open. Michelle promptly screams in fright, and I leap to the door.

"Hands?" May barks out, and I instinctively show her my hands. "Hands?" She asks Michelle, who looks like she's surrendering.

"What's going on in here?" I hear Happy's voice, then look past May to see him in his usual business attire.

"Nothing." I laugh, then smile at May. "We're talking."

"Talking." Happy echoes me.

May immediately gives me a scathing look. "You know the rule about the door."

"We were talking!" I counter. "I forgot! Sorry."

"Why was it closed in the first place?" She demands.

"Because decathlon was just here and I had to deal with a situation?"

"A situation?" Happy asks.

I nod and look past May, who still looks livid. "Yeah. With Friday."

"Friday. Does Pepper know?"

I nod. "Already taken care of."

"It doesn't look like Friday had a situation." May points out astutely.

_Because you can't see it May._

"Yeah, because there's so much evidence." I turn around and gesture out to my room. "Everywhere."

When I turn back, May's giving me a look. "What's your deal right now?"
"There's no deal right now. I'm fine."

Michelle does something behind me that catches May's eye before she says "You don't sound fine."

"May." I glance back to MJ, then back to May. "I'm fine."

"Okay…" May hesitates, giving me an unsteady look. "Well, you know the rule. Don't close—"

"May." I begin to reassure her.

"—door because I—"

"May."

She continues "Don't know what you two are doing back here and I'm not—"

"MAY!"

May takes a step back, while Happy takes a step forward, putting his hand on the door. "We're just talking. No big deal. Just…talking."

"Okay." She finally concedes. "Just talking. Sorry for butting in."

"It's okay." I smile at her as she takes a step out of my doorway.

Happy meanwhile, does the opposite. "Hey."

"Hi." I deadpan before starting to close the door.

"What's up with you?" Happy asks, putting his body weight on the door so I can't shut it further.

"Nothing."

*Doesn't he realize that I'm stronger then him?*

Happy leans further on the door before I put my foot down and stop the door immediately. "This isn't nothing. Open the door."

"No."

"You can't tell me no." Happy counters.

"Oh?" I blurt out. "I can't?"

"No, that's not what I meant—"

*Whatever.*

I put a little more force into the door, and it continues methodically closing on him, with May sliding towards the kitchen. "Hey, hey!"

"Bye." I smile, before shutting the door fully.

*I'm done.*

*I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done I'm done.*
Before I can really process it, I'm face down on my bed, head in my pillow.

I'm done with Happy. I'm done with May, and the Avengers, and everybody demanding something from me. I'm tired of Mr. Stark, and Hill, and Dr. Banner. Everyone!

I'm done.

I'm just done. Get me off this stupid planet and out into space.

I need a vacation.

After I don't know how long, I hear Michelle's voice.

"You and May are going to Europe?"

"Mhmm." I nod into my pillow. "Two and a half weeks."

"That sounds fun."

Yup.

"It will be." I roll over, then glance in Michelle's direction. "Good to get out of here for a while."

"Where are you guys going?"

"Paris, Prague, May wants to check out some flower place in the Netherlands. And I think we're going to Italy." I repeat myself.

Again.

"Sounds nice."

Yup.

"Mhmm." I roll back over.

"Will you be back in time for the wedding?"

YES.

I roll back over to face Michelle. "Yeah. Double checked it against all my schedules. I'll be there."

"Are you sure?"

YES!

"Karen?" I call out.

"Yes Peter."

"Can you please tell MJ that I'll be back in time for the wedding. What day do I get back?"

Karen reports back. "August 6th."

"Oh." Michelle says.

"There ya go."
Problem solved.

I'm not missing that wedding. She invited me to it, completely out of the blue. I have to go.

And if I somehow miss it...I think I'll just go to Hill and have them withdraw me from Midtown. Because I cannot deal with the backlash. Again.

Between Flash, who I bet already know, and Betty, who will probably attempt to kill me, and Ned asking questions that he thinks will help but won't, I...

I just can't.

Wearily, I roll back over onto my back, only to see Michelle tapping on her phone intently.

(2 Days Later)

The Zephyr continues shakes ominously, pressing my back relentlessly into my seat before suddenly it just...stops.

"Is that it?" I quietly ask Rhodey, who is seated across from me to the left.

He quickly shakes his head. "Nah, just a quick stop."

"This happened last time." Thor adds reassuringly. "Nothing to be too concerned about."

Last time.

Before I can reply, I see Wanda glance over to me and a speaker crackles to life. "We have reached our position in Low Earth orbit. Please make any and all last minute travel accommodations while we perform our final checks." A stern, female voice says.

"Okay." Wanda says after a moment, unbuckling her seatbelt and moving towards the back of the ship.

Romanoff, meanwhile, turns to Rhodey. "What'd you bring?"

"Not much. I'm tired of you guys giving me such a hard time about Game of Thrones, so I loaded up all the episodes to my tablet."

"About time." Romanoff chastises him.

"Hey." He smiles defensively. "I wasn't on the run for years with a ton of leisure time."

"Yeah, but you still could have watched it."

"I was busy keeping Ross off your ass." Rhodey smiles again in reply.

Natasha concedes the point with a tilt of her head. "Very true. Bruce is binging Thrones too."

"Anything else?" He inquires.

"Nah." She shrugs indifferently. "Some of the Oscar nominated movies while he was off in space. Brought some books too."

"Who's Oscar?" Thor asks.
What?

I turn back to Thor before I hear the muffled laughter of one of the S.H.I.E.L.D agents strapped in close by. "Huh?"

"She mentioned a, uhm, film by a guy named Oscar. Who is he, is he famous on Earth?" Thor asks, seemingly genuine.

"Oscar's not a person. It's the name of an award. The top films are nominated for those awards, which are named the Oscars." Rhodey explains as Romanoff looks bemused.

Makes sense. Why would Thor know about the Oscars?

"Those awards don't always go out to the right movie. Or person." I hear Director Fury say quietly in Thor's direction. "For example, Pulp Fiction should have won in '94. But it didn't."

"Yeah it should have." Rhodey adds. "That or Shawshank."

Thor asks. "What won?"

"Something about a guy who loved running a lot." Fury says, tone beyond dismissal. "It's on cable all the time. You can't miss it."

"What's cable?" Thor asks in response.

Oh here we go.

Ahead of us, before anyone can answer Thor's question, the door to the front of the Zephyr opens. "Which one of you is Peter?"

"Me." I raise my hand to the small woman.

"They want you up front." She says. "Seat swap, before we all take off."

Okay...

Reluctantly, I obey the request, unbuckle myself from my seat, grab my backpack and start down through the door and down the same passageway that Daisy led me through a few weeks ago.

At least I kind of know where to go.

I walk for a moment, the quiet creaking of metal on either side of me before the narrow hallway opens up, revealing a crowded cockpit full of voices.

"Perigee altitude, check. 407 KM and holding steady." Somebody says. "Apogee altitude at 410 KM, also holding steady."

"Hey." A voice says in front of me, and I blink in time to see Daisy Johnson smile and stand up. "You made it."

"Yeah. You asked for me to come up here?"

Daisy smiles widely, then nods. "Yeah. Heard that you wanted to be an astronaut. So I figured you might enjoy being up here instead of back there with no windows."

"There's a small window." I counter, before Daisy takes my backpack from me with a knowingly
smile.
"C'mere."

Okay…

Daisy leads me past a set of jump seats on either side of a door before we reach the cockpit, which seats at least ten. "Pretty sure that's a lot better than your tiny window." She comments.

Below us, floating serenely, is Earth, rotating imperceptibly as we float above the clouds and skies.

"I thought you'd be more impressed." Daisy admits, after a few seconds.

"Sorry. I've kind of already seen this part." I apologize. "Just didn't get to enjoy it much."

"When?" A sharp female voice asks.

"Oh. Peter, this is Elena." Daisy jumps in, making introductions. "Or, as we like to call her, Yo-Yo."

"Yo-Yo?" I ask, as the woman peers at me curiously.

"I'll explain later." Daisy counters, then turns to Elena.

Elena seems to accept this. "So how long will we be waiting on this person we're supposed to meet? I thought the timing for all this was supposed to be very important."

"It is." A unfamiliar voice says, and I turn in time to see one of the aliens that was working on the ship. "According to reports, they should be here soon?"

"I don't know." Daisy confesses, then turns to me. "Do you?"

"I have a hunch." I say off the top of my head.

*There's only one person that claims 'space' as their territory. But she can get to wherever we're going on her own.*

"I bet it's the glowing chick from New York. The one whose eyes glowed and shot energy bursts out of her fists." The man named Deke says, way too excitedly.

"I doubt that she's coming. I would imagine that she can catch her own ride." Simmons comments, causing me to turn and for her to wave warmly at me.

I return the wave, then turn back to Daisy. "Where do I…?"

"Sit?" She smiles. "Here, with me. Sorry, the rest of the seats are kind of assigned." She jokes, then opens up a bulkhead door and slides my backpack inside.

"Okay." I smile, then peer around and find the only two empty seats, behind Simmons, Mack and an angry looking Asian woman.

"You know, I thought you'd be more excited. I mean, you're in space." Daisy says, beaming at me. "Are you not excited?"

I shake my head. "Not really. I'm actually kind of glad to get out of here for a little bit."
"Really?" Daisy blurts out.

"That's depressing." Deke adds as the stern looking woman turns in her seat, apparently trying to get a look at me.

I smile at the woman for an instant before sliding towards my seat. "Whatever problems you're leaving on Earth, they'll still be there when you come back." The woman named Elena says sagely.

"I'm not running from my problems." I correct her. "I'm going on vacation."

"If this is your idea of a vacation I'd hate to see your work."

_Yeah, well when you're Spider-Man…_ 

Daisy gives me a reassuring look as I move to sit down in my seat. "Right there. Eight o' clock." Mack calls out.

"I see it." The woman from the PA says simply.

_Oh shit._

"Calculating a path to avoid a collision with the unidentified object." I hear somebody call out.

"No." I say quickly.

_It's her. I'm right._

"Huh?" Daisy says, as nearly everyone turns to look at me.

"That's who we're waiting on."

Silently, almost as one, everyone turns back to the blazing light that is rapidly approaching our ship. The light flashes right past the cockpit widow, disappearing in a flash.

"That was anti-climactic." Elena says dourly.

Seconds later, a blinding light appears directly to my right, penetrating through the many levels of steel and other metals before coalescing beside me, in the form of a blonde woman, wearing a smirk.

_Yup._

"Hey Peter Parker." She says, laughter in her voice. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Hi." I laugh. "Looking for us?"

"I am." She comments, then peers around. "Are we ready?"

"I, uhh, think so." Daisy says unsteadily, causing Danvers to turn to her.

"We are." Dr. Banner calls out to us, causing her to turn and walk in his direction, towards the only empty seat remaining. "Evening Colonel."

"Hi Bruce." She smiles back, finding the seat. "Ready when you are."

Quickly, I sit down as Daisy hisses "You know her?!!" to me.
"Yeah." I nod.

"And that was your hunch?" She asks as behind her, Deke looks ecstatic.

The stern woman clears her throat, then hops on the PA system, announcing our imminent departure.

*Well...here we go.*

Daisy lets out a nervous breath beside me. "I, uhm, haven't been much farther into space than this." She confesses with a nervous grin.

"It's not too bad." I shrug. "My trip wasn't."

*Got jostled around a bit, but nothing too bad.*

"Coordinates calculated...jumping in three..." Colonel Danvers calls out.

"Two!"

Beside me, Daisy grips our shared armrest as tight as she can.

"One!" Danvers calls out, then grabs onto a lever and pulls it back.

Suddenly, I'm plastering into the back of my seat, and I quickly grab onto the armrest as my head begins being pushed deeper and deeper into my headrest. Before my eyes, the empty blackness of space is replaced by a whirlwind of colors, followed by the sound and feel of an enormous sonic boom.
“Following evaluation, ‘Benjamin’ was escorted upstate to Avengers Compound, along with family.” The line breaks off onto another page of the document.

_Nah, I know everything from here._

Instead of swiping the screen, I set aside the tablet and collapse back onto my bed.

_Well…that’s what happened._

Everything that I remember. The ship coming down, going to Titan, the fight. It all happened. Then…

_Then I died. Thanks to the Snap. Mr. Stark gets saved, Thanos died, five years passed, Mr. Stark made Back to the Future a reality, the Avengers time travelled, got the Infinity Stones, snapped them before Thanos came back through time thanks to a duplicate Gamora._

THEN I remember everything again. Waking up on Titan, the fight in that massive crater, which is where they had just Snapped everybody back. The relay through the battle, trying to hide the Stones in some ugly brown van that could access the freaking Quantum Realm. Thanos destroyed it, right when I thought we’d actually won.

The shockwave knocked me near Captain Marvel, and once I’d gotten back up, it was just him and Thanos and…

_And he’s gone. In my arms, before I collide with a building, dropping him._

He wasn’t the only one that was gone. Five years gone. Poof.

_Bruce checked back on the time stamps of everything, pre-Snap and once we came back. And it matches seamlessly._

Like Thanos’ first snap resulted in his defeat in the streets of New York instead of Snapping away half of all life in the universe.

_That’s what happened._

After a minute, I force myself to sit up, then glance out through the panel that recreates a window outside the ship.

_Still looks more colorful than hyperspace should be._

_There’s so much we don’t know._

Like, why? Why did this happen? What happened to those five years?

_I thought the idea behind taking the stones back to prevent dying timelines wasn’t supposed to have that as a loose end._

The file said ‘Mr. Stark insisted that the five years that had past since the event had to stay in the past, allowing his daughter…’

_To live in a world safe from Thanos and protected by the Avengers._
But instead…she’s not here. She’s months away from being born and she’ll never meet him.

Ever.

I don’t understand. What happened? Thor said that he snapped his fingers, like Thanos did.

What the hell happened in that Snap that would erase time, making it like it never even happened? What happened?

Oh! And another thing! How’d Romanoff and Gamora escape the Soul Stone after they died on Vor—whatever the planet. They’re here, I’ve seen them.

Something went weird with the Stones.

Has to be. The device, the Gauntlet brought everybody back. Bruce did that, somehow. Only because the radiation lined up, everybody else would have died.

“I…” I start, then hang the sentence out to dry before I continue and collapse back into silence and onto my thin comforter.

This is a lot. A lot a lot.

I guess it’s kind of funny. All this starts basically by Mr. Stark and I chasing an alien spaceship. And when I finally get to figure out what’s happening, I’m out in space again.

All this is way, way bigger than us.

Thanos, the Mind Stone, sending Thor’s brother down to New York. We got in the way. Thanos’ plan (I think) was to use a Stone to get a Stone.

And we know how that went.

Thor took the Space Stone home to Asgard. After a bit, Thor found the Reality Stone, fought over it with something called Dark Elves. Of course, he won, hid the Reality Stone.

Because we’re on the same page here, now: They’re too dangerous to be kept together.

The Guardians found, fought over, and protected the Power Stone with the help of the Nova Corps.

The file on the Power Stone is thin, which I thought would have been the biggest because that’s the one that apparently he always had, at least before he found Thor. Nope.

Speaking of Thor…his story is insanity.

Lost an eye, lost his hammer, lost his brother, lost his planet.

THEN he lost to Thanos.

He’s always seemed okay since I came back to New York. On the other hand…he went on a five year bender.

He is rebuilding Asgard, on Earth, in the Rocky Mountains basically. At least that sounds like where Thor’s base of operations is going to be. A majority of the 10,000 Asgardians that survived everything will probably stick close by. The land gift by the United States to Thor on behalf of the world didn’t need to be as big as it is.
Thor only asked for a place to call home for he and all the remaining Asgardians.

The Reconstruction of Asgard is apparently going excellently. Because the world is getting misdirected.

At some point after we all came back, Thor and T’Challa talked. It apparently went so well that all the resources worldwide that had been distributed in the Wakandan Outreach Centers are now going to Asgard.

T’Challa’s sister, who according to Dr. Banner’s notes, is nearly as smart as Mr. Stark, is heading the whole thing up. The entire operation, billions of dollars’ worth of time, labor, tech, materials, everything. And it’s on schedule to be ready for March, for people to live in comfort and peace.

They’re lucky. If Thor wanted to add on to our property upstate, it would have taken YEARS to get everything done.

Maybe it’s because Thor fought in Wakanda. Before all the Snaps. I kind of thought that the Soul Stone, the one that we know nothing about was in Wakanda.

Nope. Instead it’s the most advanced country on the planet and home to the strongest metal on Earth.

The Soul Stone needed its own planet, way out in space. So far that, according to the notes is “the center of celestial existence”.

Which sounds like it’s important. Like how Thor found the Space Stone, tracing back the steps of a story his Father told him.

No clue what it means though. But we know where it is, thanks only to some crazy new maps of space that we got from Captain Marvel. And everyone seems to agree that it’s probably there.

Everyone also agrees that Dr. Strange has the Time Stone. And I don’t think he’ll lose it twice.

The only reason he lost the first time was because Thanos was unstoppable and was channeling the Power, Space, Reality and Soul Stones.

You can’t beat the Stones. At least it doesn’t seem like you can.

We were doomed on Titan. We just didn’t know it.

I know that Fury is nearly obsessed with Dr. Strange. He’s got this theory that he knew what was going to happen. It sort of makes sense. The whole 14,000,605 possible outcomes, and that he gave the Stone away. Fury thinks it all hinged on a crazy bunch of bets. Which actually happened, and now we’re here. Like it was his plan.

That’s not a plan. That’s a fluke. We got lucky. I already knew that.

14,000,604 times unlucky.

Groaning at the thought, I grab my pillow and flip it over so I can lie on the cool side.

Keep running it through my head. It’ll click into place.

It’s already making more sense. Why nobody engaged initially in New York with us. Why Dr. Banner was himself and not the Hulk.
Thanos had just kicked the crap of the Hulk, trying to defend Thor and Asgard.

It’s like he was waiting for the perfect moment. He grabbed the Power Stone, then immediately went and found Thor.

The puzzle pieces at least are fitting together better.

That doesn’t explain how everybody from the battle against Thanos over the Gauntlet on Earth, in the future remembers it.

Thor remembers it. Barton does too. Rhodey, Scott and Sam too.

Romanoff doesn’t because by that time, she’d already sacrificed herself for the Soul Stone.

But she’s alive. Like Sam, and Scott, Rhodey, Barton, Thor, me.

Anybody who wasn’t there, doesn’t know anything about what actually happened. The battle was where the Compound used to be, before Thanos blew everything up. And the Compound is still intact, perfectly fine.

We launched this trip into space from the Compound. It’s real.

As real as I am.

The whole thing makes no sense. It’s like Mr. Stark’s Snap was a second Big Bang.

Complete reset.

But that’s not how anything works. It was 2023.


You cannot change time. You can’t go back. But they did, and we did, and then they went back to 2023. Going to start again, bringing everybody back.

Because of the Time Stone.

I—

Stopping myself, I stare at the ceiling for a moment before sitting up.

I think I’m going to have to talk to Bruce about all of this. Because it makes sense, but it doesn’t. But I don’t want to go to him and look like an idiot.

I’m supposed to be an Avenger.

“Too much.” I mutter before forcing myself to get to my feet.

I’ll clean up, check the time and see if anybody’s up. I don’t even know what time it is.

Turning, I see the rectangular clock that displays both the time on Earth, and where we’re going, a place called Xandar.
I didn’t set up anything before I fell asleep once we reached our Jump Point. Where’s my bag?

There’s nowhere for it to go. This room isn’t very big, which is fine. But the bed, drawers, storage space, everything’s built into the walls.

Not a ton of room.

I want to say that I just threw it aside, and collapsed. Which I did.

And now it’s nowhere to be found.

Maybe in one of the drawers.

On a whim, I throw open the nearest drawer, only for it to be completely empty.

Nope. Maybe another one.

Closing the tallest drawer, I move to the middle one.

No. Bottom drawer? I really hope it’s in here because if it’s not—

IT IS!

“Hah!” I laugh, then pick my duffel bag up by its straps and set it onto my bed.

Toothbrush, toothpaste, all my bathroom stuff is together. The showers are somewhere on a upper level I think—

My eyes, which are looking for the bag I put everything into, fall onto my yearbook.

I didn’t...pack that.

That’s weird.

But it’s proof I guess. That it happened. Ned and Michelle and Betty and Flash and everyone.

Laughing to myself, I flip past the gaudy "MSST Class of 2018: Undeterred" on the front.

Where’s everyone...

I file through pages quickly, trying to find—

There it is.

Betty, photogenic as always. Fittingly next to Ned, who looks good. Not as bad as mine.

I look like I’m afraid of the camera.

The camera guy that day wasn’t quite all there. He caught me off guard taking the picture.

No ‘1,2,3’!'

Just snapped it and yelled for the next person.

So now I look permanently afraid of cameras, while MJ is looking up at something.

MJ.
HER NOTE.

In a panic, I drop the yearbook, then scramble to pick it up and flip as fast as I can to the back.

*I know she wrote me that note. Right before summer.*

I KNOW that. After everything that happened.

*It’s real. It’s really real.*

That’s an anchor point. Like MJ herself. I thought when she wrote that, she’d vanish for the summer.

*Instead, I’ve been talking to her constantly ever since. And it’s been great.*

Yeah, the party went bad, but that turned out to be okay. She’s met Dr. Banner a couple of times. Hill’s fully researched her, so she’s safe and sound.

*She’s been awesome.*

Finally, after flipping pages for forever, I finally find it.

---

Peter,

*I know I can be super weird and awkward in person, so I thought that it might be better if I wrote this down. Thank you for being a really good friend this year. Yeah, sometimes you don’t always succeed, but clearly you have a lot of your plate, especially since the Snap, as you call it. And you try, which I appreciate.*

*Not everybody here at school hates you. They just have a lot of questions, and thanks to Flash and Betty and the Book, they know you aren’t talking. So they’re just mean. It’s easier this way than to, you know, be nice. They’ll understand in time.*

*We’ll both be super busy this summer, but you better not go silent on me this summer. It’s really nice to have a friend to talk to. Sorry, awkward I know, but I’m writing this as you mess with my locker, and I only had a pen. Sorry. My point is, you’d better keep in touch with me. And don’t go jet setting off to some foreign planet like your boy did. I’ll kill you if you do.*

*Betty said that some people came and talked to her and her parents at her house last weekend, after we watched 50 First Dates at your apartment. But nobody came over to talk to me. I assume that’s because you told them not to. Thank you. I know you can’t say much, to anyone, but I hope you know that I won’t tell anybody anything. And that’s a promise. Besides, who would I tell, besides Betty and Ned? And apparently you’re already on top of them in that regard. Phrasing! Jeez! (Sorry)*

*You just hurt yourself helping me. I better stop writing. Have a great summer.*

- MJ

---

Oh.
“After the departure of Rogers and Barnes from Hydra’s Siberian Compound, Stark recalled the Stark Industries satellite network to return to New York and update Secretary Ross.”

“I bet that went well for him.” I comment as I swipe to the next page of the file.

*Rogue Avengers…*

“Ross, incensed, blamed Stark for the failure of the mission, and ordered him to stay out of the headlines, or he would have no issue prosecuting both he, and the remaining rogue Avengers.”

“Stark did just that, returning to the Avengers compound and retreating to his laboratory, where he made a critical breakthrough regarding nanotechnology, spurring from the public declaration of Wakanda’s King T’Challa that Wakanda would open itself up to the outside world.”

“Stark Industries was the first corporation into Wakanda, primarily due to its prior history and recent track record in regards to clean energy and Stark’s connection to the Avengers. It is unknown if Stark and T’Challa ever spoke face to face or intera—”

My train of thought is knocked aside by a sudden knock on my door.

“Come in!” I call out while pushing myself up by my elbows.

*Uh oh.*

“Hey.” Romanoff’s head pokes in. “Got a second?”

I quickly answer “Yeah.” before she closes my door behind her and moves to lean on the small door frame.

“Somebody hasn’t come out of their room in a while.”

*Another smirk.*

“Been reading.” I say. “Files and stuff.”

“I know.” She smiles, then grabs one of the two chairs meant for the table and sits on it backwards. “You had to access to central server to do it.”

*Which I have been able to do for months now…*  

Romanoff smiles again at me. “You’re not in trouble.”

“Kind of feels like I am. I’ve been able to access that server for months.”

“But…” She pauses. “You’ve been in your room, except to go eat. Surely you have some thoughts on what you read.”

I can’t stop a laugh, which gets a small smile out of her. “So, tell me. You don’t have to sugarcoat it.”
Yeah. Well…

“I’m sorry I was such a pain to you guys.”

*Constantly demanding information. Yelling at Hill. Not using my suit. Butting heads with everyone.*

*And I didn’t even know what was going on.*

To my surprise, Romanoff shakes her head then lets out a breath. “You are not a pain. Intent matters.”

“But with Hill, and Dr. Strange—”

“You didn’t know about that.” Is her instant counter.

“It didn’t make anything easier.”

She appears to consider this for a moment. “Like I said, you meant well. Nobody is frustrated or upset with you. We know it takes time to understand everything, and to properly let it all sink in.”

*Like it’s something that only takes time.*

“C’mon.” She gets to her feet, motioning for me to do the same. “Get some shoes on.”

“Okay.” I leap into action. “Where are we going?” I ask, then slip past her to where my shoes are by the door.

“We’ve got to get you on the same page as everybody else.”

*Huh?*

“I thought that was what that was about.” I respond, pointing to my tablet as I tug my left shoe on. Romanoff looks to my tablet, then back to me as I slide into my other shoe. “Not quite. Being an Avenger is a lot more than just knowing everything. And we don’t even know everything.”

*Right. I need to ask about that.*

“Do we, uhh—” I start, then stop as Romanoff gives my room a quick scan. “Do we know where Cap is?”

Romanoff avoids my eye for a second, then shakes her head. “No.”

*From what the final file on the last fight in 2023 said…Cap just vanished.*

He was fighting Thanos, like Thor and Danvers and everybody else. Then the second Snap happened, dumping us all in New York.

The Cap from that day apparently was a double, or something. The file didn’t really go into it. But it was noted that day of, they knew that Cap didn’t come back with us.

“And all that’s true.”

“Yes.” She nods, then ushers me out the door, into the hallway. “You now know what we know.”

“There are massive holes.” I reply.
“Which is why we’re here.”

Romanoff starts leading us down the hall. “Do we think that the Nova Corps or anyone else has the answers?”

“Possibly.” She succinctly answers, then falls silent.

Possibly.

Seems like a lot to hang on ‘possibly’.

“I know it seems hard to get past.” She says after a few turns. “But we know a lot more now than we did before Thanos came down.”

If you say so.

“What about you?” I ask mid-turn, then nearly walk straight into her. “Sorry, sorry…”

Romanoff doesn’t respond, staying quiet for a second before shaking her head. “I don’t know. We just don’t. I…” She starts, before I see her jaw barely quiver.

Whoa.


“Can’t explain that either.” She shrugs, then looks away from me and swipes a card at the door in front of us, which pops open. “Inside.”

I obey instantly, then hear “There he is.”

“Hi.” I smile to the room, specifically Dr. Banner, who is standing near a rolling metal container. Off to one side sit Rhody and Wanda, with Thor and Danvers nearby.

“You know what you’re here for?” Danvers calls out.

I shake my head before Romanoff slides past me. “ Didn’t get to that part. Spent too much time on the apology.

“Apology for what?” Danvers fires back.

Romanoff simply turns to me. “How’d you say it?”

“Sorry for being a pain.” I answer, then glance to the container.

Keep your eyes somewhere else.

“You’re not a pain.” Thor says instantly.

“Not at all Pete.” Rhody turns to really look at me. “You were just trying to work thru everything. And you still will. Just because we brought you here doesn’t mean it’s over.”

“Just that it’s really getting started.” Romanoff puts the cherry on top.

“What do you mean?”
Danvers hops off her seat. “Well, we’re out here in space. We have to answer all their questions. Then Thor’s taking us…where are you taking us again?”

“Can’t tell you that. It’s a surprise.” Thor answers, only for Rhodey and Danvers to look mildly irritated.

“And!” Danvers gets herself back on track. “We’re going to start teaching you how to be an Avenger.”

“What do you mean?”

There’s no ‘How to be an Avenger’ handbook.

“We’re going to teach you how to be an Avenger.” Rhodey repeats the point. “It’s not all fighting and looking cool.”


“Not just a hat and sunglasses either. The real stuff.”

“The gadgets and tricks Hill has been trying to get you to work into your everyday heroics?” Romanoff looks to me expectantly. “More of that.”

“And maybe some decent advice along the way too.” Rhodey adds, throwing in a smile at the end.

Okay.

“C’mere Pete.” Banner waves me forward. “Put your hand on the scanner.” Doing as he asks, I walk up to the unmarked metal container, and place my hand onto the scanner.

“Beginning biometric scan…” A foreign voice speaks up. “Biometric scan complete.”

Keeping my hand where it is, I turn back to Romanoff. “What is this?”

“Shh.” She spins me back around.

“Hello Mr. Parker.” The voice says.

“Uhh…hello?”

What’s going on.

“What is this?” I ask Banner, just before the female voice speaks up again.

“Would you like to access the suit?”

The what?!!

I look to Banner, who smiles and nods once. “Yeah, sure.”

A loud, compressed air type of sound hisses out, followed by the metal container instantly shifting into a rectangular display case.

For the Iron Spider Suit.

I hear Danvers behind me as I move to get a better look. “Is it made of the same stuff as Stark’s
suit?"

“Yeah. Nano-particle core with a gold and titanium interweave. Quickly and easily deployable.” Banner explains to Danvers.

“You separated it from the suit?” I ask him.

Last time I heard they had trouble with it. It took them hours to get me out of it in the first place.

“Told us awhile. Ended up having to dig into Tony’s archives to find the magic instructions.” Rhodey adds “Knowing Tony, I assume ‘band practice’ means something?”

Band practice.

“Yeah.” I laugh, then smile at Rhodey. “Long story.”

“I bet.” He returns the smile.

“What’d he do, pull you out of practice?” Romanoff asks.

Banner adds. “It’d explain how his classmates suspect so much.”

“No, that’s…that’s my fault.” I confess.

I need to be better at that.

And I need to go back with B.A.R.F and really investigate that whole ferry fiasco.

“No it’s not.” Danvers quickly corrects me.

“Don’t worry about what they think Peter. They can either get with the program, or not. Their choice.” Rhodey tells me.

Okay.

“Then why are you giving me the suit back?” I ask the room.

“Because we’re arriving tomorrow.” Danvers informs me.

“Already?”

She smirks at me, then adds “Time flies when you’re digging into years of Avengers history.”

Guess so.

“Where are we arriving?”

Romanoff answers this time. “It’s in the packet you haven’t looked at yet.”

“I’ve been busy.” I defend myself.

She laughs. “I know.”

“The plan…” Rhodey gets to his feet. “Is for you to wear this underneath your disguise at all times, in case of an emergency.”
“I’ll be wearing the suit the entire time?”
Rhodey nods, and Romanoff picks up where he left off. “Along with a mask to disguise your true identity.”

*The whole time.*

“And we’re meeting with allies?” I double check.

Danvers nods. “Better to be safe than sorry.”

“Try it on Pete. See how it fits.” Rhodey encourages me, before I feel everyone else take a slight step back.

*Okay…it’s activated upon contact or thought. And I don’t think it’s connected to my wristbands…*

Cautiously, I reach out and set my hand on the suit, only for it to quickly adhere to me and begin covering up my body. Once complete, the helmet portion snaps over my face, and a new display pops up.

“Did you install a display?” I ask, hearing footsteps behind me.

*I think it’s Thor.*

“No, is there one showing up?” Banner asks me.

I nod. “There wasn’t really one last time.”

*I stumbled into everything by accident.*

“Fascinating. This is one of Stark’s most impressive works.” Thor says, then claps me on the shoulder.

“Considering how he deployed it too? Absolutely.” Rhodey adds.

*Where are…the arms.*

Banner glances at a laptop close by. “Whatcha looking for?”

“There’s these arms…” I try to explain as I keep cycling thru options. “Last time I only used them on accident. I’m trying to find them.”

“Arms?” Romanoff turns to Bruce.

“Keep looking.” Rhodey instructs me.

*Not viaduct, not airfield, not air show either…*

*Give me *Missulena*.*

Immediately, I feel something pop out of the back of my suit, then glance to my left while popping off my helmet, only for two arms to be deployed.

“Whoa!” Thor says quickly, causing Banner, Romanoff and Rhodey to turn.

“That was fast.” Rhodey jokes.
“How’d you know which one it was?” Romanoff asks me.

“Missulena. It’s a type of venomous spider.”

Banner chuckles. “It’s one of the most venomous spiders in the world.”

“I believe it.” Wanda speaks for the first time, eying the metal limbs.

“Does it fit alright?” Danvers asks, just to my right now.

I nod. “Yeah. I just don’t have much experience with it honestly.”

“That’s why we’re here.” Romanoff tells me. “To get you used to that suit and comfortable. Among other things.”

“Among other things?” I turn back to her.

“We’ve got to teach you to dance too.” Danvers adds.

“Dance?” I whip back around, only for her to be smirking at me.

“Yeah. Dance.” She smiles. “Can’t have you looking like a fool at that wedding with Michelle.”

Michelle.

“I know how to dance.” I quickly explain. “A little bit.”

“Well we’re really going to teach you.” Romanoff declares. “Formal, ball room—”

“Slow dance…” Danvers smiles.

“I…don’t have a choice. Do I?” I ask, then look to her and Romanoff.

“Nope.” Romanoff smiles at me.

Helplessly, I turn to Banner and Rhodey, only for them to shrug their shoulders.

“Alright, if we’re going to be so formal about this…” Romanoff says, approaching me before forcing me to turn around.

The outline of the keypad turns green as I slip the card Daisy gave me back into my pocket then walk into the cockpit, where everyone is seated and in position.

Crap.

As quickly as I can, I slide into my seat and strap in before I hear “You made it.”

“Yeah. Reading stuff for too long.”

Yeah. More like swiping thru pictures on my phone.

“About what?” Daisy asks, throwing a smile on top.

I shrug. “Not much. Couldn’t focus.”

That’s what everything’s said about me.
And I got straight A’s.

“All this is covered.” She says reassuringly, then leaning down to get better eye contact.

“I know.” I nod, then try to give her a smile in return.

*I’ve already got my suit on, underneath my clothes in the same style Mr. Stark did. Mask is waiting to be deployed.*

“All set then.” Daisy looks pleased, as behind her I see Danvers smiling.

*Well, here we go I guess.*

Xandar, whatever that is. Traveling thru over 1000 jump points.

*True interstellar travel. Using planetary systems as the navigational points.*

To the rest of the galaxy, we’re from the planet Terra, also known as C-53.

The sun is just another average star. Our solar system doesn’t stand out from the billions of other systems in the galaxy.

*But here we are. We’re not even in our own galaxy. Apparently we’re in the Andromeda Galaxy now.*

In front of me, I hear a loud click, followed by a telephone being hung back up onto the ceiling. “Everybody strapped in?”

Daisy looks to me, then looks to the others. “Yup.” Is all anybody adds.

“Coming out of hyperspace in three, two, on—.”

Immediately, the cockpit rocks before coming to a halt, revealing a large formation in front of us.

*The report said—*

“Whoa.” I hear Daisy blurt out.

*That’s…not a natural formation.*

The cockpit is silent for a second before the Asian woman, who must be the pilot turns back. “Colonel, did they say anything about a greeting party?”

“No.” Danvers shakes her head.

*It…kind of looks like a procession.*

There’s two rows of spaceship, one after another lined up in front of this blue-ish green planet. Leading directly to it.

*On the planet itself it looks like—*

“Earth Vessel One, this is Xandarian Captain Day speaking. Do you copy our transmission?”

Immediately, our pilot responds. “Loud and clear. Is all that for us?”

“It is.” The male voice. The initial ship on your right will pull out front and lead you in whenever
you’re ready.”

I finally look away from the scarred, burnt portion of the planet. Back to the massive formation of ships.

They were waiting for us.

“Did that Thanos guy do that?” Deke asks.

Yeah.

“He did.” Danvers answers quietly, getting Daisy to move in her seat.

The decimation of Xandar.

“That’s the first ship.” Mack calls out as things begin moving.

“Let’s get moving then.”

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