Pieces of Echoes

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by geekymoviemom

Summary

When weapons designer and SHIELD consultant Tony Stark and his son are kidnapped following a routine weapons demonstration, newly defrosted World War II hero Steve Rogers is sent to find them.

But what begins as just another mission, a way for Captain America to reintegrate back into society, quickly warps into something more as betrayals are discovered, harsh, long-buried truths are finally brought to light, and Tony and Steve come to realise that their biggest allies are each other.
Cold. Why's it so cold? And dark? Wasn't the sun out when we were driving?

Dad? Are you there? My chest hurts, Dad, I think I need my inhaler. And my head hurts, too. Like I hit it on something really, really hard.

Dad? Where are you?

Where am I?

As Peter Stark's mind slowly inched back towards consciousness, the dry, freezing air smelling strongly of wood and burning metal assaulting his senses, the thought that it had all simply been a
bad dream flitted briefly across his foggy mind. Another minor accident in the lab, perhaps, one of his chemistry experiments that had gone slightly wrong—not that any of his experiments ever went wrong, though. Peter was always very meticulous when he was running his experiments. After nearly singeing off his eyebrows a couple of times when he was younger, Peter had learned to always be extra careful, even programming DUM-E with the parameters of each of his experiments so the bot could warn him if he tried to get ahead of himself.

So that couldn't be it.

But Dad had still accidents from time to time. It was par for the course being an innovative weapons designer, or so Dad always told him. And besides, that’s what DUM-E was there for. Always ready with his fire extinguisher and broom, standing over them like a robotic guardian angel.

So cold! Why's it so cold in here? Aren't we in the desert?

Dad? Are you there?

"Ow!" Peter croaked a second later as a sharp pain in his head quickly yanked him back to reality. Someone was poking at the back of his head with something very sharp, like a needle, and Peter flinched, groaning as he attempt to raise his hand to try and swat the offensive object away.

"Do not move yet, young man," said a stern voice as a large hand wrapped around his arm, holding it in place against the hard metal cot where Peter was lying flat on his stomach. His head was tilted to the side, being held in place by a wadded up cloth that smelled faintly of chloroform. "I haven't yet finished stitching your head wound and I'd rather not use anymore of the chloroform. Your headache is going to be bad enough without it."

Um… okay. I'm definitely not in the lab.

"Ow! Hurts!" Peter moaned, the sound barely escaping past his parched throat, his head throbbing with every beat of his heart as if it were being hit with a hammer. "What're you doing to me?"

"I told you," replied the man. "I'm stitching your head wound closed. Try and remain still, please. It should be over soon."

"Uhh," Peter stammered, his tongue poking out to wet his dry lips as he blinked his eyes open, squinting against the harsh yellowish glow of a single bare overhead light bulb. The throbbing in his head instantly grew worse, his stomach churning less than a second later, and he quickly squeezed his eyes closed again as another soft groan rumbled up from his tight chest. "What—? What happ—, what's happened to me?"

"You took a few pieces of shrapnel to the back of your head," answered the man as the sharp end of his stitching needle again poked through Peter's skin, causing him to flinch. "You're very lucky that they did not penetrate any further, or you and I would not be having this conversation. It was all I could do to get the bleeding to slow down while I tended to your father."

A violent shiver raced down Peter's spine as he recalled the staccato spray of gunshots that tore through their military Humvee as if it'd been made out of tin foil, the panicked yelps of his father as he pushed Peter down into the wheel well of the vehicle, and the massive explosion that followed, launching them both out of the Humvee and onto the hard sandy ground of the Afghanistan desert.

"Shrapnel?" Peter asked, trying to clear his throat. "From the bombs?"

"Yes, shrapnel," answered the man. "And from Stark Industries bombs, no less. They are the best, after all." He let out a heavy sigh, resting his hand on Peter's shoulder for a moment. "Your father
took the worst of it since he attempted to shield you from the blast, but he will survive. You Stark men are apparently quite difficult to kill."

"That's 'cause we're made of iron," Peter answered, almost without thinking. It was one of the first things Peter remembered his father telling him when he was small, something his father's father had always told him.

"Stark men are made of iron."

"Is that something that your father says?" the man asked, and Peter could have sworn he almost sounded amused.

"Uh… huh," Peter wheezed as the needle once again pierced his tender skin, his hands clenching into tight fists at his sides. He absolutely hated needles, and it was only due to the pounding in his head and the fact that his limbs felt like they'd been filled with sand that he was able to remain as still as he was.

"Well, then you are lucky," the man said, finally tying off the final stitch. Peter sucked in a sharp breath as the man poured a small amount of what smelled like alcohol over the wound, carefully dabbing it dry with a cloth. "Iron is very difficult to destroy."

"Exactly." Peter inhaled as deep a breath as his tight lungs would allow, trying to psyche himself up to attempt to open his eyes again. "Where—? Where's my dad? And what happened to Colonel Rhodes and the rest of the soldiers that were with us?"

"Your father is resting comfortably," replied the man. "Or, as comfortably as he's able, given the circumstances. As for the rest, I'm afraid I have no idea. I've been here in this cave for quite some time." He paused for a moment as he gathered up his equipment. "Do you usually accompany your father on trips like this, young man?"

"Peter," answered Peter. "My name's Peter. And no, I don't. This trip… it was a last minute kinda thing. My dad didn't want to bring me here, but he didn't really have a choice."

"I see," the man said politely, crouching down to Peter's eye level. "Nice to meet you, Peter. My name is Yinsen."

"Uh huh," Peter murmured. Hot tears stung his eyes as he searched past Yinsen for his father, finding only the blurred edges of what looked like large wooden crates, the same kind of crates that Stark Industries used to ship its weapons out to the military. His glasses must've gotten lost in the explosion. "So, where's—? Where's my dad? I can't—, I can't see him. My glasses—"

"He's on your opposite side, Peter," answered Yinsen, placing a gentle hand on Peter's head, careful to avoid the freshly stitched wound. "How old are you, young man, if you don't mind my asking?"

Peter shook his head, as well as he could while lying practically flat on his face. "I'm eleven."

"I see. I have a son who is only a couple of years older than you," Yinsen continued. "Now, as I was saying, Mr. Stark is resting on your opposite side. His wounds were a bit more… severe than yours, and he was quite agitated when he was brought in, so he is still unconscious. But I don't want you turning your head just yet. You likely have a slight concussion in addition to the wound, so you'll just have to take my word for it right now. Okay?"

The tears Peter had been trying to hold back finally spilled over, tracking down his grimy face in salty rivulets. "How bad is he hurt? Is he gonna be all right?"
"War!" stated the tinny voice emanating from the television hanging on the light beige wall of the living room, the old black and white video displaying squadrons of marching German soldiers saluting their Fuhrer as they passed. "With the forces of darkness pressing in from the East and from the West, America heeds the call to fight for freedom! And at the front of the fight, shoulder to shoulder with our battling boys, is Captain America!

"A product of old-fashioned values and exciting new science, Captain America is the name that every enemy fears! Top secret new weapons are no match for our man. When tough times turn tougher, when hope's on the ropes, he's the man to knock the Axis powers on their axis. He's out there fighting for the land that we love, and he won't stop—"

With a heavy sigh, Steve Rogers clicked the PAUSE button on the hand device that operated the television, pausing the grainy, sepia-toned image on a picture of him in full uniform, riding on his motorcycle in front of a tank.

Nearly seventy years, Steve thought as he stared at the image, remembering clearly the exact date and time it was taken as if it had been only yesterday.

Which wasn't really all that far from the truth, as it turned out.

Setting down the hand device—what had Director Fury called it again? A remote control?—Steve glanced out the nearby window. The rising sun was glinting off of the clear, mirror-like surface of the nearby lake, throwing a soft orange glow around the living room of the cabin he'd been living in for the past week or so.

It was called a safe house according to Agent Coulson, one of Director Fury's men who had brought Steve to the cabin after he'd—accidentally—torn up a part of their SHIELD facility in New York City.

In Steve's defence, it might have been better if they had simply told him the truth from the beginning, rather than attempt the elaborate ruse that Steve had been able to see right through after only a couple of minutes. It hadn't taken all that long after Director Fury had caught back up with Steve, gaping in confusion at his surroundings in the middle of a busy New York street, for him to decide that perhaps the safe house was a better place for Steve to get used to this new time. Away from things that were too painfully familiar but still just different enough to be frightening.

The whole thing was still so disconcerting. Steve had driven the Red Skull's plane into the icy water of the Arctic knowing that it was the only way to protect the citizens of New York City from dying horrific deaths, and also knowing full well that he was going to die in the process.

But then, he didn't. Thanks to the super soldier serum, apparently all he did was go to sleep.

On the coffee table in front of him sat a stack of SHIELD files, given to him by Director Fury for his perusal when he was first dropped off at the cabin. There was a file for each member of his old squadron, the Howling Commandos, and Steve's throat tightened as he thumbed through them for probably the umpteenth time, each sight of the word DECEASED stamped underneath their names piercing his heart like a sniper shot. They were all dead, with every last one of them dying from natural causes after what seemed like a long, fulfilling life.

Except for Bucky, the only Howling Commando to give his life in the service of his country. Had
they ever even bothered to search for his body, or had they just left him where he fell, to be buried under sixty-plus years of snow and ice?

Steve would have to remember to ask Fury the next time he saw him.

Shoving the files away, Steve got up from the couch and headed for the small main bedroom, reaching for his running shoes. He'd already filled over half of an eighty page sketchbook with various drawings, so maybe another run would help clear his head a bit. Director Fury hadn't yet told Steve what they planned to do with him, but he had a strong feeling they weren't just going to keep him in some isolated cabin in the middle-of-nowhere Maryland for too much longer. He would surely go stir-crazy, even if there was an unlimited supply of sketchbooks and pencils and running shoes.

The sun was shining brightly overhead by the time Steve returned from his run, huffing and puffing and dripping with sweat. He headed immediately to the kitchen for a glass of water, the glass nearly slipping out of his hand as he heard the sound of a car door slamming shut, followed a few seconds later by a knock on the front door.

"Morning, Captain," said Director Fury as he stepped inside, followed by Agent Coulson and another man that Steve didn't recognise.

"Director," answered Steve, nodding at Coulson as he blotted his sweaty forehead and neck with a towel. As per his usual, Fury was dressed in black from head to toe, and Steve had to bite back the urge to ask the man if he owned any clothing in other colours when the third man opened his briefcase, silently pushing three more files into Steve's hand. Steve immediately flipped them open, his eyes going wide as they swept across the names and faces, one of whom Steve instantly recognised.

Howard Stark. Also deceased, according to the file. And the other two were apparently Howard's son... and grandson, based on their names and the familial resemblance to Howard. Did Howard actually end up settling down and getting married after all?

"There's something we need to discuss, Captain," said Fury, jerking his head towards the living room. "Why don't we all have a seat?"

"I know Howard Stark," Steve said as he folded his large frame onto the couch, gulping down another large sip of his water. "Or at least, I did know him."

"Yeah, that's correct," replied Fury. "Along with Dr. Erskine, he was the main person responsible for creating you. Howard was also one of the founding members of SHIELD, along with yet another person with whom you're familiar."

A lump formed in Steve's throat. "Peggy Carter," he said softly. Her file was sitting over on the table, right on top of Bucky's. But, unlike Bucky, she at least was still alive. According to the file, Peggy was now well over ninety years old and suffering from dementia, but at least she was still alive. The only link to his past.

"And this is Howard's son?" Steve asked, holding up the file marked Tony Stark.

"That's also correct," Fury answered. "And that boy there is Tony's son, his only living relative. He's actually the main reason why we're here."

"The boy?" Steve asked, his brow furrowing as he studied the boy's picture. He had the same dark hair as Howard and Tony, and the same shape to his brown eyes. But where there was a grave
seriousness to both Howard and Tony's photos, with a deep, underlying sadness evident in Tony's eyes that struck Steve in particular, the picture of young Peter was one of pure, childlike innocence, something Steve hadn't seen in a long, long time.

"Why is the boy so important?" he repeated, looking pointedly at Fury. "It seems odd for SHIELD to be so interested in someone so young."

Fury leaned back against the back of his chair, crossing his legs as he quirked an eyebrow in Agent Coulson's direction, indicating for him to take over the conversation.

"As you probably already know, Captain, Howard Stark was involved in quite a few projects during World War II," Coulson began, his lips quirked into that smirky smile he always wore when he was around Steve, a product of his childhood Captain America hero-worship, according to Fury. "With several of those projects helping the United States to end the war. Once the war was over, he continued in his pursuits to invent new weapons technologies based on his studies of various artefacts recovered during the war."

"Artefacts?" interrupted Steve. There had been plenty of things on board the Red Skull's plane that could potentially wreak havoc if they were to fall into the wrong hands. "You don't mean things like the—"

"That's not really important right now, Captain," Fury cut in, shooting Coulson a harsh look. "Please continue, Agent Coulson."

Coulson cleared his throat, shooting Fury an apologetic look. "The short of it is, Captain, is that Howard Stark's company, Stark Industries, is worth billions of dollars and supplies a majority of the weapons to the United States military. Tony Stark, Howard's only son, is the current CEO of Stark Industries. Seven days ago, Tony and his son Peter were riding back to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in a military convoy following a new weapons demonstration, when they were attacked and kidnapped by a group of insurgents."

"Kidnapped?" Steve exclaimed. "For what purpose?"

"We assume to extort money from Stark Industries, or from the government," answered Coulson. "As I said, the company is worth billions—as is our government, for that matter—and Tony Stark would be a pretty valuable prize for any of the dozens of terrorist factions currently operating in the Middle East."

Steve scowled, once again glancing down at the picture of young Peter. What kind of a father would bring his young son into an active war zone? Steve couldn't even fathom how frightened he must be right now. "Is that all you're really worried about? The possibility of a ransom demand? This is a kid we're talking about here!"

"A kid who's the sole heir to a multi-billion-dollar company, Captain," Fury said in a low voice. He pursed his lips, tilting his head as his uncovered eye studied Steve with such an intensity that it seemed like he was almost challenging Steve to look away. But Steve held his gaze, unblinking. He was very much used to people trying to intimidate him.

"Look, Captain," Fury finally said. "Tony Stark has been a consultant for SHIELD for quite a few years now, and as a result, I feel like I've gotten to know him fairly well. And from what I know of him, there is no possible way he would voluntarily bring that boy of his on one of these trips unless he had no other choice. There is absolutely nothing more important in Tony's entire world than his son. Tony's so overprotective of him that he doesn't even allow him to be photographed by the media unless he prearranges it first, so for him to just randomly choose to bring Peter on such a potentially
dangerous trip, well... that's just not like the Tony Stark that I know. It smells funny to me, Captain, and I don't like it when things smell funny. It gets me cranky, if you know what I mean."

There was a pause as Steve allowed Fury's words to sink in, trying to decipher the hidden meaning behind them. Surely someone of Tony Stark's means could afford a trustworthy caregiver for his son during his absences, couldn't he? And did that mean that the boy's mother was completely out of the picture?

"So what are you saying, Director?" Steve finally asked. "You think someone on the inside had something to do with this? Someone close to either the boy or to Tony?"

Fury quirked an eyebrow. "That's one possibility, Captain. Peter does have a nanny, a woman who's been in Tony Stark's employ since Peter was a baby. But she was called away at the very last minute for a sudden family emergency, and with Tony's personal assistant and head of security both out of town, Tony really had no choice but to take the boy with him. These aren't exactly the kinds of trips you can simply postpone because someone calls in sick."

"That does seem like too much to just be a coincidence," Steve agreed. "So you're thinking that the boy was the intended target, rather than Tony Stark himself?"

"Not necessarily," answered Fury. "Right now it seems likely that they were both the intended targets. Taking both of the Starks out at once would certainly serve the interests of many of these terrorist groups. The destabilisation caused by the sudden loss of the Stark Industries CEO and his heir would ripple throughout the entire U.S. military, giving the terrorists a temporary advantage. It is a very unstable area of the world, Captain, and these insurgents would jump on any opportunity to tip the odds in their favour."

*That's an awful lot of power to give just one man, especially a civilian,* Steve thought. *And a lot of pressure.*

Huffing out a sharp breath, Steve swiped the sweaty towel across his forehead, downing the rest of the water in his glass. "So... why are you telling me this?"

Fury jerked his head in Coulson's direction, who cleared his throat.

"Despite what the military are calling 'their best efforts'," Coulson began. "They have not managed to begin a proper search for Stark and the boy as of yet. We were hoping that you might be willing to pick up the slack, as it were."

"If they're so worried about destabilisation in the area, then why aren't they trying harder to find them?" Steve asked. "That seems counter-intuitive."

"It is, Captain," answered Fury. "But as I said, the power balance in that region is precarious. Any attempt at a search and rescue on the scale required to locate the Starks has so far been deemed too aggressive by the base commanders in the area."

"They're afraid it could possibly invite further attacks against them," said Steve.

"Likely, Captain," stated Fury. "Not possibly."

Steve glanced again down at the files, his eyes flicking back and forth between Tony and Peter's photos. "So, you want me to go in and find them? Is that what this is about?"

"You're one of the greatest military strategists to ever live," said Coulson. "Or, who's still living, as the case may be. And given your... extraordinary abilities, it's likely that you wouldn't require as
much backup as a more… traditional soldier."

"So I'm expendable," Steve grumbled. "Is that it?"

"No, Captain," Fury said firmly. "You're just the right man for the job."

"Peter!" Tony Stark called, his voice barely louder than a raspy whisper as he pulled frantically on
his son's hand, trying to keep Peter from drifting off yet again. Yinsen had said he was concerned
that Peter might be developing an infection in his head wound in addition to his concussion, so going
to sleep was not a good idea at the moment. "You can't go to sleep again, buddy, okay? Not yet!"

"Mmm," moaned Peter, his eyes already at half-mast, his rapid, shallow breaths sounding like they
were being sucked through a straw. He was shivering violently, his skinny body covered in both he
and Tony's blankets. Yinsen said his fever was spiking again, which would only make his lung
problems worse. "So 'ired, Dad. Wanna sleep!"

"I know you do, buddy," Tony said, his throat thick with unshed tears. As scared as he was, he was
absolutely not going to give these assholes the advantage of seeing him cry. Not yet, at least. "I know
you do. But Yinsen's trying to get you some more medicine first. Once he comes back and you take
the medicine, then you can go to sleep. Okay, buddy? But you gotta stay with me until then, okay?"
"Please buddy, stay with me! And damn these fucking people who won't even give us another blanket!

"Mmm," came the muffled reply from the trembling form on the cot. "Don' feel good, Dad. My chest
hurts, and my head hurts, and I'm so cold!"

"I know, buddy. And I wish I could help you. I wish I could make all of this just go away," croaked
Tony, cursing his inability to offer any proper comfort to his son. Peter was always extra clingy
when he was sick, and Tony always indulged him with as many hugs and cuddles and bowls of
chicken soup as he wanted. Tony couldn't remember the last time he himself had been sick, but poor
Peter apparently hadn't inherited his propensity to repel germs. And even with all of the advances
Stark Industries had made with their medical technology over the years, Tony still couldn't seem to
find a way to help Peter breathe any better.

But as it was, Tony could barely sit up without assistance at the moment, and it wouldn't do Peter
any good at all if he were to pass out again from the horrific pain in his chest and torso, a pain so
intense that he could barely breathe, shooting throughout his body with every spoken word.

"You just gotta hold on a little longer, okay bud?" Tony continued, squeezing Peter's hand. "Yinsen
should be back soon."

"Uh huh," Peter murmured. "I'll try."

"That's right," said Tony. "That's my boy." He glanced down at his chest, his upper lip curling in
disgust at the sight of the thick wire extending out from the center, tethering the car battery sitting on
the floor next to his cot to the electromagnet Yinsen had implanted into his sternum.

The electromagnet that was keeping the imbedded pieces of Christmas tree-shaped shrapnel from
entering his atrial septum, and killing him.

The walking dead, Yinsen had called this type of wound. Said he'd seen plenty of it in his village,
some place called Gulmira. And when Tony had asked how in the hell these people had gotten ahold
of so many of his company's weapons, Yinsen had only smiled sadly and shaken his head.

"These are your loyal customers, Stark," he'd said, not without a hint of irony. "They are called the
Ten Rings.

This is all my fucking fault. All of it. I should've just canceled the trip, to hell with the goddamn Board of Directors and Obie's overactive paranoia.

This is all my fault.

The loud scrape of metal against metal startled Tony from his black as pitch thoughts, and he turned to see Yinsen shoved through the door to the prison, his hands raised in the air and a rifle—a Stark Industries rifle, no less—poking him in the back, held by a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man with a salt-and-pepper beard and a mean-as-hell gleam in his eyes. Peter's fingers automatically tightened around Tony's, pulling a choked sob from his chest as the man and Yinsen stopped at Peter's bedside.

"He says if you wish for medicine for the boy," Yinsen said, translating the man's Arabic words. "You must then agree to their terms."

Gritting his teeth, Tony gave Peter's hand what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze and then gripped the edge of his cot, managing to turn himself onto his side as a massive wave of pain crashed through his body. He narrowed his eyes at the man holding the rifle, proudly, as if it were his most prized possession.

"How did you get ahold of my guns?" Tony asked, with all the intensity he could muster. "Where'd all these weapons come from?"

The man immediately began speaking in rapid Arabic, a language that Tony didn't understand, finally indicating for Yinsen to translate.

"This is Abu Bakar," Yinsen began. "And he says, welcome Tony Stark, the greatest mass murderer in the history of America. He is very honoured to meet you."

"Can't say I feel the same," Tony replied quietly.

Abu reached into the pocket of his jacket, producing a folded photograph that he handed to Yinsen, still rattling off words that Tony couldn't decipher. Arabic had never been on his list of languages to master.

"He says, you will build for him the Jericho missile that you were demonstrating for the soldiers," said Yinsen. "Once they have a fully operational missile, they will set you and your son free."

"Bullshit!" Tony thought, barely able to keep from speaking the word out loud. "No, he won't," he said instead as he looked over at the shivering body of his son. "He'll either force me to build them something else or he'll kill us." Clenching his jaw, Tony slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position, looking Abu straight in the eye. "I'm not doing a goddamn thing for you until you get my son some medicine for his fever."

Tony watched Abu closely as Yinsen translated his words, the terrorist's eyes widening such that they looked as though they might pop out of his round head by the time Yinsen was finished. He shouted something in Arabic over his shoulder, roughly shoving Yinsen out of the way with the butt of his rifle as three other men rushed inside and grabbed ahold of Peter, yanking him right off his cot and dragging him towards the door.

"Dad!" Peter yelped, desperately reaching for Tony as he disappeared through the open doorway, his raspy cries tearing Tony's heart into tiny little pieces. "Daddy, where're they taking me? Daddy? Help me!"
"What the hell are you doing?" Tony screamed, the force nearly knocking his weakened body backwards. He lunged forward, attempting to reach for Abu but only managing to land face first on the freezing rock of the cave floor, the resulting pain nearly knocking the wind out of him as the terrorist smiled manically and backed out of the room.

"He says they will give the boy his medicine and then they will bring him back," Yinsen was saying as he dug his hands underneath Tony's shoulders, trying to help him back up. But Tony could barely hear him over the echo of Peter's frantic cries reverberating around in his head.

"What're they gonna do to him?" Tony shrieked as he shoved Yinsen's hands away, panting as he forced himself back into a sitting position, leaning against his cot. "Are they gonna kill him? He's only a boy, how could you let them take him? He wasn't even supposed to be here!"

*He wasn't even supposed to be here. How could I let them take him?*

'Cause I'm a helpless, worthless piece of shit, that's how.

"They will not kill the boy if they think they can use him to force you to do their bidding, Stark!" Yinsen yelled into Tony's ear as the metal door to their prison slammed closed with a thundering clang. "I don't know who you think you're dealing with, but these people are not just another one of your company's Board of Directors that you can bully around. These are the Ten Rings! Their leader is known across the world only as the Mandarin, and they are hell-bent on destroying not only the West, but any attempt at global world peace. They are an organisation bent on creating chaos, and they will stop at nothing to achieve their ends!"

A choked sob forced its way from Tony's throat. "Then what're they gonna do to my son? He—, he's got lung issues, he needs an inhaler to help him breathe even on a good day, and the fever's only making it worse!"

Yinsen let out a heavy sigh as he carefully placed Tony back onto his cot, rearranging the thick wire that had gotten itself wrapped around Tony's neck. "This is a very well-equipped camp, Stark. It is quite possible they will simply give him the medicine he requires, and then bring him back."

Tony sucked in a shaky breath, letting it out slowly as he cupped his hand over the electromagnet keeping him alive. "And then what?"

"And then they will punish you for your insubordination and ask their question again," answered Yinsen. "And I suspect they'll expect a more positive response."

"They want me to build them a weapon."

"Yes."

"And as soon as I'm done, they'll kill us both," Tony whispered, a fresh wave of panic threatening to drown him. "There's absolutely nothing to gain by agreeing to their demands except maybe a bit of time."

Yinsen was quiet for a moment. "Well," he finally said. "Then this is a very important time for you, isn't it."

As the SHIELD aircraft—something Director Fury had called a Quinjet—touched down at Edwards Air Force Base, Steve felt the same quickening of his pulse that he'd always felt whenever he was about to embark on one of his HYDRA raids during the war. Fury had given Steve some informational materials on the Ten Rings—the terrorist organization that Fury suspected had
organised the Starks' kidnapping—to go over while they were airborne, and Steve had been relieved
to discover that his desire to fight back against any and all bullies hadn't wavered in the slightest in
the nearly seventy years he'd been under. In fact, as he glanced once again at the photographs of
Tony and Peter Stark, his resolve seemed to be even stronger than ever. It wasn't only the fact that he
finally felt like he was doing something useful, there was something more to it than that.

It was almost as though Steve felt protective of the Starks, something he hadn't felt this strongly since
Bucky had slipped from his fingers from the side of that HYDRA train. He couldn't seem to stop
staring at Tony Stark's picture, at the intense pain masked deep inside his no-nonsense expression, as
if he was trying to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. Howard hadn't ever been like that,
at least not when Steve had known him. Steve couldn't remember ever seeing Howard's smirky
facade waver for even a second. Not even when he was flying Steve into an active war zone.

Exiting the Quinjet, Fury led Steve into the visitor's reception area where he would be meeting up
with the rest of the rescue team. His Stars and Stripes uniform, already cleaned and repaired from its
time in the ice, felt strangely out of place amongst the muted blues and greys of the various soldiers
milling about, to say nothing about the hi-tech aircraft just sitting on display near the entrance to the
building itself.

"Captain Rogers," Fury said as they were greeted by a slender black man wearing the stripes of a Lt.
Colonel. "This is Colonel Rhodes. He's the military liaison to Stark Industries and a close personal
friend of Mr. Stark's. He'll be accompanying you on this mission."

Steve immediately stood at attention, snapping his heels together and offering a salute. "It's a pleasure
to meet you, Colonel."

"As you were, Captain," Rhodes said casually as he returned the salute, raising an eyebrow as he
glanced at Fury. "And this mission of ours is strictly off the books, as it were, so you're gonna have
to drop the formality. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," answered Steve, even though he really didn't. Military missions did not tend to go well if
the proper chain of command wasn't followed, and the military hierarchy clearly stated that a Lt.
Colonel outranked a Captain, so—

"Rhodes," said Rhodes, interrupting Steve's stream of consciousness. "Or Rhodey, that's what Tony
calls me most of the time. And I know what you're thinking, but it doesn't apply here. This is not an
officially sanctioned Air Force mission, Captain. We're just two friends out searching for another
friend and his son. Is that clear?"

"Not—, not exactly, sir," Steve stammered. "But I'm sure I'll figure it out by the time we get there."
Or at least I hope so.

"Good," Rhodes replied. "Now, unless you're itching to get targeted by every single enemy sniper in
Afghanistan as soon as we land, we had better find you something more appropriate to wear."

The mention of snipers reminded Steve of Bucky, and he forcefully pushed the thought away,
burying it deep in the recesses of his mind. He couldn't afford to dwell on the past right now with
two people's lives at stake.

"Thank you, sir," Steve answered.

"Not sir," said Rhodes. "Rhodes."

"Rhodes. Thank you, Rhodes."
Not thirty minutes later, dressed in a brand-new set of what Rhodes called desert fatigues and his vibranium shield coated with something to dull down the colours, Steve and Rhodes boarded a troop transport plane heading for Afghanistan. Almost before he even sat down Steve could feel the not-so-subtle stares aimed his way from the other soldiers. Some were merely polite curiosity—a couple even with the same hero-worship looks that Agent Coulson often wore—while others were a bit more challenging, not too far off from how things had been when he’d first joined the Army, before the serum.

He supposed he would have to get used to it all over again.

"So," he said to Rhodes, practically shouting to be heard over the roar of the plane's engines. He'd definitely forgotten how loud the planes were. "How long have you known the Starks?"

"I've known Tony since he was fifteen," answered Rhodes. "We met at MIT our freshman year." 

_Freshman year? "Tony Stark went to college when he was fifteen?" Steve asked, incredulous._

"Yep," replied Rhodes. "Tony's smart, like damn smart. Graduated with two Master's degrees in less time than it takes most people to get a bachelor's. Guy couldn't even legally drink at his own graduation party. Not that that stopped him, though."

"That's… impressive," remarked Steve. "I guess the high intelligence runs in the family then?"

"Hmm?" Rhodes asked. "Oh, yeah. Peter's smarter than hell too, Tony's always bragging about this or that that he's done that I can barely understand. The two of them are pretty much in a league of their own."

"Actually, I meant Howard," Steve said. "I knew Howard, and I could barely understand the stuff he would talk about too. It was like he spoke a different language."

Rhodes shot him a strange look. "Oh, yeah. Well, you might wanna keep that to yourself when you first meet Tony. Actually, you might wanna keep it to yourself period."

"Come again?" asked Steve.

"I wouldn't mention Howard in front of Tony," Rhodes added. "Tony gets pretty upset whenever anyone talks about his old man around him."

"I can imagine," Steve replied. "It must have been hard on Tony when Howard died."

"Um, not exactly," Rhodes said as he tipped his head back against his seat, closing his eyes. "Tony couldn't stand Howard."

"He couldn't stand his own father?" Steve asked. Having lost his own father before he was even born, Steve just couldn't comprehend that possibility of not loving your own parent. Plus, from what everyone had said it seemed like Tony Stark absolutely adored his own son, so Steve had just assumed…

"Why not?"

Rhodes shrugged. "'Cause Howard was an asshole, according to Tony. I only met him a couple of times, so I can't say I had a strong personal opinion of him either way. But from what Tony's told me they never had all that great of a relationship. So… yeah. Just don't mention the fact that you knew his dad right off the bat, okay? He's gonna be cranky enough as it is when we find him."
"Um… sure," answered Steve. *Why wasn't that information in the file?* "No problem."

"Good," Rhodes said. "Now if you don't mind, we got a fifteen-hour flight ahead of us, so I'm gonna try and catch some sleep. It's been a little hard to come by lately, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do," Steve whispered, his mind already drifting back to the photo of Tony Stark. Was his strained relationship with his father the reason why he looked so sad? Or was there more to it than that?

"How fucking long are they gonna keep my boy!" Tony shrieked as yet another shockwave of pain shot through his body. Damn his pathetic weak self! He was Tony Stark, dammit! *He* was supposed to be untouchable. *He* was supposed to be made of iron.

*He* was supposed to protect Peter.

And he'd *failed.*

"I don't know, Stark," Yinsen said in a flat, detached tone of voice that only made Tony's rage deepen. He was so angry and frightened that he could barely see straight, much less able to form any coherent thought process on how the hell he was going to get them out of this goddamn place.

*Rhodey's gotta be looking for us,* Tony thought. *He's just gotta.* Burning hot tears stung his eyes as he realized that he and Peter probably could have avoided this entire mess if Tony had just agreed to ride in Rhodey's vehicle back from the weapons demonstration, as Rhodey had tried to insist.

*Curse me and my fucking arrogance!*

A loud *clang* on the thick metal door startled Tony from his morbid thoughts, and he pushed himself up on his cot just as two men burst into the room, dragging a semi-conscious Peter between them.

"Peter!" Tony yelped, holding out his hand towards his son and trying to ignore the intense pain in his torso. "Pete? Are you okay? What did they do to you?"

But Peter only moaned in reply as the men tossed him onto his cot as if he were nothing more than a rag doll, then turned and left without a single word. Tony winced as the door slammed shut again, dropping to his knees in front of his son and brushing the sweaty curls off his forehead.

"Pete? It's me, buddy. What did those bastards do to you? Did they give you something?"

"Mmm," Peter mumbled, so softly that Tony could barely hear him. While he was no longer shivering, his round cheeks were flushed and his lungs were rattling with every single shallow inhale and exhale. Whatever they had done to him hadn't seemed to help him all that much.

"There's an injection mark here, Stark," Yinsen said, pointing to a needle prick in the crook of Peter's left elbow. "And his fever seems to have broken. They might have just given him an antibiotic."

"Might have?" Tony snapped. "But we have no way of knowing, do we? He can barely breathe, goddamnit! He's not gonna last too much longer like this!"

"They will not allow him to die if they can still use him to force your hand, Stark!" Yinsen shot back. "You need to remember that!"

"I am not building those assholes a Jericho missile!" Tony hissed. "I refuse! They'll just kill us all as soon as they have it!"
"Well, then I suggest you come up with an alternative plan," replied Yinsen. "And quickly."

Tony huffed out a sharp breath, his fingers combing through Peter's damp hair as he pressed a quick kiss to Peter's clammy forehead. "It's gonna be all right, Pete," he whispered. "I promise it's gonna be all right. I'm gonna figure something out, okay? So you just gotta hold on for me. Can you do that for me, buddy?"

Peter instinctively turned his head, his cheek resting against Tony's palm as he let out a soft, "Uh huh."

"That's my boy," Tony murmured, his mind already racing with possibilities. Yinsen had told him that the weapons casings littering their prison had been stripped of any and all explosives, but that didn't mean there wasn't still something useful there. It would definitely be a challenge to make it appear that he was building the Jericho missile when in fact he'd be building something else, but when it came down to it, there really was little that Tony Stark enjoyed more than a challenge.

_They want me to build a weapon?_ he thought, still stroking Peter's hair. _Then I'll build a weapon that they'll never forget!_

_Come find me on Tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :)_

Chapter End Notes

I cannot wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment, and thank you for reading!
Chapter 2

Thank you so much for such a positive response to the first chapter! I'm so glad you guys are enjoying the story! :)

And a huge shout-out to stjohn27, my awesome prereader and sounding board.

Steve glanced up from his pocket-sized sketchbook as the military plane touched down at Bagram Air base, surprised to see a light dusting of snow falling outside in the dark. For some reason it hadn't occurred to him that the desert-like climate of Afghanistan could get cold enough to allow for snow.

Rhodes had slept for nearly the entire flight, as had most of the other soldiers on the transport, leaving Steve alone with his drawings and thoughts, of which there were many. Just as there had been ever since he'd woken up in this strange time.

How was it, for example, that someone like Howard Stark, someone so charismatic and friendly, could have a son that would grow to dislike him so intensely?
What had happened to Howard in the years following the war? Had he really changed so much that he would risk alienating his only child? Someone who would carry on his name, and his legacy?

As the doors to the plane opened, Steve carefully placed the photographs of Tony and Peter Stark between the pages of his sketchbook, shoving it into the cargo pocket of his pants as Colonel Rhodes blinked opened his eyes.

"I hope you managed to catch some sleep during the flight," Rhodes said as Steve collected his pack and his shield. "I'm not sure how many zzz's we'll be getting once we're out in the field."

Steve just shook his head. He'd never been all that great of a sleeper. His numerous health problems as a child and young adult never really allowed him to sleep that great, and things didn't improve all that much once he got into the Army. "I don't—, I don't really sleep that much anyway, so… I'll be fine though, sir. You don't need to worry about me."

Rhodes scowled, giving Steve a single nod as they exited the plane, heading towards the main building. "Well, suit yourself. Seeing as it's only about four in the morning here most of the brass are still asleep, but the pilot radioed the base commander before we landed, so hopefully there'll be some aerial footage of some of these camps ready for us to take a look at."

"Aerial footage?" asked Steve. "You mean like someone hanging out of an airplane and taking photographs? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not exactly," Rhodes said, chuckling as they entered the building. "We have unmanned drones that fly overhead that're too small to take out with surface-to-air missiles. They take film footage for us to analyse. That's how we've planned the majority of our troop movements for quite awhile now."

"O-kay," Steve said slowly. "Do you still use paper maps at all, or is everything done electronically now?"

"Oh, I'm sure we can scrounge up one or two for ya," answered Rhodes. "If you think it'll help."

"It's what I'm used to," said Steve. "So unless you wanna have to teach me how to use all of your fancy equipment, I think it would save a lot of time."

Thirty minutes later, after a quick stop at the mess hall for some breakfast—at least the military scrambled eggs and bacon hadn't changed all that much—Steve and Rhodes gathered in a conference room around a single paper map of the area, hastily hand-drawn by a member of the combat camera crew based on the latest aerial drone photographs. Camps considered enemy territory were marked in red, forming a semi-circle around the base set near the center.

"Okay," Steve began as he circled a spot just to the south of a group of mountains. "You said that this was the location of the weapons demonstration, correct?"

"That's right," replied Rhodes. "It's about thirty klicks west of the base."

"And the terrorists would've had their own transport vehicles?" Steve asked. "Or would they have commandeered ours?"

"Our vehicles were destroyed in the ambush, plus we can track our own vehicles from the base," Rhodes said. "They definitely had their own. They were well-prepared and well-armed."

"Any guess as to the fuel capacity for their vehicles?"

"Probably close to ours, around twenty-five gallons," Rhodes said. "And the mileage sucks, so it's
likely they wouldn't've been able to travel more than about fifty miles or so each direction."

"Plus, you said the Starks might've been injured," Steve added. "So it's likely the terrorists would've wanted to get them back to their camp pretty fast if they wanted to keep them alive."

A flash of what looked like guilt crossed Rhodes' face, and he nodded somberly. "Yeah, that makes sense. I'm sure if they were dead we would've heard about it."

Steve paused, his mind whirling. "You haven't heard anything from anyone since the attack, correct?"

"That's correct," Rhodes said. "Which is strange, actually. Usually the terrorist groups are eager to let us know when they do something big like this. They like to brag about it, they think it makes 'em look strong or something."

"Okay, so why do you think they haven't said anything?" Steve asked.

Rhodes let out a heavy sigh. "With all the different factions out here, there's as much infighting as there is fighting between us and them. It's possible that whichever one of them has Tony and Peter are wanting to keep it secret until something specific happens. There still hasn't been a ransom demand, so it doesn't seem like they're just after money."

Steve's eyebrows knitted together as he studied the map. "You said the convoy was returning from a weapons demonstration, correct?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"What exactly was Tony Stark demonstrating?"

"It's called the Jericho missile," Rhodes answered. "It's a multi-component weapon designed to separate into sixteen different projectiles once it's launched. It's got a propulsion system that's brand-new, too."

"Sixteen different components?" Steve said with wide eyes. "That sounds pretty brutal."

"I suppose it is," admitted Rhodes. "But it could also potentially save American lives, so—"

"While also increasing the risk of collateral damage," Steve snapped, a little too harshly when he noticed Rhodes' jaw clench up. "I mean, aren't there families in these camps? Woman and children?"

"Perhaps," Rhodes shot back. "Which is one reason why we haven't taken out very many of them. A lot of these terrorists like to use human shields, and we don't go around willingly attacking civilians, Captain. A weapon as powerful as the Jericho would only be used after careful consideration of all of the available facts."

Steve huffed out a sharp breath. That was likely a conversation for another time. Sure, there were plenty of things that his Army squadron had done when they were busy raiding the HYDRA bases that were less than ideal, but at least they never willingly targeted civilians.

"Did Tony design this Jericho?" he asked instead.

"Yeah, pretty sure," replied Rhodes. "Tony designs most of the Stark Industries weapons, especially the newer ones. Why?"

"Could he build one out here? If given the materials?"
Rhodes tilted his head, thinking. "Um, yeah, probably. Tony's brilliant, like I said. He can build just about anything." He paused for a moment, swallowing hard. "Holy shit, I bet that's exactly what they're wanting him to do. One of those missiles could take out an entire mountain range in one shot, and there's plenty of mountains around here. But that would also mean that those assholes would have to have the correct components, which would mean—oh my God—"

Steve's pulse started to quicken as he glanced at Rhodes. "Is someone at Stark Industries selling weapons to the enemy, Colonel?"

"If there is, it isn't Tony," Rhodes fired back. "He would never do such a thing. Never in a million years."

"But as the head of the company, he's still potentially responsible for—"

"Tony would never double-deal, Rogers!" Rhodes yelled. "Never! I would bet my life on it! He may be an asshole sometimes, but he's at least an honest one, you got that? If these insurgents have gotten ahold of Stark Industries weapons it was without Tony's knowledge, so you can just drop that entire line of thinking right now. Understand?"

"Yeah, I got it," Steve said softly. He supposed he had no choice but to take Rhodes' word for it, and Rhodes was obviously harbouring a tremendous amount of guilt over the Starks' capture. "So, what's the firing range of this Jericho missile?"

"It depends on where you aim the thing, Captain," Rhodes answered, a bit more calmly. "It's mounted on a swivel, so it can be as close as a few hundred meters or potentially as far as several klicks."

"And how long do you think it would take Tony to build it?"

"If he was in good health and had all the parts, probably a few days. A bit longer if he was injured."

Steve pursed his lips. Now came the most difficult question. "And would he? Build it?"

"If it meant saving Peter's life, then yeah," Rhodes answered. "He would. He'd hate himself for it afterwards, but there's nothing that Tony cares about more than Peter, so he would do whatever it'd take to keep him alive. Peter's not all that healthy of a kid on a good day, so it's not likely that he's doing all that great out here, and that's something these terrorists would probably exploit."

A heavy silence fell across the room as Steve studied the map, finally pointing to the enemy camp closest to the base. Checking them out systematically would work just as well as trying to pick them off at random. "Well," he said gently. "Then we'd better get started."

I shouldn't be alive, unless it was for a reason.

Like a mantra, Tony's mind replayed the thought over and over as four strong hands pushed his head and torso back under the water, holding him in place until his body jerked and shuddered, his lungs screaming for relief.

I shouldn't be alive, unless it was for a reason.

Out for four or five seconds, just barely long enough for Tony to clear his lungs of enough of the filthy water and inhale a quick, waterlogged breath, the muffled screams of his son lying only a few meters away piercing his heart like bullets.
"Peter?" Tony gasped through his heaving breaths, his face and torso still dripping wet as he crawled over to Peter's cot, pressing his forehead down against Peter's cheek. The boy's chest still sounded like he was trying to breathe through several layers of cheesecloth, and Tony felt his hands curling into fists, his dirt-caked fingernails digging into his palms. "It's okay, buddy. See? I'm still here. It's okay."

Slowly, Peter curled his right arm around Tony's neck, holding him in place with what little strength he still had as Tony continued to cough up the water from his lungs. Whatever their captors had shot into Peter's arm may have taken care of the boy's fever, but he still was as weak as a newborn kitten. "You were screaming, Dad!" Peter choked out. "It sounded like they were trying to drown you!"

"Nothing you need to worry about, Pete," Tony said, glancing sheepishly up at Yinsen, who only shook his head. "They were just… teaching me a lesson." And providing me with the exact way to break us out of here.

"But are they gonna come back?" Peter cried. "What're they gonna do when they come back? Are they gonna do it again?"

Tony shook his head, shuddering as streams of freezing cold water snaked down his back. He probably should've dried himself off a bit before crawling over to Peter, but he couldn't take listening to the boy's panicked cries for one more second. Peter needed to save all of his strength for their escape.

"When they come back," Tony murmured as he stroked Peter's matted hair. "I'm gonna give them a list of supplies that I need. And once I have everything, I'm gonna build something that's gonna get us out of here, Pete. So I need you to try and rest as much as you can. I need you to try and get as strong as possible because once I'm done building what I'm gonna build, we're gonna get out of here. Okay?"

Peter's chin started to shake. "But there's nothing but desert and mountains out there, Dad. How're we gonna escape?"

"You know Rhodey's out there looking for us right now, buddy," Tony said, even as his belly swooped in fear. It was quite likely that their captors hadn't left any of the soldiers alive after the attack, which would mean that Rhodey—or anyone else, for that matter—would absolutely not be coming to rescue them.

But Tony couldn't afford to think like that, especially not for Peter's sake. Peter could always see right through the masks and facades Tony put on as part of his public persona, and there was no way Peter would try to get better if he at all suspected that there was no hope of rescue.

"Rhodey's out there looking for us right now, buddy," he said again. "So you just concentrate on trying to get stronger, okay? Don't worry about me."

Peter inhaled a raspy breath, his skinny chest rattling under Tony's ear. "Uh huh. But can I help you build what you're gonna build? I wanna help you."

Tony hesitated. Even in his weakened state Peter was still smarter than probably ninety-eight percent of the rest of the humans on the planet, and Tony would definitely welcome another pair of eyes to check things over. "Yeah, bud, I'll let you help. But you gotta do exactly as I say, all right? Do you
promise?"

His dry, cracked lips stretched into a weak smile. "Yeah, I promise. Thanks, Dad."

"Good. So right now, I want you to try and sleep for a bit."

"But, Dad—!"

"Uh, uh, uh, you promised!" Tony said gently. He pressed his lips to Peter's cheek, alarmed at how cold and dry his skin felt to the touch. "I am gonna need your help to pull this off, Pete, so you're gonna need to be as strong as possible when the time comes. And I know it's pretty much impossible to sleep all that great in here, but I still want you to try and catch some now. Can you do that for me?"

Peter's sunken brown eyes filled with tears, and he stifled a cough as he nodded. "Uh huh," he murmured. "I can try."

"'Kay," whispered Tony. He pulled Peter's blanket up to his neck, tucking it around his bony shoulders and smoothing the hair off his forehead. One of the many things on Tony's list of demands was some more food for Peter. Even though the kid usually ate enough for three people at mealtimes he still didn't have any weight to spare, and with so much of his energy currently being used just to keep him breathing, more calories would definitely be useful. "I love you, buddy."

"Love you too, Daddy," Peter mumbled, his eyes fluttering closed.

Tony remained by Peter's side until his laboured breathing had evened out, his long, dark eyelashes such a sharp contrast against the greyishness of his pale skin. The last time he'd seen Peter look this sick was over three years ago, when he'd caught pneumonia after some little asshole classmate of his had swiped his inhaler after one of their gym classes. Tony never did find out the name of the kid who'd done it, which was a testament to how stubborn Peter could be when he wanted. Of all the things he had to inherit from Tony…

Abu and two of his lackeys ended up reappearing about an hour later, his Stark Industries rifle hanging from his shoulder and his face plastered with the smug look of someone who thought he had won a major battle of wits.

W ell, Tony thought, his jaw clenching in determination. I'm gonna show him.

"He says he wishes to know if you have changed your mind," Yinsen translated.

With a quick glance down at Peter's sleeping form, Tony nodded. "Tell him to make a list, I'm gonna need some supplies."

"He says he is prepared to bring whatever you need," Yinsen said.

Tony's upper lip curled into a smirk. "All right. Here's what I need." And he proceeded to rattle off an alarmingly long list of materials while barely pausing to take a breath, requiring one of Abu's henchmen to pull out a small notebook and pencil and start scribbling things down.

"I need a clean workstation, so this entire area needs to be cleared of clutter," Tony continued, barking orders in such a way that it would've made Rhodey proud. "I need more lights so I don't end up burning off my fingers. I need welding gear, doesn't matter if it's acetylene or propane, I can use either. I need helmets for all three of us, three pairs of goggles, smelting cups, two full sets of precision tools, and a computer capable of running calculations by the gigabyte. Actually, make that two of 'em."
The henchman writing everything down finally looked up, shaking out his hand as he babbled furiously at Abu.

"He asks if you are finished," said Yinsen.

Tony smiled. "No, I'm not. I also need three extra blankets, a tub and hot water for washing, and a bar of soap. And none of that homemade lard crap, I'm talking real, actual soap here. I also need an extra leather jacket for the boy, three clean pairs of socks, toothbrushes, a deck of cards with the jokers removed, peanut butter, and not the crunchy kind, that stuff is nasty, a bag of individually wrapped peppermint candies, coffee, and three large sets of Legos. With no missing pieces."

Abu's eyes nearly bulged out his head at that, and Tony had to stifle a chuckle as he cuffed his henchman on the side of his head, grumbling something too rapid for even Yinsen to catch.

"Tell him I require all of these supplies," Tony added, relishing in the confused reactions of the terrorists. It was about damn time he regained some control over the situation.

"He says there are no Lego pieces present in the Jericho missile," Yinsen said, his voice a bit shaky. "He says you are trying to make them look like fools."

"Uh huh," Tony answered. "And is he absolutely sure about that?" He leaned in towards Abu, his nose mere centimeters away, fighting the urge to smirk when Abu blinked first. "I must have everything on this list, or I absolutely cannot assemble the missile. That's my final word."

With a snarl that would've made even Obadiah happy, Abu turned on his heel, shouting orders at his subordinates as they headed out the door, slamming the metal door so hard that it shook the stone walls of the cave and startled Peter awake.

"Dad!" Peter cried, his shoulders relaxing as his eyes met Tony's. "What happened?"

"Oh, I just gave them my shopping list, Pete," Tony answered. "And let's just say they were a bit… surprised."

"Oh. Surprised in a good way?" Peter asked.

"Nope," Tony said with a grin as he leaned down to ruffle Peter's hair. Yinsen was staring at him with a look on his face that was both shocked and amused. "And that makes it even better."

"Mmm, okay," Peter said warily, coughing into his elbow. "So when do we get started?"

"Soon as our supplies get here, Pete," replied Tony. "And you take a bath. You stink, buddy." Plus, the steam from the warm water would hopefully help open Peter's lungs up a bit.

Peter wrinkled his nose. "It's not like you smell any better, Dad."

"No, probably not," agreed Tony. "But you're still going first."

"You could use a shave too, Dad," Peter added. "You're starting to kinda look like Tarzan."

Tony scrubbed his palm along his face, grimacing at the greasy feel of his overgrown and matted facial hair. "Yeah, okay, buddy. But only after you wash up and eat something, yeah?"

"Fine," muttered Peter, stifling another cough. "But then I wanna help you."

Steve let out a sigh as he huddled up against the sandy rock formation that was serving as their
shelter for the night, pulling out yet another protein bar from the pocket of his flak jacket. The bars were definitely lighter to carry around than the old small cans of beans and beef stew that he'd carried during the war, but after eating nothing else for over six days, Steve longed for something to fill his belly that was at least hot, even if it ended up tasting like canned dog food.

Not that Rhodes would have let him start a fire out here in the first place. Too easy for enemy snipers to spot, he'd said. Plus, the thermal blankets in their packs offered better protection against the chilly winter winds than any fire, and didn't leave any incriminating evidence behind.

Rhodes had been quiet for most of the mission, which suited Steve just fine. He wasn't really the type for too much small talk anyway, even if the lack of a fire made it more difficult to get any drawing done, so he was a bit surprised when Rhodes finished up his protein bar and cleared his throat.

"So," he said. "You knew Howard, huh?"

"Um, yeah," answered Steve, choking down a mouthful of water. They'd have to refill their canteens sometime tomorrow. "He worked for the Strategic Science Reserve as a civilian consultant on Project Rebirth."

"And what the hell does that mean?" asked Rhodes. "Is all that code for something?"

"Howard worked with Dr. Erskine on Project Rebirth," Steve added, his shoulders sagging as he recalled the plucky little German scientist, and how he met his demise at the end of a HYDRA pistol. "It's how I was… made."

"Mmm. So… what. Weren't you some kinda shrimp or something? I mean, I'd heard about Captain America in some of my military history classes, but all this time I just kinda thought it was just a made-up thing, ya know? I also remember Tony mentioning him, or I guess, you, a couple of times, but the Air Force isn't really privy to all that secret-spy stuff, so I never got the rest of the story."

Steve hesitated. "I'm not really sure how much I'm supposed to tell anyone. I mean, this was a top-secret organisation and a top-secret project, so—"

"I have Top Secret clearance," Rhodes cut in. "Being the military liaison to Stark Industries requires me to know a little more than the average grunt, and since this happened over seventy years ago I'm pretty sure there's no one left who could come after us if you tell me. Especially if it'll help us find Tony and Peter a bit faster."

Huh? "How is knowing more about me going to help us find them faster?" Steve asked.

Rhodes shrugged. "If nothing else, it'll help pass some of the time."

"Okay, that makes more sense," Steve said, shaking his head. "So, what do you wanna know?"

"I'm mainly curious about Howard," answered Rhodes. "What he was like. Like I said, I only met him a couple of times before he and Tony's mom were killed, so—"

"They were killed?" Steve interrupted. Howard's cause of death had been conspicuously absent from his SHIELD file, now that he thought about it. "How?"

"Car crash," Rhodes replied. "Little over a week before Christmas. Tony was twenty-one."

"That's horrible," murmured Steve. "Poor Tony."

"Yeah," said Rhodes. "He wasn't one to celebrate Christmas all that much because of it. Not till Peter
came along, that is. I still say that boy ended up saving his life."

"Oh? How so?"

Rhodes was quiet for a moment, as if contemplating how much to tell Steve. "Tony was on a pretty self-destructive path after his parents died. Drinking way too much, sleeping around, that kinda thing. I lost count of how many times I had to drag his ass home after one of his wild parties at whatever nightclub he hadn't yet trashed that particular week. He was out of control, and nothing I or anyone else ever said could seem to get through to him."

"It sounds me like he was grieving," Steve said. "Didn't anyone offer to help him through the grieving process?" Like Peggy helped me with Bucky?

"Yeah, we did," answered Rhodes. "Me, his assistant, Pepper, Happy, Obadiah, Peggy Carter—"

"Peggy?" Steve cut in, his head jerking around to look at Rhodes. "Tony knows Peggy Carter?"

"Yeah, she's like a godmother to him," Rhodes said. "She was a friend of Howard's, they used to work together. Why?"

"I—, I know—or I guess I knew—Peggy too," Steve whispered. "She's quite a lady."

"Yeah, that's what I've heard," said Rhodes. "And like I said, we all tried to help Tony. He just… wasn't interested. He had no frame of reference on how he was supposed to act, so he just acted like a damn fool instead."

"Seems like it was a desperate cry for attention," Steve said, almost without thinking. He'd seen it a few times in the Army. Boys who'd said they'd never gotten noticed enough in their own families, so they acted out in order to draw attention to themselves. Hodge had been one such person.

"I suppose someone could see it that way," Rhodes admitted after a moment's pause. "There was more to it than that, though. Tony… he's just… well… he's unique. I'll never forget the first time he met my parents. They came to visit one weekend while we were at school our freshman year, and my dad raised his hand, you know, to clap Tony on the shoulder or something. It's what he always did with me and my friends, but I saw Tony flinch, like he was afraid he was gonna get hit or something. He wasn't used to any sort of affection at all. He didn't even know what it looked like."

Steve's throat tightened, his thoughts once again shifting to Bucky. Bucky had been like a brother to Steve, complete with the shoulder claps and the play fights and the incessant teasing that had lasted up until the very last second of his life. Steve couldn't imagine how lonely his life would have been without Bucky.

"That's awful," Steve murmured past the lump in his throat. "And it doesn't at all sound like the Howard that I knew. I can't imagine that Howard ever raising his hand to his own child. He was eccentric, yes, but not…"

"Abusive?" offered Rhodes.

"That's a pretty harsh word to just be throwing around," Steve muttered. "And not at all what I would've chosen."

"Yeah, it is harsh," Rhodes agreed. "And it's not something I ever heard Tony say outright. It was just more of a intuition on my part. Tony never liked talking about his family all that much, so most of what I thought about his parents was just conjecture. But I will say that Howard was at the least a very distant father, always keeping Tony at arm's length, not offering too much support. I don't
remember him even cracking a smile at Tony's graduation. He just looked like he expected it, and that was it."

"Mmm," grumbled Steve. He shifted on the hard, sandy ground, trying to get comfortable. His nice soft bed back at the cabin had spoiled him in the couple of weeks he was there. "Well, I really hope you were wrong about him. No offence of course, sir."

"None taken, Captain," Rhodes said, rather sarcastically.

The two men were quiet for a moment, lost in thought and staring up at the stars in the clear sky, their breaths coming out in little puffs of white until Steve spoke up again.

"You said Tony's not like that though, with his son?" he asked quietly. "Cold and distant?"

Rhodes let out a soft chuckle. "Hell no. Tony was smitten with Peter pretty much from day one. That kid has him wrapped around his little finger, but you'd never know it. Peter's about the most selfless, most unassuming person I've ever met. You'd never guess he was the son of a famous genius billionaire, and he's even smarter than Tony. Or so Tony says, anyway. Once you're that smart you're just kinda all lumped together in my mind."

"That's good," Steve answered.

"Tony calls it breaking the cycle of shame," Rhodes added. "And he's not perfect, not by any means. He still has the infamous Stark temper, and there are times when he gets mad and lashes out. But at least Peter never has to wonder if his father loves him or not. Tony would move heaven and earth for that kid if he had to. And Tony completely cleaned up his life, too. Quit drinking for the most part, quit sleeping around. He still has his moments, of course, but he's definitely a changed man."

"That's how it should be," whispered Steve, grimacing at the sharp pang of remorse piercing his belly. He'd always dreamed of settling down with the future love of his life, whoever that might be, and having a family. Getting to be the father that he never had, that he always wished he'd had.

But now, that dream seemed even further away than it had during his days with the Howling Commandos. How could he expect to find love when he could barely even function in society now without help? At least this mission was somewhat familiar, and he felt somewhat useful, but what would happen afterwards? Would Fury just hide him back in that isolated cabin until they had need of him again? Was he back to just being used as a tool for someone else's propaganda?

"I'll take first watch tonight," Rhodes said, breaking the heavy silence. "You should get some sleep."

"I don't—" Steve started.

"I know you say you don't need to sleep all that much," Rhodes interrupted. "But I'm telling you, you need to sleep. It's been at least two days since you've gotten any and I need to make sure you're operating at your peak capacity, 'cause once we find these assholes, we're gonna have a pretty nasty fight on our hands. I'll order you to sleep if I have to, Captain, but I'd really rather not."

Steve let out a heavy sigh as he shifted so he was lying down, his arm curled under his head. "All right, Colonel."

But as he laid there, waiting for sleep to come and claim him, Steve's mind wandered again to Tony and Peter Stark. It had to be difficult for Tony being a single father, especially with all of his responsibilities with his company and the pressure that came along with them. How was it that he never found someone with whom to share his life?
"All right, Pete," Dad said, grunting slightly under the weight of the chip-rack cylinder that he'd pulled out from one of the decommissioned warheads. He carefully sent the cylinder down on the worktable, pointing at it with a pair of needle nose pliers. "You see that palladium strip there?"

Peter leaned in until his nose was only a few centimeters away, his eyes landing on the shiny, silver-coloured piece of metal about the size of his thumbnail. The absence of his glasses made it pretty much impossible for him to see anything past half a meter or so, but close-up stuff was still okay.

"Yeah."

"Good. I need you to pull it out for me and place it into this crucible," Dad said, handing Peter the pliers. "While I pull out the other eleven."

"Eleven?" Peter asked, stifling another cough. He did feel a bit stronger after eating nearly an entire jar of peanut butter, and the bath he'd taken a bit earlier had helped loosen up his chest a little, and he did have to admit that it felt good to wash most of the dust and grime away too. But breathing was still difficult, and his chest and shoulders were aching with the effort, with his left arm being particularly sore. "What're you gonna do with the palladium, Dad?"

"I'm gonna replace this monstrosity," Dad said, tapping the magnet wedged into his chest hard enough to make Peter shiver. "With something better."

"Um… but…" Peter mumbled, but he didn't bother continuing his thought. He knew better than to question things when Dad got into one of his manic spurts of creativity. "Okay. If you're sure it'll be safe."

"I'm sure, Pete," Dad answered, already working on the next cylinder. He'd tasked Yinsen with creating a sand mould, careful to keep all of their work out of plain sight of the closed-circuit cameras hiding in the cave's corners. "When has my math ever been wrong, huh?"

"Never."

"That's right," he said as Peter pulled out the tiny strip of palladium, placing it carefully down in the crucible. "You let me know if you get too tired, okay, buddy? I don't want you overexerting yourself."

"I'm fine, Dad," Peter grumbled, even as he swallowed down another cough. He hated being so sickly and weak all the time. "Don't worry about me."

"Yeah, right," Dad said under his breath, shoving another cylinder under Peter's nose. "That's my job, kid."

They worked silently for a couple of hours, as they often did when Peter was assisting his father with one of his projects. After dropping the final strip of the palladium into the crucible, Peter set down the pliers and rubbed at his eyes. Not being able to see all that well was not helping to alleviate the constant, dull headache Peter had had ever since the explosion.

"You getting too tired, buddy?" Dad asked, causing Peter to immediately drop his hands.

"No," he said automatically. "I'm fine, Dad."

Dad set down the glass ring he was holding, wrapped in a coil of copper wire taken from another broken-down weapon, his face etched with concern and fatigue. How long had it been since he'd had any sleep? "You know you're a terrible liar, don't you, Pete?"
"Dad, please, I'm fine!" Peter protested, trying desperately not to whine. "My head just hurts a bit, that's all. I don't need to rest again yet, please!"

"Mmm," grumbled Dad as he handed the crucible to Yinsen, who brought it over to the fire. "You're lucky you're cute, kid."

Peter smiled as wide as his cracked, dry lips would allow. "Thanks, Dad. What're we making, anyway?"

"The ring of power," Dad answered, winking. "It's gonna make us invisible."

"Seriously?" Peter exclaimed, wincing as his split lower lip started to sting. "That'd be so awesome!"

"Don't I wish, buddy," replied Dad. "But it really is gonna be a ring of power."

"What's it gonna power?"

"Yeah, Stark," Yinsen added as he slowly carried the molten palladium back to the worktable. "What is this going to power?"

"Something big," Dad said quietly. "Something really big." He grabbed his car battery, slinging it behind his back as he stepped out of the way. "Steady now there, Yinsen. We only get one shot at this."

"Relax, Stark," replied Yinsen. "I have very steady hands. It's the only reason you're still alive."

"Yeah, that's probably true," muttered Dad.

"There's no 'probably' about it," Yinsen added as he carefully poured the molten palladium into the mould, not spilling a single drop. "There, you see? Steady hands."

"All right," Dad said with a nod. He unfolded a set of papers, covered a hand-drawn design that didn't look like any weapon Peter had ever seen before. "Now the real work begins."

Not allowed to do any actual soldering—Dad always said he was too young to handle the tools yet—Peter could only watch as Dad carefully removed the palladium ring from the mould and placed it against the wire-encased glass circle, proceeding to solder it together with the absolute precision of a master mechanic.

"Pete, hand me that cable there," he said once he was done, pointing to one of the power cables attached to their generator.

"Dad!" Peter hissed as he handed over the cable, watching as Dad attached it to the device resting on the tabletop. "Is that—?"

"Yep," answered Dad, smiling as the lights briefly dimmed in the cave, and the device began emitting a soft, bluish light. It was working. "That's exactly what it is."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Peter. "I've never seen one so small! Obie always said that—"

"Obie was wrong, Pete," Dad cut in. His smile grew even wider. "This is our ticket outta here."

"And what exactly is this?" asked Yinsen. "It sure doesn't look like a Jericho missile."

"That's 'cause it's a miniaturised arc reactor," Dad said. "I got a big one powering my factory at home."
"And it's gonna power this?" Peter asked, indicating the drawings. "How?"

Dad quirked an eyebrow, tapping the magnet wedged in his chest. "I'm gonna power it."

"You're gonna—!"

"Shh, Pete! Yes, I'm gonna."

"But—!"

"No buts, buddy. This is the only way."

"But it's like an iron suit, Dad!" Peter whispered. "How?"

"You'll see, buddy," Dad said. "But now it's time for another nap, you look tired. And no, your patented pout isn't gonna work this time, so don't even try."

Peter scowled, sticking out his bottom lip. It was always worth a shot at least.

"Hmph. Fine."

For all of his protesting, Peter dropped off to sleep fairly quickly once Tony tucked him in, much to Tony's relief. He highly doubted there was going to be much sleep to be had once they made their escape, so he needed Peter to stock up now while he could.

Especially if these Ten Rings assholes tried to come after them, which was likely the case.

Pressing a quick kiss to Peter's forehead, Tony grabbed his car battery and headed back to the worktable. It was time to swap out the magnet and get to work.

"How much time do you think they're gonna give me to build this thing?" Tony asked Yinsen, throwing a quick glance up at the camera. He angled his body, trying to stay out of the camera's direct line of sight.

"Another two days, three at most," answered Yinsen. "They are an impatient group, Stark. Especially their leader."

"Who, the Abu guy?" Tony asked, disconnecting his arc reactor from the power cable. "He's not so tough."

"No, not him," said Yinsen. "He's not their leader, he's only a lieutenant, if you will. The real leader is named Raza, and he is, shall we say, quite ambitious. Gave me a pretty eloquent speech about ruling all of Asia like the great Genghis Khan when I first arrived here."

"Hmm," replied Tony. He inhaled a deep breath and disconnected the cable connecting the electromagnet to the battery, bracing himself as he prepared to yank it out. "Well, I highly doubt that Genghis Khan had one of these."

Installing the arc reactor was unlike nothing Tony had ever experienced before. His chest wall had healed nicely around the circle left by the magnet, so it wasn't too difficult to fit the reactor inside. But Tony was unprepared for the rush of warmth that he felt as he slid the reactor into place, the tingling sensation that stretched across his chest and down his arms and legs, making him feel like he himself was now invincible.

That he was really made of iron.
"Oh, yeah!" he said softly. "This is… this is incredible!"

"It is impressive, Stark," Yinsen agreed. "Might I suggest that you replace your shirt now, though. Before you are seen?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Tony said, pulling his grimy shirt back down and smiling at the blue glow coming through the thin fabric. "All right, then, let's get going on the rest."

They worked diligently over the next couple of days, with Peter assisting as much as Tony allowed him. But as the hours stretched on, the effects of whatever their captors had shot into Peter's arm started to wane, such that by the morning of the third day, Peter's breathing was so raspy and raggedy that Tony could barely stand to listen to it. Fear and anxiety that Peter wasn't going to make it out of the cave alive began to consume Tony, and it was all he could do to use that fear as a motivator to keep going instead of an excuse to give up.

By the time Tony had finished shaping and pounding out the helmet and face mask for the suit, its final component, Peter's chest retractions were so deep that he could barely sit up straight, and even eating had become too much for him to handle, requiring Tony or Yinsen to help him.

They needed to get out. Now.

"This isn't the right one either," Steve said as he arrived back at the small cave where Rhodes was waiting for him. He set down his pack and shield against the wall of the cave, sliding down next to them. "Or at least it isn't now. Looks like it's been abandoned for awhile."

"Goddammit," Rhodes muttered under his breath. "We only have three more to check out!"

"If these are in fact all of the camps in the area," Steve said. "You're absolutely sure these drones of yours would be able to find all of them?"

"No, not absolutely sure," Rhodes answered. "These mountain ranges are thick, Captain. It'd be impossible to know for absolute sure."

Then what in the world are we doing out here? Steve thought, but he didn't dare voice the thought out loud. Instead, he pulled the map out of his jacket pocket, flattening it out on the floor of the cave, and drawing a big X across the camp he'd just eliminated.

"So," Rhodes said a moment later. "You need a break?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"All right then. Onward?"

"Onward."

"Peter! Peter, you gotta just keep breathing, buddy. In and out, in and out," Tony pleaded, shaking the boy's shoulders to keep him awake. He was terrified if Peter fell asleep again that he wouldn't be able to wake up. "You just gotta keep breathing, okay? We're almost there, buddy, don't give up on me now!"

"So 'ired, Dad," Peter whispered, so softly that Tony could barely hear him. "I can't—, I can't—, I just wanna sleep!"
"Not yet, buddy," said Tony, glancing helplessly up at Yinsen. "It's time to get the hell out of here, and I need you to be awake now. Once we're rescued you can sleep as long as you want to, okay?"

"Rescued," Peter rasped, his bleary brown eyes blinking rapidly as he looked up at Tony. "That sounds awesome, Dad."

"That's right, bud." He nodded up at Yinsen, who grabbed the chest plate and helmet that Tony had built for Peter.

"C'mon, young man," Yinsen said lightly. "Let's get you ready." Much lighter than Tony's crude set of armour, Peter's armour wouldn't be able to hold up the mad barrage of bullets Tony was expecting once they made it out of their locked room, so the plan was for Tony to take out as many of the men with the guns himself, then call for Peter and Yinsen to follow once the coast was clear.

"Make sure to triple-check all the turns before following me out," Tony said, pulling on the oil-stained leather jacket and gloves that were at least three sizes too big. The leather was necessary to help keep his skin from burning against the metal of the armour, and help cushion him against the blows of the bullets.

"I got it, Stark," replied Yinsen. Finishing with Peter, he sat the boy down on the floor, propping him up against his cot with his head lolled to the side and headed for the hoist holding up Tony's suit.

"Peter can barely even stand on his own, Stark. I'm not sure how he's going to be able to make it out."

"He's my son," Tony said firmly. "He'll do it because he has to. He's gonna be fine." Please buddy, you gotta be fine.

"Why?" Yinsen asked as the heavy suit settled on Tony's shoulders. "Because he's made of iron?"

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"But he's not," said Yinsen. "He's just a boy, made of flesh and blood. As are you."

"What the hell are you getting at?" snapped Tony. He raised his arms, testing his range of motion.

"Isn't it a bit late to be discussing this now?"

Yinsen pursed his lips. "Perhaps. But just remember, Stark. Your suit may be made of iron, but people are not. And your son deserves better than to grow up with an iron monger for a father."

"I am not an iron monger!" Tony shot back, but his words had no bite to them. He'd been designing and building weapons ever since he took over the company because that's what his father had done, and because it was what Obadiah expected of him. He'd never even thought that he might be able to do something else. Especially after Peter came along.

"Just get me buttoned up here, we're on a clock in case you hadn't noticed," said Tony.

Yinsen let out a sigh, nodding as he grabbed a wrench. "Right."

But Yinsen was only on the second bolt when the tiny window in their metal prison door slid open to reveal the wide eyes of one of their captors, who immediately started speaking in gibberish.

"What's he saying?" demanded Tony.

"I don't know!" Yinsen cried, still tightening as fast as he could. "He's speaking Hungarian. I don't really know Hungarian!"
"Then tell him what you know! We're not ready!"

"Dad!" Peter choked out from the floor. "Dad, are they're coming for us?"

"It's okay, Pete. It's gonna be okay," Tony answered. He raised his eyebrows at Yinsen, jerking his head towards the door where the man was still jabbering through the slit window. "You gonna say anything back to him?"

"Ahh," Yinsen stammered, sputtering out something in broken Hungarian that neither Tony nor the man at the window seemed to understand. "It's not working, Stark! He can't understand me!"

"Then just do every other bolt, Yinsen, we gotta get moving!"

"They're coming, I can hear them!" Peter cried. "Dad, they're coming!"

"It's all right, Pete! Save your strength for the run!"

But Peter shook his head, crawling over to the worktable and pulling himself up to the computer terminal. "At least let me be useful," he said in his raspy voice. "I can initialise the power sequence."


"Uh huh," Peter answered, his fingers flying over the keys as the status bar appeared. "Got it."

"Get it going," ordered Tony. "And then get out of the—"

Before Tony could finish his sentence, the metal door swung open, activating the small bomb Tony had rigged to the handles and blowing the doors clean off their hinges. "Get to your hiding place, Pete!" Tony yelled, lowering his face mask. "Don't come out until I call you, understand?"

"Oh yeah, that definitely worked!" Yinsen said as a chorus of Arabic shouts filled the rock hallway outside of their prison. "I'd say that definitely worked!"

"Then get outta the way," Tony commanded. He started walking towards the open doorway, the loud thunk of each heavy footstep causing dust to rain down from the ceiling. "Keep Peter safe and don't come out until I say, got it?"

"Go, Stark!"

"Be careful, Dad!"

I'm gonna fucking be careful, Tony thought as he stomped into the hallway, sending the first two guys flying with just simple swings of his arms. Oh yeah, here we go.

The bullets began two steps later, pinging off the heavy suit like pieces of hail as Tony marched on, swinging his arms around like armoured baseball bats. The panicked men began to retreat, still firing their guns at him as they ran backwards, shouting in whatever language they liked to shout in.

Pulling back his fist, Tony took out one of the men with a single punch, his body landing against the rock wall with a sickening crack.

"That's what you get, asshole!" Tony muttered under his breath as the bullets continued, littering his suit with tiny dents before falling harmlessly to the floor. He paused at a split in the hallway, trying to remember which way led to the outside of the cave.

Right, he thought a second later. It's to the right.
"Yinsen!" he yelled behind him. "First checkpoint is clear!"

"Watch out!" Yinsen called back, his words drowned out by another barrage of bullets hitting Tony from the opposite hallway. Tony immediately raised his left arm, activating the machine gun implement to take out the three men firing at him. Three shots, three dead.

"Now it's clear!" Tony said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, damn it!" Please, let these seams hold!

After turning his entire body to ensure that yes, the checkpoint was in fact clear—his peripheral vision was crap, he'd realised a little too late—Tony continued his advance, noticing a second later that the shooting had stopped. Maybe they had finally figured out that bullets were useless against his armour.

Three pounding steps later and Tony realised that nope, they had just all retreated behind the door that led to their command center, thinking the locked door would be enough to keep Tony out. Damn fools, they were.

Stomping up to the door, his heavy breathing inside his helmet reminding him of a deep-sea diver, Tony drew back his right arm, hitting the metal door hard along the seam and causing a dent in the exact shape of his gauntlet. Biting back a smile, Tony hit it again, widening the dent, relishing in the frightened squeaks and whimpers he could hear on the opposite side.

That's right, you fuckers. It's your turn to be scared outta your mind!

With the third hit the door flew open, the heavy metal panel crushing one of the insurgents underneath as Tony stepped over it, raising his arms and preparing to activate his flamethrowers. "Yinsen! Checkpoint two is clear!"

"Daddy, duck!" Peter suddenly shrieked. "On your left!"

Without thinking Tony drew back, pressing himself as flat into the wall of the cave as he could just as an RPG streaked by him from a cross corridor, exploding into a wall and causing not only the wall to collapse but a chunk of ceiling as well. Tony immediately raised his left arm, activating the small projectile he'd installed in the gauntlet and firing at the ceiling above the shooter, burying him under a pile of rock and fire. As Tony clomped up to the man, he recognised him as the leader of the group, the Genghis Khan wanna-be.

A bit more advanced than a bow and arrow, isn't it? Tony thought. You're damn right it is.

Squaring his shoulders, Tony turned towards the beam of light coming from the end of the tunnel, about twenty or so paces away. "Peter! Yinsen! It's time!"

"Dad!" Peter cried from somewhere behind him, and Tony's heart swooped as he realised that Peter was actually crying. "Daddy, it's Yinsen! He—"

Slowly, Tony turned back, his eyes landing on a stack of rice bags where Yinsen had collapsed about ten meters away, his blood-stained hand holding his chest where a bullet—or several, as it appeared to Tony's untrained eye—had penetrated him straight through. Peter was sitting next to him with his face mask open, holding the older man's hand, tears streaming down his round face.
"He—, he saved me, Daddy," Peter whimpered through his gasping breaths. "He stepped right in front of me, and—"

"C'mon, Yinsen," Tony said gruffly, raising his own mask. "We got a plan, we gotta stick to it. You wanna see your family again, right? Then you gotta get up!"

"This was always the plan, Stark," Yinsen whispered, his tanned face already draining of color, the bubbling noises in his throat turning Tony's stomach. "I—, I couldn't save my family, but I—, I can still save yours."

Tony locked eyes with Peter, cursing himself for not seeing what had been hidden between the lines all along. Yinsen had always talked about his family as if they were still alive, just waiting for his return back in his small village of Gulmira.

But apparently, they were not.

They were all dead, and now Yinsen wanted to join them. He'd kept himself alive just long enough to help Peter and Tony escape. That had been his plan all along.

Burning hot tears stung Tony's eyes, his entire body trembling with pain and rage. "Thank you for saving us," he murmured.

"Don't waste it, Stark!" Yinsen gasped as a trickle of blood ran out of the corner of his mouth. "Don't waste your life on building weapons of destruction! Use your potential, Stark, your son deserves better!"

"I will," Tony replied through clenched teeth, his lower lip shaking. "I swear to you, I will."

With a final weak smile at Peter, Yinsen closed his eyes and breathed out his final breath.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Tony inhaled a deep breath, closing his mask down over his face. It was time to finish this. "Mask on, Pete," he said. "You stay right here until I take out the rest of them, and then you run like hell as soon as I call for you. Understand?"

Peter nodded weakly as he covered his tear-stained face with his mask. "Uh huh."

Stomping towards the mouth of the cave with rage coursing through his veins, Tony paused just outside, blinking against the harshness of the sunlight. How long had it been since he'd last seen the sun?

"He's coming!" someone shouted from a few meters away. "The iron man is coming!"

"Prepare to fire!" shouted someone else—maybe Abu, from the sound of his voice—just as Tony's eyes landed on the massive pile of weapons off to the side. Stark Industries weapons.

Oh no you assholes don't!

With the flamethrowers already primed and ready to go, Tony immediately raised his arms and flipped the switch, the smell of burning fuel filling his nostrils as ropes of flame shot out from his gauntlets, consuming everything from rockets to rifles to food supplies to men. Bullets rained on him from all directions, but as the rockets exploded they sparked even more fires, the conflagration moving from box to box, feeding on itself. Soon enough the bullets stopped as the men began to flee in all directions, some of them covered in flames, all of them screaming.

"Peter!" Tony shouted over his shoulder as the fuel lines began to sputter and choke. Shutting down
his right gauntlet, he opened a metal flap on his left arm and flipped the switch, the resulting whine indicating that the repulsor system was charging up. It was time to get the hell out of this place.

"Now, Peter!"

"Dad," Peter croaked as he stumbled up to Tony, holding out his skinny arms. Tony caught him just as another set of bullets opened up, hitting the back of his suit, the loosening bolts already starting to rattle. The suit was not going to survive too many more hits.

"Hold on as tight as you can," barked Tony as Peter hooked himself onto a special notch Tony had built into his chest plate. "Ready?"

"Ready," whispered Peter, and Tony nodded, bracing himself as the repulsor whine grew louder and louder.

*Please, let this work.*

*And please don't let it kill us.*

Tony held his breath as his boot thrusters began to fire, his left arm still shooting out flame as his right wrapped tightly around Peter, his hand holding onto the collar of the boy's chest plate.

"We're gonna go straight up first," he murmured. "Then once we're free of the camp I'll angle us away towards the mountains." He was assuming that the mountains would be easier to survive in than the flat plains of the desert.

As the repulsors reached their max capacity and lifted off from the ground, Tony couldn't help but let out a triumphant whoop, one that grew even louder as the repulsor blast itself ignited a final box of weaponry, causing it to explode just as Tony and Peter cleared the top of the cave.

"Hold on tight, Pete!" yelled Tony once they were free of the camp, grunting as he angled the suit down so they were now flying in a parabolic arc instead of straight up. He really had no idea how long the repulsors were going to hold out, and he wanted to put as much distance between themselves and the camp as possible.

About thirty seconds later, with the metal of the suit clattering so loudly it sounded like it was trying to shake itself apart, Tony ran some quick calculations in his head and cut the power, angling himself back so he would hit the ground first instead of Peter. They still hit the sand going far faster than Tony would have preferred, but due to Yinsen not having enough time to properly seal Tony into the suit in the first place, the suit broke apart on impact, allowing the sand to better cushion the blow.

Which was good, considering that Peter landed squarely on top of Tony when they hit. Even as small as Peter was, his impact still could've broken a few of Tony's ribs, or worse, if they'd been going too much faster. As it was, Tony only got the wind knocked out of him for a few panicked seconds.

"Pete? You okay?" gasped Tony once he'd managed to regain his senses. He quickly tore both of their helmets off, lest their heads start baking in the unrelenting sun. "All right, buddy?"

"All right, Dad," Peter replied between his shallow, raspy breaths, his head tucked up into Tony's neck. The adrenaline from their escape was already seeping out of his skinny body, and his chest retractions were returning with a vengeance. They didn't have much time. "What—, what do we do now?"

Pushing himself more upright, Tony took Peter's face in his hands, looking directly into his baby
brown eyes. "Now, we wait for someone to come for us," he answered, as firmly as he could muster. "Word will get out fast that the camp was destroyed, so someone should come out looking for us right away. We just gotta be patient, okay?"

"Uh huh," came the whispered reply, and Tony kissed Peter's forehead, hoping against hope that he wasn't just talking out of his ass. They only had one bag of water between them, which Tony had hidden underneath Peter's chest plate. It was a given that Tony would go without it as much as he was able, but Peter's rapid breathing was only going to dehydrate him that much faster, so what would normally be able to last them a couple of days would likely only last for one or less. If they were lucky.

Someone had to be looking for them, they just had to.

*Please, Rhodey! Please come for us!*

"Did you hear that?" Steve asked, his pencil frozen in place against his sketchbook as he tilted his head, listening. Rhodes had ordered them to take a twenty minute break so he could swap out his socks, and while Steve didn't need to worry about possible foot problems as much as Rhodes did, he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to get some drawing in during the daylight hours. "I heard something."

Rhodes paused, his left foot halfway back into its boot. "Like what?"

"I don't know," answered Steve, his brow furrowing in frustration. "It almost sounded like an impact. It was there for just a second, but I haven't heard anything else like it since we've been out here."

Shooting Steve a wary glance, Rhodes quickly shoved his foot into the boot and reached for his radio. "Base, this is Colonel Rhodes," he said. "You guys pick up any unusual activity in the last few minutes?"

A sharp burst of static sounded from the radio, followed by a man's voice. "This is Sergeant Roth, sir, and we haven't received any recent reports. Can you be more specific?"

"Captain Rogers says that he heard something," Rhodes added, nodding as Steve pointed towards the west. "To the west of our current position, probably twenty to thirty klicks."

"Triangulating your signal now, Colonel," came the answer. "Please stand by."

"Copy that," answered Rhodes. He turned to Steve, raising his eyebrows. "You're sure about this? 'Cause if base command sends out another surveillance drone and they don't find anything, they're gonna want both our asses."

"I am absolutely sure that I heard something," Steve said firmly. "It was a single impact with no accompanying explosion, so not likely a weapon."

"Okay," replied Rhodes, his head snapping up as his radio crackled to life.

"Command is ordering a drone to that position ASAP, Colonel," said Sergeant Roth. "You are advised to wait until surveillance is complete before proceeding."

"Advised," said Rhodes under his breath. "Copy that, Sergeant, thank you."

"You're welcome, sir. Roth out."
As soon as the radio clicked off, Rhodes grabbed the shoelaces of his boot, tying them in record time. "Let's get going, Captain."

"Um, okay," Steve said as he shoved his sketchbook back into its pocket. "But weren't we just told to stay put? Sir?"

Rhodes got to his feet, swinging his pack over his shoulder. "'Advised' does not equal 'ordered', Captain. I know Sergeant Roth pretty well, and he chose his words very carefully there for a reason. Our official policy is never to advance on an area prior to obtaining the surveillance footage, but this is not your typical situation, is it?"

"No, sir," answered Steve as he shouldered his pack and grabbed his shield. He couldn't help but feel a bit proud that Rhodes was willing to move out just on his word and his enhanced hearing.

Or maybe Rhodes was simply getting desperate. They'd been out searching for the Starks for almost two weeks now, and their supplies were starting to get dangerously low. In a couple more days they would have to call it quits, and there were no guarantees that the base commanders would allow them to attempt another search.

The midday sun was relentless, beating down harshly on them as they trekked across the sand dunes, with Steve keeping his eyes and ears as open as possible, listening for any possible change in the silence of the seemingly endless stretch of desert. A couple of times he heard the whirring noise of the drones as they flew overhead, but other than that, there was nothing.

"You're sure about this?" Rhodes asked after several hours, pausing just long enough to mop his brow. "This is pretty far off the beaten path, if you know what I mean."

"I'm positive," Steve said, even as he was trying to convince himself that he hadn't just been hearing things. But just as Rhodes was obviously desperate to find his friend, Steve felt just as desperate—if not even more so—to find the boy. There was a child somewhere out here, an innocent child being held prisoner in some bully's cave only because of the work of his father's company. It was so completely unfair that Steve could hardly even stand to think about it.

The sun was just starting to set when Rhodes' radio once again crackled to life. "Colonel, be advised. We have a positive sighting of what appears to be a recently destroyed insurgent camp. A pretty big one, sir, from the looks of it."

Rhodes' eyes went wide. "How recent?"

"Very, sir," replied Sergeant Roth, and Steve's heart began to thud. "There were still active fires burning."

"And you're sure that they weren't just attacked by another group?" demanded Rhodes.

"Not positive, sir," said Roth. "But there's no evidence of any recent movement between the camps either. If they were attacked, it was likely from the inside."

"Then I'd say that's our guys," Rhodes said. "Get a medevac chopper ready to send out to my position, and tell 'em to prepare to receive a really sick kid."

"Copy that, sir. Chopper will be standing by."

"Copy that."

"You're sure this is our guys?" Steve asked before Rhodes was even able to turn off the radio. He
didn't bother asking what a chopper was, choosing to just assume that it was some sort of rescue aircraft, which suited Steve just fine.

"That's what my money's on," Rhodes answered, quickening his pace. "And it's either gonna be my money or my head if I'm wrong. C'mon, we gotta hurry!"

"Right," replied Steve, already praying that the two Starks wouldn't be as injured as Rhodes feared.

They had trotted in silence for about twenty minutes when Steve's eyes caught sight of a piece of silver-coloured metal half-buried in the sand, riddled with what looked like bullet impacts. As they drew closer he noticed several more pieces strewn about, as if an aircraft had started shedding parts before it crash-landed.

"Could Tony Stark have built an airplane?" he asked as they started climbing up the side of a tall sand dune.

"Wouldn't surprise me," was Rhodes' quick reply. "He's smart enough. And it would also explain the impact you heard."

They were only about halfway up the dune when Steve's ears picked up the faint, raspy cries of what sounded like a man. A man who was very, very frightened.

"Peter! Please, buddy, don't do this! Not now! They're gonna find us, you just gotta hold on!"

"I hear something!" Steve shrieked as he began to scramble even faster, his arms and legs screaming with the effort of climbing the impossibly high mountain of sand. "Colonel, I can hear them!"

"Breathe, buddy! Please, you just gotta breathe!"

"Go on!" cried Rhodes from a couple meters below. "Find them, I'll catch up!"

"Tony Stark!" Steve called as soon as he reached the top. The setting sun was directly in his face, forcing him to squint as he searched the shimmery horizon. "Tony Stark!"

"Over here!" came the frantic reply, slightly to the left about twenty meters away. Steve immediately tossed his shield down onto the dune and jumped on top, sliding down the chilled sand like it was one of the snow hills back in Brooklyn. He and Bucky used to have so much fun sliding down the snow on their trash can lids… whenever Steve's weak lungs had allowed him to venture outside in the winter, at least.

Steve was on his feet before he'd even reached the bottom, grabbing onto his shield as he ran flat out towards Tony Stark, who was holding the limp body of Peter in his arms.

"The boy!" Tony said hysterically as soon as Steve had skidded to a halt next to him. "Please, you gotta help him, he's not—, he's not—, he can't breathe. I can't get him to breathe! Oh God, please, you gotta help him!"

"Okay," Steve said as reached for Peter, gently laying him down on the sandy ground. The boy's lips were the most frightening shade of blue Steve had ever seen, cracked and split with his swollen tongue poking slightly through. Steve tucked his hand under Peter's neck, quickly pressing his ear to the boy's chest to listen for lung sounds, and hearing nothing.

"He's got too much air trapped inside," Steve muttered, instantly recognising the boy's symptoms as status asthmaticus, a severe asthma attack that he'd experienced numerous times as a child. "He can't breathe because there's too much air trapped inside. It makes it impossible to exhale."
"Can you—, can you help him?" shrieked Tony. "Please, you gotta help him! Oh God, I can't lose him now! I can't! Not after everything!"

Steve's heart was hammering so hard he felt lightheaded as he carefully straddled the boy, placing the heel of his palms directly under Peter's ribcage. He pushed carefully once, his heart nearly cracking in two as the boy flinched in pain and he heard the telltale snap of a breaking rib. He was still getting used to his own strength again after being frozen for so long.

"You're hurting him, goddammit!" cried Tony. "Don't hurt him, he's been through enough already!"

"Oh God, I'm so sorry!" Steve whispered as he positioned his hands just a bit further down the boy's torso, over his diaphragm. "But I gotta get the trapped air out!" He inhaled a deep, shaky breath, releasing it slowly as he pushed again, and again, and again, careful to avoid Peter's already cracked rib. "C'mon, Peter, you gotta breathe for me!"

He pushed again, nearly collapsing in relief when Peter let out a weak cough. "That's it, little guy," Steve said as he pushed again, rewarded with a slightly stronger cough this time. "That's it. Keep coughing, we gotta get the trapped air out."

"Peter?" whispered Tony, his wide, frantic eyes sweeping across Steve as he crawled over to his son, lifting his head onto his lap and smoothing the sandy hair off his forehead. "You're okay, buddy. You're gonna be okay."

"He needs to keep coughing," Steve said as he backed away. "There's still more trapped air, but he should be able to breathe in a bit now."

"Tony!" shouted Rhodes as he appeared over the top of the sand dune, followed by the still-distant sound of an approaching aircraft. "Tony!"

"Rhodey! Peter's really bad, we gotta get him out of here!" Tony cried, and for the first time Steve could see the extent of some of Tony's injuries. He was so worried for his son that he likely hadn't even noticed the blistering burns covering most of his right arm and shoulder or the bleeding gash by his left eye. And something else that was glowing blue, wedged right into the center of his chest.

"There's a—, a chopper on its way," Steve said. "Hopefully they'll have a medic on board."

"Tony!" Rhodes said as he slid to a halt next to Tony, throwing his arms around him as the helicopter appeared over the top of the sand dune. "Damn it, Tony! You gotta quit pulling crap like this!"

"We gotta get Pete—," Tony stammered. "He's really bad, Rhodey, we gotta get him out of—"

"Tony, what the hell is this?" demanded Rhodes, pointing at the glowing blue circle. "What did they do to you, is this some sort of explosive or something?"

"It's what I did to me," answered Tony. "And it's not an explosive. I'll tell you all about it later, yeah?"

"Okay," Rhodes said warily. "Then let's get out of here. Can you walk?"

"Yeah. Pretty sure my legs still work."

"I've got the boy," Steve said as he gathered Peter into his arms, positioning his shield to protect Peter's face from the blowing sand. Peter was still coughing, with his lips a slightly less scary shade of blue, but he wasn't out of danger yet. They needed to get him to a hospital for treatment as soon as
possible. "I'll get him to the helicopter."

Steve could sense Tony's eyes on him as the helicopter landed and they climbed aboard. As soon as they took off Steve laid Peter down on the stretcher, stepping back to allow the medics to take over. He sank down into a seat, tipping his head back as a massive wave of exhaustion swept over him, barely noticing when Tony sat down on the floor in front of him, leaning over his son with Peter's small hand clutched between his own. The medics had started Peter on oxygen and some IV fluids and he was already starting to look much better. With any hope, he would make a full recovery.

"So," Tony said, his eyes flicking up towards Steve, a mix of suspicion and gratitude hiding behind the deep, almost visceral vulnerability that Steve had noticed the first time he saw his photograph. "Who the hell are you?"

"I—, I'm Steve," answered Steve, clearing his throat. "Steve Rogers."

Tony's eyes immediately went wide, then narrowed almost as fast, and Steve felt his heart skip a beat as he saw Tony's expression waver, that vulnerability in his eyes ramping up just enough to be noticeable before he was able to catch and correct it.

"Really?" Tony asked.

"Yep," answered Steve. "In the flesh."

"Hmm," said Tony as he eyed Steve up and down. The mask was back in place. "Tony."

"Yeah, I um… I kinda figured that out," Steve replied. "I'd say that it's nice to meet you, but… that seems a bit odd, given the circumstances."

"You saved my son's life," Tony said. "I'll never be able to thank you enough. So… yeah. I guess it is nice to meet you."

"Tony, this is Captain America!" Rhodes cut in, clapping Steve on the shoulder. "You know, from all those old hero stories from World War II? This is actually him! Guess he didn't die after all!"

Tony froze, and Steve watched as his face blanched nearly white and he swallowed hard, his dark eyes screaming such huge volumes of hurt that Steve could practically feel it, piercing him like a knife.

"Well," Tony answered coldly, pursing his lips. "Doesn't that just figure."

And then he turned his back and hunched over Peter, leaving Steve sitting behind him, confused and wondering how in the world Steve Rogers seemed okay, but Captain America was not.

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“Pardon me, Captain,” said the soft voice of a petite blonde girl from the doorway of Steve's temporary quarters, which were really nothing more than a chair, a narrow bed that was several centimeters too short for him, and a tiny bathroom. Either space at Bagram Air Base was at a premium, or they just weren't used to having such tall people visiting. Rhodes had mentioned something about there being a height restriction on the fighter pilots, so…

“Yes, ma'am?” Steve answered, looking up from his latest drawing.

The girl chuckled. "It's actually Airman, Captain. I'm Airman Wilson. And there's a phone call for you, sir. You can take it down in the General's office."
"Um…" Steve stammered. He had no idea where the General's office even was. The only places he'd seen since he and Rhodes had rescued the Starks three days prior were his room, the mess hall, and the gym. He knew both Starks were still in the hospital, but he hadn't spoken more than a couple words to Tony Stark since they'd arrived at the base. Tony's cold as ice reaction to Rhodes calling Steve Captain America still stung more than Steve wanted to admit, and he had been trying hard to stay out of their way ever since.

"I'm not—, I don't think——"

"I can escort you, sir," Wilson replied.

"Thank you, ma'am—, I mean, Airman."

As Airman Wilson led Steve along the maze-like corridors and down three floors to the offices of the command personnel, he couldn't help but wonder how in the world he was ever going to fit into this time. He very likely couldn't go back to just being a soldier—not without some pretty extensive lessons in the modern military technology at least—but yet he didn't feel comfortable with the possibility of just being a regular civilian either. He had worked so hard to get where he was during the war, and now… it was like someone had simply plucked him from his own time and dropped him into the future as a sort of survival school exercise or something.

And just like he'd often wondered during his real survival training way back when, he wasn't quite sure if he was going to make it through.

"Here you are, Captain," Wilson said as she pointed him in the direction of a conference room, where Director Fury's profile was displayed on the television screen hanging on the wall. Wilson picked up a small device from the table, placing it in Steve's hand. "You just need to unmute the audio and you should be good to go."

"Thank you," Steve said quietly, eyeing the hand device—as remote control—as warily as if it were a grenade, ready to explode in his face at any second. *Is this how they do phone calls now? Through the televisions?*

"Director," Steve said once he'd managed to unmute the audio.

"Captain Rogers," replied Fury. He sounded impatient. "How are things in Afghanistan?"

"Um… fine, I guess. The Starks are still in the hospital. Peter was pretty sick by the time we found them, so it's taking some time for him to recover. I haven't been down there to check on them since the day after we found them, but I don't imagine that Tony has left his side all that much." In fact, that was the one thing that Steve was absolutely certain about. Tony had adamantly refused any treatment for his own injuries until the doctors had managed to get Peter somewhat stabilised, and had even insisted on calling the boy's lung doctor in New York City for treatment advice when the lead base doctor admitted that she hadn't treated a child as ill as Peter in quite some time.

"No, I suppose not," Fury said. "He's been refusing my calls for the past two days."

"Well, sir, his son is sick. Very sick, in fact, so I suppose it's understandable—"

"That very well may be," Fury cut in. "But the fact of the matter is that we still need to debrief them both, and I'd like to do that as soon as possible. In fact, I think you would need to be included as well."

Steve frowned, that protectiveness he seemed to instinctively feel for the Starks already welling up inside his belly. Poor Tony had enough to worry about at the moment without being asked to relive
he and Peter's horrible experience so soon after their rescue.

"What's the big rush, Director? If you don't mind my asking?"

Fury tilted his head, narrowing his uncovered eye. "The circumstances surrounding their escape, Captain. It is imperative that we debrief Mr. Stark and the boy as soon as possible so things aren't forgotten."

"I highly doubt that Tony is going to forget any of this anytime soon, Director," Steve retorted. "But you said so yourself; there's no one more important to Tony Stark than his son, so I would hope you could understand his need to make sure that the boy is all right before you start interrogating him."

"Hmm," Fury said after a short pause, steepling his hands under his chin. "Seems to me that Tony Stark has managed to make a new friend. Congratulations, Captain. That's not a feat that many people have achieved."

*Huh?* "I'm not sure what you mean—"

"If you don't mind, Captain Rogers," Fury interrupted. "I would greatly appreciate it if you could pass along this message to Tony. It is very important that we debrief all three of you as soon as possible."

"Not the boy, Director," Steve stated, almost before he even realised what he was saying. "You can speak to me, and I'm sure Tony will agree as well, but not Peter. He's too young, it'll be too much for him. And you know Tony will think so too."

Scowling, Fury leaned closer to the monitor. "Perhaps. But I would still appreciate it if you would pass along the message."

Steve let out a heavy sigh. Passing along the message would mean actually having to seek Tony out and attempt to speak to him. "Yes, I can do that."

"Thank you," said Fury. "I'll be calling again tomorrow for your answer."

The screen went blank before Steve could reply, and he dropped the remote control onto the table, looking around helplessly. He was sure he could find his way back to his room from this place, but he had no idea which direction the hospital was.

"Can I help you with something else, Captain?" Airman Wilson asked from a nearby desk as Steve exited the room.

"Um, yeah," answered Steve. "Which way is the hospital? I need to speak with Tony Stark."

"Oh sure," she replied with a smile. "I can show you the way."

"Thanks," Steve whispered.

As it turned out, the hospital wasn't even in the same building as the General's offices, so Steve was grateful for Airman Wilson's help. As she pointed down the hall towards Peter's room, Steve's ears picked up Tony's voice through the closed door, apparently speaking to someone on the telephone from how upset he sounded. Who was hounding him now?

*I don't give a shit that the board is getting impatient, Obie! We're not leaving here until I'm convinced that Pete's gonna be okay!*
"No! He can barely stay off the oxygen long enough to eat much of anything yet, and he's still hooked up to all kinds of tubes… there's no way—"

"I know that the New York hospital knows him better, Obie, but I'm not transferring him until he's more stable, so don't ask me again. I have been in direct contact with all of Pete's doctors since we got here, and—"

"No, I'm absolutely not going to do a press conference from my son's hospital bed, so you can purge that crazy idea outta from your head right now. I can't believe you would even suggest something so moronish!"

Steve knocked once on the door and opened it, stepping gingerly into the room that smelled like a bad combination of sickness and sharp disinfectant. Tony's back was to the door, his right arm covered in bandages up to his shoulder, and he was speaking on some sort of wireless, rectangular-shaped telephone with his free hand clutching Peter's. Steve's breath hitched at how small and vulnerable Peter looked, surrounded by softly beeping screens with his skinny arms covered in tubes and medical tape and the outline of a padded bandage visible over his abdomen, protecting his cracked rib. His skin was unnaturally pale, nearly the same colour as the stark white of the hospital bedding, and a huge oxygen mask covered most of his face. His eyes were closed, and Steve hoped he was sleeping deeply enough to not be overhearing his father's tense conversation.

He'd barely taken another step when Tony suddenly whipped around, a frantic expression on his exhausted face that relaxed only slightly as his eyes swept across Steve. "I gotta go, Obie, the doctor is here. No—, no—, I'll talk to you later—, no—, goodbye, Obie."

Dropping the telephone onto the bedside table next to a half-full cup of coffee, Tony ran his palm down his face, his dark eyes narrowing in suspicion as he glanced up at Steve. The intense tightness across his shoulders and jaw reminded Steve of Atlas, bowing under the pressure of trying to carry the world.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I—, I'm so sorry to bother you, Tony," Steve murmured. "But I just spoke with Director Fury, and he's wanting—"

"Yeah, I suppose he's itching for us to get home too, is that it?" Tony snapped. "So he can pick my brain to his heart's content? Well, Captain America, you can just tell that old pirate that he can piss off, you got that? I'm not leaving here until—"

"I already did," Steve cut in, trying to swallow down the immense frustration that was threatening to boil over. It was bad enough that he was being used as nothing more than a glorified errand boy again, the least people could do was actually listen to him. "Well, I didn't exactly tell him to—, whatever you said, but I did tell him that it wasn't safe to move Peter yet, so any debriefings would have to wait until he was stable."

"And another thing, I'm sick and tired of—, wait a minute." Tony paused, his tense shoulders relaxing just the tiniest bit. "You told Fury, what?"

"I told him that he would have to wait for a debriefing until Peter was stable enough to be moved," Steve repeated.

Tony's eyebrows shot up. "Really. And he just said, yes? Just like that?"

"Not exactly," replied Steve, squaring his shoulders. "But yeah, eventually."
"Oh," Tony gasped, squeezing Peter's hand as he practically melted into his chair, covering the blue circle on his chest with his fist. He looked absolutely exhausted, and he had to be in pretty intense pain from the burns covering his arm, not to mention whatever had prompted the need for the blue device. "Oh, that's—, that's good. Um… thanks, Cap."

"You're welcome," Steve answered. He took the opportunity to step forward, closer to Tony, his throat tightening as he scanned Peter again. He could remember being laid up for weeks following an especially bad asthma attack, and feeling miserable the entire time. "How is Peter doing?"

Sighing, Tony shook his head as he reached over to brush a stray curl from Peter's forehead, the touch so gentle and careful that tears sprung to Steve's eyes. "He's getting there. We've been down this road a few times before, but this is the worst he's ever been. And of course it had to happen halfway across the damn world, away from his doctors and everyone else who knows how to best treat him. Plus, I'm still waiting on the tox screen results. Those assholes shot him up with something while they were holding us, and we still haven't been able to figure out what it was."

"I'm so sorry," Steve whispered. "I can't imagine how hard it must be on you both. 'Cause you're not exactly the picture of perfect health right now either."

"Oh, I'll be all right," Tony said quickly. "And Pete… he's a lot tougher than he looks. I just wish—" Tony broke off then, his face nearly crumpling before he was able to catch himself. "This was all my fault. If I'd've just canceled the damn trip in the first place, none of this would've happened, and—"

"Don't, Tony," Steve said firmly. He raised his hand to clap Tony's shoulder but then paused, letting it drop to his side as he remembered what Rhodes had said about Tony not being all that familiar with affection. "Don't torture yourself with hypotheticals. It never helps anything."

"I would know."

"No, I suppose not," Tony said. His lower lip started to shake, and he caught it between his teeth. "But still, I should've done something. I was practically halfway out the door when Rosa got the call about her mother, and Hap and Pepper were thousands of miles away, they'd been planning that vacation of theirs for months, he was gonna propose to her, and—, there just isn't anyone else that I could've left Pete with, so—"

"There was nothing else you could've done, Tony," Steve replied. "Absolutely nothing. There was no way you could've known that this would happen."

Tony scoffed, rolling his eyes. It didn't matter at all to him that there was nothing he could've done, he was still going to feel guilty about it. Probably for the rest of his life.

And unfortunately, that was also a feeling that Steve understood all too well.

"Look," Steve murmured, placing a tentative hand on Tony's good shoulder. Tony immediately flinched, but to Steve's relief he didn't jerk away. "I'm sorry if this seems a bit out of line, but how long has it been since you've gotten any decent sleep?" It had to have been at least a few days for how bad Tony looked, with the deep purple circles under his eyes and his trembling hands, both signs of bone-deep exhaustion. He was never going to heal well unless he managed to get some rest.

"I don't know." Tony replied a few seconds later. "It's been… awhile. But I can't—, I can't leave Pete alone. If he wakes up and I'm not here then he'll get upset, and that'll just make his lungs worse, so—"

"I can stay with Peter, if you like," Steve interrupted. "Just for a little while so you can get some
"No," Tony answered, looking at Steve like he'd suddenly grown a second head. "Thanks, but I'm used to going for pretty long stretches without sleep, so I'm fine. I'll be fine."

Steve scowled. Apparently Tony had inherited Howard Stark's stubbornness along with his good looks. "I disagree," he said in his Captain's voice. "You still need to heal from your own injuries, and right now you look like you're about ready to tip over where you're sitting. And I highly doubt that it helps Peter that much to see you like this. Does it?"

His shoulders sagging, Tony glanced over at Peter, squeezing his hand, his next words so soft that only Steve could have heard them.

"No, probably not."

"You need some rest, Tony," Steve pleaded. "Let me stay with Peter, just for an hour or so. I don't mind at all. Please?"

There was a moment's pause while Tony pondered, and Steve could practically hear the wheels spinning inside his head. "All right," Tony whispered. Slowly, he pushed himself up from his chair, slipping his telephone into his pocket while Steve fought against the urge to help him. The last thing he needed was for Tony's guard to build itself back up. "Thanks, Cap. And wash your hands first, if you don't mind. Don't want any new germs getting at him."

"Of course," Steve said. "And you're welcome, Tony."

Tony paused, his mouth opening as if he was going to say something, then closing again with a shake of his head. "I'll just be in here," he said instead, pointing to a door off to the left which led to a small anteroom. "They set up a cot in here for me, but... you get me if anything happens. Anything at all, do you understand?"

"I understand," answered Steve as Tony closed the anteroom door. After scrubbing his hands so thoroughly at the sink that his ma would've been proud, he sat down on Tony's vacated chair, his mind already swirling with questions, not the least of which were who was this person Tony that called Obie, and why was he so insistent that Peter be moved before he was well?

He'd been sitting for an hour or so, just watching Peter's skinny chest move up and down when the boy suddenly flinched, his face screwing up behind his mask as if he were in pain.

"No!" he croaked in a weak, raspy voice, his hands clenching into tight fists at his sides. "Please, don't hurt him! Leave him alone!"

"Shh, Peter," Steve whispered as he gently picked up the boy's hand. "It's all right, little guy. You're safe now."

Peter's eyes flew open, flitting frantically around the room before landing on Steve. "Who're you? Where's my dad?"

"My name is Steve Rogers," replied Steve. "I'm one of the people who found you and your dad in the desert."

"In the desert," Peter murmured as his eyelids briefly fluttered closed. He let out a long, tremulous breath. "After we escaped."

"That's right."
"'Cause we escaped. My dad got us out."

"That's right, Peter," Steve said gently. "You're in the hospital now, and it's safe here. I promise."

"Uh huh," whispered Peter, licking his dry lips. His brown eyes were the same exact same shade as Tony's. "But where's my dad?"

"He's in the next room getting some sleep," answered Steve. "I told him that I'd stay with you for a bit so he could rest."

"Oh. That's good, 'cause he hasn't gotten much since we got here," Peter said. "Colonel James tried to tell him to sleep some yesterday, but he didn't listen. He never gets any sleep when I'm sick. Says he needs to make sure I'm okay first, even when I try to tell him it's not good for him to stay awake for so long. He's not a superhero, even if he tries to act like one."

A soft knock on the door by a nurse prevented Steve from replying. "Well, look who's finally awake," the nurse said, smiling down at Peter as she adjusted one of his many tubes. "Did your father step out for a moment?"

"Mr Rogers here said that he's off taking a nap," answered Peter. "'Bout time, too."

"I agree," the nurse said. "I thought I was going to have to get a couple of the MPs to force him to get some sleep pretty soon. Should we see if we can get you off the oxygen mask now, young man?"

"Yes, please," Peter replied. "I'm really hungry."

"Well, that's a good sign," replied the nurse. She slid something onto Peter's index finger, then raised the head of Peter's bed so he was sitting up and removed the mask from his face, replacing it with the oxygen tubes in his nose that Steve remembered all too well. "But we need to do the breathing treatment first before you eat, okay?"

Peter scowled, causing Steve's heart to flip. Howard always used to scowl in the exact same way, and if he had to guess, Tony did as well.

"I hate the breathing treatments," Peter grumbled, rubbing at his nose. "They make me feel all jittery."

"I know, sweetheart, but they also help your lungs to heal," the nurse said, patting his shoulder. "I'll be back with it in a few minutes, and once you're done we'll get you something to eat."

"Mmm, fine. But can I at least have something more than soup and crackers this time?"

"We'll see, sweetie," she said. "I'm sure your father will want us to check with your doctors in New York first."

"You know," Steve said once the nurse had left the room. "I had pretty bad asthma when I was a boy too, a long time ago. And the treatments for it were no fun back then either."

"You did?" Peter asked. "How long ago was it?"

"Well, it was pretty long ago," answered Steve. "I… um… I'm actually ninety years old."

Peter's eyebrows shot up so high they disappeared under his curls, and he let out a slight cough. "You're what? But you look younger than my dad!" He paused for a moment, tilting his head as his brown eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute! You're the Steve Rogers? Like, the Captain America Steve
Pride welled in Steve's chest at the sight of Peter's expression of awe, such a sharp contrast to the shock and suspicion of Tony's reaction. "Yeah, that's me."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Peter. "That's so cool! They finally found you in the ice! Oh, my grandpa would've been so happy!" He immediately clapped a hand over his mouth, wincing as he lowered his voice. "Ow. I keep forgetting that my chest hurts when I talk too loud."

"I'm so sorry, Peter," whispered Steve. "I'm afraid your broken rib was my fault."

"That's not what my dad said," Peter answered. "He told the doctors that you saved my life. But please don't tell my dad I said that about my grandpa, okay? I don't want him to get upset."

"Um, okay?" said Steve, confused. "But why?"

"He doesn't like when I talk about his dad," Peter whispered. "I never got to meet him; he died before I was born, but my dad has always told me that his dad wasn't very nice to him. I've seen all the old Captain America comic books in my grandpa's office at our Malibu house though, and there's a bunch of pictures of you guys in there too. My dad never goes in there, but I sneak in and read the books sometimes when he's on one of his trips. You were so cool!"

"Uh, thank you, Peter," Steve murmured, his head whirling with conflicting emotions. That was now two people who were close to Tony that had told him that Tony and Howard hadn't gotten along well.

What _had_ happened to Howard after the war?

The nurse returned then, carrying some sort of small machine and two vials of clear liquid medicine. Steve watched carefully as she poured the liquid into a cup at the top of the machine and connected it to a narrow tube that she handed to Peter, who pouted as he stuck the end of it into his mouth.

"As long as you keep up with the breathing treatments," she said to Peter. "You should be able to stay off the mask and start eating more today, okay?" She glanced over at Steve when Peter nodded. "We'll of course double-check everything with his doctor in New York first. Would you mind making sure that Mr Stark is aware, Captain?"

"Um… sure, ma'am," Steve stammered, noticing the name Carey on her badge hanging from a lanyard around her neck. He probably should have already let Tony know that Peter had woken up in the first place, but seeing how relieved Peter was that his dad was finally getting some rest, Steve decided to let it slide. Peter was far too young to be worrying so much about his own father.

"Did you have to do these yucky things too when you were little?" Peter asked around his mouthful of tubing as soon as the door had closed behind the nurse. "I bet they tasted even worse back then!"

"Not exactly," Steve said with a smile. "I used to have to smoke cigarettes, actually. Not so easy when you can't breathe out."

Once again Peter's eyebrows shot up, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. "They used to have you _smoke? _But smoking makes your lungs so much worse! What were they thinking? That's just… _insane, _what kinda doctors were they?"

Laughing, Steve shook his head, not realising until a couple of seconds later that it was the first time he could remember laughing since before he'd crashed the plane into the ice.
Actually, now that he thought about it a bit more, it was probably the first time he'd laughed since before Bucky died.

"I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be talking this much during your treatment, little guy," Steve said, still chuckling. "But to answer your question, they weren't regular tobacco cigarettes, like the kind they gave all the Army soldiers during the war. They were special medical cigarettes, designed to get the asthma drugs down inside my lungs. But I didn't like them very much. They made me cough quite a bit, and if I got really bad, sometimes I'd even see things that weren't there."

"Yeesh," Peter mumbled. "That sounds horrible!"

"It wasn't fun, that's for sure," Steve said, his voice trailing off as he remembered how during his sickest times in the hospital that not even his ma could come and visit him, out of concern that she would possibly give him tuberculosis from one of her patients. It got even worse when she herself became sick, when Steve's doctors forbade him from even seeing her as she lay dying, worried that he'd catch the often fatal disease and die too.

"Are you okay, Mr Rogers?" Peter asked a few minutes later, once he was done with his treatment. "You look sad."

Steve's throat tightened at Peter's perceptiveness, and he forced out a smile. "You can call me Steve, Peter. And yeah, I'll be okay."

"I bet it was kinda weird though, waking up in the future like this," said Peter, stifling a cough. The boy's hands were shaking as well, but his colour had definitely perked up a bit.

"Yeah, you can say it's been a bit weird," answered Steve. "Do your hands always shake like that after one of your treatments?"

"Uh huh. It's one reason why I hate them," Peter grumbled. "They make me feel sick to my stomach too. I hope they bring me some food soon."

As if on cue, Carey swept back into the room carrying a loaded tray. "Still hungry, sweetheart?" she asked Peter.

"Yes!" Peter exclaimed as Carey set down the tray, pulling out her stethoscope so she could listen to his lungs.

"You sound so much better, sweetie," she said. "Probably only a couple more days and you can be discharged."

"Sounds good," Peter answered around a mouthful of what looked like the same green jello they used to serve back when he was in the Army. "I'm ready to go home and get some real food." He paused to take a sip of water. "Aren't you gonna eat something, Mr Rog—, I mean, Steve?"

"Oh, no, Peter, don't worry about me," Steve said, trying to ignore his own growling stomach. It was well past what he considered lunchtime. "I can wait until—"

"Are you hungry too, Captain?" asked Carey. "I'd be happy to run down to the mess hall and grab you something. It's no trouble!"

"Um—"

"Please, Steve?" Peter asked. "I doubt my dad's gonna sleep too much longer. I don't think he's slept this long in one stretch in years, actually. He must really trust you already, which, like, never
"Then it's settled," said Carey before Steve could protest. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"O-kay," Steve said slowly. "Thank you."

"Do you know how to play chess?" Peter asked once Carey had left the room. "If not, would you wanna learn? My dad and I play quite a bit, but I don't mind teaching you if you don't know how to play."

"I actually don't know how to play, but I have always wished that I did," Steve replied. "But are you sure it won't tire you out too much? I'm not sure your dad would want you to—"

"Please?" Peter pleaded. "I get so bored just lying here, and I don't have any of my books or Legos or anything here either. I promise I'll tell you if I get tired. Please, Steve?"

Steve's heart gave a leap, and he smiled widely at Peter as he nodded. It had been so long since he had seen such a pure and kind soul. The Great Depression that had begun so abruptly in 1929 had washed away the innocence of youth almost overnight, with the horrors of the world war ten years later stamping it down even further. Steve had almost given up hope of ever seeing any of that innocence ever again.

"I'd love to, Peter," he said, his shoulders feeling lighter than they had in years. "That sounds like fun."

"Peter!" Tony screamed, his chest threatening to completely split open with the force of it. Something seemed seriously wrong with him, something their attackers hadn't counted on. "Peter!"

"Daddy!" Peter shrieked, his panicked voice sounding like it was coming from very far away, echoing around in Tony's head. "Daddy, where are you? Help me!"

The last thing Tony could remember seeing was two men pulling a hood over his son's head, with blood staining the back of it only a couple seconds later. Tony's hand was pressed to his chest over his heart, his palm already slick with his own blood. He felt woozy, like he'd had too much to drink, and his legs were wobbly, refusing to cooperate.

"Peter!" he cried again, weaker this time, the throbbing pain in his chest growing with every erratic beat of his heart. "Peter? Answer me!"

Another hood covered his head, and Tony felt himself thrown across the backseat of a vehicle. A heavy hand clamped down over his chest, trying to stem the bleeding and forcing another choked cry from his throat.

"Where's—," he wheezed, trying to be heard over the gibberish their captors were speaking, growing louder and more frantic by the second. "Where's my son? Who the hell are you people? Peter? Peter?"

Bright lights suddenly replaced the darkness of the hood, and Tony blinked against their harshness, his eyes searching frantically for Peter. "Peter! Buddy? Can you hear me?"

Tony cried out as an unfamiliar face abruptly blocked out the light, scanning his bleeding chest as he shouted instructions. Strong hands latched onto his shoulders and legs, his attempts to thrash away halted by the intense pain lancing across his chest, radiating down his arms and legs. Something was badly wrong.
A scalpel appeared above him, and Tony's breath caught in his throat as it came closer to him, halting as another hand holding a rag dripping with a sickly-sweet liquid closed in towards his face, coming to rest over his nose and mouth.

"Peter!" he tried to call again, only managing to inhale a lungful of chloroform.

And then, everything went black.

"Peter!" Tony gasped as he came to, expecting to see the rock walls of their cave prison but instead finding the light beige walls of what appeared to be the smallest bedroom known to man. It was more like a closet, in fact, with the narrow cot—it was really nothing more than a stretcher, actually—he was lying on taking up nearly the entire room. He immediately looked down, huffing out a quick sigh of relief as his eyes landed on the light blue glow of his arc reactor.

He wasn't back in the cave. He was at the base, in the hospital. With Peter. And Peter was recovering. Slowly, but he was recovering.

Why do hospitals always paint their walls such a boring-ass colour?

And why am I lying on a stretcher inside a goddamn closet?

There was a small window opposite him, close to the ceiling, through which the last remnants of the setting sun were shining, throwing long shadows across Tony's legs. A fresh wave of panic welled up inside him, and he let out a rather loud groan as he reached for his phone, forgetting his painfully burned arm, his eyes widening in shock as he saw the time.

He'd been asleep for nearly six hours.

Who in the hell had let him sleep for nearly six hours? He never slept that long!

Lurching to his feet, Tony stumbled for the door on shaky legs, bursting into Peter's room to find him not dead, as he'd feared, but in fact looking the healthiest that he'd looked since they'd first arrived in Afghanistan. He was propped up in his bed, a smile stretched across his round face as he reached for the one of the black knights sitting on the chessboard in front of him, giggling wickedly as he took out one of his opponent's bishops.

His opponent who just happened to be Steve fucking Rogers.

"Hey, Dad!" Peter said as he looked up, his voice still throaty and raspy but stronger than it had been in days. He was wearing his brand-new glasses and had even managed to get rid of the oxygen mask. "Did you have a good sleep?"

"What the hell is going on here?" demanded Tony as he turned on Rogers, who immediately gulped and shrank back. "I told you to get me if anything happened!"

Rogers raised his hands, probably trying to placate him but only managing to infuriate Tony even more. "Tony, I didn't mean—"

"Dad!" interrupted Peter, his eyebrows knitting together. "Nothing happened! Steve and I have just been playing chess while you slept, that's all. I taught him how!"

"But—!" Tony sputtered as he sank down onto the hospital bed next to Peter, reaching for him as if to convince himself that the boy really was all right. He threaded his hands into Peter's messy hair, pointedly ignoring the pain shooting through his arm and shoulder. "You're awake, and sitting up, and talking, and playing chess?"
Peter shrugged as he stifled a cough. "You were asleep for a pretty long time, Dad. And I'm feeling better now."

"Peter asked me to not wake you, Tony," Rogers said carefully. "He said you needed the rest, so I just thought—"

"You just thought you'd take the word of a sick eleven-year-old boy over my own?" Tony snapped. "Did ya, Rogers?"

"Dad!" Peter yelped, pulling back to glare at him. "Why're you being so mean? You hadn't hardly moved from that chair since we got here, it was about time that you got some sleep!"

Tony's shoulders sagged, and he buried his nose in Peter's hair, kissing the top of his head. "You're right, Pete. I'm sorry."

"It's not me you should be apologising to," Peter murmured. "You needed the sleep, Dad, and you look a lot better now. And Steve's been with me the whole time, he didn't leave me alone once."

"Mmm," Tony muttered. "Well, at least there's that."

"Peter's nurse thought he might be well enough to be discharged in a couple of days, Tony," Rogers said. "After they confirm with his doctors in New York, of course. She asked me to tell you that."

"Great," replied Tony, rolling his eyes. "So then we can fly home and be interrogated by Nick Fury for the next three weeks."

Rogers furrowed his brow. "I really don't think Director Fury will—"

"Yeah, well, suffice it to say that I might just know him a bit better than you do, okay, Rogers?" Tony barked, glaring at the broad-shouldered man. "So the next time you talk to him you can tell him that I'll answer his goddamn questions, but he's not getting his hands on Pete. Do you understand me?"

Hurt flashed in Rogers' blue eyes, and Tony felt a small twinge of guilt. "I've already told him that, Tony," Rogers said firmly, his jaw twitching. "We're both on the same side here, even if you don't want to admit it. There's nothing to be gained by involving Peter in a debriefing."

"Mmm," grumbled Tony. "Well, then at least we agree on something." What Tony didn't add was that he'd already tried asking Peter about the time when their captors had dragged him away, but apparently Peter had been too out of it at the time to remember anything useful. Whatever it was that they had shot into Peter's arm hadn't seemed to have any lasting effects on him, so maybe Yinsen had been right all along. Maybe it had just been an antibiotic after all.

"Well, I think I'm going to head out now," Rogers said after a few awkward seconds of silence. "I'm sure Peter could use some more rest."

"Aww, but we haven't finished the chess game!" Peter exclaimed, punctuating his sentence with a raspy cough. He definitely wasn't out of the woods yet. "Can't we finish it first?"

"I can maybe come by again tomorrow, Peter," Rogers answered. He glanced sheepishly at Tony. "As long as it's okay with your dad."

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to say 'no', but one quick look at Peter had him nodding his head. Peter had long-ago mastered what Pepper always called his puppy dog eyes, and Tony found it nearly impossible to resist them.
"Can you come right after breakfast, Steve?" Peter asked. "Please?"

"Sure, Peter," said Rogers. He reached over to pat Peter on the head, his touch extra gentle. "Then I guess I'll see you both tomorrow."

"Bye, Steve!" Peter called as he walked out of the room, turning to Tony as soon as the door closed behind him. "Why were you so upset with Steve, Dad? He didn't do anything wrong, and I think you made him feel bad."

Of course he didn't do anything wrong, Tony thought bitterly. Steve Rogers probably never did a goddamn thing wrong in his entire life. I was always the damn disappointment. I was always the one who could never measure up.

Tony wrapped his arms around his son and drew him into a hug, careful to avoid pressing on his injured rib. He'd never taken the time to explain to Peter about Steve Rogers because it had never occurred to him—and why would it, really?—that he'd ever actually get to meet the man, much less have him rescue them from near-death in the middle of the Afghanistan desert. That was something he never would've thought would happen in a million years.

But now… now all of those old feelings of resentment and anger that Tony had always had towards Steve Rogers, feelings he'd tried so hard to stamp down over the years, were being painfully yanked back to the surface, forcing Tony to have to deal with them yet again. And the fact that Rogers had managed to save Peter's life out there in the desert when Tony couldn't had only added to his feelings of inadequacy.

Peter was one of the few truly good things that Tony had accomplished in his life, and he was loathe to want to share him with anyone, much less share him with Captain America of all people. As it was, the changes he was planning to make to Stark Industries were sure to cause Obie to have a coronary, and he didn't really need the added stress of having to deal with the sudden return of a long-dead World War II superhero whom his own father had idolised to the point of lunacy.

"I'm sorry, Pete," Tony whispered. "You're right. I was out of line."

"Mmm. I still think you should apologise to Steve too," Peter said, rubbing his nose on Tony's shirt. "I'm not the one who you hurt."

"I will tomorrow buddy, okay?"

"Uh huh."

Pressing another kiss to Peter's head, Tony helped him lay back against his pillows, brushing his curly hair off his forehead. Kid was overdue for a haircut when they got home.

"So, did Rogers say how long he'd been back?" Tony asked as he eyed the chessboard. Peter was an excellent chess player, but Tony could see from the position of the pieces on the board that Rogers had been giving Peter a pretty decent run for his money.

"He said about two weeks before Mr Fury sent him out here to help find us," answered Peter, stifling a yawn. "He told me that SHIELD had him living out in a cabin on a lake."

"Mmm, that sounds nice," Tony said. He pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the beginnings of a caffeine-withdrawal headache coming on. "You should try and rest a little now, Pete. You look tired, and it's gonna be time for another breathing treatment soon."

Peter wrinkled his nose but didn't argue, just placed his glasses on the bedside table as Tony lowered
the head of his bed back down and moved the chessboard, careful to avoid jostling any of the pieces. He was actually looking forward to watching Rogers and Peter finish their game tomorrow, even if he’d never admit it out loud.

"Dad?" Peter asked a couple minutes later.

"Yeah?"

"Does it hurt? The circle in your chest?"

Tony's muscles immediately seized, and he squeezed his eyes closed as he brought his palm up to cup the arc reactor, feeling the low-pitched hum reverberate up his arm. As far as Tony knew, Peter hadn't been aware of very much of Tony's emergency heart surgery in the cave due to his head injury, and Tony was determined to keep it that way. The poor kid had already been through enough.

"No, it doesn't hurt, Pete."

"That's good," Peter murmured. He inhaled a deep, noisy breath. "Are you gonna have it fixed when we get home?"

"We'll see, Pete," Tony answered. "There's gonna be a lot of other things we'll have to deal with first." Like the complete restructuring of the company. That's gonna be fun.

"Uh huh. I'm glad it doesn't hurt, though."

"You don't need to worry about me, Pete. Get some rest now, okay?"

"Uh huh."

Three days later, after receiving the blessing from his doctors in New York, Peter Stark was officially discharged from the hospital. Tony insisted on leaving Afghanistan only a couple hours later, which Steve could understand. He had a strong feeling that the brief nightmare he'd witnessed poor Peter having hadn't been the first one he'd had, nor would it likely be the last.

And Steve knew all about nightmares too. They were one of the many reason why he never slept all that much.

Peter and Steve ended up playing chess and talking for nearly the entire trip back to Edwards Air Force Base while Tony mostly kept to himself, talking on the telephone and sketching what appeared to be schematics out on various paper napkins, with a pensive look on his face the whole time. It seemed obvious that he was planning something—and a pretty big something at that, based on the schematics—but Steve had no idea what it was and Peter didn't seem concerned. Maybe this was just how Tony did things. Howard had definitely had his share of odd quirks too.

Heat was shimmering off the tarmac in waves as they landed in California, a sharp reminder to Steve at just how long they'd been gone. It had been over seven weeks since Director Fury and Agent Coulson had first showed up at the isolated cabin by the lake, which meant that he'd now been defrosted for about ten weeks. Almost three months.

As the door to the Stark Industries jet opened, Tony shoved his collection of paper napkins into his suit pocket and grabbed onto Peter's shoulder, guiding him carefully down the steps. As soon as Peter's feet hit the ground he was nearly tackled by a slender woman with strawberry blonde hair who immediately started crying, saying over and over how sorry she was. A rather portly man stood
behind her, his hand resting gently on the woman's back as she cried herself out into Peter's hair, waiting for his turn to welcome Peter back home.

"That's Pepper Potts, my assistant," Tony said as he came up to stand next to Steve. "And that guy behind her is Happy Hogan, my head of security. They just got engaged."

Steve nodded as he studied the two of them, remembering Director Fury's suspicions that perhaps someone close to the Starks had somehow been involved in their capture. Steve had always considered himself to be a pretty good judge of character, and from what he could see, Pepper and Happy's reactions of relief and sorrow seemed genuine enough for him to want to dismiss them as possible suspects, but he knew he would have to get to know them a little better before making any final decisions.

If in fact he would have the opportunity to get to know them better. So far Director Fury hadn't given Steve any indication on what he was planning on doing with him now that the Starks were back in the U.S.

"Did you call for the press conference like I asked?" Tony said as soon as they had all piled into one of the fanciest cars Steve had ever seen, probably second only to the car owned by Johann Schmidt.

"Yes, but I still don't think this is the best idea," Pepper answered. "We really should get you and Peter both to a hospital, and—"

"I've had my fill of hospitals for the time being," Tony cut in. "And I know Pete has too. We could use some decent food before we head over, though."

"Yeah, okay, boss," Happy said. Steve could see Happy eyeing him suspiciously through the rearview mirror. "But first, who the hell is this?"

"This is Steve Rogers, Happy," Peter exclaimed from his seat between Steve and Tony. "He's Captain America! He and Colonel James were the ones who found us in the desert."

"Cap—, Captain… America?" Happy stammered, his eyes flicking over to Tony. "Boss?"

"It's a long story, Hap," Tony said, rolling his eyes. Steve had noticed that he did that a lot too. "Drive now, please, and food first. Pete's looking forward to something besides broth and jello."

"Oh yeah," Peter said. "I don't think I ever wanna see green jello ever again."

About thirty minutes later, filled up on burgers and fries given to them through what Peter explained was called a drive-thru window, Happy pulled the fancy silver car into the employee entrance of a sprawling group of buildings, the centerpiece of which was a towering glass skyscraper that glowed like a beacon of pure light, almost as bright as the sunlight glinting from it.

As they arrived next to the curb Steve noticed a large group of people that had amassed by the entrance, who he assumed to be Tony's employees. They were led by a bald, bearded man wearing what looked like a very expensive suit and a rather unsettling look in his eyes. Steve's hand instinctively tightened around the handle of his shield as his jaw clenched. While the man was smiling, and by all appearances seemed very happy to see Tony and Peter, there was something about him that just seemed… off.

"Who is that?" he quietly asked Peter, jerking his head towards the man as Tony gulped, his left hand clenching into a fist. Steve had noticed that Tony tended to do that a lot too.

"That's Obadiah Stane," Peter whispered back. "He's the second-in-command at Stark Industries. He
used to work with my grandpa."

Obadiah Stane. Was that the Obie person Tony had been speaking to on the telephone that day in the hospital? The one who had made Tony so upset?

As they exited the car to a chorus of cheers, Stane immediately stepped forward, enveloping Tony into a hug that reminded Steve of being hugged by Senator Brandt back in his days of selling war bonds. It was something you just had to grin and get through.

"Colonel James!" Peter called, waving as they were ushered into the large room in the main building that was already filled to the brim with news reporters. Colonel Rhodes turned at the sound of Peter's voice, a wide grin breaking out on his face as he hurried over.

"Hey, Peter!" Rhodes said as he pulled Peter into a careful hug, ruffling his hair. "You're sure looking a lot better than the last time I saw you!"

Peter nodded humbly, tugging on the sleeves of his sleek, charcoal grey suit jacket that was the same color as Tony's. Both he and Tony had changed into their suits about thirty minutes before the plane had landed in California, and with both Pepper and Happy dressed in suits as well and Colonel Rhodes in full uniform, Steve was starting to feel out of place in his simple jeans and t-shirt.

Tony, who had disappeared for a few moments after they had entered the room, suddenly reappeared at Steve's elbow, that pensive look back on his face. "Do not let Peter out of your sight while we're here, you got that, Rogers?"

"Of course I won't, Tony," Steve answered, his brow furrowing in concern. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Tony said quickly, almost a bit too quickly. His eyes flicked up to briefly lock with Steve's, and Steve felt his heart stutter.

Tony looked scared. Almost as scared as he'd looked in the desert, when he thought Peter was dying.

"At least, not yet," Tony added, his lips quirking into a sort of half-smile as he headed up the aisle towards the podium set up for the press conference.

Still gripping his shield, Steve placed his free hand on Peter's shoulder as Obadiah Stane joined Tony at the podium and raised his hands, asking for silence. In the few seconds that it took for the murmurs and whispers to die down, Steve noticed Nick Fury and Agent Coulson slipping silently into the room, heading in he and Peter's direction.

"Thank you all for coming," Tony began. "Before we begin, I want to first make something very clear. Other than the specific items that I am about to share with all of you, I will not be answering any additional questions about what happened in Afghanistan, and anyone who attempts to discover any further information via any other means, including attempts to pester my son or anyone else who was involved, will answer swiftly to my lawyers and to myself."

Concerned silence greeted his words, broken only by the snaps of camera shutters and the scratching of pencils. As the seconds stretched on, and Tony's clenched hands began to tremble on the podium, Steve noticed Obadiah Stane creeping forward, as if to try and usher Tony away.

"The truth is," Tony finally said. "Is that… during these last few weeks, I've had my eyes opened. I realised that I had become comfortable in a system with zero accountability, and how that was completely unacceptable." He broke off, staring down at the top of the podium, his eyes flicking over to where Steve and Peter were standing, as if to draw strength.
"I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons that I had created to defend them," Tony continued. "I saw my own son injured by a weapon, a weapon bearing my name, that I had created to supposedly keep him safe. And that is why… I am shutting down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark Industries—effective immediately—so I can reassess the future of this company and decide what I want it to be going forward."

Peter immediately gasped, looking up at Steve with wide eyes as the entire room erupted in chaos and Nick Fury let out a muffled curse behind him.

"There is a lot more to Stark Industries than making things that blow up," Tony continued over the rising noise. "And I intend to explore every possible opportunity. That is all."

Obadiah Stane immediately leapt towards Tony like a pouncing lion, pulling the shaken man towards him and whispering something in his ear that caused Tony to vehemently shake his head. Every reporter in the room was on his or her feet and shouting questions but Tony ignored them all, shrugging out of Stane's grasp and making a beeline back towards Steve and Peter as Pepper and Happy started ushering the reporters out of the room.

"Dad!" Peter exclaimed, wrapping his arms around Tony's waist as soon as Tony was within reach. "That was so incredibly brave! I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, bud," Tony whispered, his jaw clenched so tightly Steve was surprised he hadn't broken any teeth. "That's all that matters."

"Well, well, well," came Director Fury's deep voice from behind Steve. "You'd think it'd be hard to surprise me with all the stuff that I've seen over the years, Stark, but somehow you still manage to do so."

"Glad I could help," Tony replied with a frown. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get my son home—"

"Not so fast, Tony," Director Fury interrupted, glancing knowingly at Agent Coulson. "This may have been a brave move, as your boy so aptly put it, but it's also potentially a dangerous one, and I'm not comfortable just allowing you to return home as if nothing has happened."

Tony's head snapped up and he glowered at Fury, tightening his grip on Peter. "What the hell are you saying? You can't keep us from going home!"

"I'm not gonna keep you from going home, Tony," Fury said, a bit more gently. "What I meant was, you're not gonna be going home alone. I'm assigning Captain Rogers to you and Peter as an extra security precaution, effective immediately."

"What?" Tony cried, his shocked eyes narrowing angrily as he looked over at Steve, as if this were all somehow Steve's idea, which hurt Steve a lot more than he wanted to admit. "Why? I don't need a goddamn bodyguard, Fury! I hate, no I abhor bodyguards, and you know it!"

"This is not a request, Tony," Fury said firmly. "It's an assignment. You may think that everything's going to be all peachy-keen now that you're shutting down your bomb division, but something tells me that the people who's retirement accounts you just decimated might think otherwise. You do realise what your little announcement is going to do to the Stark Industries stock prices, don't you?"

Gulping, Tony slowly nodded. "Well, yeah. But things'll bounce back soon enough. They always do, people just gotta be patient."

"That's easy to say when you're a billionaire," said Fury. "And you'll have enough work on your
hands with your proposed restructuring without having to worry about all of the ramifications of your
three-minute speech. Not to mention the little fact that someone in your company is apparently selling
these weapons of yours under the table, and we still have no idea of the whereabouts of Peter's
nanny. Captain Rogers?"

"Yes, Director?" Steve answered.

"Do you have any objections to being assigned to the Starks?"

"Uhh, no, sir?" Steve said gingerly, shooting a quick glance down at Peter, who was beaming from
ear to ear. Even if Tony was glaring at Steve hotly enough to melt glass, Peter at least seemed happy
with Fury's announcement. "No, sir," he repeated. "Not at all."

"Good," Fury stated. "Then it's settled. And Tony, I've scheduled the debrief for tomorrow at 0900.
Don't be late."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony grumbled. "Don't worry, I will be."

"Not if we're coming to you," added Fury. He stepped back, nodding at Agent Coulson.
"Gentlemen, we'll see you tomorrow."

Come find me on tumblr! I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there. :)
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of the kudos and kind comments! I'm so glad you're enjoying the story! :)

And a huge thank-you to stjohn27, my awesome sounding board and prereader. ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The car ride out to the Stark's home in Malibu was quiet, with everyone deep in their own thoughts as Peter fiddled with the buttons on the suit jacket sitting in his lap and Tony stared out the window, with one hand protectively resting on Peter's knee.

Everyone except for Miss Potts, Tony's assistant, who was busy fielding calls from seemingly hundreds of news agencies, all wanting more information about Tony's shocking announcement. And while she sounded as professional as one might expect of a CEO's personal assistant, Steve could tell by the slightly higher pitch of her voice that she was nervous. It seemed to Steve that
absolutely no one had been expecting Tony to announce that Stark Industries—who Colonel Rhodes had said was the largest supplier of weapons and technology to the U.S. Military—would actually stop manufacturing weapons.

And especially not that Obadiah Stane. Steve hadn't been as surprised as much by Tony's announcement as he had been by Stane's reaction to it. Stane had managed to hide it pretty well, but Steve had seen the man's absolute shock turn quickly to an almost murderous anger in the three or so seconds before he shooed Tony away from the podium, nearly shouting to be heard over the erupting crowd of reporters.

"Okay everyone, I think what we just need to take from all of this is that Tony is back, and he's better than ever, and we just need to have a little internal discussion before we can get back to you…"

By that point, however, no one was really listening to him anyway. Everyone's eyes—and cameras—were on Tony, with their expressions ranging from fascination to intrigue to amusement to complete and utter shock.

But in spite of the shock of the announcement, as Tony had left the podium and made his way back over to Steve and Peter, there was something else that was filling the air, something that Steve thought Tony hadn't anticipated.

Respect.

Even Nick Fury, who's muffled "goddamnit" hadn't been quite muffled enough to escape Steve's ears, had sounded more respectful than angry. If Steve had to guess, he had even almost sounded proud.

"All right, Pete?" Tony whispered a couple minutes later.

"Yeah, Dad, I'm fine," Peter answered, trying to smile as the car pulled into a huge circular driveway that led to probably the largest house that Steve had ever seen. "We're home now."

"Okay," Miss Potts said, turning towards the backseat as Happy turned off the car. "Jarvis has already been informed about your arrival, Captain Rogers, and I've also made arrangements to have your personal items sent here from the cabin where you were staying. They'll be arriving tomorrow."

"Thank you, ma'am," Steve answered with a quick nod. He didn't really have all that much at the cabin, but it would be nice to have at least a few items that were familiar.

"And I can show you around the house, if you want," Peter added. "Is that okay, Dad?"

"Sure, buddy," Tony answered with a heavy sigh. "Just don't forget to do your breathing treatment when it's time, yeah?"

"I've already given Jarvis the schedule for Peter's treatments," Miss Potts added as Peter wrinkled his nose. "Every six hours for the next three days, then every eight hours for the next two weeks, then back to twice a day. And some new glasses will be arriving tomorrow for you as well, Peter."

"Thanks, Pepper," Peter whispered, absentmindedly pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a shaky hand. "You guys still haven't heard anything from Rosa, have you?"

"Not yet, Peter," answered Miss Potts, glancing sheepishly towards Happy. "We're still trying to get in touch with her family, but… right now it's not looking promising. It's like they all just vanished."
Peter nodded, catching his lower lip between his teeth as Tony patted him on the knee.

"C'mon, Pete," Tony said softly. "Let's get you inside. It's gonna be all right."

Shield in hand, Steve slid out of the car behind Peter, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder just as Tony did the same from his opposite side. Tony's head immediately snapped up and he locked eyes with Steve over Peter's head, giving Steve a slight nod, his brown eyes clouded with such immense guilt that Steve nearly choked.

"Uh huh," Peter stammered as his chin started to shake. "I know it is. It's just… I mean… we almost…"

His voice broke off, but Steve caught his underlying meaning anyway. He and Tony had almost died out there in that desert, and no matter how tough Tony thought Peter was, that was definitely something you didn't just get over.

"It's gonna take some time, Peter," Steve said gently. "Probably more than just some. And that's okay."

Inhaling a deep, raggedy breath, Peter nodded, swiping at his eyes as the three of them headed for the glass front door of the house and stepped inside.

"Welcome back, sir, Master Peter," a mechanical-sounding British voice said as soon as they had crossed the threshold into the wide, oval-shaped entryway, causing Steve to jump and look up. "This house has been far too quiet in your absence."

"Good to be back, Jarvis," Tony replied, pulling the crumpled napkins from his jacket and then flinging it in the general direction of the couch about five meters away, rolling his eyes when it missed.

"Who's… Jarvis?" Steve asked, still scanning the ceiling, his heart thumping and his shield at the ready. "I don't see anyone else here?"

"It's JARVIS, in all capital letters, and he's a UI," Peter answered. "He runs the house. His name is an acronym that means Just A Rather Very Intelligent System. Dad based him on Mr Jarvis who was the butler here when he was little. He's really awesome, and Dad's almost got him complex enough now to be an AI."

Steve's eyebrows knitted together. He had definitely heard of people having butlers—if only in books that he'd read—but he'd never heard of a UI before.

"Okay… so… what's a UI?"

"It stands for User Interface, it's a type of computer program," Tony said impatiently. He tapped the device on his chest, glowing blue through the fabric of his dress shirt. "Look, I hate to just run off, but I gotta get going on the upgrade for this thing as soon as possible. I'm not sure how much longer the power's gonna last, so—"

"It's okay, Dad," Peter interrupted, sounding just as anxious, making Steve wonder why Tony wanted to upgrade the device instead of just removing it. "I'll show Steve around while you work."

Tony's lips stretched into a sort of half smile and he leaned over, kissing the top of Peter's head. "Thanks, buddy. You call if you need anything, yeah?"

"Uh huh, but we'll be fine." Peter answered. He watched as Tony disappeared down the circular
stairs to his workshop before turning to Steve, pulling on the loosened tie around his neck. "Can we stop by my room first? I wanna change into something more comfy."

"Sure," Steve answered with a smile. "I've never enjoyed wearing suits all that much either."

"Dad doesn't much like wearing them either, but he likes us to look sharp when we're around the press," added Peter. "Says he doesn't want us to seem weak around the birds of prey." He grabbed Steve's hand, tugging him towards the open staircase that led to the second floor.

"How many bedrooms does this house have?" Steve asked once they'd reached the top. The hallway in front of him stretched on for at least twenty or twenty-five meters, probably twice as long as the entire length of he and his ma's old apartment back in Brooklyn.

"Five, six if you count the spare one downstairs," answered Peter. "And here's mine," he added, pointing to a door marked with a rather odd-looking circular nameplate covered in curved lines. Twisting the knob, Peter and Steve stepped inside the massive bedroom, with one entire wall lined in glass that overlooked the ocean and decked out in what Steve guessed were characters and scenes from one of Peter's favorite movies. Peter had told Steve a few stories about his favorite science fiction movies back when he was in the hospital, and it was almost as if Steve had stepped onto the actual set of a movie with how realistic it seemed.

And while there were also plenty of pictures of Peter and Tony decorating the walls and sitting on top of Peter's large dresser, Steve noticed that there was not a single photograph of anyone who looked like she might be Peter's mother.

"Hey, guys!" Peter exclaimed, dropping to his knees as two small, flat, circular robots zoomed across the floor to him from their perch in the far corner of the room, one white and the other dark grey in colour. The robots stopped right in front of Peter, squeaking and beeping excitedly as he petted them, almost as if they were puppies welcoming home their master. "Did you miss me? I missed you too!"

"Are those more UIs?" Steve asked with wide eyes. Do people even have real pets anymore?

"No, these are just two roomba vacuums that I programmed and upgraded," Peter answered, laughing at a particularly emphatic beep from the grey robot. "They help keep my room clean and keep me company when we're out here since pretty much all of my friends are back in New York. They're names are Wally and Eva."

"Wally?" Steve asked. "That's a pretty old-fashioned name for something so sophisticated."

"It's spelled as wall hyphen e," Peter said. "Wall-E. It's from a movie, I can show you later if you like."

"Okay," Steve whispered. I guess the yellow brick road has gone by the wayside. "Sure."

"You can say hi to them, Steve," Peter said as he got back to his feet and removed his tie, tossing it onto a chair in the corner. "They can understand you."

"Um… sure," Steve said as Peter disappeared into what Steve assumed was his closet. He crouched down, eyeing the two round robots who were squeaking in curiosity. "Um… hello there. It's nice to meet you."

The robots squeaked again, nudging against Steve's foot until he reached out and touched them, earning something that sounded like a mechanical purr in return. Steve couldn't help but smile as he petted the flat, circular machines, earning louder and louder purrs as he went on. Somehow it made perfect sense to him that while Tony's UI was a disembodied personality based on someone who no
doubt used to tell him what to do, Peter's were as close to real life pets as you could get, and probably adored him just as much.

"There, that's better," Peter said as he emerged from his closet wearing a simple pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and a smooth zippered sweater with a hood. "Wanna go see your room now?"

"Sure," answered Steve as he got back to his feet, shaking his head as the two vacuums zoomed back towards their corner.

They have computerised butlers and robotic vacuum cleaners that purr when you pet them. I am never going to fit in here.

"JARVIS," Peter said once they were back in the hallway. "Which room is Steve's?"

"I thought it prudent to allow the Captain to choose, Master Peter," JARVIS replied.

"Oh, that's nice of you," answered Peter. He grabbed onto Steve's hand, leading him down the hallway. "This one is Dad's," he said, pointing to the door one down from Peter's room. "Rosa's is the one at the very end of the hall, so you can pick from the other two. Dad told me when my grandpa built this place he wanted to make sure that all the bedrooms faced the water, so they're all on this side of the house."

Opening the first door they came to, Steve's jaw dropped as he stepped inside the vast, open-air room, with ceilings at least twenty feet high and the entire outside wall made of glass, just like Peter's, allowing in the natural light that Steve always loved when he was painting. He could even hear the crash of the waves hitting the rocks below, a sound that Steve had always found quite soothing. The colour scheme was varying shades of blue with soft white accents, complete with a squishy navy blue comforter on the huge bed against the wall and a bookshelf covered in hardcover books set next to a very comfy-looking chair. A tall reading lamp stood behind the chair, and a massive television screen was mounted on the opposite wall.

"I'm gonna guess that you like this one?" Peter asked with a grin.

"Yeah," Steve said softly as he set down his shield against the wall by the bed. "It's ah… bigger than the apartment where I grew up, but… yeah, I like it."

"Great!" exclaimed Peter. "I was hoping you'd choose this one, blue is one of my favorite colours. I come in here sometimes to read the books, there's some good ones in there."

"Blue is one of my favorite colours too," murmured Steve.

"JARVIS can order anything else that you want for it," Peter added. "More books, art supplies, whatever you need. And you probably need some more clothes, don't you? Pepper said your stuff from the cabin would be here tomorrow, but you'll probably want some pyjamas at least for tonight, right?"

Steve looked down at his jeans and t-shirt, just now realising that they were all the clothes that he had besides his uniform. He'd been wearing the base fatigues the entire time that Peter was in the hospital, and hadn't bothered to pack any of his sparse wardrobe from the cabin, thinking he wouldn't need it out in the Afghanistan desert. "Um… yeah. I guess I do need a few things. But shouldn't we check with your father first?"

"Nah," answered Peter. "JARVIS doesn't let me shop for anything that he thinks is unnecessary, but I don't think this counts as unnecessary. Right, JARVIS?"
"Right you are, Master Peter," answered JARVIS. "Captain Rogers, if you would be so kind as to give me your sizes and fabric choices, I would be happy to order some proper clothing for you, as well as anything else you may require to feel at home."

Blinking, Steve looked up at the ceiling, feeling foolish. "Does JARVIS overhear everything that's said in this house?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't intervene unless he's addressed by name," Peter said. "It's part of Dad's security measures, gets rid of the whole 'he said, she said' thing, ya know?"

"Sure," Steve said slowly. *But how in the world can anyone feel comfortable with someone eavesdropping on them all the time?*

"I can assure you, Captain," JARVIS said. "Anything you say in this house will be kept under the strictest of confidences."

"He's right, Steve," Peter added. "JARVIS is just here to help protect us, that's all. I promise!"

"All right," Steve said after a short pause. "Um… I'm not really sure what size I am, though. I haven't worn too many clothes that weren't Army-issued." *Not since the serum, at least.*

"Oh, that's okay," said Peter. "JARVIS can just scan you and get your sizes that way."

"Uhh, okay," Steve stammered. "How does he do that?"

Not three seconds later a beam of red light shot out from one of the ceiling vents and swept down the length of Steve's body.

"Um, just like that," Peter said. "Painless, right?"

"Yeah," whispered Steve. *I guess they don't need tailors anymore either.*

"Your clothing will arrive in approximately three hours' time, Captain," JARVIS stated. "Would you like me to order anything else?"

Steve hesitated. While he would really appreciate some art supplies, he knew how expensive they usually were, especially canvases, and the last thing he wanted was to make himself look greedy.

"It's okay, Steve," Peter said, as if he'd read Steve's mind. "You'd want some paints, right? And an easel? What else?"

"Do you prefer oil-based paints or watercolours, Captain?" asked JARVIS. "Or I can simply order both, if you like?"

"Order both please, JARVIS," stated Peter. "And rags, and canvases, and plenty of brushes in different sizes." He looked up at Steve, his big brown eyes nearly sparkling with excitement behind his glasses. "Dad has a pretty big modern art collection that he just keeps stored in a room. He only buys them because he thinks he's supposed to, so I'd love to have some of your paintings to put up around the house. Make it feel a bit more… homey, if you know what I mean. This house is way too museum-like for my taste most of the time."

Smiling, Steve nodded. As much as he hated to admit it, he was very much looking forward to getting his hands on some good quality art supplies, things he never thought he'd be able to afford.

"I'd be honoured, Peter."
"Awesome!" Peter said happily. "Would you wanna go and watch a movie now? We can get some snacks too, if you're hungry. Dad's gonna be down in the workshop for awhile still, so we have time."

Steve's stomach growled then, causing both he and Peter to laugh. He was used to eating every couple of hours or so, and it'd been at least that long since their quick lunch before the press conference.

"A snack sounds great," Steve said. "Is the kitchen back downstairs?"

"Yep," Peter answered, grabbing Steve's hand and leading him from the bedroom towards the staircase. Steve had already noticed that Peter seemed to crave nearly constant physical contact, he'd noticed it with both Peter and Tony, now that he thought about it. There were very few moments back in the hospital where Tony wasn't holding Peter's hand or resting his palm on the boy's shoulder or arm, and Steve's heart gave a flip as he realised that Peter was obviously already comfortable enough with him to seek out that sort of fatherly comfort from him as well.

*This might be the closest I ever get to having my own child,* Steve thought. And if that was indeed the case, then he couldn't think of a sweeter, more kind child to have than Peter Stark.

If Steve had thought his new bedroom was extravagant, he was completely unprepared for the size and scale of the kitchen. All of the silver-coloured appliances and dark grey countertops that glinted in the sunlight streaming through the windows, Steve's mouth started waterling almost at the sight of it. He'd always enjoyed cooking—when he was well enough to do so—and even after he joined the Army he was always looking for excuses to help out in the barracks' kitchen. He could only imagine what he'd be able to create in a kitchen like this.

"I take it you like it?" Peter asked, giving his hand a light tug. "Do you like to cook, 'cause that'd be pretty awesome if you do."

"I do like to cook," breathed Steve, still looking around in awe. *If only ma could've seen this!* "Who does it normally around here?"

"No one, really," Peter said with a shrug. "I mean, I know how to make a few basic things, like toast and sandwiches, stuff like that. And sometimes Rosa would make me something, but she wasn't really very good at it. And Dad, well, most of the time he's home he either forgets to eat or just uses his blender down in the workshop, so——"

"So then what do you usually eat?" asked Steve. "Surely you can't forget to eat, you're a growing boy." Steve may have been small when he was Peter's age, but he still remembered being almost constantly hungry. Which wasn't too far off how things were now, as a matter of fact.

"We order in most of the time," answered Peter. "JARVIS has all the menus from our favourite places stored, so we just tell him what we want and he orders it." He paused, looking up at Steve though the mass of curls covering his forehead. "Um… I wouldn't mind at all if you wanted to start cooking though. It'll do Dad some good to have regular meals too, but don't tell him I said so. He won't like it."

Steve's eyebrows knitted together. "Why not?"

"'Cause he doesn't like it when I try and take care of him," Peter said sadly. "He thinks since he's the dad that he's only supposed to take care of me, not the other way around. But he doesn't really have anyone else, so…"
"Your dad is lucky to have you," Steve interrupted, gently squeezing Peter's shoulder. "And you're very lucky to have him as well. It's pretty obvious how much he loves you."

Peter sniffed, pushing up his glasses as he nodded. "I know I'm lucky, and I know he loves me. He tells me it all the time, but he shows it too. He always says that he never got anything from his own dad except a cold shoulder and the occasional drunken backhand, so he tries really hard to not be like that. And he's told me all about how he was before I was born, how he used to drink too much and sleep around and stuff. And he still drinks wine and stuff sometimes, but I've never, ever seen him drunk, not even once. And I know he still brings people home sometimes, that's what that extra bedroom is for, actually. He only does it when he's really lonely, and they're always gone early the next morning before I wake up." Peter paused, swallowing hard. "He doesn't know that I know about that stuff, so—"

"Don't worry, Peter," Steve said softly, his heart aching as his eyes filled with tears. Apparently Rhodes had been right; Howard had raised his hand to Tony from time to time. "I promise I won't say anything."

"Uh huh," whispered Peter as he swiped at his nose. "Um.. so, you still wanna watch a movie? We could make popcorn, do you like popcorn?"

"I do like popcorn," answered Steve, forcing a smile. "That sounds great."

Three minutes later, after sticking a folded, flattened bag into some sort of magical box hung over the fanciest stove Steve had ever seen, Peter pulled out the perfectly popped popcorn, pouring it onto a large red bowl.

"What do you like to drink?" he asked as he rummaged through the icebox. "We got orange juice, that's one of my favorites, water, some Coke, um… something that looks like one of my dad's leftover smoothies that's probably gone bad, I'll just toss that out, and—"

"Coke?" Steve asked. "Is that like Coca-cola?"

"That's exactly what it is," Peter answered. "Happy likes it, so we always have some here. It's good, but I like Dr Pepper better."

"I'd like that, please," Steve said eagerly. The last time he'd had a Coca-cola had been on a trip to Coney Island with Bucky for Bucky's eighteenth birthday. And then he'd proceeded to throw it all back up after Bucky dared him to ride the Cyclone again.

They carried their popcorn and drinks back up to Peter's room, where Peter pulled two things out of his closet that he called beanbag chairs and set them up on the floor in front of his television screen. Peter scooted right next to Steve as soon as he'd plopped down onto his chair, leaning his head against Steve's arm as the two robotic vacuum cleaners took positions at their feet.

"So what do you wanna watch?" Peter asked, indicating the large television screen. "Wall-E? Star Wars? Or something that you like? JARVIS has all kinds of movies in his database, I'm sure he's got something in there that you've seen before."

"I really don't mind, Peter," answered Steve as he took a large sip of his Coca-cola, his eyes briefly fluttering closed. It tasted just as delicious as it had back on Bucky's birthday, over seventy years ago.

"Okay, so Star Wars then," Peter said. "My room is Star Wars, so you'll get to see where some of my stuff came from. My room at the tower is mostly Star Wars too, but there's some Star Trek stuff
mixed in there with it."

"The tower?" Steve asked, tossing some popcorn into his mouth. How long had it been since he'd had popcorn?

"That's where we live in New York," Peter replied. "Stark Tower. It's one of the tallest buildings in Midtown, and our apartment is at the very top. We live there during the school year."

"But isn't it still the school year?" asked Steve. According to the calendar he'd seen back at the base, it was still only the first part of May.

"Yeah, but my dad said I didn't have to go back for the last couple weeks," Peter said, his voice wavering slightly. "You know… because…"

"Of course, Peter," Steve whispered, mentally kicking himself for being so insensitive. "I'm so sorry, that was very insensitive of me."

"Nah, it's okay," Peter said as he shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth. "But I don't really don't want to talk more about it right now. I'd rather just watch the movie, is that okay?"

"Absolutely," Steve said, ruffling his hair.

"Which Star Wars movie would you like, Master Peter?" asked JARVIS.

"Episode four please, JARVIS," Peter said. He leaned in conspiratorially. "Episodes one through three aren't as good, so I don't usually watch those."

For all of his lack of knowledge of modern technology and entertainment, Steve had always been a huge fan of movies, and he soon found himself engrossed in the story of the young, ambitious protagonist who wanted nothing more than to join in the fight against the evil empire.

It was definitely something that Steve could identify with.

He became so engrossed in the story, in fact, that he didn't even realise that Peter had fallen asleep against his arm until he moved to put down the popcorn bowl, accidentally causing Peter's head to loll backwards. He woke with a start, crying out in fear as his eyes flicked frantically around the room, very much like they had when Steve had witnessed his brief nightmare back at the hospital.

"Shh, Peter," Steve murmured as he wrapped his arm around Peter's shoulders. Peter coughed, burying his face into Steve's chest. "It's okay, little guy. You're safe now."

"Uh huh," Peter mumbled, his skinny chest heaving. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep. That was rude of me."

"It's all right," Steve assured him. "You hardly slept on the plane, you have to be tired."

"It is now time for Master Peter's breathing treatment," announced JARVIS.

Peter's narrow shoulders sagged, and he let out a raspy sigh. "Yeah, okay. Thanks JARVIS."

"Would you like me to go and get you another snack?" Steve asked as Peter assembled the machine for his treatment, pouring in the liquid medicine. "I remember you saying that these treatments make you nauseous."

"Really?" Peter said. "Yeah, that'd be great. Dad usually gets me something, but I don't wanna disturb him since he's rebuilding his chest piece. That's more important right now."
Steve was fairly certain that Tony would beg to differ on that statement, but he nodded anyway. "It's no problem, Peter. What would you like?"

"Some gummy worms, please. JARVIS can tell you where they are."

"Sure," Steve said, grunting as he hoisted himself out of the beanbag chair. They were not all that easy to escape from, apparently.

Arriving back in the kitchen, Steve started searching the cupboards, finding some basic dishes and pots and a few boxes of cereal, but nothing that appeared to be a gummy worm. Do I even want to know what gummy worms are?

"Can I be of any assistance, Captain Rogers?" JARVIS suddenly asked. "It appears you are searching for something."

"Um…" Steve stammered. It was still hard for him to get over the fact that he felt like he was addressing a talking ceiling. "Peter would like some gummy worms, I'm just trying to—"

"The gummy worms are located in the third drawer under the center island," said JARVIS. "They have been Master Peter's favorite candy since he was five years of age."

Candy. That at least makes more sense, Steve thought as he located the crumpled bag shoved haphazardly into the drawer. "Great, thank you, JARVIS."

"It is my pleasure, Captain."

Peter was just finishing up with his treatment when Steve got back to the room, his eyes lighting up as he eagerly took the bag with a shaky hand. "Thanks, Steve," he said, shoving two of the long, stringy candies into his mouth. "It's been far too long since I've had any of these."

"You're welcome," Steve said with a chuckle. "But wouldn't you like something a bit more substantial too?"

"We can order some pizza," suggested Peter around another mouthful of candy. "Even Dad usually stops what he's doing for pizza, even if he says the pizza out here can't compare to New York's."

New York is known for its pizza? thought Steve. As far as he knew pizza was still considered an Italian dish. Or at least that was the only place where he'd seen it before.


"Awesome! JARVIS?"

"I have already placed the order, Master Peter," JARVIS said. "With an extra large pizza for Captain Rogers. Your wait time is approximately forty-five minutes."

"Cool. That gives us just enough time to finish the movie," Peter said, falling back onto his beanbag chair. "C'mon, Steve! The end battle is the best part!"

But before Peter could resume the movie, Tony's profile suddenly appeared on the screen, his brow furrowed in what looked like frustration as his eyes flicked back and forth between Steve and Peter. "Hey bud, I could use your help down here with something."

"Okay!" Peter exclaimed as he bolted up from the beanbag chair as if he'd been shot from a gun, tugging on Steve's hand. "We'll be right down!"
Steve had felt certain that he'd seen all there was to see inside the Stark's massive home, with the robotic vacuums and talking ceilings and magic kitchen boxes and automatic home movie theatres. But none of that could compare to the eye-opening, jaw-dropping experience of arriving at Tony's workshop. Peter grinned as he pulled Steve over to the thick glass door and tapped a code into the control panel. The door hissed as it unlocked, with Peter having to practically pull Steve into the room as he gaped around in awe. He remembered visiting Howard's makeshift lab a couple of times during the war and being thoroughly impressed, but this was on a completely different level.

The room—it was a garage, really, given the fact that there were no less than seven cars and three absolutely gorgeous motorcycles parked over on the far left side—was huge, encompassing the entire width of the house. Television screens lined one entire section, with additional smaller screens mounted along a long countertop that was covered in various tools, some familiar to Steve and some not. A second countertop, running parallel to the first, was covered in one of the most elaborate chemistry setups that Steve had ever seen, complete with a fume hood and a large sink at the very end.

Near the center of the room was Tony, bare-chested and holding a device in his hand that was glowing blue, just like the one mounted—no, not mounted, it was actually **embedded!**—in the center of his chest. He was sitting on what looked like a dentist's chair while some sort of robotic appendage hovered over him, beeping and squeaking not too unlike Peter's pet vacuum cleaners. Steve's breath caught in his throat at the sight of him. He looked so intensely vulnerable, sitting there alone in the middle of this huge room surrounded by machines, most likely that he'd built himself, struggling to keep the mask in place to shield his feelings.

In fact, if Steve had to guess, this entire workshop seemed to be a pretty accurate real-world representation of what went on inside Tony's head. It was chaotic, but in a sort of beautiful way that wouldn't immediately cause one to think of it as chaos. It reminded him in a way of the old impressionist painters he'd studied in school before the war.

"You're done already, Dad?" Peter asked. "Can I see it?"

"Sure thing, bud," Tony answered as he held up the device. Peter took it carefully, turning it over in his hands as he studied the design.

"Wow," Peter murmured. "It looks awesome!"

"Definitely a bit more sophisticated than the original, don't you think, Pete?" asked Tony.

"I still say it is far more powerful than is necessary for its main purpose, sir," JARVIS cut in. "In fact, the original device still had plenty of power remaining if in fact its only use was to keep the shrapnel from entering your heart."

"Shrapnel?" Steve exclaimed, his belly swooping in fear and shock. He hadn't wanted to ask Tony the true purpose of the glowing blue circle, not wanting to pry in case it had been put there as some sort of torture apparatus or something, but it had never occurred to him that Tony was now constantly on the verge of being killed.

"Tony, what's he talking about? What shrapnel?"

"From the bombs," Peter said softly. Handing the device back to Tony, Peter looked up at Steve, gulping as Tony's arm wrapped around his waist, the guilt in his eyes back in full force. Tony had obviously been trying to hide from Peter just how badly he was injured, but apparently Peter already knew anyway. "The bad guys, they hit us with our own bombs, and Dad—, he tried to shield me, so… he got the worst of the blast. Yinsen said he almost died three times during his surgery."
"Surgery?" gasped Steve. *Tony went through heart surgery in one of those mountain caves?* "Oh my God! Tony, why didn't you say anything?"

"What's there to say, Rogers?" Tony snapped. "Yinsen did the best that he could, but there's still about eight or so pieces of shrapnel stuck in my chest, with one particularly pissed off piece constantly trying to crawl its way into my heart. This keeps it out."

"But—, but—," Steve sputtered. *How in the world could they both be so calm about this?* "We need to get you to a hospital! There has to be something they can do, isn't there?"

"JARVIS has already scanned me," Tony shot back. "And there's no way to get at the piece without killing me in the process, at least not with the currently available surgical tools." He tapped the circle in his chest hard enough for Steve to wince. "This is the only option."

"But—!"

"That's enough, Rogers! I've already accepted it, and all you're doing by dwelling on it now is scaring the kid!"

Steve took a step back, gulping as he shook his head. "That wasn't my intention, Tony," he said firmly. "I only want to help you both."

"It's okay, Dad," Peter said, shooting Steve an apologetic look. "I'm fine, Steve's not scaring me. We were upstairs watching Star Wars when you called."

"Mmm, something new for a change?" Tony said with a wink, nearly giving Steve whiplash at the abrupt change in his demeanor. "And did you do your treatment?"

"Yes, Dad," Peter answered, rolling his eyes. "What do you need help with?"

"I need you to help me swap this out," said Tony. "There's a copper wire down there that I can't quite reach, and your hands are smaller than mine."

Peter leaned forward to peer inside the metal tunnel into Tony's chest, biting his bottom lip. "You're still using the palladium?"

"Yeah, bud," replied Tony. "I know it's not ideal, but I don't really have any other options right now."

"Not ideal is a pretty big understatement, Dad," Peter said with a frown. "Palladium is toxic. That's definitely not ideal."

*Toxic?* Steve thought. *No, I'd say that's definitely not ideal!*

"And it's something I'm still working on, Pete," Tony said, rather impatiently. "But I can't do that until we get this installed, so let's get to it, shall we?"

"Can I help you come up with something better?" asked Peter. *Please?*

"Absolutely. But like I said, we gotta install this one first, okay?"

"Uh huh."

"Good. Just make sure the wire doesn't come into contact with the socket wall when you pull it out, yeah? I don't feel much like getting shocked today."
"Like the operation game?"

"Yep, just like that."

Despite himself, Steve leaned forward, watching intently and trying not to cringe as Peter slid his small hand down into the hole in Tony's chest, carefully pulling out the wire in question and hooking the new device into its place. As he pushed it in, Steve noticed Tony's eyelids fluttering closed for a brief moment, like he was in pain. Steve was definitely no expert in human anatomy, but he'd at least seen a few pictures of the human skeletal system while he was in school, and there was no way he could imagine that having a metal device imbedded into your sternum could be at all comfortable. It would impact not only his breathing, but every movement of his upper body as well, including his arms and neck. Could he even lie down properly? Maybe that was one of the reasons why he never wanted to sleep back in Afghanistan.

Tony had to be in nearly unimaginable pain. It was a miracle that he was even functioning, much less of enough sound mind to build a second device. Rhodes had bragged about Tony's intelligence to Steve on numerous occasions while they were searching for Peter and Tony, but this seemed like something even above and beyond Rhodes' accolades.

"There," Tony said once Peter was finished, huffing out a sharp breath. "Good job, bud."

Peter smiled widely, wiping his hands on a rag as Tony sat back up, pulling on a thin t-shirt just as JARVIS announced that their pizza had arrived.

"Go on and wash up, bud," Tony said as he got to his feet, with Steve fighting against the urge to help him. "I'll be up in a couple minutes."

"Uh huh."

As soon as the glass door slid closed behind him, Steve turned to Tony. "Tony, I am so sorry. I never meant to—"

"Look, Rogers," Tony interrupted. "I know you're only here because Fury thinks Pete and I need a bodyguard for some reason, and while I still think that's a bit of an overkill, I know it's doing Pete some good to have someone else in the house, especially since Rosa seems to have fallen off the face of the earth. But I absolutely will not allow you to bring up anything about what happened in Afghanistan around him. It's hard enough on Pete already without constantly having to be reminded of what he went through over there. Is that understood?"

Steve frowned, pursing his lips. It had been his experience that talking through traumatic events actually helped a person heal, not the other way around. He couldn't imagine how hard it would've been trying to keep his grief over Bucky locked inside him forever. As painful as it had been at the time, talking it through helped him to begin the healing process. What Tony was saying went against every single thing Steve had always believed.

That being said, he was not about to contradict Tony about it, as difficult as it might be. Tony was Peter's father, and therefore his opinion overruled Steve's just on that basis alone. Even if he suspected that it was Tony's guilt doing most of the talking.

"Do you understand?" Tony asked again, his brown eyes filled with such an intense fear that Steve had to blink and look away. It was almost as though that not even Tony believed what he was saying, he just didn't know any other way to deal with it.

"Okay, Tony," Steve said softly. "I understand."
"Good," Tony said. "Glad we got that established." He jerked his head towards the door. "Did I hear JARVIS say something about pizza?"

"Ah, yeah," Steve said with a nod. "Peter thought it sounded good for dinner."

"Well, Pete's usually right about that kind of thing."

They headed up the stairs to find Peter sitting in the kitchen in front of a large open box, already working on his second slice. He smiled at the sight of them, and Steve's heart gave such a strong lurch that he almost gasped, managing to cover his mouth just in time. There was so much pain and fear rooted into the very air and walls of this house that it was almost palpable, and yet both Peter and Tony just seemed to accept it like it was something completely normal.

"Are you okay, Steve?" Peter asked, holding a plate of pizza towards him. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Definitely," Steve answered as he sat down. He smiled at Peter, earning a wide smile in return as Tony took the seat opposite Steve, muttering something about how he couldn't remember the last time he'd actually eaten in the kitchen.

Tony and Peter were both afraid to talk about their problems because they didn't want to burden the other. Tony wanted to protect Peter because he was an innocent child who deserved to be sheltered from the harshness of the world, but Peter also wanted to protect Tony. He wanted to minimise his own struggles so as to not add to the burden of pain that Tony already carried.

And while it was indeed noble on both their parts, Steve knew that it was also very unhealthy. The two of them had just gone through an ordeal that could very well have broken them both, and it didn't take a genius to see that they were both now suffering from a form of post-combat stress. Steve had seen the effects of this several times during the war, so he knew from experience that it wasn't something you just got over. They both would need help, especially Peter, and for Tony to think otherwise was not only arrogant, but potentially dangerous as well.

Tony sat on one side of Peter's bed, watching fondly as he brushed his teeth and said goodnight to his robots, just like he always did before he went to sleep at night. It had been their normal routine ever since Peter was a baby; every night that Tony wasn't out of town or at some function or another, he always tucked Peter into bed, brushed the hair out of his eyes, and told him he loved him.

Every single night.

"Tired, buddy?" Tony said as Peter crawled underneath his fluffy comforter, embossed with his favorite Star Wars droid.

"Uh huh. It was a pretty long day today," Peter murmured. He wrapped his arms around his favorite stuffed animal, an old, misshapen polar bear that had definitely seen better days. Peter had been fascinated with polar bears ever since Tony had taken him to the San Diego Zoo when he was three, and he was fairly certain the stuffed animal was at least that old.

"Too long," Tony agreed as he brushed the hair from Peter's forehead and leaned down to kiss him, breathing in the green apple scent of his shampoo that he'd always loved. He would have to ask Pepper if she could bring Peter for a haircut soon, maybe in the morning so he could be out of the house during Fury's interrogation. Tony would just as soon not have to expose Peter to any part of that nonsense if he could help it.

He had also called Peter's school principal on the flight home, explaining that Peter would not be returning to school until the start of his seventh grade year. There were only a couple of weeks left in
the school year anyway, and after already missing over two months there was no point that Tony saw to try to push Peter back into school so soon after they got home. Better to let him have the summer break to rest and recharge before facing what Tony imagined to be a barrage of unwelcome questions from his classmates.

"I love you, buddy," Tony whispered. "Sleep well. I'll be down in the workshop if you need me."

"Dad?" Peter asked, stifling a cough as he grabbed onto Tony's hand. "Can you—, would you mind sitting with me a bit longer tonight? Just until I fall asleep? Please?"

Tony's throat tightened, and he shook his head at his own insensitivity as he wrapped his arm around Peter's shoulders, pulling him flush against his side. "Of course, buddy. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."

Or thinking too much, actually. Tony had been preoccupied with what he was planning to do ever since they'd landed in California, and he was chomping at the bit to get started.

"It's okay," murmured Peter. He burrowed his nose further into Tony's side and draped an arm across his chest, careful to avoid touching the arc reactor. Tears sprung to Tony's eyes at his son's ever-present thoughtfulness. He hadn't been lying when he'd told Peter that it didn't really hurt, but the skin around the reactor was a bit sensitive since it was still healing, and it never failed to amaze Tony just how perceptive Peter could be.

As Peter's eyes fluttered closed and his breathing became more even, Tony tipped his head back, replaying Yinsen's final words over and over in his mind.

"Your son deserves better than to grow up with an iron monger for a father. Use your potential, Stark!"

"Use your potential."

Tony had heard those words before. His mother, his professors at MIT, even Rhodey and Aunt Peggy had said them more than a few times after his parents were killed, and Tony had always simply brushed them off. He knew what was expected of him; it had been his legacy ever since he was born, but he'd be damned if he was ever going admit it out loud.

He was expected to follow in Howard Stark's footsteps.

And it wasn't as though building weapons was the only purpose of Stark Industries, Howard had at least made sure the company was more diversified than that in case they ever lost their military contracts. In addition to their weapons factories, they also had a pharmaceutical division that conducted research into genetically-enhanced wheat, rice, and other grains in order to help decrease crop losses due to blight and other diseases in poorer countries, as well as produced several protein-based medications.

Aside from that, the tech division was Tony's pride and joy, pioneering advancements in everything from smart appliances to vehicles to phones and tablets. There was nothing that he enjoyed more at work than designing the latest interface for the newest StarkPhone, or programming the latest operating system for his favourite cars, something he was trying to master before Peter got old enough to start driving.

Unfortunately, while the pharmaceutical and tech divisions still pulled in their fair share of profits, weapons really were the company's bread and butter, as Obie liked to point out every time he thought that Tony's focus was slipping. Obie wasn't a designer, or even all that tech-savvy. His focus was always on the financials of the company, and if the financials were not where he thought they
should be, then he tended to get cranky.

Obie had attempted to call Tony a few times earlier in the day, probably to try and talk to him about his announcement at the press conference, but Tony had been in absolutely no mood to listen to one of his lectures and had told JARVIS to relay that they would speak soon, once Tony was able to get Peter better settled in. Tony knew that would only make his CFO even more pissed off, and that a pissed off Obie usually went out of his way to make Tony’s life miserable, but this time he really didn't care. He had a promise to keep, and to hell with the falling stock prices or loss of the massive profit margins Obie had grown accustomed to.

Because Yinsen had been right; Peter deserved better.

And Tony could be better. He could build more things that would help people instead of killing them. He could show the world—he could show his son—that Tony Stark could be more than just another war profiteer, just another iron monger. More than the Merchant of Death the editorials in the newspapers liked to call him.

Instead, he could be a hero. At least for the time he had left.

With a final light kiss to Peter's forehead, Tony slid carefully off the bed, adjusting the comforter over Peter's shoulders. Eva—or was it Wall-E, Tony could never keep their names straight—beeped softly as Tony padded towards the door.

"Keep a close eye on him for me, will ya?" Tony whispered, letting out a soft chuckle as the tiny robot squeaked in agreement.

Lights were still on down in the living room when Tony entered the hallway, and he descended the staircase to find Steve Rogers sitting on the couch, pouring over what looked like a massive box of clothing that sat next to an even larger box of art supplies. Artist, huh? he thought, impressed despite himself. Who would've thought?

Tony watched as Rogers pulled out a t-shirt in a particularly nice shade of blue—Tony had always been fond of the colour blue, not that he would ever admit it—nodded appreciatively, and proceeded to fold it with a mastery that would've made Edwin Jarvis proud, rest his soul.

Rogers looked up as soon as Tony entered the room, his jaw twitching as he set down his newly folded shirt on top of a clothing stack at least five inches high. Tony had already noticed that he tended to do that thing with his jaw a lot, as well as the little crinkle that formed between his blond eyebrows whenever he was confused or upset.

"Got a couple packages there, I see?" Tony asked, trying to keep his voice casual and failing miserably.

"Um… yeah," Rogers answered, throwing up his hands as he glanced around at the piles and piles of clothing, complete with a very nice-looking navy blue pinstriped suit from Tony's favourite designer and three pairs of running shoes. "When Peter offered to order me some clothes I didn't think that he meant enough clothing for three people. I'm pretty sure I don't need all this stuff."

"Nah," Tony said. "We only send our laundry out about once a week, so better to have enough than not, ya know?"

"Oh," answered Rogers, shaking out another blue t-shirt, this one a bit brighter in color, and laying it across his lap. "Well, okay then."

Tony frowned, crossing his arms in front of his chest as he leaned against the archway. It was still
difficult for him to wrap his brain around the fact that the man he'd grown up hating for stealing away his own father's love had shown up in the middle-of-nowhere Afghanistan desert to save him and Peter's lives, and was now sitting in his home, right in front of him. There were so many jumbled thoughts echoing around in his head that he felt woozy, and the worst part of it was that the only person he felt he could possibly confide in about it was Peter, and there was absolutely no way in hell Tony was going to do that. Peter had enough to worry about without the added burden of Tony's petty daddy issues.

Besides, he was the dad, dammit. He was supposed to have all the answers, or at least be able to fake it often enough so that Peter wouldn't notice when he didn't.

Howard Stark's obsession with all things Steve Rogers had driven him to near-madness, permeating throughout everything he did for as long as Tony could remember, and nothing Tony ever accomplished on his own, not the fact that he started college at fifteen, not the prestigious awards for his groundbreaking robots, not the fact that his weapons designs were lauded as the best the military had ever seen could ever compete with the memory of someone who had been dead for decades. Howard had always said that Steve Rogers was the best thing he'd ever accomplished, and Stark men being made of iron or not, those words had hurt Tony. More than he'd ever cared to admit.

But now the subject of Tony's intense hatred was sitting in his living room after having spent most of the day entertaining Peter. Tony could tell that Peter already adored Rogers, and that Rogers was just as equally smitten with Peter as well. Peter was always polite, almost to a fault, but Tony could tell the difference between him just being his usual polite self and really bonding with someone, and that alone was enough for Tony to be willing to give the man a chance. Deep down, Tony did realise that it wasn't Rogers' fault that Howard had been an asshole of a father. It was always just easier to blame Rogers for it because he was never around to argue.

Tony cleared his throat, jerking his head towards the second floor. "Did Pete show you your room?"

"Yeah," answered Rogers with a nod. "It's really nice, Tony, thank you. This entire house… it's pretty overwhelming."

"Yeah, it is a bit grandiose, I'll give you that," Tony said. "But you'll get used to it. I'm sure Pete will help too, he loves that kind of thing." And he's a helluva lot more patient than I am.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Rogers said, smiling. "He's a pretty great kid."

"Yeah, he's the best," Tony said proudly. "I'm still not sure who the hell thought I deserved someone like him, but I'm glad they did."

Rogers' jaw twitched again. "I… um… I was wondering if it would be okay for me to go to a food market sometime tomorrow? I'd like to pick up some groceries. Peter said it was okay, but I thought I'd double check with you first."

"Food market? Sure, I don't see why not," answered Tony. "I can have Happy drive you out there once Fury's done with you tomorrow. Pete'll probably wanna go with you too. In fact, it'd probably be best if he did. I would highly suspect that the modern grocery store is quite a bit different from the food markets you're remembering."

"I can only imagine," Rogers said, not without a touch of melancholy. "And I'd love for Peter to come with me, thank you."

"No problem," Tony said as he huffed out a sharp breath. He was eager to get back downstairs and start inputting the new design specs he'd been tinkering with on the flight home. He could still feel
the heat from his new reactor coursing through him, renewing his determination to both make those Ten Rings assholes pay, and destroy any remaining weapons caches that were floating around out there in the desert. Yinsen had told Tony that his village had been destroyed by Stark Industries bombs, and that was something that Tony could not allow to happen again. Not ever.

"You need any help with all that stuff?" he asked.

"Nah, I can get it," Rogers replied, folding yet another t-shirt, this one a bluish-grey colour. "Thank you, though."

"All right, then I'm gonna head back downstairs," Tony said. "Get some more work done while I can. I guess I'll see ya tomorrow."

Rogers smiled again, and Tony felt his heart stutter ever so slightly. The man definitely had a nice smile. Nice broad set of shoulders too, now that he thought about it, and a pair of eyes that almost exactly matched that blue t-shirt sitting on the top of the pile, and—

"Goodnight, Tony," Rogers said, breaking Tony from his stream-of-consciousness. Tony gulped, his face flushing hot as he realised he had actually been ogling Captain America.

*How goddamn embarrassing.*

"Night," he grunted, turning before Rogers could notice that he was blushing like a goddamn teenager and practically sprinting downstairs to his workshop.

"Are you all right, sir?" JARVIS asked as Tony took his place in front of his monitors, still panting like he'd run a marathon.

"Yeah, J, I'm fine," barked Tony. He tapped his monitors to life, ignoring the numerous flashing messages from Obadiah. He'd sic Pepper on him tomorrow, that would give Tony at least another couple of days of relative peace. "C'mon, we got work to do."

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Come find me on tumblr, I'm [geekymoviemom](http://geekymoviemom.tumblr.com) and [geeky-writes](http://geeky-writes.tumblr.com) there! :)

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

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Chapter End Notes
"Shh, buddy," Tony whispered as he combed his fingers through Peter's messy hair. "It's okay. I'm here, you're safe now."

"I don't wanna be alone, Daddy," Peter whimpered, rubbing his nose on Tony's shoulder that was already damp with fallen tears. "Please don't leave me alone."

"I'm not gonna leave you alone again, Pete," murmured Tony, blinking back his own tears. What in the hell had possessed him to think that Peter might actually sleep through the night on their first night back? "Try and get some more sleep now, bud. I'm gonna stay right here."

"Uh huh," Peter said with a loud sniff. He tucked his head down under Tony's chin and grabbed a
fistful of Tony's shirt, careful to keep pressure off the arc reactor. Even right after a terrifying
nightmare, he was still always thinking of others first.

*I don't deserve this kid. I have never deserved this kid.*

Tipping his head back, Tony gently dug the pads of his fingers into Peter's scalp and was rewarded
with a contented sigh. Peter had loved getting his head rubbed ever since he was a baby, and nothing
ever helped calm him more when he was hurt or sick than Tony massaging his scalp.

Tony had only been down in the workshop for an hour or so when JARVIS informed him that Peter
was having a nightmare. Rogers, who had apparently been setting up his new art supplies in his
room, had come running down the stairs about three seconds later, nearly crashing headlong into
Tony as he made his way up. After tasking Rogers with fetching a glass of water, Tony had raced
into Peter's room to find him screaming and writhing on his bed, his legs tangled up in his sheets and
his two tiny robots beeping worriedly as they repeatedly bumped into the legs of the bed.

The whole scene might've been kind of funny if it hadn't been so absolutely horrible.

It had taken the two of them nearly twenty minutes to get Peter calmed down, and another twenty or
so minutes to get his bed cleaned up enough to attempt to sleep on again. Peter had then latched onto
Tony like a baby koala as soon as Tony sat down onto the freshly made bed and hadn't really let go
of him since, falling into the occasional light sleep only to be woken by yet another nightmare.

"I can't hear your heartbeat anymore, Daddy," Peter had whimpered after being jolted awake yet
again, nearly cracking Tony's heart in two. "It's all covered up now, I can't hear it anymore!" Peter
had always loved resting his head on Tony's chest and listening to his heartbeat. It was how Tony
always used to get him to sleep back when he was a tiny, colicky baby, and as a small child—and
even not-so-small—it was often the only way Tony could get him to sleep during his numerous
hospital stays. Peter had always loved the sound of Tony's heartbeat, and no matter where they were,
at home or the hospital or on a trip somewhere, Tony's heartbeat still sounded the same. It was Peter's
anchor.

But now it was gone, replaced by the low-pitched electronic hum of his arc reactor. So now not only
had Tony been the cause of Peter's terrible nightmares in the first place, he could no longer even
provide the comfort from them that Peter was used to.

He had never felt so useless.

Closing his eyes, Tony shifted slightly, trying to get comfortable enough to maybe catch a few winks
himself before Fury and Agent Coulson showed up at the house. He usually wouldn't care all that
much about looking presentable for Nick Fury, but he was afraid if he didn't that Fury would try to
insist on questioning Peter as well, and that was something that Tony was absolutely not going to
allow.

"Peter!" he screamed as he came to, hearing nothing except the sound of blood rushing past his
ears. Not even a second later the pain hit him as if a rocket had crashed headlong into his chest,
stealing all the breath from his lungs as he attempted to call Peter's name again.

"Peter?" he croaked, nearly choking on the thin tube that had been shoved down his bone-dry
throat. He attempted to swallow, but his throat was so parched that he couldn't even seem manage
that.

"Peter?" he whispered, so softly he barely heard himself. "Buddy, where are you?"
When no answer came Tony attempted to raise his head, squeezing his eyes closed against the wave of dizziness that threatened to overtake him as the throbbing in his chest increased to a critical level. It took every ounce of strength he had left in him to force open his eyes and examine what they had done to him.

And then, he just as quickly wished that he hadn't.

Bandages covered nearly his entire chest, glued to his skin with sweat and dried blood, and in the center was a device of some kind, round and bumpy and attached to two wires that led somewhere off to the side. Tony immediately gasped, once again nearly choking on the blasted tube threaded down past his throat. Wincing, he raised his right hand, wrapping his fingers around the tube and pulling hard, shuddering and gagging as it snaked its way out of his throat and nose. Peter had had nasal tubes before when he was too sick to eat properly and had always hated them, but Tony had never had to experience one for himself.

And just like he was with most things, Peter had been right. They completely and utterly sucked.

Dropping the disgusting tube onto the floor, Tony turned his head, his eyes landing on the silhouette of a man in the far corner of the cave. He appeared to be shaving, if the light humming noise was any indication. How in the hell could someone be shaving at a time like this?

Tony's tongue poked out to lick his dry lips, grimacing at the disgusting taste. "Where's—, where's my son?" he managed to whisper. "What've you done with my boy?"

The man ignored him, continuing with his shaving as if it was the most normal thing in the world, as if they weren't stuck in a dank, dark cave in the middle of nowhere Afghanistan, being held by who-knows-who for who-knows-what-reason.

"Where is he?" Tony repeated, a little louder this time, raising his head up off the hard metal cot he was lying on. "What have you done with him? Where is my son?" His voice was rising to near-hysterical levels, tearing through his throat that felt like it had been rubbed with the roughest grade of sandpaper. "Where's my son? Tell me!"

"Tony!" a gentle but firm voice said as a large hand carefully shook his shoulder. "Tony, wake up!"

Tony's eyes flew open with a gasp, blinking rapidly as they locked with the concerned blue eyes of Steve Rogers, who was crouched down next to him.

"What the hell?"

"You were calling for Peter in your sleep, Tony," Rogers said softly. "You sounded pretty frantic. He's okay though, he's right there next to you."

"Yeah," Tony rasped as he looked down, huffing out a sharp sigh of relief as he saw Peter lying on the bed next to him with his face burrowed into Tony's side. He must have rolled off of Tony in his sleep at some point, which was probably what triggered his nightmare.

"Yeah," Tony repeated, scrubbing a palm down his face. "I couldn't—, I couldn't find him. And no one would tell me where he was."

Rogers nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry to have to bother you, but Director Fury and Agent Coulson are downstairs. They're ready for your debriefing."

"I thought they weren't coming over until nine!" Tony barked. It couldn't be time for the debriefing already, the windows in Peter's room were still dark. "It can't be—"
"It's after 11:30 already, Tony," Rogers interrupted. "I've already had my debriefing and they're ready for you now. I tried to stall them as much as possible, but Director Fury is insisting. He says he's already spoken to Colonel Rhodes as well, so—"

"JARVIS," Tony muttered. "He must've kept the windows tinted because he knew Peter needed the sleep."

"And you as well," Rogers said gently. "I know you didn't get all that much last night either."

Tony scoffed. "I don't really need it. Besides, I've got a ton of work I need to get going on, so…” his voice trailed off as he glanced back down at Peter, shaking his head. "I don't really want to leave him. He needs to rest or his lungs will just start acting up again, and—"

"I'll stay with him, Tony," Rogers said. "I don't mind at all."

Tears sprang to Tony's tired eyes as his head thudded back against the headboard. He wanted so badly to just keep hating Steve Rogers, like he'd conditioned himself to do ever since he was younger than Peter, but Rogers was just making it so damn hard. There didn't seem to be a single unkind bone in the man's entire body, and the fact that for some reason Tony seemed to implicitly trust him with Peter already just made it all that much more difficult.

Not to mention the fact that he was wearing that brand-new blue t-shirt of his that exactly matched his eyes, and it looked good. Like, damn good.

"All right," Tony said. He placed his hand on Peter's back, keeping it steady as he carefully slid off the bed, his throat tightening even more when Rogers slid into his place just as carefully. Peter sighed in his sleep, throwing a skinny arm across Rogers' chest as he snuggled up closer to him.

"Thanks, Cap," Tony whispered as he prepared to tiptoe out of the room. "I… um… I really appreciate it."

"Steve," Rogers replied with a soft smile. "My name is Steve, and since that's what Peter calls me, maybe you could too?"

A slight smile tugged on Tony's lips, and he nodded. "Yeah, sure, Steve. I can do that."

"Good," Steve replied. "And you're welcome."

"Well, well," Nick Fury said from his spot on the couch as Tony entered the living room. Phil Coulson—wearing his usual smirky smile—was perched on the opposite end, leaving the loveseat for Tony. "Nice of you to finally grace us with your presence."

Tony glared at him as he sat down, leaning back and crossing his legs. At least he'd remembered to change out of his tear-stained t-shirt before he came downstairs.

"Peter had a bad night," he said tersely, kicking himself for not grabbing some coffee before he came in. Conversations with Fury never seemed to go very quickly, and Tony had no way of knowing how long they were going to trap him in here with their endless questions.

To Tony's shock, Fury's expression softened just the tiniest bit. "I'm not surprised, Tony," he said. "And it probably won't be the last, either. Is Captain Rogers with him now?"

"Yeah," answered Tony, narrowing his eyes. "Why?"
"Just wondering," Fury said. "Seems like they're getting along pretty well already."

"Yeah, well, Pete could charm the socks off an alligator, Nick," Tony retorted. "You know that. Now, can we please just get this over with?"

"Oh? What's the big rush?" asked Fury. "Cause I highly doubt that you've bothered to look at the news this morning."

"Didn't really have the time," Tony grumbled. "How bad is it?"

"Well, let's just say that the CNN and CNBC folks are having a field day," piped up Coulson. "They're questioning the continued purpose of a weapons-manufacturing company that no longer produces weapons. Likened Stark Industries to the Hindenburg, I believe one of them said."

"Stark Industries makes a lot more than just weapons," snapped Tony, his hands clenching into fists. "And anyone who's important knows it. It just might take some time for people to be reminded is all."

"And so that's what you're planning to do next, then?" Fury asked. "Remind people?"

Tony pursed his lips. "Maybe. I haven't actually—"

"You haven't actually decided yet?" interrupted Fury. He leaned back, shooting Coulson a knowing look as he draped his arm across the back of the couch. "Pardon me if I don't quite believe you, Tony. You may be what some people consider impulsive, but there's no way you would deliberately sabotage your own kid's inheritance without some sort of backup plan. So… what is it? What's the backup plan? Does it have something to do with that thing in your chest?"

"Why do you suddenly care so much?" Tony blurted out, cupping his hand over the arc reactor like he was afraid Fury was going to try and steal it or something. "You've never cared about how I run my company as long as I always answered all of your little questions, and you've certainly never given a damn about my wellbeing before. What's with all the interest all of a sudden?"

"How did you and Peter escape from the cave, Tony?" Fury asked, completely ignoring Tony's question. "SHIELD has already sent people out there to search where you were being held, and they found the place completely destroyed. Like, completely destroyed, and this wasn't just another minor insurgent camp, Tony. It was a headquarters for the Ten Rings, and the Ten Rings are a pretty major terrorist group. Probably the major terrorist group, with dozens of cells all across Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries." Fury leaned forward, steepling his hands under his chin. "So I'm asking you. What is that thing in your chest, and how did you and Peter manage to escape?"

Tony was quiet for a moment, running the variables in his head on how much trouble he'd likely get into if he told the truth now versus trying to see how long he could keep things a secret. He wasn't ready to share his arc reactor technology with SHIELD—or anyone else, for that matter—just yet. Not until he finished what he had to do first.

But then again, this was Nick Fury, the spy of all spies. He was so deep into things his secrets probably had secrets.

"It's a miniaturised arc reactor," he said softly. "Keeping a piece of shrapnel from entering my heart and killing me."

Phil Coulson's bushy eyebrows immediately shot up. "Shrapnel?"

"Yeah, shrapnel," Tony repeated, rather impatiently. "You know, from the bombs the assholes blew
"up in order to capture us?"

"They were Stark Industries bombs," Fury said. "Correct?"

"Yeah they were, Nick," snapped Tony. "They were my own damn bombs that nearly killed me and my son, are you happy now?"

"Not exactly," Fury snapped back. "'Cause that arc reactor still doesn't explain how in the hell you and Peter managed to both escape and trash the hell out of that camp at the same time!"

"They had an entire shitload of my weapons at that camp, Nick!" shouted Tony. "And I couldn't just leave them there! I had to take 'em out!"

"And so you built another weapon while you were in captivity?" Fury asked. "A weapon to destroy all the other weapons?"

"No," Tony replied. "That's—, that's what they wanted me to do, but that's not what I did."

"Okay… so…" Fury prodded. "What did you build? How did you and Peter escape?"

Tony shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as he fidgeted. He still desperately needed some coffee. "It was a suit," he whispered. "I built a suit."

"A suit?" Fury asked, quirking an eyebrow at Coulson. "What kind of a suit?"

"I used the casings and materials from a bunch of broken-down weapons," Tony answered.

"And… what, you just threw it together and then you and Peter flew the coop?" Fury asked. "That sounds pretty dangerous, Tony."

"Pretty much," said Tony, clenching his fists. He didn't really enjoy having to relive their harrowing escape, or the sacrifice that made it possible. "And yeah, it was dangerous as hell. But a lot less than staying there would've been. Peter was getting worse by the minute; he was dying, Nick. We had to get outta there."

"Mmm. And now Peter's fine again and you're dying," Fury stated. "Isn't that the case?"

"No, not exactly—"

"Yes, exactly," Fury cut in. "You're acting like I've never heard of an arc reactor before, Tony, but I have. It's one of your father's old inventions. Came up with it along with his old Russian partner, Anton Vanko."

Tony's upper lip instinctively curled into a sneer at the mention of his father. "Yeah, so?"

"So, when your dad found out that Vanko intended to try and sell the arc reactor technology, Howard had him arrested and deported. He said it wasn't ready to be sold yet because it was unfinished."

"Yeah, so?"

Fury rolled his eye. "So, unless you've managed to come up with a better design in the meantime, that thing in your chest is eventually gonna kill you, Tony. Howard told me that the element used as the power core was toxic to humans. Works fine as a source of power for a factory, for example, but not so great as a replacement for a damaged body organ."
"Yeah, and I already know all of this," Tony said impatiently. "Which is one of the main reasons why I should be downstairs working right now instead of up here yammering with the two of you. Pete and I need to figure this out."

"Oh? Why Peter?" Fury asked.

"Cause he's already one of the smartest chemists in the world," Tony stated. "If anyone can figure out another element or combination of them to use, it's him."

"Uh huh," Fury said skeptically. "So if I told you that Howard left some materials behind for you to dig through that just might help with that, would you believe me?"

Tony shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

Fury shot him a disgruntled look, then raised his gaze up over Tony's head, nodding towards the stairs where Steve and Peter were coming down, with Steve's large hand resting protectively on Peter's shoulder. Peter was still a bit paler than his usual self, but at least he looked somewhat well-rested after his rough night.

"Good day Director Fury, Agent Coulson," Peter said politely, and a strong flash of pride shot through Tony. Always polite to a fault. He sure didn't get that from Tony.

"Good day, Peter," Fury answered while Coulson simply smirked and nodded.

"What's up, bud?" asked Tony as Peter leaned down for a brief hug.

"Steve and I were wanting to head out to the grocery store," Peter said. "Happy said he'd take us, is that okay?"

"Sure, bud," Tony replied. "Might as well stop for a haircut too, while you're out." He glanced over at Steve, who nodded.

"Yeah, okay," said Peter. "I'm sure Happy won't mind."

"He won't mind as long as you don't make him get one," Tony said with a grin, ruffling Peter's wild curls. "Have fun."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Sure thing," Tony murmured. "Just… stay real close to Cap while you're out, okay?"

"I will."

"And don't let the old man out of your sight either, Pete," Tony called as they started to walk towards the door. "Wouldn't want him to get lost."

Thankfully, Steve caught on to his sarcastic tone after a couple of seconds and smiled, that toothy smile of his that proceeded to send shocks of heat across Tony's chest, almost like the arc reactor was overloading.

Damn that man had a nice smile.

Fury cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse me, Tony, we aren't quite finished here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Tony retorted. "I thought we were."
"Not exactly," replied Fury. "As I was saying, your father had some materials that might shed some light on your problem. I can have them sent here if you're interested."

"Why're you so eager to help me?" Tony asked after a moment's pause. "I've been not much more than a pain in your ass ever since you met me, so why so eager all of a sudden?"

Fury leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his one good eye boring into Tony's skull. "You think that you're the only Stark man to ever love his child, don't you," he said. "Well, I'm telling you that's not the case."

"Bullshit!" Tony spat out, almost without thinking. "Howard never loved me, he never even liked me. I know for a fact that I was nothing more than a pain in his ass, and he spent way too much of his time collecting scientists and technology and chasing a ghost to have any left over for me. His happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school."

"A ghost who turned out to not be," Fury said pointedly. "And who just happened to save your son's life."

Tony gritted his teeth as he clenched his fists. "Yeah, so? What's your point, Nick?"

"My point is, Tony, is that yeah, Howard may have had his faults, which probably included spending way too much of his time searching for someone that he considered a friend. But that doesn't mean he wasn't proud of you. He knew that he didn't have the technology available to him to complete the arc reactor, and it frustrated him to no end. But he also knew that someday that technology would exist, and once it did, that you could uncover it."

"Well," Tony said softly. "Then I guess you knew him better than I did."

"Maybe," said Fury, not in an argumentative way, just stating a fact. "But I'd be willing to bet there's someone else around here who knew him even better than me."

"Steve Rogers," whispered Tony, swallowing hard.

"Uh huh," answered Fury. "And if you're willing to let go of some of your preconceived notions about the man, then maybe you might be able to find some answers for a few of your questions. Do you think you can do that?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Tony simply nodded. *We'll see.*

"Good," Fury said, pushing himself up to his feet. "Then I'll have the materials sent over. And Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"I have a feeling I know what you're planning to do next, and I also know that you don't give a shit what I happen to think about it. So all I'm asking, and I'm asking this as your friend, not as the director of SHIELD, is that you be careful. As much as you might not want to admit it, Peter wouldn't be the only person to mourn you if something bad were to happen."

And with that, Fury jerked his head towards Agent Coulson and headed for the front door. Tony watched them go, his mind swirling with everything that Fury had just told him. Tony had always known that Howard was interested—or rather, obsessed—with the work of other scientists, always trying to collaborate with them so that he remained on the cutting edge of whatever was going on in the world. Tony had even met one of them a couple of times, a guy named Hank Pym, although the last time was so long ago that Tony wasn’t sure if he was even still alive. But this was the first that
he'd heard of an Anton Vanko.

Shaking his head, Tony headed to the kitchen to grab his coffee and then went immediately down to his workshop, with DUM-E beeping a greeting as soon as he opened the door.

"JARVIS," he said as he started searching through one of his cluttered drawers for an extra StarkPhone. "Get a phone number set up for Steve Rogers, will ya? And keep it on our private family circuit only, I don't want his number broadcasted to the rest of Stark Industries."

"With pleasure, sir," answered JARVIS.

"Thanks," Tony answered, tapping his monitors to life. "And open up that new file we started last night while you're at it. It's time to start tinkering."

"Very well, sir. Would you like me to copy it to the Stark Industries servers?"

Tony hesitated. He usually copied everything over because backups were a good thing, and because Obadiah usually enjoyed seeing his progress as he worked on designs. But since this wasn't technically for Stark Industries, then…

"No, let's just keep everything on my private server for now," said Tony, watching as a holographic projection of his bulky iron suit appeared in front of him, the suit he had designated as the Mark I. "I don't want this winding up in the wrong hands. Maybe in mine it can actually do some good."

Tony peered at the design, shaking his head as he spun it around. It had definitely been crude, but it had gotten the job done.

"Let's start by streamlining the design, it's a bit too much of a Michelin Man look for my taste right now," he stated. "Try thirty percent."

"Very good, sir."

Steve had remembered Tony's warning that the modern grocery store would likely be a bit different from the food markets he was used to, but for some reason Steve hadn't thought that it could really be that different. Groceries were still groceries, weren't they?

Well, apparently he'd been wrong.

As he, Peter, and Happy walked through the sliding glass doors of Whole Foods—as opposed to… what, exactly?—Steve's eyes widened at the nearly overwhelmingly bright colours and noisy din that filled the bustling market. Was everything done electronically now? Even shopping for food?

"C'mon, Steve," Peter said as he grabbed onto Steve's hand. He looked even younger now with his brand-new haircut. "I'll show you around. Do you have a list?"

"Um… yeah," Steve answered. He dug into his jeans pocket for the little notebook he'd picked up at the base commissary back in Afghanistan, flipping it open to the list he'd made the previous night. If nothing else, he was looking forward to trying out some of his ma's old recipes in that incredible kitchen back at the Starks' house.

"Eggs, butter, milk, cheese, sugar, flour," Peter recited down the handwritten list. "Those should be pretty easy to find. Are you gonna make cookies for us? It's been so long since I've had a homemade cookie! My friend Ned's mom makes them for us sometimes, but he lives in New York, so…" His voice trailed off as he gulped, biting on his bottom lip. "So…"
"My ma used to make really good chocolate chip cookies," Steve said. *At least when we could afford the ingredients.* "What kind of cookies are your favourite?"

"Oh, I love chocolate chip cookies!" Peter exclaimed. "Especially when they're fresh out of the oven and all gooey and stuff." He tugged harder on Steve's hand, pulling him towards a row of carriages. "Let's get a cart and get started!"

They ended up spending nearly two hours roaming the various aisles of the store, with Happy following a few meters behind the whole time. Steve was relieved to find that at least the flour, milk, and eggs still looked the same, as well as most of the fruits and vegetables. They probably spent at least forty-five minutes in the cereal aisle alone—Steve had never imagined that corn flakes and Cheerios could come in so many different flavours—with Peter patiently answering every single question that he asked. By the time they made it to the checkout lane, where Peter thankfully took over, paying the enormous bill with a small piece of plastic he called a credit card, Steve's stomach was growling so loudly he was surprised the entire store couldn't hear it.

"Can I help you make the cookies?" Peter asked once they were on their way home.

"Sure," Steve said, smiling. "But we should probably eat lunch first, don't you think?" At Peter's suggestion they had picked up several pieces of fried chicken and some already prepared mashed potatoes along with the rest of their items, and the delicious scent filling the car was making Steve's mouth water. It had been a long time since he'd had fried chicken.

"Oh yeah," answered Peter. "Shopping always makes me hungry."

Smiling, Steve reached over to ruffle Peter's hair. "Me too, little guy. Me too."

They arrived back at the house to find a package containing the rest of Steve's things from the Maryland cabin, along with an envelope from SHIELD that contained a brand-new driver's license and military identification card. Apparently Director Fury had some pull with both the Department of Motor Vehicles and the U.S. Army, because Steve was fairly certain that both of his IDs had expired several decades ago.

"Whoa, you got a motorcycle license too? That's so cool!" Peter exclaimed through a mouthful of mashed potatoes. "Will you take me for a motorcycle ride sometime? Please? I've always wanted to go on one!"

"Sure, little guy," Steve answered, grinining widely. It was nearly impossible not to smile around Peter Stark, his childish enthusiasm for pretty much anything was infectious. "As long as it's okay with your dad. And you have a helmet."

"Oh, I'm sure he won't mind," Peter said. "He never even uses the motorcycles down in the garage. They just kinda sit there whenever he's not tinkering with them."

*How can you not want to drive those beauties?* Steve thought. He'd only gotten a brief look at them the previous day, but his hands were already itching to take a drive. It had been far too long.

"And I have a helmet," added Peter as he finished his third piece of chicken. Steve still had no idea where Peter put all the food that he ate. His only guess was that the boy's bones were hollow or something. "It's in my closet... somewhere."

Tony—via JARVIS—had declined Steve's offer to join them for lunch, saying he was "in the zone", which Peter explained meant that he didn't want to stop what he was doing long enough to eat something. When Steve then asked Peter how Tony managed to go so long without eating, Peter
merely shrugged, saying Tony was just used to it.

"A package has just arrived for Captain Rogers," JARVIS said as Steve and Peter were clearing away the lunch dishes.

"Another package?" asked Steve. "What now?"

"Oh! I'll go get it!" Peter yelped, racing out of the kitchen before Steve could protest. He returned less than a minute later carrying a medium-sized box that he handed to Steve. "Go ahead and open it."

"What is it?" Steve asked, his eyes narrowing at the sheepish look that crossed Peter's face. He ripped the tape from the box, his jaw dropping in surprise as he pulled out an absolutely gorgeous dark leather baseball glove and a brand-new baseball, embossed with the logo of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Steve's favourite team. Director Fury had told Steve that his beloved Dodgers had moved to Los Angeles in 1957 and he was now supposed to cheer for the New York Mets instead, but the Dodgers would always be Steve's team.

Tears filled Steve's eyes as he slid the glove onto his hand, pushing the baseball into the pocket and closing the glove around it. Peter had even thought to order some oil for the glove as well, to make sure the leather stayed nice and supple. He really was one of the kindest people Steve had ever met, and he was only eleven years old.

"Thank you, Peter," Steve whispered, too overwhelmed to say anything else.

"You're welcome," Peter said happily. "I remember you telling me back at the hospital that you loved baseball when you were younger, but then you said you didn't have a glove or a ball or anything anymore, so I just thought that you might like one. And I kinda got one for myself too, I thought we could maybe play catch sometimes, when you wanted to take a break from your painting and stuff. My dad said it was okay, so… do you think you'd want to?"

"I would love to, little guy," answered Steve. "Anytime you want."

"Great!" said Peter. "But first I wanna make cookies!"

Steve laughed, the sound still foreign to his ears, but already a bit less so than it had been. "That sounds great."

Over the next several weeks the three of them fell into a somewhat normal routine. Steve would wake early, as he was used to doing, and go out for a long run along the oceanside roads, returning right around the time that Peter and Tony were waking up for the day. They would then all eat breakfast together, after which Tony would either go into his office for a few hours or down to his workshop, and Peter and Steve would play catch or build Legos or swim or watch movies until Tony came back. Steve would make dinner, usually with Peter's help, and the two of them would pester Tony until he came upstairs long enough to eat.

It was nice, and Steve was easily the happiest he'd been since before Bucky died. But even within the joy he felt at finally feeling like a part of a family again, there was still something bothering him that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Tony.

Tony had softened considerably towards him after that initial night, when he'd helped take care of Peter after his bad nightmare, and they had even managed to have a few talks since then that weren't
solely about Peter. Mainly small-talk type discussions, but still discussions nonetheless. But even so, Steve could tell that something was still off with him. He was spending hours and hours down in his workshop, working on something that he hadn't yet shared with Steve or even with Peter, but kept insisting that it wasn't a new weapon. He was also handing more and more of his responsibilities at his company over to Miss Potts as the weeks went on, which was not making Obadiah Stane at all happy, something that Steve had noticed pretty much right away. Obadiah had met the news that Steve was now living with the Starks with an outwardly flippant indifference, but Steve could tell he had not been pleased with the announcement, and ever since then had tried to insist on speaking to Tony whenever Steve wasn't around. Which, Steve had been happy to learn, Tony had refused to allow.

But even besides the issues with Obadiah and Stark Industries and Tony's secret project downstairs, Steve could tell that there was something else going on, something that was conflicting Tony. At first he thought he might have been just imagining the way Tony's eyes seemed to light up whenever he entered the room, or how they would rake across his shoulders or down his chest when he thought Steve might not notice. He even allowed himself to occasionally wonder if Tony ever thought about him when he wasn't around. Most likely wishful thinking on his part, because there was absolutely no doubt in Steve's mind that Tony would be completely mortified if he knew just how often Steve thought about him.

Steve had never met anyone quite like Tony Stark. Howard had been close, probably for obvious reasons, but not even he had been as complex a man as Tony. Tony was... well... unique, for lack of a better word. By all outward appearances he was every bit the devil-may-care, playboyish charmer that Howard Stark had been, and an even better businessman, at least according to Peter. While Howard had built Stark Industries into an extremely successful tech company before he was killed, its growth had exploded when Tony took over, with Tony diversifying it in ways that Howard had always been reluctant to do so. As such, Tony had been correct that the company would not only survive the dismantling of its weapons division and the subsequent initial drop in its public value, it would in fact start to thrive even more.

And then there was the fact that the Howard Stark Steve had known and the Howard Stark that Tony had grown up with were two very different people. Steve still felt guilty about the time that Peter had taken Steve into Howard's office, located down a little-used hallway off of the kitchen, and showed him the literal shrine that Howard had created for Captain America. There were pictures of Steve covering nearly every flat surface, both in and out of uniform, along with stacks of the Captain America comic books the Army had had printed during the war, all carefully preserved in dust jackets. A huge map of the arctic area where Steve had crashed the Valkyrie was pinned to one wall, covered in harsh red lines and black Xs, which Peter explained had been Howard's fruitless attempts to search for Steve after he was lost. Attempts that had continued up until the day that Howard died.

In a sense, Steve was flattered that Howard had cared so much about him that he would spend years of his life and who knows how many thousands of dollars on trying to find him. But he was mostly ashamed and saddened by it. Because of him, Tony's childhood was unhappy at best, and at the worst... well... Steve didn't really enjoy thinking about the worst.

Regardless, Tony had deserved better than to feel second-best to someone who was presumed dead. Steve had never even met his own father, but he at least always knew that his father had loved him. Tony never even had that.

It was thoughts like those that had prompted Steve to head into the kitchen at 12:30am and attempt to reheat one of the calzones he had prepared for dinner earlier that evening. Peter had showed him how to use the microwave oven once he started doing most of the cooking, but Steve still felt uneasy using something that emitted radiation to cook with, so he ended up using the regular oven most of
They had all had a pretty busy day that day. Tony had gone into the office for most of the day, so after Steve's run he and Peter had splashed around in the pool for a few hours, taken a nice drive on the motorcycle for lunch, then proceeded to build one of Peter's newest Lego sets, something that turned out to be what he called the Hogwarts Castle, based on a series of books about a boy wizard who lived in England. Since Steve had been all over England during the war, he found the books rather fascinating as he could remember quite a few of the places that were referenced in them, not to mention the fact that the identification, separation, and persecution storyline of the later volumes was something that resonated pretty deeply with him. Steve had had several friends in the Army who were Jewish, including Howard Stark, and several others who were closeted like himself. It was one of the main reasons why he was always so passionate about fighting against the Nazis. No one should ever have to feel ashamed of who they were, or forced to change who they were in order to fit someone else's agenda.

Tony had come home from the office looking tired and drained, and after saying a quick hello to Steve and Peter had immediately headed down to his workshop, refusing to come up until it was time for him to tuck Peter into bed. Peter's nightmares had improved a bit over the course of the summer, to the point where he was able to sleep on his own through the night about half of the time, so as soon as he was asleep, Tony had gone back downstairs, telling Steve he was trying to finish something important and would see him tomorrow.

And as he often did, Steve had just shrugged it off and nodded, returning to his room to read until he felt tired enough to try and sleep. But after he realised that he'd reread the same paragraph of his book at least three times, he marked the page and headed back downstairs to the kitchen. If he couldn't help ease Tony's burden by helping him with whatever he was working on, he at least could see that he had something decent to eat.

Pulling the steaming hot calzone from the oven, Steve carefully slid it onto a plate, grabbing a bottle of water as he left the kitchen and headed down the stairs. Tony had given him his own code for the workshop about a month prior, something that had made Peter especially proud. Apparently Tony was quite strict with whom he allowed into his workshop, and Peter had explained that only he, Colonel Rhodes, Pepper, and Happy had their own unlock codes. Not even Obadiah was allowed to enter Tony's workshop unless he was escorted, so for Steve to be given his own code was a pretty big deal.

Balancing the plate on his forearm, Steve punched in his code, his eyes narrowing as he looked through the glass and saw Tony hovering several inches off the floor, wobbling back and forth in the middle of his work area as if he was trying to balance on something round. He stepped inside, setting the plate down on one end of the cluttered countertop and wincing at the immensely loud music that Tony always insisted on playing whenever he was down there alone. Peter had explained that the workshop was completely soundproof, which was good because there was no way Steve would be able to concentrate on anything with that noise playing in the background that was loud enough sometimes to rattle the walls.

Thankfully, the music cut out less than a second later. Tony's head immediately turned towards Steve, his eyes widening as he wobbled towards him, coming to a stop a few feet away and dropping to the floor.

"What's up, old man?" Tony asked, huffing and puffing like he'd just ran a marathon. "Is Pete okay? JARVIS didn't say anything about—"

"Peter's fine, Tony," Steve answered, his mouth going dry all of a sudden. Tony was wearing a
black sleeveless t-shirt and a pair of red arm gauntlets with bright, round lights resting over his palms. The t-shirt was tight across his chest, which meant that the blue glow of his arc reactor was completely visible through the thin fabric, and that his well-defined shoulders and upper arms were right there, on full display.

And he had absolutely no idea just how beautiful he was.

Steve cleared his throat, forcing his eyes back to Tony's. "I just... you didn't come up for dinner tonight, so I just thought—" his voice broke off as he glanced down at Tony's feet, which were encased in a pair of shiny red metal boots, the same colour and look to his gauntlets. "Are those... rocket boots? Were you flying?"

"Technically, they're repulsor boots," answered Tony. At least he didn't seem too upset at the interruption. "But yeah, that's the general idea. I've built an entire suit. Actually, I've built two of them. This is the newest one, and I gotta say I'm liking the red a lot better than the silver I was using."

"Um... okay," Steve stammered, trying desperately to keep his eyes on Tony's face. "Why?"

Tony pursed his lips. "Because those assholes in Afghanistan who took Pete and me had an entire boatload of my weapons," he said in a hard voice. "And since it's highly doubtful that they were the only ones, I need to find the rest of them and destroy them before they can be used."

"But why?" Steve repeated. "I mean, I can understand why it's important, but why you, specifically? It has to be dangerous, Tony, and—"

"Because it's my goddamn name on those weapons," Tony snapped. He reached for a plastic bottle sitting on the counter, filled with what looked like spinach juice and took a long drink. "And therefore it's my son's name on those weapons. And I'll be damned if I'm gonna let people continue to think that all that name is good for is destroying things and killing people. Peter deserves a better legacy than that."

Steve's heart started to thud at Tony's ominous statement. *Peter deserves a better legacy than that.*

The word 'legacy'—at least in Steve's experience—was usually mentioned only when talking about something that was handed down from someone who was dead or dying, and as far as he knew, Tony was not dead or dying.

"Of course Peter deserves the best, Tony," Steve said carefully. "But why are you talking like you might not come back from this mission? If it's that dangerous, then I'm sure Director Fury or Colonel Rhodes could—"

"Nope," Tony interrupted. "They can't, old man. It has to be me."

"Okay, then at least let me come with you," Steve pleaded. "I can help you."

"No," Tony said, a bit gentler this time. "I need you to stay here and look after Pete. And he can't know about this, Cap, not about any of it. You have to promise me that you won't tell him."

"But—!" Steve sputtered, aghast. His mind was racing in every which direction, and he drew in a deep breath, trying to clear it. "Tony, what's going on? Is something wrong with you?"

Steve watched as Tony's jaw twitched, first in annoyance, then in something that more closely resembled resignation. "Remember when Pete said that the palladium powering this thing was toxic?" He tapped against the blue circle. "Well, he was right, of course."
"Okay," Steve said slowly. "But when he said it, you acted like you already knew it was toxic."

"I did," said Tony. "And I still do."

"So why aren't you and Peter trying to fix it?" Steve asked. He glanced over at the elaborate chemistry setup covering the adjoining countertop. "You've always talked about how smart he is, surely there must be something—"

"There isn't," Tony cut in. "And yeah, Pete's one of the smartest chemists in the country already, if not the world, but no, there isn't another option. JARVIS and I have already run through every single possible element or combination of known elements and found nothing."

"Then why hasn't Peter said anything?" demanded Steve.

"Because he's under the impression that the reactor isn't being used for anything except to keep the shrapnel from entering my heart," replied Tony. "Holding back the shrapnel uses only the bare minimum of its power, which means the bleed from the core is a lot less than when it's being used for more than that."

Steve's belly dropped down to his knees. "And I'm guessing that what you're building down here uses more power than that?"

"Yeah," Tony said softly. "A lot more." He let out a morbid chuckle, shaking his head. "It's kinda ironic, don't you think? The device that's keeping me from dying is also killing me. Serves me right, I guess."

"I disagree," Steve said firmly. He squared his shoulders, looking at Tony head-on. "This is ridiculous, Tony, and I won't accept it."

"Well, you don't exactly have a choice here, old man."

"Yes, I do!" Steve snapped. "I refuse to believe that after everything you and Peter went through in that cave, and how you managed to escape because you wouldn't give up, that you're now just going to sit by and let this happen to you. There has to be another way!"

"You think this is what I want?" shouted Tony, clenching his fists and causing one of his robots to cower in fear. "You think I want to be slowly poisoned to death? You think I want to miss out on watching my son grow up? Is that what you think? Well, you're wrong! But this is the only way I can make sure that no more of my weapons fall into the wrong hands, and I have to do it, Cap. I have to. Because Peter deserves far better than to be vilified for my goddamn mistakes!"

Steve's heart was thudding so hard that he felt dizzy, and he gripped the edge of the countertop, trying to keep himself upright. There was more to Tony's outburst than just about leaving a positive legacy for Peter, there had to be.

Peter had told Steve that Tony had taken over the top position at Stark Industries when Howard and Tony's mother, Maria, were killed, but what he hadn't confessed until several weeks later was that Tony had done so reluctantly. He hadn't wanted to do it, and had even almost been talked out of it by Obadiah Stane, who had offered to run the company himself while keeping Tony on as a consultant and majority stockholder. But in the end Tony had agreed to take over because he knew that's what Howard would have wanted him to do. He was honouring Howard's legacy.

But Tony was never happy about it because building weapons wasn't Tony's passion. His passion was the simple act of creating things, much like Steve's was with his artwork and Peter's with his chemistry.
And now Tony's only focus was on destroying the things that had haunted him since Howard's death and creating a better legacy for his own son, one that Peter could be passionate about and proud of, something that Tony never had. But there was no possible way in hell that Steve was going to allow him to kill himself in the process.

Plus, from what he already knew about Peter, Peter could have cared less about the family name. He loved Tony because Tony was his father, not because he was a Stark.

"I'm sorry, Tony," Steve said in his Captain's voice. "But I can't make that promise."

Tony's head snapped up, his brown eyes narrowing dangerously. "What're you talking about?"

Steve shook his head, swallowing down past the knot in his throat the size of a marble. "If what you said about Peter is true, and he's as smart as you say he is, then I can't promise not to tell him because I have no doubt in my mind that he could help you. You just have to let him."

"That's not your choice to make, Rogers!" Tony barked. "He's my son!"

"That's right, Tony!" shouted Steve. "He is your son! Your son who loves you and looks up to you and doesn't want to watch you die!"

And he's not the only one!

Tony's upper lip curled into a sneer, and he raised his right arm, aiming the round light of the gauntlet directly at Steve. "You don't get to tell me what to do, Rogers. I'm not just another one of your soldiers that you can order around. Now get the hell outta my lab before I blast you out."

Inhaling a deep breath, Steve planted his feet, staring squarely at Tony. If this was the only way to make him see reason, then it was the only way.

"Go ahead and try."

"I mean it, Rogers," Tony said, his arm starting to shake ever so slightly. "I'll do it!"

"And I said go ahead!" Steve said, taunting him. "Go on, what're you waiting for?"

"Goddamnit you're a stubborn fool, Rogers!" rasped Tony. "Get the hell outta here!"

"It takes one to know one, Tony!" Steve shot back. "So if you're gonna shoot me, then shoot me!"

Suddenly a loud whine split through the air, one that made all the hair on the back of Steve's neck stand straight up and his heart skip a beat. A split second later a blinding flash of light burst from Tony's gauntlet, sending a blast wave across the room and shattering one of the glass door panels behind him. Steve immediately dropped to his knees, his hands tightly clamped over his ears. How could it be? He thought he'd destroyed all the HYDRA weapons during the war? Where had Tony managed to find one?

I destroyed the Red Skull. I destroyed HYDRA. How is this possible?

Steve wasn't sure how long he remained there, curled into a tight ball on the floor of Tony's lab, his heart thudding hard against his ribcage and his mind filled with the echoes of long-dead soldiers, screaming as the powerful HYDRA weapons tore through their bodies as if they were made of nothing more than tissue paper. It wasn't until a pair of rough hands wrapped around his shoulders, shaking him just firmly enough to bring him back to himself, that he was able to let out the breath he'd been holding.

Peeling his eyelids open, Steve slowly raised his head, looking up into the worried brown eyes of Tony Stark. "I'm here," he whispered past his tight throat. "I'm not... there. I'm here."

"Yeah, you're here," Tony murmured, giving his shoulders another gentle squeeze. "And I'm guessing that the 'there' you're referring to was somewhere during the war?"

"Yeah," whispered Steve, wrapping his arms around his front. He was starting to shiver, and with his enhanced metabolism he was hardly ever cold. "Whatever you... shot at me, it sounded almost exactly like a HYDRA weapon."

"Mmm. Well, in my defence, I shot off to the side of you," Tony said. "And two, I can promise you that my repulsors are not HYDRA weapons. I invented them myself."

"That's good," answered Steve as he sat up, leaning against a cupboard. "'Cause if they were, I'd be duty-bound to destroy them."

The slightest of smiles danced across Tony's lips. "Just like a good soldier."

"Damn right."

They were quiet for several heartbeats until Tony spoke up again.

"Look, Steve—"

"No, Tony," Steve interrupted. "HYDRA weapon or not, I meant what I said. We need to tell Peter what's going on, because I think even you know that he could help you, which also means that you're not telling me the whole truth. Are you?"

Tony leaned back, dropping his chin to his chest with a heavy sigh. "No, I'm not."

"Okay, so what else is there?"

"Fury sent over a few boxes of my dad's old stuff after we first got back," Tony said after a short pause. "He told me that Howard had invented the arc reactor way back in the sixties, but since he knew that the palladium core was toxic to humans he shelved the invention because he considered it unfinished. Fury said that Howard told him later on that I'd be able to finish it someday."

"And was Howard right?" Steve asked. "I don't think he would've said that if he didn't mean it."

"Maybe," grumbled Tony as he threw up his hands. "But if that's the case, then we'd have to come up with a brand new element, and not even Pete has managed to do that yet."

Steve inhaled a deep breath, swiping at the sheen of sweat that had broken out along his hairline. "Well, then I suggest we open up those boxes and see what's in them. May as well get started, don't you think?"

Tony tilted his head, thinking. "All right. But I'd like to eat first if that's okay. Isn't why you came down here in the first place?"

Laughter bubbled up from Steve's chest, and he shook his head in amazement. "Yeah, it was. But it's probably stone cold again by now, if in fact it's still intact."

"Nah, it'll still taste better than that damn chlorophyll I've been drinking all day. And I made sure to aim away from the plate, just in case."
"Chlorophyll?" Steve asked. "Like the stuff that comes from plants? Why on earth would you want to drink it?"

"Supposed to reduce the effects of the palladium toxicity," replied Tony. He grabbed the plate with the calzone, taking a huge bite. "But yeah, this is definitely better."

"I would certainly hope so." Steve grabbed onto the counter, pulling himself back up to his feet. "We're gonna all figure this out, Tony. I know we can if we do it together. You, me, and Peter. You just gotta let us try."

The lab was quiet for several seconds, with the whirring noise of Tony's robot sweeping up the broken glass in the corner the only sound.

"All right, Steve," Tony finally said. "We'll do it together."

______________________________

I'm on tumblr at geekymoviemom and geeky-writes, stop by and say hi! :)

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

As eager as Steve was to get started right away, Tony was finally able to convince him that they could wait until the following night with little to no further danger to Tony's health. Steve tried hard to put up a brave front after his scary flashback, but Tony could tell he was still pretty shaken up by it. No sense in sending them both into a flashback in the same night if he could help it, if in fact his guesses were correct about what was in those boxes of Howard's stuff.

Tony had stumbled upon a few old home movies of his father's before, shortly after his parents' funeral. He'd never been quite sure what had possessed him to actually attempt to watch them, other than the fact that he was probably drunk off his ass at the time, but he'd barely been able to get through three minutes of the very first one before pitching an almost-full bottle of Scotch directly at the screen, shattering both it and the bottle into a million pieces. The film had been nothing more than
a greatest hits of Captain America, complete with a marching band soundtrack and a Howard Stark voiceover, just like the old propaganda clips the U.S. had put out during the war.

The next morning, once he had sobered up enough to stand upright again, Tony had gathered up everything of his father's that he could find and packed it away into Howard's office, right next to the shrine Howard had built for Steve Rogers.

And then he had closed the door and walked away, and he hadn't been back since.

He knew Peter went in there from time to time, especially when Tony was away for the evening or out of town. The boy was far too curious for his own good most of the time—he had been ever since he was old enough to crawl, actually—and since Tony avoided talking about his parents as much as possible he wasn't too surprised that Peter would seek out the information elsewhere. It didn't really bother him all that much. Peter deserved to know about his family and where they came from, and if he was able to accomplish that without Tony having to actually talk to him about it, even better.

*Without actually talking to him about it.*

*God, I really am no better than him, am I?*

As the murky thought echoed across his mind, Tony let out a heavy sigh. Hadn't that always been one of the biggest aspects of he and Howard's issues? The fact that they never really talked to each other?

Talking hadn't ever really been a problem with he and Peter. For one thing, Peter hardly ever stopped talking. Even as a baby he was always babbling constantly, at least as much as his sick lungs would allow. In fact, Peter ceasing to talk was always one of the initial symptoms that indicated a rapidly worsening asthma attack, and something that never failed to cause Tony to panic.

They talked about movies and Legos, they talked about Peter's school classes and whatever Tony was building or whatever experiment Peter was running. They talked about hopes and dreams and all that they could accomplish together. But they hardly ever talked about Tony's past or his family, and they never, ever mentioned Peter's mother. As far as Tony was concerned, she no longer existed.

It wasn't even all that interesting of a story, really. Tony had always been the playboyish type, very much like Howard was when he was younger, a lifestyle that Tony never particularly enjoyed but felt drawn to regardless because of its automatic absence of commitment. Howard hadn't settled down and gotten married until he was close to fifty years old, and that being the only real example that Tony had, it was the one that he chose to emulate.

At least until Regina came along.

Tony could never quite put his finger on what it was about Regina Williams that had enthralled him so. She wasn't the most beautiful woman that he'd ever been with—even though with her dark hair, green eyes, and pale complexion she was rather pretty—nor was she particularly knowledgeable about physics or engineering, Tony's two favourite disciplines. She was an actuary, someone who worked with numbers all day. She could calculate the Fibonacci sequence in her head up to its fiftieth figure.

*Or at least, so she'd said.*

Regardless, the night he met Regina at one of the quarterly Stark Industries benefits, Tony had found himself immediately drawn to her. He was used to women—and men, for that matter—looking at him like he was merely an object, something that they just wanted to get their hands on and devour,
but Regina never did. She had been the first woman besides his mother—and maybe Peggy Carter—to ever look at him like he was someone actually worth seeing. And Tony, who had always sworn to himself that he would never, ever fall in love, found himself falling in love with her.

And then, barely six months later she simply disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again, shattering Tony's heart into so many pieces he thought there was no possible way it could ever be whole again.

In fact, Tony had been so drunk the night that he got the call from the Mount Sinai Children's Hospital's neonatal intensive care unit, asking him to come down and claim the baby boy that had been born the day before, that at first he thought it was just some elaborate practical joke someone was trying to pull over on him. Regina hadn't ever mentioned being pregnant before she disappeared, but in hindsight, he supposed it made sense given the circumstances.

Because as it turned out, Tony hadn't really meant anything to her after all. She'd only been playing a role; to her he had been just another assignment, and once that assignment was completed she had simply moved on to the next one. Regina Williams hadn't even been her real name, as it turned out, and she hadn't been just an actuary working at one of the accounting firms retained by Stark Industries.

Her real name had turned out to be Mary Parker, and she was an agent, assigned to evaluate Tony by none other than SHIELD itself. She had been sent by Nick Fury.

But even worse than that was the fact that she was already married, to some scientist guy who was also working for SHIELD.

And apparently Regina—Mary—had broken all sorts of SHIELD-agent rules and regulations once she was assigned to Tony, not the least of which was allowing herself to become pregnant with his child.

It had taken Tony years to recover from the sting of Regina's betrayal, and that of Nick Fury as well, but it had only taken a total of about three seconds for Tony to fall in love with his son. He was a goner almost as soon as his drunken eyes were able to focus enough on the baby to see him clearly. At almost two months premature and with underdeveloped lungs, Peter was so tiny and fragile that Tony wasn't even allowed to touch him until he was almost three weeks old, but Peter's birth had marked a turning point in Tony's life. From then on, he was a changed man.

"Master Peter says it is time for dinner now, sir," JARVIS suddenly said, breaking into Tony's thoughts. "Apparently Captain Rogers has prepared a Shepherd's pie for this evening's meal."

"Hmm, trying out one of his traditional Irish dishes tonight, is he?" Tony answered. He set down his soldering iron and patted DUM-E on his mechanical neck. Peter had updated the operating systems of both of Tony's bots the previous day, and Tony could already tell that DUM-E's movements were a lot less jerky than they were before, a necessity for the work Tony was currently doing. An unmanned rocket was allowed a certain margin of error in its flight path, but since the so-called "rocket" that Tony was building now was going to be manned by none other than himself, he would highly prefer for the margin of error to be as close to zero as possible.

"It would seem so, sir. And might I remind you that homemade meals are often best enjoyed while they are hot? I believe I've heard Captain Rogers mention something to that effect once or twice."

"Once or twice, eh J?" Tony said with a chuckle. More like once or twice a night. "Tell them I'll be up in a few, just cleaning up a bit first."
"Very good, sir."

Steve and Peter were already sitting at the kitchen table when Tony arrived, with Peter bouncing impatiently in his seat, no doubt nearly "starving to death" as he usually was by dinnertime. Tony bit his lip at the sight of the two of them, sitting there in his kitchen waiting for him to join them for dinner. They had obviously spent some time at the pool again that afternoon, as Peter's curly hair was still damp and Steve's pale skin had that slightly pink look of someone who'd stayed out in the sun just a bit too long. He knew Steve was vigilant about making sure that Peter used enough sunscreen to protect himself from being burned, but in the process would then forget to apply enough to protect himself afterwards. It was something that Tony had been guilty of on too many occasions to count.

"Good day today, Pete?" Tony asked once Steve had dished out the food, which turned out to be delicious. So far there hadn't been a single recipe Steve had tried that hadn't turned out excellent. Even Pepper and Happy, who joined the three of them for dinner usually around once a week or so, had raved about Steve's cooking, and Happy was one of the pickiest eaters that Tony had ever seen.

"Oh, yeah," Peter answered, taking a sip of his milk. "Steve taught me how to throw his shield today. Dad, that thing doesn't obey the laws of physics at all! It seems like it would be really heavy and hard to throw, but it's not."

"That's 'cause it's made out of some magical metal that only grew in Africa," Tony said. "It's one of a kind."

"Your grandfather made that shield for me, Peter," Steve said. He shot a furtive glance at Tony, who nodded. "It helped me defeat HYDRA during the war."

"I bet that really pissed those assholes off too, getting their asses kicked by something that looks like an overgrown frisbee," Tony said with a wink.

"Yeah, it did," agreed Steve. "Although I don't think they exactly knew what a frisbee was at the time. I know I didn't."

"I love the sound it makes, too," Peter added. "It makes like the coolest thwanking noise whenever it hits something. It's not like any metal sound I've ever heard before."

"Yeah, too bad there's not any more of it around," lamented Tony. What he wouldn't give to be able to make his new suit out of vibranium rather than the gold/titanium alloy he was using. The alloy was very strong; it was the same alloy he used for the Stark Industries satellites, but it still couldn't compare to vibranium.

"Do you have to go back downstairs now, Dad?" Peter asked once they had all scraped their plates clean. "Steve and I were gonna watch a movie tonight, can't you watch with us? Please?"

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to say no, that he needed to get back downstairs because he was still trying to finish soldering the final seams onto his new chest plate so he could take the entire suit out for a test drive. There were still some things that he was missing with the design, tweaks that he wouldn't be able to find until he actually flew it around and discovered them, and the clock was continuing to tick. Plus, it had been almost a full week since he'd last shown his face inside Stark Industries, which was making Obadiah especially cranky, and there was only so much Pepper could do to placate him before he decided to throw another one of his full-bore tantrums.

"Pete—" Tony started.

"Please?" Peter begged, turning his puppy dog eyes on in full force. "It's only for a couple of hours,
can’t you take a break for a couple of hours? We’re watching the Harry Potter movies and tonight it’s the Goblet of Fire. I know you like that one, please?"

"All right," said Tony with a huff, quirking an eyebrow over at Steve, who only smiled and shook his head. "But only if you do your breathing treatment first."

"Mmm, fine," Peter grumbled, frowning as he pushed himself up from the table. "But then I’m gonna want popcorn too."

"You just ate more dinner than Cap and me combined!" Tony exclaimed to Peter’s back as he ran from the kitchen. "I won’t need to eat again for a week!" He shook his head as he turned back to face Steve. "I don’t know where he puts it all!"

"I’ve often wondered that myself," Steve said, his eyes crinkling in the corners. Tony had noticed they always did that when Steve was amused or happy, which seemed to be most of the time when he was around Peter. "And I thought I had a big appetite."

"And you know it’s only going to get worse," muttered Tony as he gathered up the dinner dishes, stacking them in the dishwasher before Steve could start washing them by hand. "The kid’s turning twelve next week, which means that puberty is just around the corner, and good God, I don’t think I’m ready for that! In fact, I know that I’m not."

"Do you guys usually have a birthday party for him?" asked Steve.

"Yeah," Tony answered. "We usually go back to New York the week of his birthday so he can celebrate with his friends, but… I’m thinking this year we’ll make it a bit more low-key, maybe just go to Disneyland for the day or something. I’m not sure if Pete’s ready to face his classmates just yet. Or rather, ready to face all of their nosy questions."

"Disneyland?" Steve asked, confused. "As in, Walt Disney, the Mickey Mouse guy? He made a… land?"

"Yeah, I’m surprised Pete hasn’t mentioned it yet," said Tony. "There’s a world too, but that’s down in Florida and is much bigger. They’re big theme parks. You know, roller coasters and stuff, that kind of thing."

"Mmm. Kinda like Coney Island?"

"Bigger," Tony said. "Pete loves roller coasters, there’s one at Disneyland called the Matterhorn. We always go on it at least three times whenever we’re there."

"I’ve never done too well on roller coasters," lamented Steve. "But the only times I’ve ridden on them were before the serum."

"Yeah, I bet you can’t even get motion sickness now, can you?"

"Probably not," Steve answered, shuddering. "And that’s okay with me, it was no fun."

"What’re you guys talking about?" Peter asked as he bounced back into the kitchen, heading directly for the cupboard where the popcorn was kept.

"Oh, nothing," Tony said quickly, throwing an exaggerated wink in Steve’s direction. "Just some kid’s birthday that’s coming up, no big deal."

Peter whipped around, a huge smile stretching across his round face. "Really?"
"Really," answered Tony. "Since Cap's never been to Disneyland, I thought we could go there for the day. How does that sound?"

"That sounds awesome!" Peter yelped. "Oh, Steve, you're gonna love Disneyland! Do you like roller coasters?"

Steve's eyes went wide as he cleared his throat. "Um... well, I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"Oh, I just know you're gonna love it, it's so much fun there!" squealed Peter, pulling his bag of popcorn from the microwave. "Are we gonna watch the movie now?"

"I guess so, buddy," Tony said. "You didn't really give me much of a choice, did you."

Peter shrugged. "You work too much, Dad," he muttered as he headed for the living room. "It's good to take a break sometimes."

"Yeah," Tony whispered, his heart aching as he watched his boy plop himself down onto the couch. How many more of Peter's birthdays was he going to be around to celebrate? "Wouldn't wanna miss out on anything."

"That's good advice, Tony," Steve murmured from behind Tony, causing Tony to jump. He still hadn't gotten used to Steve's enhanced hearing.

"Yeah, well, what can I say?" grumbled Tony. "Kid's too smart for his own good."

They settled in on the couch, with Peter cuddling right up against Tony's side and his feet resting on Steve's lap. As the movie began the gnawing ache in Tony's heart grew even stronger, and he pressed his fist to this chest in a vain attempt to keep his breathing even. For nearly twelve years now it had only been the two of them, only he and Peter. Rosa had been there too, but she was strictly an employee, a nanny that was more like an occasional babysitter for how much of Peter's care Tony had always insisted on managing on his own. And Pepper and Happy had been there too; Happy ever since Tony's parents had died and Pepper since Peter was about two years old, but they weren't really Tony's family. As much as he liked to think of them as family, they still worked for him. They were still employees. And after the whole fiasco with Peter's mother, Tony had sworn off ever allowing himself to become vulnerable like that ever again. The risk of heartbreak just wasn't worth it.

All of the demons that he'd created and walled off deep inside him were just too powerful a force to ever be unleashed again.

But now... now Tony didn't know what to think, and he hated it, hated not feeling in control of his own thoughts and emotions. He was dying, slowly being poisoned to death, and there was no way he could sugarcoat that fact. He also had a mission—as Steve put it—to complete. He needed to find and destroy any remaining illegal Stark Industries weapons caches before they could be used against more innocent people like the American soldiers that were killed trying to protect Peter and himself in Afghanistan.

And against innocent people like Yinsen, who willingly saved both of their lives despite the fact that Stark Industries bombs had killed his entire family and decimated his village.

If things had been normal, Tony could have just chalked it up to his hormones starting to get the best of him, which usually meant that it was time to make use of that spare bedroom again so he could get it out of his system. He could always just take care of things himself too, he'd done plenty of that over the years, but it was more fun to have another willing participant. At least most of the time.
That wasn't quite it, though. What Tony was feeling this time was a lot more complicated than simple horniness. In fact, there was no way for him to even begin to quantify what he was feeling in regards to Steve Rogers, and that in and of itself was enough to make Tony fidgety. Steve was an exceptionally handsome man, probably the most beautiful specimen of a man that Tony had ever seen, actually, and it wasn't only because of his broad shoulders and bulging biceps and defined abs that were visible through those tight t-shirts that he always wore.

It was the way Steve looked at him, like he wasn't just looking, but that he could see right through the mask Tony had tried so hard to perfect over the years. He could see Tony, and unlike Regina Williams, Tony could tell that it wasn't all just an act on Steve's part. Tony had seen enough clips of Steve's old USO shows to know that the man was a terrible actor, and if the eyes were indeed windows into the soul, then the soul of Steve Rogers was as pure as those Catholic saints his Irish mother had probably prayed to every night. There was nothing remotely evil or deceptive hidden in those gorgeous blue eyes of his.

Those same blue eyes that darkened ever-so-slightly whenever they landed on him when Steve thought he wasn't looking, just for a second before flitting away. As if he was completely oblivious to the effect he was having on Tony, which, as pure as he was, probably wasn't too far from the truth.

And then there was that dimple in his right cheek that always showed when he smiled widely enough, and the wrinkle that formed between his eyes whenever he was concerned or upset. And the way he spoke, clearly and to the point, with no room for any bullshit. Steve always spoke what was on his mind and that was it, take it or leave it.

Probably most of all, though, was the way Steve was with Peter. Tony was still amazed at how quickly Peter and Steve had bonded over the course of the summer, but at the same time he really wasn't surprised in the least. Peter was the most patient and caring person Tony had ever seen, so he really was the perfect person to help ease Steve into the twenty-first century. The two of them were so similar in so many ways that sometimes when they were all together, it was actually Tony who felt like the outsider.

And if nothing else, at least Tony knew that Peter would be in the best of hands if he failed to find a long-term solution to his palladium problem. Steve may be employed by SHIELD to protect Peter and Tony, but Tony knew that Steve's motivations went far beyond any duty to his employer now. There was absolutely no doubt in Tony's mind that Steve loved Peter as if he were his own son, and while Tony had always been quite possessive of Peter before, he was strangely okay with it now. Peter didn't have any demons to hide.

Not like Tony.

Steve wasn't too surprised when he looked back and saw that Peter and Tony had both fallen asleep before the movie was over. He and Peter had been outside for most of the day, and Steve knew that being out in the sun tended to drain a person's energy. Plus, Steve had no idea the last time Tony had gotten any decent amount of sleep. Ever since they had returned to California Tony had been keeping ridiculously long hours, and if it hadn't been for Peter and his nightmares, there was no telling when he would ever stop to rest.

Steve's heart gave a swoop as his eyes swept across the two of them. Both of Tony's arms were wrapped tightly around Peter's torso with his nose buried in the boy's hair, and Peter's head was resting against Tony's neck, his glasses askew on his face and his slender fingers curled around Tony's forearm. The sight was so incredibly precious that for a moment, Steve desperately wished that he had a camera handy.
"Oh, yeah," he murmured to himself, suddenly remembering the portable telephone that Tony had given him shortly after he'd first moved in. "I do have a camera."

Shifting slightly, he wiggled the phone from his pocket, careful to avoid disturbing Peter as he readied it to take a picture. Tony's eyes flew open a split second after he pressed the shutter, flitting nervously around the room just as Peter's often did when he woke up from one of his nightmares.

"What the hell?" Tony muttered, scrubbing his eyes with his palm.

"I'm sorry, Tony," Steve whispered. "I didn't mean to disturb you. You guys just looked really… sweet." He showed Tony the photograph, relaxing a bit when Tony let out a soft smile.

"Mmm. You must've worn him out today, Cap," Tony said. "I don't think he's ever fallen asleep during one of these wizard movies before."

"We were pretty busy," admitted Steve. "I made sure he didn't forget any of his treatments though."

"Nah, it's good," Tony replied. "Hopefully he'll be tired enough to sleep through the night tonight." He huffed out a sharp breath. "Think you can get him up to his room without waking him up?"

"I can definitely try," Steve said with a nod. Carefully, he lifted Peter's feet off his lap as Tony uncurled Peter's fingers from his arm, allowing Steve to slide his arms around the boy and lift him. Peter sighed in his sleep but didn't wake, tucking his head under Steve's chin as Tony plucked the crooked glasses from his face.

"You're a natural, Cap," Tony said as Steve laid Peter down onto his bed. He leaned down to brush the hair from Peter's forehead so he could kiss him, and Steve felt his heart stutter. Tony tried so hard to project the image that he was unbreakable, made of iron, but the pure unmasked adoration that his eyes held whenever he looked at his son belied all of his outward toughness. It was one of the things that Steve adored most about him.

Steve hadn't wanted to admit it at first; he was on an assignment—a mission—after all, and he was fairly certain that Director Fury hadn't planned on Captain America being anything other than a professional when it came to his missions.

He at least hadn't planned on being anything other than professional, but then Peter Stark had offered to teach him how to play chess while in the hospital, and over the course of only a few hours managed to worm his way so deeply into Steve's heart that there was no way Steve could get rid of him now if he tried. Tony often liked to joke about how Peter could charm just about anyone, only it wasn't really a joke at all. The only person that Steve had ever come across that hadn't seemed completely enamoured with Peter was Obadiah Stane, and from what Steve had seen over the course of the summer, Obadiah didn't really like anyone, so he didn't count.

Tony, on the other hand, was a completely different puzzle. It had to be exhausting, how hard he worked to project the image of the indifferent, unflappable billionaire genius that he wanted everyone to see, and yet, even from the beginning when he had been harsh with Steve, there still was an aspect of trust there, lying beneath the surface of his gruff exterior. Peter had told him that Happy had earned his place in both Tony's employ and his trust after he'd once saved Tony's life, and since the first thing Tony had ever seen Steve do was save Peter's life, it worked the same way. From then on, Steve had had Tony's implicit trust, no matter how hard of a shell he tried to maintain.

Even so, it had taken a while before he'd realised how happy he had become. How he'd grown used to smiling and laughing again, not only with Peter, but with Tony as well. Tony could be unbelievably funny at times, and most of the time he didn't even realise it.
As they tiptoed from Peter's room, Steve smiled as his two round robots zoomed over from their corner, taking up their sentry positions at the foot of Peter's bed. While he had found the robots odd at first, he couldn't deny that they were as loyal to Peter as any pets could be, and with no risk of triggering any of Peter's numerous allergies.

"Are you ready to head back downstairs now?" Steve asked once Tony had closed Peter's door. "Probably a good idea to get started in case Peter wakes up."

Tony gulped, a haunted look crossing his eyes as he gave Steve a quick nod. "Yeah, sure," he said, his voice trembling even as he tried to sound casual. "Might as well get this over with."

They walked downstairs in silence, with Steve searching for something to say that would possibly be encouraging and only coming up empty. According to Peter, the fact that Tony was willing to even go through Howard's old files at all was nothing short of a miracle, and even more so that he was willing to do it with Steve by his side. Steve, who had unknowingly been the cause of much of the rift between Howard and Tony, was now going to attempt to bridge them back together, and he was more than a bit nervous about it.

But if it worked, if there really was something in those boxes that could both save Tony's life and give him some peace at the same time, it would be more than worth the nerves he was feeling now.

Taking their places on either end of the couch located at the far end of the workshop, Tony unlocked the complex buckles that sealed the first box closed and raised the lid. A set of rolled-up blueprints sat on the top of the box's contents, which Tony immediately grabbed and unrolled to reveal what appeared to be a diagram of something similar to the device in Tony's chest, the arc reactor. Across the top of the plans were two names: Howard Stark and Anton Vanko.

"Tony," Steve murmured. "Is that—?"

"Yep, it is," Tony said quickly. "Just like Fury said." He placed the blueprints off to the side and continued digging through the box, pulling out several folded newspaper clippings, a stack of black and white notebooks, each of them filled with handwritten notes and diagrams, and finally, a pile of small tin circles, which Steve recognised as film canisters. Tony paused, turning the first canister over in his hands as his lower lip started to shake.

"Fuck it," Tony finally muttered, dropping the canister on the couch and hurrying over to a utility closet, where he rummaged around for a few minutes before dragging out an honest-to-goodness old-fashioned film projector, just like the ones that the Army used to use to show their propaganda films during the war. In a workshop filled with nearly every futuristic technological gadget that one could possibly imagine, it seemed so woefully out of place that in any other circumstance, Steve would have laughed at the irony.

But whatever mirth Steve might have been feeling was quickly quashed once Tony flipped the switch on the projector and the grainy image of Howard Stark appeared on the screen. Steve's breath caught in his throat at the sight of his friend, looking far older than Steve ever remembered him but still so unmistakably the same. He was dressed in a grey suit and holding a half-full glass clinking with ice cubes, leaning against a dark wooden desk as he spoke directly to whoever was holding the camera.

"Everything is achievable through technology. Better living, robust health, and for the first time in human history, the possibility of world peace." The camera suddenly panned away, focusing in on a large model of what looked like a park of some kind as Howard walked over to stand in front of it. "I'm Howard Stark, and everything you'll need for the future can be found right here."
"This was from 1970," Tony said softly. "The first year of the Stark Expo, and the year I was born."

Steve only nodded, not trusting himself to speak at the moment. The film continued with Howard speaking in the background as the camera moved slowly across the model, requiring several takes as Howard flubbed his lines, getting progressively drunker with each attempt until the cameraman finally suggested that they try again the following evening.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Howard scoffed, wildly waving his arm and nearly causing himself to tip over in the process. "We can try again tomorrow. And maybe my kid will just magically start sleeping through the night too, huh? I s'pose one can always hope!"

"Goddamn figures," whispered Tony, his upper lip curling into a sneer as the screen went black. Steve watched, feeling as though he'd just been punched in the gut as Tony's chin dropped to his chest and he shook his head. Reaching a hand towards the switch on the projector, Tony jumped as the screen suddenly sprang back to life to reveal Howard, this time wearing a set of striped pyjamas and cradling a crying baby with a shock of wavy brown hair against his shoulder, pacing back and forth across the camera.


"This is the third night in a row that you've kept me up with your mad screaming," Howard said from the screen, awkwardly patting the baby's back as he attempted to get him to suck on the dummy looped around his finger. "Thought I'd give your mother a break for a bit."

"My mother," Tony said, so softly that only Steve could have heard him as he curled his shaking hands into fists. "She was alive back then."

"Yeah, I do know," Steve murmured, because he did. He'd been an orphan too. His ma had died when he was barely eighteen, and he'd never even known his father who was killed in action during World War I. He reached a tentative hand over to grasp Tony's shoulder, his breath catching when Tony's hand clapped down over his own. "I do know, Tony."

"Since you haven't learned how to talk quite yet," Howard continued on the screen, bouncing with each step, the baby Tony in his arms quietly sucking on his dummy and looking up at Howard with his huge brown eyes. "I thought I'd put this on film for you." He stepped aside to allow the Expo model to fill the frame. "See that, Anthony? I built all of this for you. And someday, hopefully once you've learned the value of sleep, you're going to realise that it represents a lot more than just some people's inventions. It represents my life's work. Someday you'll be able to figure it out, and when you do, you'll do even bigger things than I can even dream of." He cupped the baby's head in his hands, looking directly into his face. "You're the future, Anthony. You're my greatest creation, and this, this is the secret to that future."

And then the screen went black once more.

The workshop was quiet for several moments, until the film ran out and started flapping against the projector. Without looking, Tony reached up and turned it off, slumping back against the couch with a heavy sigh, his expression so wretched that Steve felt his heart start to splinter.

"Tony," Steve murmured a few heartbeats later. "Do you think—?"

"I need to take a look at that model," Tony interrupted as he snapped up from the couch. He ran a shaky hand through his hair, his eyes wild and unfocused. "There's something… I gotta look at,
"Tony?" Steve called as he headed out the glass door of the workshop towards the stairs. "Tony? Where are you going?"

"In his office…" muttered Tony. "I put everything in his office…"

"Put what?" asked Steve as he rounded the corner onto the first floor and headed down the hallway towards Howard's office. "Tony, what are you looking for?"

But Tony didn't answer as he pushed open the office door and walked directly over to the table covered in Captain America pictures and comic books. He reached underneath the table and pulled out a long, narrow cardboard box, nodding as he looked up at Steve.

"Help me carry this downstairs, will ya, old man?"

"Um, sure," Steve replied. He grasped one end of the box, which was easily as long as he was tall, and hefted it up. It was bulky, but not particularly heavy.

Setting up the model over in what Tony called his virtual desktop, Steve couldn't help but admire its complexity. The grainy film image had held nothing on the finished product, which now more closely resembled a small city rather than a park. As he stepped back so he could better admire it, Steve happened to notice the plate attached to one corner of the wood.

The plate that read, "The Key to the Future is Here."

"JARVIS," Tony said. "I need a digital wire frame of the model, do you mind?"

"Not at all, sir," replied JARVIS, and as Steve watched the model was suddenly flooded with sparkling blue lights, the same colour and brightness as Tony's arc reactor. "Expo model scan complete."

"It's beautiful!" breathed Steve as Tony lifted the projection from the base model and carried it over to a clear area, leaving it at waist-height. He had watched Tony work a few times over the course of the summer, and it never failed to amaze him just how elegant Tony was when he was in his element. Creating was what he loved to do, and he was beautiful while doing so.

"How many buildings are there here, JARVIS?" asked Tony.

"Am I to include the Belgian waffle stands, sir?" JARVIS replied.

Tony shot Steve an odd look. "It was rhetorical, J," he said, rolling his eyes. "Just show me."

As the lights surrounding the various buildings started to glow a bit brighter, Tony stepped back, dragging his palm down his face as he studied the complex structure. "Ah huh," he said proudly. "I was right. J, what's what look like to you?"

When no answer came, Tony turned to Steve. "What's it look like to you, old man?"

"Um…” Steve said, narrowing his eyes as he studied the glowing structure. It had been so long since he'd taken any sort of science class, but he could vaguely remember seeing a model that looked something like this when he was in high school.

"Sir," JARVIS cut in. "I must inform you that Master Peter's body temperature has dropped four degrees in the last twelve minutes."

"He is shivering, sir," replied JARVIS. "But he does not appear to be dehydrated or otherwise ill. He is on his way downstairs now."

Steve's belly swooped in panic, the feeling mirrored in Tony's face as they both bolted for the door to find Peter already walking down the stairs, dressed in no less than three of what he called hoodies topped off with one of Steve's own sweatshirts, which was so big on him that his hands were completely hidden in the sleeves.

"Pete!" shrieked Tony as he pulled the shivering boy into his arms, rubbing Peter's back with his palms. "Are you okay? Why didn't you call me, we would've come upstairs!"

"It's not a big deal, Dad," Peter said through his chattering teeth. "I feel fine, I just got really cold all of a sudden. I tried to tell JARVIS not to bother you, but he wouldn't listen."

"He's not supposed to listen when you're trying to hide the fact that you're feeling lousy," Tony said, scowling as he pressed his palm to Peter's forehead. "How's he doing now, J?"

"His body temperature has already started to recover, sir," answered JARVIS. "It is up to thirty-five degrees Celsius and is continuing to climb."

"Don't fevers usually raise your body temperature?" asked Steve. "It seems odd that it would drop like that all of a sudden."

"Yeah, that's right," Tony grumbled. "He's never had this happen before. Even when he had his worst asthma attacks his temp never dropped. Inflammation raises your temp, it doesn't lower it."

"His temperature is now at thirty-five point five degrees, sir," JARVIS said. "I believe Master Peter will be fine."

Tony huffed out a sharp breath as he kissed the top of Peter's head. "All right. But no trying to hide stuff like that from us, Pete, you got it?"

"Uh huh," Peter replied sheepishly. "This is why I didn't want JARVIS to tell you," he added under his breath, throwing Steve a guilty look when Steve quirked an eyebrow at him. Sometimes having enhanced hearing came in very handy.

"What're you guys working on down here?" asked Peter once Tony released him. The blue lights of the holographic projection were glinting off the boy's glasses, throwing shafts of light up to the ceiling. "Can I help?"

"All right," Tony said after a moment's pause. "But only if you stay close to Cap, yeah? I wanna make sure you stay warm until your temp's back to normal. You mind, Cap?"

"Not at all," Steve replied, smirking when Peter scowled.

"Fine," grumbled Peter as he grabbed one of Tony's lab chairs and dragged it over to the work area, piling onto Steve's lap once he sat down and leaning his head back against Steve's chest, nearly causing Steve's heart to burst. He really was the sweetest kid Steve had ever seen.

"So," Tony started. "What do you think this looks like, Pete?"

"Like an atom," Peter replied, so automatically that it was like he didn't even have to think about it, it was something that he just knew. Steve was constantly in awe of Tony's intellect, but up until now
he hadn't really had much of a chance to see Peter's in action. He knew Peter was smart; no one could put together a multi-thousand-piece Lego set without using the building instructions unless they were smart, but with Tony keeping Peter out of the workshop for most of the summer, Steve hadn't really had a chance to observe Peter at work like he had Tony.

"But it's not any atom that I've seen before," Peter added. "Is it new?"

"That's what I'm thinking, Pete," replied Tony.

"Hmm, okay," Peter said, tilting his head such that his hair started tickling Steve's nose. "Highlight the nucleus there, Dad."

As Steve watched, Tony tapped his index finger on the model of the Earth, expanding his hands outward to enlarge it.

"JARVIS, lose the footpaths," said Tony, tapping his chin. "Pete?"

"Get rid of the trees and parking lots too please, JARVIS," added Peter, leaning forward as Tony flicked away anything he considered extraneous. "Dad, can you make it a bit bigger, please?"

"Gotcha," answered Tony as he expanded the holographic globe even more. "And lose the continents while you're at it, J."

"There it is, Dad!" Peter exclaimed, pointing his sleeve towards the globe. "It's right in there, I can see it!"

"In the pavilions," Tony said as he clapped his hands together. Steve's heart was thudding so hard against his ribcage that Peter could probably feel it even through all the layers he was wearing. "JARVIS, structure the protons and neutrons using the pavilions as a framework."

"That's it!" yelped Peter, jumping from Steve's lap over to Tony, wrapping his arms around Tony's waist. "Dad, that's it!"

Smiling the widest smile Steve had ever seen, Tony quickly ruffled Peter's hair and raised his arms, enlarging the hologram until it expanded throughout the work area. Steve's breath caught as the entire workshop was suddenly filled with light, the tiny little circles just calmly floating in midair, almost like the three of them were standing inside the solar system itself.

He had never seen anything like this before. Not even in the lab of Johann Schmidt, who had once proclaimed himself to be the smartest man alive.

And while Steve wasn't quite sure what exactly had just happened, he could definitely appreciate the honour of being a part of it.

"These are all atoms, Steve," Peter said, pointing to the floating blue circles. "They're the building blocks of all matter that exists in the universe."

"This is an element that is not currently found on the periodic table, sir," JARVIS said. "It is theoretical."

"But see, that's the funniest thing about this whole party," Tony replied. He turned to Steve, waggling his eyebrows. "It's not actually a theoretical element. It's just one that hasn't made it onto the periodic table quite yet."

"How do you know it's not theoretical?" Steve asked.
"'Cause my dad had a stash of it back in the forties," Tony answered with a sly wink in Peter's direction. Peter frowned for a moment, then let out a loud gasp, clapping his hand over his mouth.

"Are you kidding me?" exclaimed Peter through his fingers. He walked further into the projection and took one of the glowing blue lights into his hand, cradling it in his palm. "This… is vibranium?"

"What?" Steve blurted out. "Are you serious? Tony, why didn't you tell me that's what you needed? I would've given you my shield, all you would've had to do is ask—"

"I didn't tell you because I didn't know, Cap," Tony said. "The structure for vibranium has never been recorded before, or at least not anywhere that would share that kind of thing."

"But—!" sputtered Steve. It didn't make any sense. His shield had just been sitting on the floor of Howard's lab, almost like Howard made it only as an afterthought. If Steve hadn't noticed it when he did there was no telling what Howard would have done with it. "If that really was all the vibranium that Howard had, then why did he give it to me?"

That dreadful haunted look clouded Tony's eyes again, but only for a moment before it dissipated. "Well," he said softly. "I guess he must've thought you were worth it."

And maybe a big part of the reason why he tried so hard to find me over the years, Steve thought. He didn't dare voice the thought out loud and ruin Tony's moment, but it did make him feel just a little bit better. He could far better stomach the thought of Howard searching for the rare element needed to power his newest invention and launch a brand-new form of clean energy than he could the accepted version that Howard was obsessed with finding Steve to the absolute detriment of his relationship with his own son.

"I will begin running simulations, sir," JARVIS said, breaking the awkward silence. "To check element viability."

"Yeah, you have a ball with that, JARVIS," Tony replied. "I already know it's gonna work."

"Simulations for what?" Peter asked. "And don't we still have to kinda make it first?"

"No," Steve said firmly. "You can use my shield instead."

"Absolutely not," Tony retorted. "I'm not gonna destroy your shield, Cap. Pete and I can handle this."

"Yeah, we can, but simulations for what?" asked Peter again, a bit more emphatically this time. "If this came from Grandpa's research then he already knew it would work for the arc reactor, so why do we need simulations? JARVIS? Why do we need simulations?"

"Sir?" JARVIS said. "I am unclear as to what I should divulge in this situation."

Peter's eyes went wide behind his glasses. "Dad? What's going on? Divulge what? What're you not telling me?"

Tony looked over at Steve, his eyes filled with guilt and terror, and Steve gulped as Peter's eyes grew impossibly wider.

"You know what he's talking about too?" he demanded, the hurt in his voice piercing Steve like a knife. "Why is everyone keeping secrets from me all of a sudden?"

"Pete—" Tony started as he reached for Peter, wincing when Peter jerked away, wrapping his arms
"No!" he cried. "I don't wanna hear about how I'm just a kid right now and how you need to protect me! I just helped you rediscover a new element, and I wanna know what's going on! What are you gonna do with it?"

"Peter," Steve said gently. "Maybe it would be better if we all went upstairs and—"

"I'm building another suit, Pete," interrupted Tony. "Actually, I've already built another suit, worked out some of the kinks, and now I'm building a third. J, go ahead and bring up the Mark III schematic."

Steve watched as another hologram appeared in midair, displaying the suit of armour that Tony had been working on when Steve interrupted him the previous evening. Peter stepped back, his mouth dropping open as he circled the display.

"But… why?" he asked a few seconds later, his lower lip trembling as he turned to Tony. "Dad? Why?"

Tentatively, Tony held out his arms, gasping in relief as Peter walked into them. "Because those people who captured us had a whole bunch of my weapons, buddy," he murmured. "And I can't have that."

"But you destroyed them all when we escaped!" Peter said against Tony's chest, and Steve's heart gave a painful lurch at how miserable he sounded. "I saw it! I saw them all blowing up as we flew away!"

"I know buddy, but I also think that there's more of them out there," Tony said as he rubbed Peter's head. "And I can't allow them to be used by terrorists, Pete, I just can't. Those weapons nearly killed you, and I'm not gonna let them be used against innocent people again. I need to find them all and destroy them."

"Those weapons nearly killed you too, or have you forgotten already!" cried Peter as he pushed Tony away again. "We both almost died out there, Daddy! So why in the hell would you wanna go back?"

Tony glanced helplessly at Steve again, but Steve shook his head. If Tony wanted to give Peter the same foolish reasons as he gave Steve for wanting to risk his life, then that was on him. Steve knew for a fact that Peter could have cared less about the fact that his name was on those weapons, or if Stark Industries were to go bankrupt and they'd have to start over from scratch. Peter didn't wear the Stark name like a noose around his neck like Tony did. Peter only wanted his father to be safe.

"Peter," Tony said. He drew Peter back into his arms, burying his nose in Peter's hair. "I don't want to go back, buddy, but I have to. I need to right the wrongs that I caused. Yinsen's family were killed by those weapons; I need to make sure something like that doesn't happen again."

"Mmm. I still can't believe you didn't tell me," Peter said petulantly. "You don't usually hide things like that from me."

"Your dad was only trying to protect you, Peter," said Steve. He still thought that Tony was wrong for not talking these things through with Peter, but now wasn't the time to bring that up. "He didn't want you to have to see any reminders of what happened over there."

"Hmph," muttered Peter. "Good luck with that. Every single time I look at my dad I'm reminded of what happened. The blue glow in the middle of his chest isn't exactly subtle."
Well, I can't really argue with that, thought Steve.

"Pete," Tony said with a heavy sigh. "I have to do this, buddy. I have to fix my mistakes."

"But destroying those weapons won't fix your heart," Peter said, his voice muffled against Tony's chest. "And it won't bring back Yinsen, or his family."

"Maybe not. But I can make sure it never happens to anyone else," whispered Tony. "I gotta take responsibility, Pete. That's how it works when you're the boss."

"Hmph," Peter said again. "You're letting Pepper do most of the work at Stark Industries now anyway. I'm not five years old anymore, Dad, you don't need to make up stories for me anymore. You wanna do it because you want to avenge Yinsen and those soldiers that were killed and get revenge at the same time. That's what this is."

Tony's eyes locked with Steve's again, so full of torment that Steve's throat tightened. Peter had hit the nail on the head with his last statement, and Tony didn't want to admit it. He didn't want to admit that his son could see right through him.

"Peter," Steve said as he placed his palm on the boy's shoulder. "Try and think of it as a mission. You know I used to be a soldier, right?"

"You weren't just a soldier," replied Peter. "You were a superhero. You still are a superhero."

Steve sucked in a sharp breath. "Well, okay, then just think about this as another superhero mission, only this time it's your dad who's the superhero instead of me."

Peter was quiet for a moment. "Okay, but if that's the case, then you should go with him."

"Not gonna happen, Pete," Tony said quickly. "Steve needs to stay here and take care of you."

"Okay, then Uncle James can go with you," said Peter. "You said you have two new suits built already, right? Why can't he use the other one? You know he can fly pretty much anything."

"Who's Uncle James?" Steve asked.

"Colonel James," Peter said, a slight smile playing on his lips. "Uncle James got promoted to Lieutenant Colonel on my birthday last year, and Dad bet me that I couldn't last a year calling him Colonel James because of it."

"And I guess you couldn't," Tony said, looking triumphant. "Your birthday isn't till next week, kid."

"Well, that's just too bad," Peter shot back. "I think after tonight I get a pass for the last few days. In fact, I think I've earned enough to ask for two days at Disneyland instead of just one."

"He does kinda have a point, Tony," Steve said with a chuckle. There really was never a dull moment in the Stark family. "And Peter is right, having backup is always a good thing on any mission. I'm sure if you asked Colonel Rhodes he would agree."

"I'm not afraid to go on my own," Tony stated, frowning up at Steve. "This is my mess, Cap. I don't need help cleaning it up."

"Being fearless doesn't mean that you're being safe, Tony," argued Steve. "And if you're not going to allow me to help you, then asking Colonel Rhodes is the next best thing. Probably even better, in fact, if he's as good a pilot as Peter says."
"He's even better than Peter says," answered Tony. "I just… there's a lot of logistics involved here too, and I don't really want the Air Force getting their hands on my tech, not even if it's just Rhodey. Not quite yet." He reached again for Peter, cupping the boy's face in his hands. "I'm gonna do the first couple flyovers by myself, and if I decide that I need help, then I promise I'll ask for it. Okay?"

Peter's lower lip started to shake, and he caught it between his teeth as his brown eyes flicked back and forth between Tony and Steve. "I'm not sure I believe you, but I guess I don't have any choice, do I?"

"Pete—"

"No, it's okay, Dad," mumbled Peter. "I'm getting tired, I'm gonna go back to bed now."

Tony's shoulders sagged. "All right, buddy. Are you sure you're warmed up enough?"

"Yeah." Peter turned to Steve, tugging on the sweatshirt he was wearing. "Do you mind if I keep this for awhile? It's comfy."

"Not at all, little guy," Steve said, his face breaking into a huge smile when Peter wrapped his arms around his waist in a tight hug. "Sleep well."

"Uh huh," Peter answered as he gave Tony a hug. "Night."

"I love you, buddy," Tony called after him, and Steve had to bite his tongue to keep from saying those words himself. He already knew that he loved Peter as if he were his own son, but he was too afraid to say that in front of Tony, especially after the tense conversation they just had.

"Love you too," Peter answered as he disappeared up the stairs.

The sparkling blue lights from the holographic atoms were still flickering in the background as Steve turned to Tony, his expression a combination of fear and determination.

"Tony—"

"The kid loves you, you know," Tony cut in as he walked over to his workstation, tapping furiously on the keyboard. "I've never seen him act like this with anyone else. Not even Rhodey."

Steve swallowed hard. He wanted so badly to tell Tony everything that was hurtling through his mind at the moment, but he knew that he couldn't. If he had learned anything at all about Tony over the past few months it was that he was even more emotionally fragile than Peter, and he was too afraid to say that in front of Tony, especially after the tense conversation they just had.

"Love you too," Peter answered as he disappeared up the stairs.

Oh well. He supposed he could be patient.

"It's okay, Cap," Tony added. "You can admit it. I'm not gonna get jealous or anything."

"He's the sweetest kid I've ever seen, Tony," murmured Steve. "You're very lucky."

"We're very lucky," Tony said. "You saved his life. He's just as much yours now as he is mine."

Not trusting himself to speak, Steve merely nodded.

"What would you have called your dad if he'd lived?" Tony asked a few moments later, causing Steve's head to snap up in surprise. "You guys were Irish, right? Did they use 'Dad', or was it something else?"
"Um, my ma always called my father 'Papa' whenever she talked about him," Steve murmured. "So I guess that's what I would've used too."

Tony tilted his head, thinking. "Mmm. I bet Pete would like that. J, are we ready?"

"We are indeed, sir," answered JARVIS.

"Um… ready for what?" Steve asked. He supposed he should be used to Tony's rapid changes of subject by now, but they still never failed to make his head spin.

"I'll need to get some stuff out of storage first, not to mention we'll have to knock out some of that wall over there—"

"What?" Steve sputtered. "We need to knock out a wall?"

"Yep," Tony said. "Why, you getting tired, old man?"

"No, I'm not. Just… confused. What exactly are we doing?"

"Creating more vibranium," answered Tony, winking. "You up for some heavy lifting?"

"Sure, but—"

"Well, then we may as well get started," Tony said. "No time like the present, right?"

"O-kay," Steve said slowly, bewildered as Tony disappeared into another storage area, returning a few moments later with a massive wooden crate.

"What's in there?"

"Bunch of stuff from a bunch of Howard's other projects," replied Tony. "Projects Pegasus, Exodus, and Goliath, to name a few. This is just one of the crates that I need, would you mind grabbing the next one while I get going on the electrical grid?"

Steve huffed in frustration. "Okay, but not until you tell me what's going on!" He wasn't really frustrated, more like enthralled, but he didn't dare allow that to show. He had thought Tony was an impressive force of nature during his initial press conference when he was still shaky and uneasy with everything that had happened, but now, seeing him like this, renewed with determination and eager to get started on saving his own life, Steve was actually more than just enthralled.

He was *entranced*. And Tony still had no idea the effect he was having on him.

"We're creating a new element, Steve," Tony said. "And that involves a bit of planning. And poking holes in the walls, and probably some blown out light bulbs too, once we get going, I should probably warn Pete so he doesn't get scared when that happens."

"Okay," Steve said again, breathing in a shaky breath and hoping against hope that the heat in his cheeks wasn't too obvious. "Then let's get started.
Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

Thank you so much for all of the kudos and kind comments! I'm so glad you're enjoying the story!

And a huge thank-you to stjohn27 for prereading.

This time it was Steve who ended up suggesting they wait until the following day to begin, especially after Tony explained that they would have to drill into the living room floor in order to access one of the wiring grids for the house, then poke another hole completely through the floor in order to thread the heavy wires that Tony needed to power the machine he was building. By the time Steve and Tony had managed to find all the crates that Tony needed and get them unpacked it was nearly four in the morning, and while the downstairs workshop was soundproofed, the living room was not, and Steve didn't feel that Peter would appreciate being suddenly woken by the ear-splitting noise of a jackhammer coming from one floor below. Better to get some rest and wait until morning to start tearing apart the house.
Or in Tony's case, spend the time running through the hundreds of calculations he would need in order to make the machine they were planning to build work, as well as construct a brand-new arc reactor device in anticipation of the project's success while Steve took a few minutes to sketch some pictures of it all. May as well document the history in the making that he was witnessing, right?

"This is gonna draw a helluva lot of power," Tony muttered at one point, causing Steve to look up from his drawing. "I'm gonna have to tap into the Oracle grid, which isn't gonna make Pepper all that happy, but it can't really be helped, so…"

"Would you like me to inform Miss Potts of your plans, sir?" JARVIS asked.

"No, no," replied Tony, running his fingers along his goatee. Steve had noticed that he did that a lot when he was thinking. "It'll just make her twitchy, and that won't help anything. Should only be for a few minutes anyway."

"What's going to make Miss Potts… twitchy?" Steve asked. Do I really want to know? He still found it difficult to follow their conversations most of the time, especially when they seemed to delight in constantly interrupting each other or speaking over each other. Steve wasn't quite sure how she tolerated it given how professional she was, but she seemed to accept it as just part of the job.

Tony quirked an eyebrow. "I'm gonna have to tap into the Stark Industries power grid in order to power this thing," he explained. "Which means that every single computer in Stark Industries is gonna shut down at the same time, which will probably cause a few people to wonder what the hell's going on. But like I said, it should only be for a few minutes, so—"

"Better to ask for forgiveness than permission?" Steve inquired.

"Yeah," answered Tony, smirking. "Something like that."

"Master Peter has awoken, sir," JARVIS said. "His body temperature is normal and he appears to be in good health. His current location is the kitchen."

"Thanks, JARVIS," Tony said. He set down the tablet he'd been working on and jerked his head towards the stairs. "C'mon old man, I bet Pete's excited to hear what we've got planned for the day."

"I'm not sure 'excited' is the word I would use," Steve mumbled, remembering the terse conversation that they'd had the previous night. Steve still wasn't completely sure why Tony was insisting on creating more vibranium when he had a perfectly good supply of it sitting up against the wall in his bedroom, other than the fact that he hadn't seen Tony this animated about anything else the entire summer and he selfishly wanted to see more of it. Tony was vibrant, full of life, and the whole time they'd been down in the workshop, Steve found that he could barely tear his eyes off of him in order to concentrate on his drawing.

They found Peter in the kitchen making pancakes, and Steve's heart soared when he realised that Peter was still wearing his sweatshirt from the previous night over his pyjamas, and that he was making the pancakes from scratch, just like Steve had taught him. Peter had even remembered to add the small touch of vanilla extract to the batter that Steve particularly enjoyed, and the scent of it was wafting throughout the huge, open kitchen, adding to Steve's feelings of bliss and excitement. Vanilla was one of his favourite scents, much like Tony with his green apples and Peter with his peppermint.

And to make things even better, the pancakes turned out amazing. Steve couldn't have made them better himself.
"You know bud, I'm not at all surprised," Tony said as he polished off his second pancake. He leaned over to ruffle Peter's hair, his face etched with pride. "I mean, cooking is just edible chemistry, and chemistry is just one of the many things that you're really, really good at, so you would think it would just follow that you'd be really, really good at this too."

"Yeah, maybe," answered Peter as he ran his index finger down his plate, mopping up the rest of his syrup. He shot Steve one of his sweet, wide smiles. "Or maybe it's just because I had a really, really good teacher."

"Well, yeah, there's that too," Tony replied, his brown eyes sparkling as they swept across Steve, causing the warm fuzzies he was already feeling from Peter's compliment to explode like fireworks across his chest, sending a hot flush up his neck to his cheeks.

"Thank you, Peter," Steve said, clearing his throat. He knew he was blushing again, and could only hope that the sunlight streaming in through the kitchen windows was able to hide most of it. "So does this mean that I'm off the hook from cooking from here on out?"

"Nope," Peter said, rather matter-of-factly. "I just knew that you guys hadn't gone to bed yet and you'd probably be hungry." He crossed his arms in front of him and scowled, a pretty comical sight given the huge sweatshirt that hung from his narrow shoulders like an oversized cloak. "And since I have a feeling that our plans for the day involve something that's gonna be both noisy and destructive, knowing Dad, I figured we'd at least start off with something yummy to eat."

Tony raised his eyebrows as he looked over at Steve, biting his lip to keep from smiling. "Well, I can't say that I disagree with the kid's assessment, old man. Can you?"

"No, not at all," chuckled Steve. "I'd say he's pretty much got it right."

Peter looked up at Steve, his eyebrows knitting together as he glanced between he and Tony a couple of times, then gave his head a slight shake.

"Okay, so… are we gonna get started?" he asked.

"Ah, yep," Tony said quickly as he stacked up the plates, carrying them over to the dishwasher. "Let's go."

Once down in the workshop they got right to work. With a sly grin, Tony handed Steve a sledgehammer and a pair of protective glasses, donning a second pair for himself while he tasked Peter with going over a holographic schematic of the wiring for the house and cutting the power to anything that they didn't absolutely require for their experiment.

"All right, old man," Tony said as he hefted his sledgehammer onto his shoulders. He was dressed in that tight, sleeveless black t-shirt again, and Steve was already struggling to keep his eyes focused on his task instead of on Tony's toned arms and back. "Are ya ready?"

"Um… are we sure this isn't a load-bearing wall?" Steve asked as he planted his feet. He'd never actually swung a sledgehammer before, but it couldn't be too much different from swinging a baseball bat or throwing his shield, could it?

"Hmm, good question," said Tony. "JARVIS, is this a load-bearing wall?"

"It is not, sir," JARVIS answered.

"Thanks," replied Tony. He stepped back and readied himself, smiling rather manically up at Steve. "Nope, it's not. We're good. Just aim for the target there and we should be good to go."
And with that, he reared back and swung, grunting with the effort as he and Steve took turns hitting the solid concrete wall until they'd made a hole about a foot or so in diameter. After that came the drilling into the floor upstairs as Tony's bots looked up in alarm, no doubt confused as to why small pieces of plaster and concrete were raining down on them from above, with U in particular beeping in annoyance as he attempted to sweep up the mess.

With all of the holes drilled, they moved on to the real heavy lifting, with Tony directing Steve to carry long pieces of grey metal tubing that he then bolted together into a sort of U-shape, with one of the end pieces poking through the hole in the wall.

"Okay, Pete," Tony called once all the coil segments were in place. "Time to goggle up. You too, Cap. This is the point where things are gonna get a bit dicey."

"Uh huh," replied Peter. He held out a pair of glasses with dark red lenses, not too unlike the pair that Howard wore when Steve underwent his serum procedure. "Here, Steve. Gotta protect your eyes."

"And the rest of you too, Pete," Tony added. "Get your apron on, yeah?"

"Okay," Peter answered, a little less enthusiastically.

"What exactly is this machine?" Steve asked.

"It's called a particle accelerator," answered Tony as he slipped on his own protective glasses. "It smashes the nuclei of the atoms together and reformulates them into the new element. At least, that's the theory that we're working with."

With the words 'theory' and 'reformulate' pretty much the only words that Steve understood in that sentence, he decided not to ask for a further explanation and simply took his place next to Peter.

"And you're sure that it's safe?" he asked Tony.

"Well," Tony said with a smirk. "I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

Alarmed, Steve glanced down at Peter, who merely shrugged. "This is just how he works, Steve. You'll get used to it eventually."

"Okay," Steve whispered, even as he wrapped his hand around Peter's shoulder and moved the boy to stand behind him, wondering if he should fetch his shield just in case.

"Sir," JARVIS suddenly cut in. "Agent Coulson has just arrived. Shall I send him down?"

"What?" Tony exclaimed. "What the hell does Fury want with me now?"

Before JARVIS could answer Phil Coulson appeared at the bottom of the steps, knocking impatiently on the glass door.

"Let him in, JARVIS," said Tony with a sigh, removing his glasses as Agent Coulson stepped into the room. "Look, we're kinda in the middle of something here, Coulson, so if you—"

"I'm not here to interfere with your work," Coulson interrupted. "I'm here to speak with you and Captain Rogers. It should only take a second."

"Mmm. And you couldn't've just called? Left a message? Sent a carrier pigeon or something?" grumbled Tony.
"What is it, Agent Coulson?" Steve asked.

"Director Fury wanted me to give you both a heads-up." Coulson said. "There's been some... unusual activity lately in Virginia and New Mexico that we're currently investigating."

"What kind of unusual activity?" asked Peter.

Coulson frowned, like he was just noticing that Peter was there. "I'm not sure I should—"

"Don't worry about Pete, Coulson," said Tony. "He's not gonna spill any of your dirty little secrets. Are you, Pete?"

"No, I won't," Peter answered.

Coulson shrugged. "I'm on my way to New Mexico now to investigate with a couple of our other agents, and that's really all I can say about it. As for Virginia, there was an incident that occurred yesterday at Culver University that I'm sure you can read about in the news if you're really that interested."

"That all seems a bit too straightforward for you to have taken the trouble of coming out here to tell us in person, Mr Coulson," Steve said. "So what else is going on?"


"I'm not at liberty to say anything more than that, Captain," Coulson replied after a short pause. "But suffice it to say that if things escalate beyond the point of the other agents' comfort levels, we may have need of your services."

"What?" Peter cried as he grabbed onto Steve's hand. "No, you can't take Steve away! He's been assigned to us! He lives with us now!"

"Assignments can easily be changed, young man," Coulson said, and Steve couldn't tell if he was being patronising or simply stating a fact. It was still difficult for him to get a good read on the man. "And as Captain Rogers now works for SHIELD, then he's required to go where we send him."

"But—!" Peter sputtered.

"But only if the situation escalates, correct?" Steve said in his Captain's voice. He gave Peter's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Otherwise—"

"Otherwise things will remain as they are," answered Coulson. "Like I said, Director Fury just wanted to give you a head's up. Agents Romanoff and Barton are two of the best, but this may turn out to be more than even they are bargaining for."

"And now you've done that," Tony cut in. "And seeing as how we're all a bit busy here—"

"Then I'll get out of your way," Coulson finished, his eyes sweeping around the messy workshop with little to no change in his demeanor. "We'll be in touch, gentlemen."

"Hope you enjoy the Land of Enchantment," Tony called as the door closed behind Coulson's back.

Peter was still clinging tightly to Steve's hand, a deep frown marring his round face as he looked up at him. "I don't want you to go."

Steve's throat tightened, and he wrapped an arm around Peter's shoulders. For some reason the possibility that he might be reassigned away from the Starks hadn't even occurred to him, but he
supposed it made sense. "I don't want to either, little guy," he murmured. "Like Agent Coulson said, he was only giving us a head's up, so let's just hope it stays that way."

"Don't you worry, Pete," said Tony as he slipped on his glasses. "I'm not afraid to go eye to eye with Nick Fury when I have to, and I'm not letting Cap go without a pretty big fight, okay? Especially since there's been pretty much zero progress on figuring out where those Ten Rings assholes have been hiding lately."

"Uh huh," Peter replied, sniffing.

"Can you explain to me how this thing works, Peter?" Steve asked. Maybe if he got Peter talking about the science they were attempting he wouldn't focus too much on Coulson's ominous visit. Steve had heard mentions of Agents Romanoff and Barton before, and heard they were both quite good at their respective jobs, but he hadn't personally met them.

To Steve's relief, Peter let out a huge smile. "Sure! You see that thing in Dad's hand there?"

"That looks like a rectangular-shaped mirror?" asked Steve.

"Yep! That's exactly what it is. There's a bunch of those placed throughout the whole accelerator, and their job is to focus the laser beam in the correct direction so it can bombard the test element with the supercharged particles. The test element is the little silver triangle that Dad mounted in that circular thingy at the every end over there."

There was a pause while Steve tried desperately to understand anything of what Peter just told him. "So…"

"So basically, we're trying to break something into its atomic parts, but then catch all of the parts before they go flying off into oblivion so we can rearrange them into the new element."

"So… kinda like a baseball being hit so hard that the cover flies off the ball, but you're trying to keep the cover from actually flying apart so you can put it back together?" asked Steve. "Even though it won't be the same?"

Peter tilted his head, wrinkling his nose as he thought. "Yep, that's pretty much it."

"If you two are about done with your yammering, I'm ready to start," Tony said, his stern words contradicted by his amused, rather lighthearted expression.

Once again Steve gently guided Peter to stand behind him, making sure his glasses and apron were in place. "We're ready when you are, Tony."

With a nod, Tony walked over to the end of the coil setup and inserted a large silver key into the control panel, the resulting whine of the machine as it powered up reminding Steve of the sound of the fighter airplane engines during the war.

"Initialising prismatic accelerator," announced JARVIS over the increasingly loud whine of the machine. Tony looked over at Steve and Peter, nodding once as he trotted over to the valve he'd installed at the top of one of the connected sections.

"He's adjusting the laser beam now," Peter shouted over the now near-deafening noise. "And any second now it's gonna—"

"Whoops!" Tony called as the laser beam suddenly shot out from the vibrating machine, immediately cutting through a metal storage cabinet and a set of metal shelves on its way over to the mounted
"Whoops?" repeated Steve, both aghast and amused at the same time. It seemed like such a Tony thing to say while calmly cutting apart a wall with a laser.

"I told you," Peter added. "This is just how he works. He's okay, though, Steve. I'll tell you if he isn't."

Nodding, Steve watched as Tony struggled to get the beam angled correctly, finally grabbing a large wrench to help him adjust the valve. Almost without thinking Steve took a step forward to try and help, but stepped back just as quickly. This was Tony's moment, and he didn't want to ruin it by interfering unless someone was in danger.

"Approaching maximum power!" JARVIS shouted over the ear-splitting noise as the blue laser continued its destructive path through the workshop, slowly approaching its target. Steve fought against the urge to cover his ears, gripping Peter's shoulder just a bit tighter.

As the laser beam finally reached the triangle the humming sound changed, becoming more like the sound of strong wind gales through a narrow tunnel as the the triangle began to glow a dazzling bright white, too bright for Steve to look at even with the protective glasses.

Not three seconds later Tony shut down the machine, his eyes firmly fixed on the glowing silver triangle as the light continued to pulse.

"Did it work?" Steve gasped, just now realising that he'd been holding his breath for the last several seconds.

"JARVIS?" Tony asked, and the fear in his voice was unmistakable as he gingerly retrieved the triangle and placed it inside the new arc reactor device. "How'd we do?"

Several heartbeats passed before JARVIS answered. "Congratulations, sir. You have created a new element."

"Okay, so…" Tony prompted. "None of that matters if the reactor doesn't accept the core."

Steve watched with bated breath as the reactor flickered several times, then let out a steady blue light just a shade or two lighter than the device currently in Tony's chest.

"The reactor has accepted the modified core, sir," JARVIS said once the flickering stopped. "I will begin running diagnostics."

"Woohoo!" yelped Peter as he threw off his heavy apron and launched himself into Tony's arms, nearly knocking him backwards. "Dad, you did it!"

Tony's eyes locked with Steve over Peter's head, his expression mirroring almost exactly what Steve was feeling, torn between laughter and tears. "We did it, buddy," he said firmly, his hand combing through Peter's wild hair. "All three of us."

"Well, that's good," Peter said. "Cause otherwise we would've made a pretty big mess for nothing."

An almost maniacal laugh burst from Tony's chest. "That's true, bud," he said as he squeezed his eyes closed, kissing the top of Peter's head. He let out a hard, shuddering breath, looking like he was about ready to topple over as Steve stepped forward to place a steadying hand on Tony's shoulder, his heart doing a flip as Peter wound a skinny arm around his waist and pulled him into the hug as well.
"Are you all right?" he murmured to Tony, still trying to wrangle his own emotions.

"Course," Tony said as he looked up at him with glassy eyes. He seemed like he was trying desperately not to cry. "I'm fine."

"He always says that," Peter said, his voice muffled in Steve's chest. "Even when he's not."
Tony rolled his eyes. "Telling all of my dark and dirty secrets now, are we, Pete?"

"No, just the ones that should be told," answered Peter as he glanced up at Steve. "But this time I think he really will be okay."

"The diagnostics on the new core will take several hours, sir," JARVIS said. "I will let you know when they are complete."

"Thanks, J," Tony replied.

"And Miss Potts is on the line as well, sir," JARVIS continued. "I'm afraid she sounds quite upset."

"Oops," Tony said, huffing out a sharp breath. "Are the computers down?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Yeah, we probably tripped all the company fuses from here to Hong Kong with our little science experiment," muttered Tony. "Tell her I'll be there in about twenty minutes, I should probably clean up a bit first."

"Good idea, sir."

"You're gonna go into the office now?" Peter asked, sticking out his bottom lip. "I was hoping we could all do something fun together."

"More fun than this?" Tony said. "I would think you'd wanna save some of your energy for Disneyland tomorrow."

In a flash Peter's expression went from pouting to pure, unadulterated joy. "Really? Are you serious?"

"As long as Cap is up for it," replied Tony, turning to Steve and quirking an eyebrow. He was trying to hide it, to play it off as just another day in the life of Tony Stark, but Steve could see the nearly overwhelming relief in his brown eyes as clearly as if it were being painted out for him.

"Steve?" Tony said, nudging him gently with his elbow. "You gonna be up for it? Roller coasters and all?"

It hit Steve all of a sudden, much like so many of the suckerpunches to the gut that he'd taken in the Brooklyn alleyways while growing up. He had been sent here to do a job, to help guard Tony and Peter Stark, but he was so far beyond the simple logistics of the job now that it was almost inappropriate for him to continue doing it as a paid position. Tony and Peter had become his family, their lives so closely intertwined with his own that Steve could no longer imagine his life without either of them, and he highly doubted that Director Fury would be very pleased if he knew how badly compromised Steve had become. No one had ever said anything to Steve specifically, but he felt certain that it wasn't typical of a SHIELD agent to fall in love while on a mission.

Even if that mission was Tony Stark, and his adorable-beyond-words son.
"Yeah," Steve said, his voice quavering as he tried to smile. He would have to speak to Director Fury about this as soon as possible, but for now he was going to enjoy what they had managed to accomplish this morning, and just try to avoid thinking about the rest of it.

"I am definitely up for it."

"C'mon Steve, this is one of the best roller coasters here!" Peter exclaimed as he yanked on Steve's hand, dragging him over to the FastPass entrance for the Matterhorn. It was a beautiful, sunny August day in Anaheim, which meant that the park was quite busy, usually something that would have made Tony more than a little impatient and cranky despite the fact that they were there to celebrate Peter's birthday.

But today Tony wasn't impatient or cranky. The day before he had managed to accomplish something that not even Howard Stark had done, and now, with the dread of being poisoned to death no longer hanging over his head and his new reactor nestled inside his chest, he could concentrate more fully on the task of finding all of his renegade weapons and destroying them.

And, probably even more importantly, figure out how in the hell the weapons went renegade in the first place. He had recently tasked Pepper with searching through some of the old sale invoices for anything that looked out of place or peculiar, but so far she hadn't turned up anything, and he really couldn't blame her. If someone inside Stark Industries really was responsible for selling weapons to the Ten Rings, they probably wouldn't just leave their invoices out there on the company server for everyone to see.

Tony grinned as he and Rhodey followed Steve and Peter through the zigs and zags of the ride line, chuckling at the uneasy smile lighting across Steve's face. For someone who had faced down pretty much the whole of HYDRA during the war, including the Red Skull, it seemed kind of funny to Tony that he'd be afraid of something as simple as a roller coaster.

Then again, he supposed it also made perfect sense. Riding a roller coaster meant that you were at the mercy of the ride, and based on what he had observed over the past few months, Steve didn't really enjoy not being in control. Every single morning he had a plan on what he wanted to accomplish that day, a flexible one given the fact that he'd been living with Tony and Peter for the entire summer, but still a plan. It was probably one reason why he was such a good soldier.

The Star-Spangled Man with a Plan.

And, if he was being completely honest with himself, Tony wasn't all that fond of giving up control either. That initial test flight he'd had where his suit iced up and he'd ended up plummeting back to Earth in a complete freefall was not something that he ever cared to repeat. Especially once he finally managed to get home in one piece only for JARVIS to threaten to tell Peter and Steve on him if he ever thought it necessary to ignore the UI's mid-flight warnings again and attempt another foolish trip to the moon.

He couldn't deny the rush of euphoria he'd felt during that initial flight, though. Reaching the moon or not, the flight itself had been something so completely new and wonderful that nothing, not any drunken escapade nor sexual encounter had ever compared. In that moment, Tony Stark had really felt like he was indestructible, that he was actually made of iron.

An iron man.

"You don't need to yank the poor guy's arm out of its socket, Pete," Tony called. "Try and keep in mind that the only coaster Steve's ever seen is the Cyclone."
"It's all right, Tony," Steve called over his shoulder. "He's just excited."

"You guys seem to be getting along pretty well," Rhodes piped up from next to Tony, slurping up the remainder of the milkshake he'd been carrying around ever since they had paused for lunch. "Not that Captain Rogers is all that difficult to get along with, mind you, but—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," grumbled Tony. "I'm usually the difficult one to get along with. Isn't that where you were going with that particular train of thought?"

"Hey, you said it, not me," Rhodes said. "All I said was—"

"Pete absolutely adores him," Tony interrupted. "Has from day one. And he's been good for Pete. Kept him nice and busy this summer so he couldn't dwell on things, stuff like that."

"Uh huh," Rhodes said pointedly. "And who's been helping to distract you, hmm? 'Cause from everything I've heard, you're the one who's been dwelling on things."

"I'm fine, Rhodey," grumbled Tony. "And I'm not dwelling, per se, just trying to—"

"Trying to play superhero," Rhodes cut in. "Or at least that's what Pepper's been telling me."

"Not only trying," Tony mumbled under his breath. "Oh really? Mind telling me what's going on?"

"No," Tony stated. "It's probably best if you didn't know. You know, the whole plausible deniability thing. Don't wanna get you in trouble with your superiors or anything."

Rhodes shot him an odd look, one that Peter would've called a 'duh' look. "Yeah. 'Cause you're always concerned about me getting into trouble with my superiors."

Reaching the end of the line, Tony paused as they were sorted into their respective areas, smirking at the look on Rhodes' face as he was shuffled over to the adjacent line. Each bobsled-like car on the ride sat only three people, so Rhodes was stuck being the odd person out.

"Can we go on the other track once we get off this one?" Peter asked as he took his seat in the front of the car. He was practically vibrating with excitement, while Steve was still looking a bit paler than his usual self.

"As long as Cap doesn't mind, Pete," Tony replied.

"Oh, no, you don't have to worry about me," Steve said warily. "I don't mind if you—!"

And then they were off, with Peter letting out an excited shriek way louder than any child his size should be capable of, and Steve holding the handrails so tightly that his knuckles were white. From his place in the back of the car, Tony kept his eyes on him the entire time, forgoing the force and acceleration calculations that he usually busied himself with to ensure that Steve didn't go into another flashback or something.

"Woohoo!" yelped Peter as the ride came to a close, immediately twisting around in his seat. "That was so awesome! Can we please do the other one now, Steve? Please?"

"Absolutely," Steve answered as he unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to Tony, flashing that megawatt smile that never failed to make Tony's knees a bit weak. He didn't look like he was feeling horrible, but Tony wasn't about to accept that at face value. He had a feeling that Steve would rather
"Ya sure you're up for it?" he asked. "'Cause I can see if Rhodey could just take him again, I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"No, I'm fine, Tony," Steve insisted, his smile growing even wider when Peter let out another loud whoop. "It was fun."

"Then c'mon!" Peter insisted, pulling on Steve's hand. "The Fantasyland side is even better!"

They ended up staying until the fireworks show closed out the park, by which time Peter was practically falling asleep on his feet, leaning so precariously against Steve's arm as they headed back to the car that Steve finally just picked him up and carried him like he was a toddler. Tears sprang to Tony's eyes at the sight, of his boy resting his head on Steve's shoulder with his skinny arms curled around Steve's neck. Normally such a sight would make Tony burn with jealousy, if he even allowed it to happen in the first place, but not this time.

This time it seemed completely natural. Like a proud papa carrying his tired son back to the car after his birthday trip to Disneyland.

Apparently Howard hadn't been wrong after all. Steve Rogers really was good at everything.

"You okay, Tony?" Rhodes asked in a low voice. "You seem… distracted."

"Always," Tony replied without thinking.

"Uh huh, sure," said Rhodes. Thankfully he knew better than to press Tony in front of Peter, sleepy or not. "So when are you guys heading back to New York?"

"I'm thinking next week sometime. Let Cap and Pete get used to the city again before school starts. And hopefully give me some time to talk to Pete's principal and teachers. I don't want him getting bombarded with questions as soon as he walks into his classroom. The seventh grade is gonna be hard enough without a bunch of nosy little brats pestering him about everything that happened last spring."

"That is a pretty awkward time for a kid, isn't it," Rhodes said, shuddering. "I sure don't miss it."

"Yep," agreed Tony. "I mean, the kid's still losing teeth for Christ's sake, how in the hell is he in junior high already?"

"It's good that you're not pushing him though, Tony," said Rhodes. "I know you managed to survive starting college at fifteen—mostly thanks to me—but I'm not sure I'd want Peter to try and do the same."

"No way in hell," Tony said firmly as they arrived at the car. "I'm gonna let him be a kid for as long as possible. He deserves at least that much."

Peter dozed against Steve's arm the whole way home, waking only after they'd dropped Rhodes off and pulled into the garage. After a quick shower, breathing treatment, and another snack—where did the kid put all of his food?—Tony tucked Peter into bed, brushing the damp hair away from his eyes.

"Have fun today, Pete?"

"Oh yeah," Peter breathed, hugging his polar bear to his chest. "Loads of fun! Are we still gonna go again before we leave for New York? You said we could go two days, and Steve told me that he
really liked the Matterhorn, so he should be okay."

"I s'pose we can if you insist," Tony answered. He leaned down to kiss Peter's forehead. "I love you, buddy."

"Love you too." Peter bit his lip as he buried his nose into his polar bear's neck. "Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you mean what you said about Steve? That you'd tell Mr Fury that we want him to stay here with us?"

Tony pursed his lips, gulping as a hot flush crept up his neck to his cheeks and hoping Peter couldn't see it in the dim light of his room. "Yeah, I did. I know how much you like him, Pete, and how much he's helped you this summer, and I'm not gonna allow that to be taken away from you if I can help it. And Fury owes me big anyway, so you shouldn't have to worry about it."

"Mmm," Peter murmured. "That's good. But I still think you're missing something that's pretty important."

"Oh? And what's that?"

The corners of Peter's mouth curled into a slight smile. "That I'm not the only one who doesn't want Steve to leave."

_Oh shiii, Tony thought as his belly gave a violent swoop. Kid's always been too perceptive for his own good._

"And what's that supposed to mean?" he asked, trying and failing to sound casual.

"I think you know, Dad," Peter said pointedly. "And I'm not stupid either. I've seen the way you look at him. And the way he looks at you."

"Well..." stammered Tony. "He is a pretty spritely-looking guy for an older fellow, I'll give you that. And if I do say so myself, I'm not all that half bad either, so it would make sense for—"

"That's not what I mean and you know it," Peter cut in. "I've never seen you look at anyone else like that, Dad, not even Pepper or Uncle James. You look at Steve like you love him."

Tony's heart was hammering against the arc reactor and his cheeks felt like they were about to spontaneously combust. Had it really been that obvious? Peter had always been able to read him like a book, and liked to tease Tony that his eyes were incapable of lying, but had it been even obvious to Rhodey earlier? Was that the reason for Rhodey's third degree at the park?

"Pete—"

"Why can't you just admit it?" asked Peter. "Steve is so awesome, Dad, and if he feels the same way as you, then what's the problem?"

"It's not that simple, Pete," Tony said with a heavy sigh. "I spent most of my life hating Steve Rogers. That's not something that you just get over just like that."

"No, you spent most of your life hating the image of someone who was an innocent bystander caught in the middle of your yucky relationship with Grandpa," said Peter. "You were projecting, Dad."
Tony's chin dropped to his chest. It seemed surreal that his not-quite-even-twelve-year-old son was trying to give him advice on his nonexistent love life. "Are you sure you're not turning twenty instead of twelve, buddy? Where's all this coming from?"

Peter rolled onto his side, burrowing further into his covers. "I just want you to be happy, Dad, and I think Steve makes you happy. You just have to let him in."

"Pete—"

"Please?" begged Peter. "Daddy, he's right here! What're you so afraid of?"

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to just blurt it all out. To tell Peter everything that had been racing through his mind ever since he first laid his panicked eyes on Steve Rogers in the middle of that horrible Afghanistan desert. How he'd been trying so hard to keep him at an arm's length because he was afraid. Afraid of allowing himself to open his heart again, of allowing himself to become vulnerable, because he was terrified of not only getting hurt again, but of hurting Peter as well. Tony hadn't ever told Peter the full story about his mother. It was bad enough that she disappeared without a trace the day after she gave birth to Peter two months premature, Tony wasn't about to tell him that he'd been a complete accident in the first place because Tony had dared to let his guard down and then been made to look like an utter fool.

There was no doubt in Tony's mind that Peter already loved Steve, and loved the way he had embedded himself as part of their family over the summer. But if Tony were to allow things to progress beyond their current status and then realise later that it wasn't working… well, there was no way Tony could do that to his son. It would absolutely break Peter's heart.

In Tony's experience, if something seemed too good to be true, then it always was. Every single time.

He'd created too many demons for it to not be true.

"Get some sleep, Pete," Tony said instead. "It's late."

Peter huffed out a sharp breath, glaring at Tony. "Fine. Goodnight."

With a final kiss, Tony ruffled his hair once more and headed for the door, turning when Peter spoke up again.

"You're not gonna be able to ignore it forever, Dad. Not when it's staring at you right in the face. And I think I know why you're afraid, but I really don't think that Steve would hurt you. He's just too good."

"We'll see, Pete," Tony murmured. "Sleep now."

"Uh huh."

"Want some help unpacking, Steve?" Peter asked, poking his head around the doorway of Steve's new bedroom in the Tower apartment. They had just arrived in New York the previous day, and since Dad had gotten rushed off to a meeting with the Stark Industries Board of Directors and Peter had already completed all of his unpacking—or rather, had completed tossing his stuff haphazardly into his closet and hoping for the best—he thought he'd check to see how Steve was doing.

Stepping inside the spacious, open air room, Peter couldn't help but let out a wide grin. All of the bedrooms in their penthouse apartment were along the southeast side except for one, but this one in particular was located on the corner and therefore got the most natural light of any of them, something that Peter knew Steve would appreciate having for his painting.

And the best part of it was that the room used to be Dad's bedroom. He had given it up and had it completely redecorated so Steve could have it. Steve didn't know that, of course, but Peter did. Dad could deny or hide it all he wanted, but he was already thinking of Steve as someone a lot more important than just a temporary bodyguard. Dad's actions had always spoken a lot louder than his words, and sometimes even in the exact opposite way of his words.

"Think you could handle unpacking my paints?" Steve asked, handing Peter a square box. Steve had insisted on bringing most of his art supplies from California out to New York with them, saying that he didn't want them just sitting unused for several months as it could potentially cause the oil-based paints to separate.

"Sure thing," answered Peter. He sat down on the floor and opened the box, arranging the paints according to colour in their special wooden case while Steve got to work on organising his rather large collection of sketchbooks, one of which, Peter happened to notice, was open to a rather elaborate drawing of his father.

"Can I see that?" he asked gingerly, pointing to the sketchbook. "The picture you drew of my dad?"

Steve immediately flushed so hard that even the tips of his ears turned pink. "Um…" he stammered. "Peter, I didn't really mean for you to see—"

"It's okay, Steve," Peter murmured. "I already know anyway."

"Know what?" Steve said quickly, just before dropping his head and sighing. "Oh God, is it really that obvious?"

"Only to me," Peter assured him. "It's not like we've really had a lot of opportunities to be around too many other people over the summer, have we?"

"I'm pretty sure that's how your father wanted it for you, little guy," Steve said softly, laying a gentle hand on Peter's shoulder. "He thought it would be easiest on you if you didn't have to answer too many questions about what happened."

"I know," whispered Peter. It was how Dad always handled things that were hard; isolating himself and burying himself in work until he either forgot about them—not likely—or they were replaced with the next hard thing that he would have to work to forget. It was a vicious cycle, and one that that gotten even worse ever since he and Dad were almost blown up in Afghanistan. Aside from the brief questions Dad had asked Peter about the time their attackers had dragged him away, Dad hadn't brought up the attack, their harrowing escape, or even mentioned Afghanistan by name at all over the summer. Or at least he hadn't done so in front of Peter.

And Peter knew without a doubt that he and Dad would've died out there in that desert if Steve and Uncle James hadn't found them when they did. It really was that simple. Dad had told Peter in the hospital that Steve had saved his life, but in all actuality Steve had saved both of their lives that day. There was no way Dad would've allowed himself to be rescued if Peter had died.

"It's his way of trying to protect me," Peter added. "And he just doesn't know any other way to do it. He's never had anyone like you to help him."
"Like me?" Steve asked. "What do you mean?"

Peter's heart started to thud. "Someone who loves him."

Steve shook his head, flushing impossibly pinker. "Peter, I know that—"

"It's okay now, you know," Peter cut in. "For a man to love another man. I know people used to say it wasn't okay where—or when—you came from, but that's not how it is anymore. You can even get married if you want to."

"Peter, I don't—" Steve started, then paused, narrowing his eyes. "Is that really true? There's no more… stigma?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it's completely gone," replied Peter. "'Cause there's always people who're gonna be jerks about stuff no matter what, but there shouldn't be any." Peter dropped his gaze to the drawing sitting in his lap, his heart swooping at how intricate and beautiful it was. Steve had not only captured a perfect likeness of his father working down in his lab, down to the exact shape of his eyes and that little quirky half-smile thingy that Dad sometimes did, but Steve had also managed to capture the inner, hidden version of him that Dad only allowed certain people to see, and even then on only the rarest of occasions.

He wondered if Dad had even been aware of it at the time.

"This is from the night before we made the vibranium, isn't it?" Peter asked.

"Yes," Steve whispered. "I tried to tell myself that I was just drawing to pass the time, but… I couldn't help but want to capture how Tony looked in that moment. He had been so despondent when we were watching the old videos left behind by his father, but in that moment, when he was swept up in the marvel of what he had discovered and was so impatient to get started… it was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Tony was… well, he was beautiful, Peter. He is beautiful."

Peter stared at the drawing for several heartbeats, the lump in his throat growing larger with each one. He had read something in one of his books once that people who were the hardest to love were usually the ones who needed it most, which pretty much described his father to a T.

And, which probably also explained why someone so completely different from him would be the perfect person to love him.

"You need to tell him," Peter finally said. "Please? Dad thinks he's unlovable, that he's done so many bad things in his life that he's unworthy of it. You need to show him that he isn't."

Steve's haunted blue eyes skipped up to meet Peter's. "I want that, Peter," he said. "I want nothing more than for us to all be a family. I'm just…"

"Afraid?" Peter asked.

"Yeah," whispered Steve, sniffing as he dropped his gaze to his lap. "The first time I fell in love… well… let's just say it didn't end well."

"What happened?" asked Peter, cringing as soon as the words left his lips. He should've known better than to ask such an obviously painful question. He really was too curious for his own good sometimes.

"He died," Steve said plainly. "I watched him fall down a mountain from a speeding HYDRA train during the war, and there was nothing I could do. It was like I was up there just to watch."
"Oh my God," Peter whispered. "I'm so sorry, Steve! I didn't know."

"There's no way you could've known," Steve answered, swiping his nose. "And it's all right. It... wouldn't've worked out with us anyway. He... um... he only liked the gals."

"Oh. Well, I guess that would've been a bit of a problem."

Steve let out a sort of morbid chuckle. "Yeah, just a bit. There was also a gal that I knew during the war, and she was pretty incredible. If I were to have ever married a gal, it probably would've been her."

"Well, if it helps at all, my dad's afraid too," Peter said. "But I'm hoping the difference between you and him is that you're not too stubborn to do something about it. Please, Steve? I just want you both to be happy."

Huffing out a sharp breath, Steve reached for the sketchbook, tracing his index finger down the side of Dad's cheek on the paper. "All right, Peter," he murmured. "I'll do it."

"Yay!" yelped Peter as he threw his arms around Steve's neck. "Oh, thank you!"

"Don't thank me yet, little guy," Steve answered, laughing as he patted Peter's back. "Let me work up the courage to ask him for a date first, all right? They do still call them dates, don't they?"

"Uh huh," Peter said happily. "At least I think so."

"That's good. At least there's one thing that hasn't changed in the last seventy years." Steve pulled back, smiling as he ruffled Peter's hair. "Now, I thought you came in here to help me unpack?"

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Much like his workshop in the Malibu house, Tony's spacious lab in the Tower penthouse was also soundproofed, which was probably a good thing seeing as how he seemed to forgo sleep for work as much in New York as he had in California.

However, while the lab itself was in fact soundproof, that did not include the outside landing pad, which Steve realised late one night when his ears picked up the loud metal *clank* of Tony's boots touching down outside and clomping towards the entrance to the lab. From what Peter had said when they'd first arrived at the Tower, the landing pad was brand-new, designed specifically by Tony with a special robotics system to facilitate the removal of his elaborate armoured suit after experiencing a few rather bungled attempts to remove it on his own.

Tony had caught Steve earlier that day, hurriedly explaining that he'd just received some new intelligence on a possible location of the Ten Rings and was planning on scouting it out, which would require Steve to pick Peter up from school and make him dinner, something that Steve was only too happy to do. He'd already done the school pickup several times during the three weeks since school had started when Tony had been stuck at the office, and he knew Peter enjoyed it. Especially when Peter mentioned that the classroom bully hadn't yet stopped talking about the fact that "tiny little Peter" was getting picked up by none other than Captain America himself, and on a motorcycle, no less.

As the clomping noise disappeared, replaced a few moments later by the normal footsteps of Tony moving through the apartment towards the kitchen, Steve pushed himself up from his squishy armchair and headed for the door. If nothing else, he could at least let Tony know that Peter had eaten a decent dinner and had been sleeping nightmare-free so far.

He found Tony standing at the icebox—refrigerator—chugging from a bottle of orange juice while
he waited for his coffee to finish brewing. Tony whipped his head around as Steve approached, his hair standing nearly on end and his eyes wild, one of which was so black and blue that it looked like he'd been repeatedly punched by one of his own gauntlets.

"Tony!" Steve gasped as his eyes swept across several other deep bruises that traced up and down his arms and shoulders, including one that ran nearly the length of his entire lower left arm. "What—, what happened to you?"

Tony pursed his lips, a flash of guilt crossing his beat-up face. "Oh, just had a little run-in with one of Rhodey's fighters, no big deal. How's Pete doing?"

"One of Rhodey's fighters?" Steve sputtered. "I'm assuming you don't mean fighters as in boxers, do you?"

"Not exactly," Tony said, trying to smile and only managing to wince. "More like multi-million dollar Air Force fighter jets. Those kind of fighters."

"But… why?" demanded Steve. "Why on earth would Colonel Rhodes want to attack you?"

"Well… 'cause he didn't exactly know it was me," replied Tony, far too nonchalantly than someone should after nearly getting knocked out of the sky by an airplane. "I hadn't told him about the suit yet, so after I blew up a couple of the Ten Rings' tanks he ordered the planes to investigate. He was just doing his job."

"But—!" stammered Steve. "But what if you hadn't come back? How would I have explained this to Peter?"

"I wish you'd let me help you on these missions," he said instead. "It's always better to have someone watching your back."

"It's all right, Steve," Tony insisted. He set the bottle of orange juice back in the refrigerator, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'd rather have you here taking care of Pete. Besides, I made it back in one piece, so it's okay."

"Yeah, this time," Steve muttered as he leaned against one of the countertops, crossing his arms. "How many more of these missions will you have?"

"As many as it takes," replied Tony. "As many as I need to get rid of the stolen weapons and take the rest of those Ten Rings fuck—, sorry, I mean bastards out."

Steve couldn't help but smile a bit at Tony trying to correct his foul language. He had gotten so used to correcting his squad mates in the Army that it just came automatically to him, and it was something that never failed to make Peter giggle.

"Hmm. Well, I hope you're planning on allowing yourself to heal before you tackle the next one. You don't exactly look like you're still in one piece."

Tony scoffed as he examined the horrible purple bruises covering his arm. "Nah, I tend to heal pretty quick. Not as fast as you, but pretty quick for just your average human."

Steve gave his head a light shake, trying to rid his mind of the image of Tony getting hit with the same type of airplane that he'd seen at the base in California. "Can I get you something to eat? Peter and I made homemade pizza for dinner, and there's some leftovers in the—"

"I'm fine, Steve," Tony said firmly. "The suit took some pretty good hits during the fight, so I have
some repair work I should get started on."

"Now? You just got back, why do you have to do it now?"

"Why not?" Tony asked, without a single hint of sarcasm. "Better to do it while Pete's asleep, don't you think? The bullet holes might scare him a bit."

_Bullet holes?! Yeah, I would think so!_

"Well, maybe because you're bleeding all over yourself, for one thing?" Steve snapped, pointing to the oozing gash by Tony's bruised left eye. "At least let me clean you up a bit first. Okay?"

Tony's shoulders sagged. "All right," he said softly. "But only 'cause I don't feel like getting blood on the floor."

"Whatever works," Steve mumbled as he pulled the first aid kit out of one of the kitchen cupboards, quickly unwrapping a gauze pad and wetting it with some antiseptic solution. Tony flinched as he gently touched the pad to his bleeding wound, then relaxed as Steve continued to dab at it, carefully cleaning off the blood.

"It doesn't look too deep," murmured Steve, applying a bandage over the area. "Don't think you'll need stitches or anything."

"Sounds good, Dr Rogers," said Tony. He flashed Steve a tired smile, causing Steve's heart to skitter. "Thanks. I'm gonna go work on the suit now."

"Okay," Steve whispered, gulping as Tony grabbed his coffee and turned to leave the kitchen. He bit down hard on his bottom lip as he watched Tony go, remembering what Peter had said about him being stubborn.

"Tony?" Steve called after his retreating back, his breath hitching when Tony poked his head back around the doorway. He felt like a teenager again, struggling to breathe against lungs that didn't want to seem to let him.

"Yeah?"

"I… um…" he started, his cheeks burning like fire and his mouth as dry as the Afghanistan desert. "I was wondering if you would like to go out to dinner with me this Friday."

Tony's eyebrows immediately shot up, and he winced, sending Steve's heart plummeting towards his knees. _What the hell was I thinking? Peter was wrong, this was a horrible idea._ "I mean, it's okay if you don't, I just thought that maybe—"

"No, no, Steve, it's just my eye," Tony said, pointing to his bandage. "I guess—, I guess it stings a bit more than I let on."

"Oh!" gasped Steve. "Do you need me to——"

"No, it's fine," said Tony. He was clutching his left arm in his right hand, gingerly brushing his fingers back and forth along the bruises. "I'm just… um… we eat dinner together all the time, Steve, so—"

"Well, yeah, I know," Steve cut in. He gulped in as deep a breath as he could, gripping the countertop behind him so tightly that he was surprised it hadn't yet cracked into pieces. "I was just thinking that if we called it a date, then maybe you'd allow me to kiss you goodnight afterwards."
Again, Tony's eyebrows shot up, and he winced again, shaking his head. "Goddamnit! That fuck—, sorry, freaking hurts!"

Steve's heart was hammering so hard that he felt certain that Tony could hear it echoing off his ribcage. "I mean, if you don't want to, then—"

He was cut off by Tony's fingers brushing across his lips, the touch so gentle that Steve's knees nearly buckled. "Steve," he whispered, and that haunted look that Steve had come to absolutely dread fluttered across his brown eyes. "You have no idea how much I'd—, but… I'm not… I've done too much, I've got too many demons, and… they'd just eat you alive, Steve, and there's no way I could allow that to happen. You deserve so much better."

"I think that's for me to decide, don't you?" Steve said firmly. "Besides, I've already fought against plenty of demons, and they didn't scare me too much. I don't think any of yours could be worse than the Red Skull."

"I think you might be surprised," mumbled Tony.

"Then if that's the case, we can fight them together. We work well together, Tony, you know that," pleaded Steve. He reached for Tony's hand, intertwining their fingers. "Just one date. That's all I'm asking."

The ticking of the clock above the kitchen window reminded Steve of the rhythmic pounding of a drum as he waited for Tony's answer.

"All right, Steve," he finally said as he squeezed Steve's hand. "One date."

Come find me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there. :)
"Hey, Peter," Ned said as Peter entered their homeroom classroom, sliding into the seat next to him and wrapping his arms around his front. Steve had driven him to school on the motorcycle again, and while he'd been dressed appropriately enough for the chilly fall air, he was still shivering. Maybe it was time to start storing an extra hoodie in his locker since the school didn't allow students to wear their jackets during class.

"Hey, Ned," Peter replied through his chattering teeth. "How's it going?"
"Awesome!" Ned exclaimed as he shoved a magazine under Peter's nose. "Did ya see the new Lego catalog yet? There's a new Millenium Falcon set that's coming out for Christmas this year! Look at how cool it looks!"

"No, I haven't seen it yet," answered Peter as he inhaled a shaky breath, willing his body to stop shivering. The last thing he needed was to be singled out by their homeroom teacher and sent to the nurse's office again. As much as Peter loved his father, the fact that Dad had put the fear of God—or rather, the fear of Tony Stark, which was probably worse—into each of his classmates and teachers before the school year had even started made him feel like he was constantly being scrutinised for even the slightest indication that something might be wrong.

And Peter hated feeling scrutinised. It was bad enough that he was already the smallest boy in his class, he didn't need any more help looking or feeling like a complete weakling. Even Ned, who used to be only an inch or so taller than Peter, seemed to have shot up quite a bit over the summer. Being the youngest person in the class really sucked sometimes.

"You okay?" asked Ned. "You look like you're not feeling good."

"Just a bit cold," Peter said. He tugged the neckline of his hoodie further up his neck, burrowing down inside it like a turtle. "Steve drove me to school again today."

"Ah. Your dad have another early meeting or something?"

"Yeah, I guess." That was what JARVIS had relayed, at least, although Peter had his doubts. He knew Dad was already flying missions over Afghanistan to search for the Ten Rings, and was probably on one of those very missions yesterday when Steve picked him up from school. JARVIS had refused to give Peter any further information about his dad when he'd asked earlier that morning, which either meant that he was still out on the mission, or that he got called into work again by Pepper or Obadiah.

"Oh. I still think it's cool you get to ride on a motorcycle, though, it looks like so much fun," said Ned. "There's no way my mom would ever let me ride on one."

Peter smiled slightly. "It is pretty cool."

"Yeah! 'Specially since it's with Captain America!" Ned exclaimed, cringing as their homeroom teacher stepped into the classroom. "I mean, you don't get much cooler than Captain America," he added in a loud whisper. "And I bet he's a really careful driver too. I mean, there's no way your dad would ever let you ride with him if he wasn't, so I bet he is. Do you think he'd give me a ride sometime if I asked him?"

"Not if your mom says you can't," muttered Peter. "And Steve would be able to tell if you're lying. No one can get anything past him."

"Mmm. Bummer."

"Yeah."

"Attention, class," the teacher said, clapping her hands. "I require all of your attention for the morning announcements."

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Peter rested his chin on his stack of books in a vain attempt to get his teeth to stop chattering, grateful that he'd at least thought to move his phone into his back pocket where it would be more difficult for JARVIS to get a read on anything unusual. Every other time this had happened he'd felt better after a couple hours or so, so there was no point in alerting anyone and
causing a fuss if it was just going to correct itself again.

And sure enough, by the time the bell rang to end their first class, Peter was already starting to feel a bit better.

"So I was thinking," Ned said as they made their way to the lunchroom. "Since you stayed at my house the last time we had a sleepover, I'm thinking it's your turn to have me come to the Tower this time. Plus, you haven't shown me the Hogwarts Castle yet, and I really wanna check it out. I still haven't been able to convince my dad to buy that one for me yet."

"It is pretty cool," Peter said distractedly, blinking as he picked up his lunch tray. His eyes had been acting a bit weird lately too, almost like his glasses were too strong for him, but only intermittently. "I left it in California though. It's not exactly what I would call a portable size, dude."

"Oh, that's a bummer," said Ned as they sat down at their table. "I was looking forward to seeing it."

"I can send you a picture next time we go back," offered Peter. "Or even better, I can have JARVIS take a picture now and send it to you."

"Mmm, okay," grumbled Ned. "It's still not the same as seeing it in person though."

"Sorry," Peter said as he bit into a chicken tender. "I can't really help you there."

"Okay, but at least we can still have a sleepover soon, right?" Ned asked through a mouthful of potato chips. "I haven't been to the Tower since last spring, right before you left for—"

Peter immediately froze, his stomach turning into a giant hunk of lead as Ned's eyes went wide and he clapped a hand over his mouth. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry Peter! My mom even told me that I was never supposed to bring that up, I'm so sorry!"

Squeezing his eyes closed, Peter shook his head, trying desperately to keep himself from throwing up his lunch all over the table. It was still so hard for him to be reminded about what happened in Afghanistan, especially since he still heard the deafening explosions of the bombs in his sleep every night, still saw his father screaming helplessly from his hard metal cot as Peter was carried away from him into that pitch-dark and freezing-cold room, still smelled the burning rocket fuel as Dad destroyed the terrorists' cache of stolen Stark Industries weapons just before they managed to fly away.

And still tasted death as it came up to choke every last dram of air from his lungs only seconds before he heard the echoing sound of Steve's kind voice. The voice that told him he was going to be okay, and to just keep coughing.

Back in Malibu he'd had Steve to distract him all day. Getting Steve used to the twenty-first century—especially the Stark's version of the twenty-first century—had been pretty much a full-time job, and Peter had welcomed it eagerly. But now that he was back in school the distraction wasn't there, and while no one else in his class had dared to mention anything to him about what happened, Peter could sense the eyes of his classmates constantly on him, almost as if he were a time bomb waiting to detonate.

"It's okay," Peter choked out past the hard knot in his throat. "I—, I just—" He pushed his lunch tray away, clutching his head with both hands as his lungs froze in his chest, his heart hammering so hard that he felt like he was going to pass out.

"Peter?" Ned said worriedly, sounding as if he was all away across the lunchroom instead of sitting right next to him. "Peter, what can I do? Do you need to go to the office?"
Shaking his head, Peter raised his trembling hand to point at his pocket. "I think—, I just need my inhaler. I can't—, I can't breathe—, please—"

"Here, here, here," Ned said, shoving his inhaler into his hand. "You need any help?"

Instead of answering, Peter simply shoved the plastic mouthpiece past his lips and pressed the actuator, sputtering as he tried to inhale the horrible tasting medicine. He pressed it again, forcing himself to inhale a somewhat even breath, wincing as he felt the medicine wafting past his tight throat. Asthma inhalers really tasted disgusting.

*Why's it have to be so gross*, he thought, concentrating hard on each inhale and exhale. *Why can't they come up with an inhaler that tastes like peppermint or apples instead of old shoes?*

"Peter?" he heard Ned say gingerly. It was nothing short of a miracle that no one else had noticed anything yet. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yeah," Peter rasped after a few more deep breaths, his palm pressed to his chest. "I just… I just don't wanna talk about it."

"God, Peter, I'm really sorry," Ned repeated. "Um… do you think we should call your dad?"

"No!" yelped Peter, gasping as his lungs threatened to seize on him again. "I mean, no, thanks. He's, um… he's busy."

Ned jerked his head back in surprise. "Peter! There's no way that he'd say he's too busy if you're sick, you know that!"

"I do know that!" Peter snapped, a lot harsher than he intended when Ned jerked his head back. "But I'm not sick, not really. I just—, I just don't wanna talk about it, okay?"

"Well, all right," Ned said warily. "But you know he's gonna get upset if he finds out that you're trying to hide stuff from him."

"I'm not hiding anything," insisted Peter as he shoved his inhaler back into his pocket. "It was just a little asthma attack. I get 'em all the time, in case you've forgotten."

"Yeah, but not usually when we're just sitting in the lunchroom," Ned said, holding up his hands when Peter shot him a glare. "Okay, okay. If you say you're all right, I won't argue anymore."

"Good."

They were silent for a few moments as Peter tried to concentrate on his breathing, in through his nose, out through his mouth. He felt bad for snapping at Ned like he had since Peter knew he'd just been trying to help, but all he wanted was for things to get back to normal, and calling his father for the third time since the school year started was not the way to get back to normal.

"Hey, Peter?" Ned finally asked. "Um… do you think I can have the rest of your chicken tenders? If you're not gonna finish 'em?"

Peter sputtered out a laugh. While his breathing had finally calmed down, his stomach still felt like it'd been tied into knots. "Sure. Go for it."

"Thanks," said Ned as he reached for Peter's tray. "They're one of the few decent lunch things this school has."
"Still better than most," muttered Peter. Although Midtown School of Science and Technology was still technically a New York City public school, it was set apart from most by the fact that students were required to pass a rather difficult entrance exam before admittance. That plus the fact that Peter Stark was one of its students, which meant that Tony Stark routinely upgraded all of the equipment in the science labs, as well as the food choices the cafeteria. There were also scholarships in place to cover meals for poorer students, as well as to cover the costs of field trips and equipment deposits. Pretty much whenever the school had a need of any kind, they knew they could go to Tony Stark in order to fill it.

"True," Ned said through a mouthful of chicken. "Your dad does take pretty good care of us."

"Yeah, he does. He always has," Peter whispered as his mind wandered back to the workshop in Malibu, and Dad spending most of his nights building his new armoured suit so he could go flying off back to Afghanistan. Peter had given up on trying to convince him that it wasn't necessary, especially after Steve had talked to him about it again the previous evening. Steve had reiterated that Peter should try and look at Dad's new armour as a tool that he was using to help rid the world of an evil enemy, just like Steve had fought against HYDRA during the war. When Peter then pointed out that Steve hadn't done most of his HYDRA fighting alone, and in fact had had an entire Army squadron devoted to helping him, Steve had only shrugged and said that he was sure that Dad understood modern weaponry and warfare better than Steve did, and that they should simply try and trust his judgement.

And while Steve's wise and kind words did help Peter feel just a bit better, he couldn't help but wonder as Steve tucked him into bed, just how long it would take before Dad finally realised that Steve was far more worried about him that he dared to let on, and that sometimes asking for help wasn't a sign of weakness, it was instead a sign of strength.

"Hey, buddy!" Tony said as Peter slid into the backseat of the car. He curled his arm around Peter's shoulders, wincing as he pulled him into a brief hug. He kept forgetting about the annoying bruises littering his arm. "How was school today?"

"Not too bad," Peter answered, his brown eyes going wide behind his glasses as he studied Tony's face. "But what happened to you? You look like you got beat up by something, when did this happen?"

"It's nothing, Pete," Tony said dismissively, pointedly ignoring the look Happy was throwing him from the rear view mirror. It was bad enough that Pepper had completely freaked out when she saw Tony in the office earlier that morning. "Just had a little run-in with something on my flyover last night, no big deal. Steve got me patched up, so I'm fine. Nothing you need to worry about."

"A run-in with what?" yelped Peter. "And you said if you ran into trouble that you would ask for help! You promised!"

"I didn't run into trouble, Pete," Tony stated. "It was more like the trouble ran into me."

"Hmph," muttered Peter, crossing his arms. "Same difference."

"Not exactly," Tony shot back. "And what's this I hear about you having an asthma attack during lunch today?"

Peter's face drained of colour, and he dropped his gaze to his lap, wiggling his fingers the way he always did when he was trying to hide something.
"It wasn't so bad, Dad," he murmured. "Nothing really worth bothering you about. I told Ned not to call you, but I guess he didn't listen."

"No, I guess he didn't, and I'm glad he didn't, Pete," Tony said firmly, even as he pressed his fist to his chest. It had taken all of his self-control and then some to not race down to the school the moment he got Ned's call. Tony could deal pretty well—or so he thought—with most of the normal growing pains of parenting an adolescent boy, but he never, ever discounted anything that had to do with Peter's lungs. The nearly six weeks that Peter had spent on a ventilator after he was born because of his sick lungs had been seared so deep into Tony's memory that even the smallest hint of a possible problem with Peter's breathing was enough to send Tony into a full-blown panic attack.

Breathing was pretty essential to life, and since Peter was essential to Tony's life, logic therefore dictated that Peter's breathing was essential to Tony's life. There really was no way around it.

"My lungs were just acting up a bit at lunch so I had to use my inhaler a couple times," Peter said. "And they cleared up right away, so I didn't think it was that big a deal."

"Buddy, you know you're supposed to call me when that stuff happens," Tony said, his calm voice belying the mild panic he was still feeling. He really needed to get going on another upgrade for JARVIS now that Peter thought he was old enough to start hiding things from Tony. "I don't care how minor you think it is, I need you to let me know whenever you're having trouble breathing, you got that? I'm not saying I'm gonna rush down and pull you out of school every time you have the hiccups, but something like that, like an actual asthma attack, I just need to know. All right?"

"All right," grumbled Peter.

"Good. Now, tell me every fascinating thing you learned about in chemistry today."

That at least brought a smile back to Peter's face, and he spent the rest of the fifteen minute ride back to the Tower detailing Tony with the plans he had to invent a new type of super superglue, stronger than any of the superglues currently available. He had thought of the idea when he and Steve had been hanging up some of Steve's latest paintings throughout their Tower apartment, saying that the glue could maybe one day replace having to pound nails into the walls to hold up the heavy canvases.

"And if I can get it as strong as I think I can," Peter continued, his brown eyes bright behind his glasses. "Then I'm thinking you could even use it in some of your work instead of soldering stuff together."

"That sounds incredible, Pete," Tony said, smiling with pride. He loved how excited Peter always got about his various projects. "I can't wait to see how it goes."

"Good afternoon, sir, Master Peter," JARVIS said as soon as the elevator door opened into the penthouse. "Captain Rogers wished me to inform you that he is currently down in the gym and will return in time to prepare dinner."

"Thanks, JARVIS," Tony replied, chuckling as Peter started hopping towards his room, trying to remove his shoes as he went. Instinctively he raised his hand, brushing his fingers along the bandage next to his eye that Steve had placed so carefully the previous night. He let out a shiver as he remembered the gentle brush of Steve's fingertips across his stinging skin, and the way he'd nearly moaned out loud at the warmth spreading across his body like wildfire when Steve took his hand. If he hadn't been half out of his mind with pain and exhaustion in that moment, there was no doubt in Tony's mind that he would have happily thrown caution into the wind and tried to jump Steve's bones right there in the kitchen.
It had been so long—years, in fact—since Tony had experienced anything like that he had almost forgotten what it felt like, and ever since then he'd been craving more of it. More of Steve's warm breath against his skin, more of the longing in his blue eyes whenever they locked with Tony's, even when it made him blush like he was fourteen years old again. More of Steve shyly asking him for a dinner date like it was still the 1940s.

And more touching. Definitely more touching.

He just wanted more.

In fact, if he dared to admit it, Tony wanted everything. He wanted it all.

And that scared him. It scared him more than almost getting knocked out of the sky by a fighter jet.

"Dad?" Peter said, startling Tony from his thoughts. "Are you okay?"

"What? Oh, yeah, of course I am," he answered. "Why?"

"'Cause you don't look it," replied Peter. "You look like something's on your mind. Can I help?"

Tony huffed out a deep breath, biting his bottom lip. There really was no sense in trying to hide it from Peter, especially since he kind of already knew and, more importantly, it directly affected him as well.

"Yeah, Pete," Tony murmured. He jerked his head towards the living room couch. "Um… why don't we sit down for a sec, yeah?"

"Um, why? Am I in trouble or something?"

"No, buddy, of course not," Tony assured him. "It's nothing bad. Or at least I don't think it is."

"Oh," Peter said, smiling in relief as he plopped down onto the couch. "Uh huh."

"Well…” Tony started as he sank down onto the couch, running a nervous hand through his hair. "I um… I already told you that Steve helped clean my busted-up face last night when I got back."

"Yeah?"

"Well… he also kinda… well, not really kinda, I mean, he really did ask, but—"

"Dad, you're rambling," Peter cut in. "What did Steve ask you?"

"Aahh… well, he asked me for a date, and—"

"Really?" Peter shrieked, and Tony barely had time to brace himself before Peter lunged into Tony's arms, nearly knocking him backwards. "Oh, Dad, that's so awesome! And about time, but mostly just awesome!"

"Well, yeah," Tony sputtered. "Um… I guess—"

Peter pulled back, eyeing Tony warily. "Hang on a minute. You did say yes, didn't you? Please tell me you said yes!"

"Yeah, I did," Tony answered carefully. "But, Pete, I'm not sure you understand all the ramifications here, and—"
"You mean like I'll get another dad who's incredibly cool?" Peter interrupted. "Steve's practically already my second dad anyway, and you trust him with me, you have since the very beginning. And I love him, Dad. I do. He's part of our family now."

"And he loves you too, buddy," Tony said. "There's no doubt in my mind about it."

"Then what's the problem? Why do you look so jittery?"

Tony slumped against the cushions, running his palm down his face. "Pete," he murmured. "You need to understand. If we end up going on this date, and—"

"What do you mean, 'if'?" demanded Peter. "You said you already told Steve that you'd go, so why's it only an 'if' now?"

"Just listen, bud, please," Tony said firmly. He took Peter's hand, gripping it between his own. "If we go on this date—and yes, it's still an 'if' right now because I honestly don't know who in the hell I can trust to watch you—and things… progress like I think they will, there's a chance that you could get hurt, and Pete—, I just—, I can't—"

"How would I get hurt?"

Tears sprang to Tony's eyes, and he wrapped his arms around his son, drawing him into a tight hug. "Oh God, Pete," he whispered, burying his nose into Peter's hair. "You know I'd rather do anything, and I mean anything, than see you get hurt. And well, I don't really have the best track record for relationships, actually, I don't really have a track record at all for relationships, so if Steve and I end up trying this and it doesn't work out… I couldn't stand to see you get hurt. It wouldn't be at all fair to you."

You've already been punished enough for all my goddamn mistakes.

Peter was quiet for a moment. "You know," he finally said, gently tapping the arc reactor. "I think I'm finally getting used to the humming noise this thing makes. It's still not the same as hearing your heartbeat, but I actually kinda like it. It means that you're alive."

"Pete—" Tony said, trying desperately to not sound impatient. "Buddy, do you understand what I'm saying here?"

Frowning, Peter pulled back. "I'm not an idiot, Dad, I know exactly what you're saying. I'm just choosing to ignore it because I know it doesn't apply here. I mean, this date that you're planning is really just a formality, isn't it? You guys both know that you love each other, you just haven't said it out loud yet."

"What? What do you mean by—?"

"Dad, Steve loves you," Peter stated as plainly as he was stating one of his math principles. He ducked back down, tucking his head underneath Tony's chin. "He's in love with you, and I could tell that long before he finally told me. And maybe it's because of when he's from or just who he is, but I don't think he falls in love with just anyone. You're it for him. And also because I'm not an idiot, I know you feel the same way. I've never seen you look at anyone the way you look at him."

"Okay, just hold on a quick second," said Tony as his heart started to thud. "Steve… told you this? When?"

Peter shrugged like it was no big deal. "Yeah. I was helping him unpack when we first got here and I happened to see a picture that he drew of you in one of his sketchbooks. He told me then. And then I
told him to go for it because I knew that you never would. You'd rather torture yourself and miss out on an amazing guy than admit that you're in love with Captain America. Which is really pretty dumb, Dad, don't you think?"

Tony kissed the top of Peter's head, squeezing his eyes closed. *How in the hell does this kid know me so well?*

"Okay, so… and we're sticking purely with hypotheticals for the moment, what if I did? You'd be okay with this?" Tony asked, rather sheepishly. "It's not exactly conventional, you know, and I have a feeling if word gets out—"

"You mean, once word gets out?" Peter said, quirking an eyebrow. "There's really no 'ifs' about it, Dad. It's you. And Captain America. Word is gonna get out. It's exactly the kinda thing that all those gossip TV shows love to gossip about."

"Okay, then once it does get out, people might say some really ugly things, Pete," Tony continued. "And I don't want you to have to deal with anything like that. It's really nobody's business when it comes down to it, but a lot of people don't believe that. They think if they recognise your name that they can say whatever the hell they want about you."

And that was something that Tony knew from first-hand experience. The amount of times that he suspected Howard and Obadiah of paying people off to avoid broadcasting or printing something potentially defamatory about Tony's teenage and young adult escapades were too numerous to count.

"I should've said that I know that you feel the same way, Dad," Peter answered, his voice muffled against Tony's neck. "So there really shouldn't be a problem here. And it's not like people haven't said ugly things about you before, like calling you a war profiteer and the whole Merchant of Death thing. I'm not afraid of what people are gonna say about it, I just want you guys to be happy. I want all of us to be happy, and that's what Steve wants too."

*Kid just wants to be happy,* Tony thought, squeezing Peter so hard that he squeaked. *If only it were really that simple.* Tony couldn't deny that it still terrified him to admit how quickly Steve Rogers, of all people, had in only a few months time managed to tear down the iron shield that Tony had moulded around his heart all those years ago, and he hadn't even made it look difficult.

*Maybe I should've used vibranium instead.*

*Talk about fucking irony.*

And then, because he was Tony Stark and Tony Stark usually didn't know how to handle his emotions well, Tony snorted out a laugh. And then another, and another and another until he couldn't contain it any longer and both he and Peter were shaking from it.

Oh, if Howard could only see him now. Maybe this would've been enough to finally shock him into sobriety. Tony Stark, wanna-be family man.

"Dad, you're giggling!" Peter said, smirking as he pulled back.

"I do not giggle!" Tony barked, the effect completely lost as he dissolved into yet another fit of laughter. "I'll have you know that Tony Stark has never giggled in his entire life, and—"

"Until now!" stated Peter. "See? Steve's already making you happy and he's not even here!"

Tony tilted his head, still smiling as he ruffled Peter's curly hair. "I don't know what I'd do without you, buddy."
"Oh, you'd be miserable. Or dead, one of the two," Peter said without missing a beat, his words hitting Tony like a repulsor blast to the chest. Peter had meant them in jest, but he had no idea just how much truth there was to them. Tony's life had been on such a self-destructive path before Peter came along that he could have very well wound up dead in a ditch somewhere before he'd even turned thirty. He'd been so far gone for so long that even Rhodey had come close to giving up on him.

Just then the elevator doors slid open to reveal Steve, dressed in a tight white t-shirt and tan pants, with a towel draped around his neck and his blond hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. Tony's mouth went dry as he looked up at him, his broad chest still heaving from whatever workout he'd been doing. Peter had mentioned something about Steve taking some boxing lessons with Happy, something that Tony could definitely appreciate, and that he had hung up a few punching bags in the gym for Steve to practice with. Happy used to be a pretty decent amateur boxer in his youth, as he liked to say, and had often mentioned to Tony that he wouldn't mind getting back in the ring from time to time.

"Hey, Tony, Peter," Steve said, smiling through his panting breaths. Tony's face flushed hot and he squirmed, very much aware of Peter glancing between the two of them like he was watching the ball volleying back and forth at a tennis match. How in the hell could Steve act so casually like that, like he had no damn idea how handsome—or rather, hot—he was?

"Did you have a good day at school today, Peter?" Steve asked, and Tony could swear that he was almost smirking. Maybe he was somewhat aware of the effect he had on Tony after all.

"It was okay," answered Peter with a shrug. "Nothing too exciting."

"Well, exciting isn't always better," Tony murmured, clearing his throat. "I think I'm gonna go to the lab for a bit."

"All right," said Steve as he blotted his sweat-drenched face with the towel. "Peter, would you like to help me with dinner after I shower?"

"Heck, yeah!" Peter exclaimed as he jumped up from the couch. "What're we making tonight?"

"Oh, you'll see," answered Steve. His gaze locked with Tony's again and he winked, his blue eyes crinkling with mischief.

Yep. He did know exactly what he was doing. Maybe Captain America wasn't as pure as he liked to let on after all.

And the worst part was that it was working. As soon as Steve said the word 'shower', Tony's mind had immediately conjured a picture of him naked and glistening in that luxurious shower in the master bathroom, with streams of water splashing down on those firm, gorgeous pecs and abs that Tony desperately wanted to feel beneath his fingertips. The shower that just happened to be big enough for two people.

"Dad?" Peter asked. "Aren't you going to the lab?"

"Ah… yeah," Tony stammered, very much aware that his face was now the colour of an overripe tomato. If Steve could manage to undo him this much with just a few pointed looks, he was likely to explode by the time they finally got around to doing more than just looking.

"I'm… that's exactly where I'm going, yes it is."

"We'll call you when dinner's ready, Tony," Steve said as he patted Peter's shoulder.
Not trusting himself to speak, Tony could only nod as he turned on his heel and headed directly for his lab, pausing just long enough to toss a reminder at Peter about homework before entering.

"Your heart rate is quite elevated above your usual level, sir," JARVIS announced as soon as Tony tapped his monitors to life. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, JARVIS," Tony mumbled. He inhaled as deep a breath as he could, letting it out slowly as he pressed his palms to his flaming cheeks, trying to cool himself down.

"Your vital sign readings are indeed unusual, sir," JARVIS added. "Is there anything I should be made aware of?"

"Not yet, J," answered Tony, his fingers flying over his specialised keyboard. He brought up a schematic of his newest suit, the one he had designated as the Mark IV. His Mark III had gotten a bit more shot up than he'd originally realised upon further examination the previous night, so Tony had decided to just scrap it and move forward rather than trying to patch up the dozens of bullet holes covering its surface.

Plus if he just started over, it made it a bit easier to hide the extent of the damage from Peter as well.

"Let's get going on the rendering for the Mark IV," Tony said. "Only design changes are an increase in the gauntlet thickness by three millimeters and the extra flexibility I added across the shoulders and neck, which should be indicated in the database."

"Very good, sir. Should I make the appropriate adjustments to the robotics as well?"

"Yeah, might as well," answered Tony, tapping his chin. It would be really handy if he didn't have to rely on his complicated robotics system in order to suit up and down, but the design of the armour itself didn't really lend itself to too much portability, or at least not yet. "And while you're doing that, open a new design file designated as Mark V. I'm... gonna try something new for the next one."

"That's usually code for 'I'm planning on causing structural damage to the laboratory', sir," answered JARVIS.

"JARVIS, how could you say such a thing?" Tony exclaimed, feigning hurt. "You know I always operate under the strictest of precautions."

"If that is indeed the case, sir, I'm fairly certain I would not want to see an example when you are not operating under the strictest of precautions," JARVIS said. "Render for the Mark IV is complete, shall I commence with assembly?"

Tony hesitated. Going forward with the assembly while Peter was still awake could potentially lead to questions on why Tony needed yet another new suit, which would then lead to Tony either having to lie to Peter, or admit to him that his flyovers were a bit more involved than just simply flying over. While getting hit by that F-22 Raptor flying at Mach 1+ had hurt like a sonofabitch, the bumps and bruises had been more than worth it to finally be able to liberate Yinsen's village of Gulmira from under the Ten Rings' thumb. And leaving Abu lying in the snow-sprinkled sand to face whatever justice the remaining villagers had decided to dispense had felt even better. It had taken all of Tony's self-control and then some to not just blast the asshole's head clean off once Tony caught up to him, especially after he had witnessed a little boy not too much younger than Peter being forcibly ripped from his father's frantic arms.

"Better wait until Pete's asleep for the assembly, J," Tony said quietly. "Don't want to worry him if I can avoid it."
"Very well, sir," JARVIS replied, and Tony cringed at the reproachfulness in the UI's voice. "However, might I remind you of Master Peter's intelligence quotient score? And while Captain Rogers may not have attained the rank of genius, he is far from what anyone would consider unintelligent. I believe he even claims to possess an eidetic memory, if I recall correctly."

"If you recall correctly. As if you didn't have an eidetic memory too," Tony said sarcastically. He clapped his hands together, closing out the holographic projection of the Mark IV. "No, a reminder wasn't necessary, JARVIS. I am well aware of the level of both Captain Rogers' and Peter's intelligence."

"Very good, sir."

Dinner turned out to be lasagna and homemade garlic bread, one of Tony's very favourite meals and one that brought back a whole slew of memories of Edwin Jarvis, the Starks' faithful butler who used to make lasagna for Tony at least once a week when he was little. The relief evident on Steve's face when Tony pronounced the lasagna as absolutely delicious warmed Tony's heart, as did the sly I-told-you-so look that Peter shot Steve's way when he thought Tony wouldn't notice.

Once they were done eating Peter continued his homework, with Steve jumping right in to help him with a history paper he was working on that covered aspects of the New Deal enacted by President Franklin Roosevelt back in the thirties, something that Steve had a rather unique perspective on since he'd actually lived through it. With Midtown being a science and technically-based school, history wasn't something that had too much emphasis placed on it, but Tony knew Peter hated handing in any assignment that he considered less than perfect, and welcomed any and all opportunities to listen to Steve tell his rather humbling stories about growing up during the Great Depression.

And being the son of a billionaire, it was probably even more important for Peter to hear those stories. Tony had never known anything that even came close to a financial struggle, and while he had definitely humbled down a lot since Peter was born, he knew there were still a lot of ways he could improve. Having Steve there to explain how he and his ma often had to choose between having oil to heat their drafty Brooklyn home in the winter or having food on the table really helped to bring those points home, as well as got Tony to thinking about a few new projects he needed to suggest to Pepper the next time he saw her.

He also wondered if Steve had ever told Howard any of those stories.

Tony was deep into his work in the lab later that evening, the pulsating beat of his favourite AC/DC song blaring in the background when it cut out suddenly. Tony immediately looked up, his heart skittering as Steve stepped into the lab not three seconds later. After learning just how painful the booming sounds were to Steve's enhanced ears, Tony had written an alteration in JARVIS's programming to cut the music anytime he sensed Steve approaching.

"Hey, Tony," Steve said as he stepped over to the work area, his eyes quickly scanning the Mark IV suit Tony was busy soldering together. "More new armour?"

"Yeah," Tony answered as he set down the soldering iron, reaching for a rag to clean his hands. "I guess my last one got a bit more beat up than I first realised. Plus I had some changes I wanted to implement too, so this just makes it easier."

"Changes that'll make it less likely for you to get hit by airplanes?" Steve asked, his voice thick with worry.

"That won't happen again, Steve," Tony said firmly. "Rhodey knows it's me in the suit now, so it
Steve didn't look convinced, but thankfully chose not to press the issue. "Speaking of Colonel Rhodes," he said. "I hope you don't mind, but I contacted him today and asked him if he wouldn't mind coming out here for the weekend. I also contacted Director Fury, and he agreed to assign four SHIELD agents as extra security for the Tower on Friday evening, two of which will be stationed right outside the entrance to the penthouse elevator." He paused for a moment, biting his bottom lip. "As long as that's okay with you, of course."

Too stunned to even speak, Tony could only nod. The whole concept of getting any kind of babysitter for Peter was so foreign to Tony that he had been nearly paralysed with anxiety over it, and had been very close to suggesting to Steve that they just have their date outside on the landing pad rather than try and find someone he considered trustworthy enough. Rosa had always been there in the past, with Happy and Pepper filling in the few times that she'd been unavailable. But with Pepper and Happy going out of town for the weekend to scout possible honeymoon locations and Rosa still nowhere to be found, there wasn't anyone else that Tony felt comfortable leaving Peter with except maybe Rhodey, and even since the whole mess with the F-22 Tony had been trying to avoid talking too much to Rhodey out of fear of getting yet another one of his lectures. There were also private security guards stationed at both entrances to Peter's school during the day, but they weren't vetted enough to be trusted to work inside the Tower.

But Steve, he had taken it upon himself to take care of the problem, and had done so in a way that even Tony could appreciate. Having a highly trained Air Force Lt Colonel as well as four armed SHIELD agents to guard one twelve-year-old kid for an evening might seem like overkill for most people, but not for Tony. And apparently not for Steve either.

"I can't believe you got Fury to actually agree to that," Tony finally forced out past the lump in his throat. "That old bastard is usually pretty tight with the SHIELD resources."

Steve shrugged, a slight smile lighting on his full lips. "Well, I might've just maybe threatened to resign if he didn't agree. In fact, I actually pointed out that he never really gave me a choice on joining SHIELD in the first place. The only thing he told me when I woke up was that the SSR had been incorporated into SHIELD, so therefore I now worked for SHIELD, and that was pretty much it."

"Wow," Tony said, raising his eyebrows. "You actually threatened Nick Fury? That takes some gumption, I thought I was the only one brave enough to do that. Or stupid enough, I've never been able to decide which."

That brought out a laugh, one that instantly made Tony decide to add Steve Rogers' laugh to his short list of very favourite things. Steve's entire face lit up when he laughed, just like Peter's, and they both were infectious.

"I wanted to make sure you could relax on our date, Tony," Steve added. "I knew you wouldn't be able to if you were worried about Peter. And to be completely honest, neither would I."

_He's already thinking like a father. As if he wasn't already._

"Yeah," Tony said, clearing his throat. "About that. Is it safe to ask where exactly you're taking me?"

Steve smiled shyly. "Nothing too fancy, just a little place in Brooklyn that I know about. I was hoping we could take the bike though, if that's okay? I'm still not too comfortable with the idea of
driving one of your fancy cars."

"Uhh, sure," answered Tony, a burst of heat spreading across his chest at the thought of being pressed right up against Steve's strong back as he maneuvered them through the streets of Brooklyn. "I can always drive us if you're nervous though."

"I know, but I'd like to for this first date if that's okay," Steve said, his smile deepening enough to reveal the dimple in his right cheek. "Call me old-fashioned, but since I did the asking, I thought it was appropriate for me to drive."

_Oohh, you can be as old-fashioned as you want as long as I can see more of that dimple._

"Sounds good, Steve," Tony said softly. His tongue poked out to wet his dry lips as Steve smiled again and turned to leave.

"All right," he said. "Goodnight."

"'Night," Tony whispered. He watched Steve exit the lab, craning to not lose sight of him until he rounded the corner towards the bedrooms.

Peter had been absolutely correct about this date being pretty much a formality, because as it stood now, Steve could've asked Tony to try and fly to the moon again and Tony wouldn't've hesitated for a single second.

Yep. He was definitely a goner.

__________________________________________________________________________

"See?" Steve said as he pulled open the wooden door of an Irish pub called O'Malleys, holding it so Tony could enter. "Like I said, nothing too fancy."

Tony couldn't help but grin as he stepped inside the pub, with its green hanging lights, dark wooden picnic-style tables, and full-length bar lined with every kind of beer, ale, and whisky imaginable. Being a Friday evening Tony wasn't surprised to see that the place was fairly crowded, but what did surprise him was that as he and Steve were led to a table near one of the back corners was that none of the patrons they passed seemed to recognise him. Or if they did, they didn't seem to care.

And that suited Tony just fine. He was never one who could relax all that much while being watched.

"How did you hear about this place?" Tony asked once they'd placed their orders.

Steve gave him a wide smile, the smile that never failed to make Tony's heart skip a beat or three. "This place has been here for almost one hundred years, Tony. It was built the same year I was born. It looks a bit different now than it did then, but not so different that I didn't recognise it when I came out this way exploring."

"Mmm. Well, seems like a lot of good older things can be found in Brooklyn," Tony said with a rather cheeky grin. "Not that I'm at all complaining, mind you."

Oh God, there was that dimple again, and the eye crinkles, and that sort of half-smirk thing that Steve always did when he wasn't quite sure if Tony was joking or not…

Yep, he was definitely a goner.

"Well, that's good," Steve murmured. "It's not nice to discount us older fellows just on principle."
"Oh, honey," Tony said, both startled and not at how easily the endearment had rolled off his tongue. "I'm not discounting anything about you. Especially not when you wear shirts like that." Steve was wearing a plaid button-down shirt in a mix of blues that had made Tony's mouth start to water almost as soon as he laid eyes on him, something that Rhodey had picked up on almost before even Tony had.

Steve blushed as his smile widened, those blue eyes of his darkening from his usual ocean blue to a colour closer to azure as he reached for Tony's hand across the tabletop. Tony wondered briefly if they were always that bright colour or if the serum somehow enhanced them as well, but he decided not to ask. He didn't really want to think about anything that might remind him of his father at the moment.

All he wanted was to stare at the absolutely gorgeous man in front of him, the gorgeous man who for some still-unknown reason thought Tony was worthy of his attention, and listen to him tell more of his stories.

And for someone who used to consider himself an incorrigible flirt—or was it Pepper who'd called him that?—Tony couldn't remember the last time he'd been so interested in just listening. The fact that Tony often felt at a complete loss of words around Steve might've had something to do with it, as well as the purely addictive sound of Steve's gravelly voice, likely aided a bit by the rather strong Irish beer they were enjoying with their meal, but Peter had hit the proverbial nail on the head when he'd said that Tony looked at Steve like he loved him.

Because he did. There really was no sense in trying to deny it any longer. And while Tony waited for the mad rush of panic that should have followed such a thought, this time it never came. This time there was only peace, something Tony had known such little of during his lifetime that at first, he didn't even recognise it for what it was.

They ended up staying at the pub until nearly midnight, their only interruptions coming from the waiter refilling their beers and a quick text from Rhodey, telling them that Peter had gone to bed without issue and that he was following suit. Once again Steve was the ultimate romantic, insisting on paying for their meal and holding Tony's hand as they walked back to the motorcycle.

The Tower was dark and quiet when they arrived back, and after dismissing the SHIELD agent guards, Tony and Steve rode up to the penthouse floor in a comfortable silence, their fingers intertwined and sneaking furtive glances at each other, which quickly turned into a competition to see who could make the other blush harder. They were very lucky that Peter was asleep, or Tony was certain they'd never hear the end of it.

"Welcome home, sir, Captain Rogers," JARVIS said quietly as soon as they stepped off the elevator. "I trust you had a pleasant evening?"

"Very much so, J," Tony answered. "Thanks for holding down the fort."

"My pleasure, sir."

Steve tugged gently on Tony's hand, turning to face him. "I had a wonderful time tonight, Tony. Thank you."

"You're thanking me?" Tony sputtered. "Good God, you really are perfect, aren't you? Makes me wonder whatever the hell it is that you see in me."

"Tony," Steve whispered as he moved closer, his voice low and husky. "Don't do that. Don't ruin tonight with talk like that."
"Just my normal defence mechanisms kicking in," muttered Tony, huffing out a sharp breath as Steve's eyebrows knitted together and his lips dropped into a frown. "Sorry, I keep forgetting about that enhanced hearing of yours."

Steve stepped even closer, sighing lightly as he curled his left arm around Tony's waist, his beautiful face flushed and eager. "Is it all right if I kiss you goodnight?"

Instinctively, Tony raised his hands, gripping the front of Steve's leather jacket in a desperate attempt to keep himself upright. "God, Steve," he whispered. "You don't have to ask."

His right hand came up to cup Tony's cheek as Steve leaned down, pausing to say, "Yes I do," just before brushing his lips tentatively across Tony's in the sweetest kiss he could possibly imagine. It was chaste and over far too quickly, but it still nearly caused Tony's knees to buckle.

"We don't have to say goodnight yet, you know," Tony breathed as Steve pressed their foreheads together, his thumb caressing Tony's cheekbone.

"For tonight we do," answered Steve. "I want to do this the right way, Tony, for Peter's sake. I want him to see me court you."

The intensity in those piercing blue eyes caused Tony to gulp. Tony had lost his virginity when he was fifteen years old, and had kissed and slept with more people than he ever wanted to admit. And here was Steve Rogers, the poster boy for early twentieth century American purity, saying that he wanted to court Tony.

And even better, one of his main reasons was to set a good example for Tony's son.

"Are you sure you're even real, 'cause I'm still not sure I'm convinced," Tony murmured as he closed his eyes, and Steve chuckled, pressing his lips to Tony's cheek.

"Goodnight, Tony," he whispered in Tony's ear. "Sleep well."

"Yeah, okay," Tony said reluctantly. "But we can do this again tomorrow, right? At least the kissing part? 'Cause I'm pretty sure your kisses have just become as vital to my well-being as coffee."

Steve chuckled again as he released Tony, winking as he brushed the pad of his thumb across Tony's cheek. "I think you just figured out my master plan. Serves me right for falling for a genius."

"Oh my God, Steve, I swear if you don't put a door between us right now I'm gonna start begging you to touch me in some very inappropriate places," Tony groaned. Steve's eyes darkened even more as he dipped his head and pressed his lips to Tony's again, a bit more firmly this time.

"Goodnight, Tony," he repeated.

With a nod, Tony watched him head down the hallway to his bedroom, whispering an emphatic, "Holy shit," as soon as he heard the door click shut. He brought his shaking fingers to his lips, another bolt of heat shooting throughout his body as he remembered the delicious pressure of Steve's soft mouth against his. How in the hell could he be so hot and bothered from just a couple of closed-mouth kisses?

"'Cause you love him, Dad," he heard Peter's voice say in his head. "It's written all over your face every time you look at him."

Several seconds had passed before Tony realised he was just standing in the middle of the living room by himself, and he shook his head as he headed towards his bedroom on trembling legs. He
had thought about trying to get some more work done in the lab, but with the way his head was still spinning it was probably not a good idea to be working with potentially explosive electronics at the moment. He had taken out what appeared to be an entire shipment of Stark Industries weapons when he liberated Gulmira, in addition to Abu and most of his men, which he was hoping would cripple the Ten Rings enough to not be able to cause anymore trouble in the area, and maybe, just maybe, allow the U.S. Military to finally catch the rest of the bastards.

"JARVIS," Tony said as he flopped onto his bed. "Turn off my alarm for tomorrow morning, will ya? I'm gonna try to sleep in."

"Pardon me, sir?" JARVIS said. "But I believe you said something about sleeping? And in? In the same sentence?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Yes, JARVIS. Tell Pete to wake me up when he gets up, yeah?" Peter often slept in until late morning on Saturdays unless he had some sort of school event or something, and it was still too early in the school year for any of those.

"Very well, sir," answered JARVIS. "And dare I ask if you enjoyed your date tonight?"

An instant smile came to Tony's face, and he sighed happily. "Yeah, J. We had a great time."

"Very good, sir," JARVIS said. "Goodnight."

Swiping another touch of red to his latest painting, Steve sat back in his chair, tilting his head as he examined the canvas with a critical eye, the wafting sounds of the Glenn Miller Band playing on the Victrola over in the corner of the room. It was a painting of the picture he'd taken of Tony and Peter that one evening when they fell asleep during the Harry Potter movie, and Steve had been working on it for awhile now, hoping to have it finished before Christmas so he could present it to Tony as a Christmas gift.

Peter had explained to Steve that while they always exchanged gifts for Christmas, it wasn't a holiday that Tony particularly enjoyed because his parents had died in mid-December, which had tainted pretty much the entire month for Tony from then on out. But this year Steve was hoping to change that. Some of his fondest memories of growing up in Brooklyn involved Christmastime, whether it was going to see the pretty lights at night or singing carols while baking cookies with his ma, and Steve was hoping to make some similar memories this year with Tony and Peter. He had already asked Peter to help him make some Christmas cookies, to which Peter had readily agreed, and had also made some inquiries with JARVIS on locating a Christmas tree that they could put up in the living room and decorate, something that Peter said Tony had never bothered with in the past.

Steve smiled as his eyes swept across the painting again, the early afternoon sun streaming in through his bedroom windows giving it just the right amount of light to get the shade of Tony's olive skin just perfect. Peter's skin was paler, closer to Steve's, which Steve assumed came from his mother, but Tony was a full Italian with the skintone to prove it, and unfortunately it hadn't been quite as easy to replicate on the canvas.

It had been nearly three months since he and Tony's first date, three months that Steve would describe as the happiest months of his entire life. They were still taking their relationship slowly at Steve's insistence, spending a lot of time talking—and kissing, there had been plenty of that too, although they had yet to go too much further—over dessert after Peter went to bed during the week, as well as all three of them spending time together on the weekends, going to movies and other similar activities. Peter had been correct that most of the people they encountered while out and about didn't even blink when they saw Tony and Steve holding hands, something that Steve had been
Initially quite nervous about.

It was still sometimes hard for Steve to wrap his brain around the fact that he'd actually been asleep for over sixty years, lost in the Arctic ice, but if he had to do it all over again, it would be worth it if it meant that he would be able to meet and fall in love with Tony Stark and his precious son.

Steve shuddered slightly as he recalled the first few times he had attempted to sleep following his rescue, and the nightmares that had plagued him. The fistfights with the HYDRA soldiers while trying to deactivate the massive bombs targeting the United States cities. The horrific way the Red Skull seemed to just burn out of existence as he attempted to hold onto the Tesseract. The way Peggy Carter tried to hide her grief as Steve told her it was his choice to fly the Valkyrie into the water, because his life was worth the sacrifice if it meant saving millions of others.

And then there were the new nightmares that came in the months following the Starks' rescue. Peter dying in Steve's arms instead of Steve being able to save him, and Tony refusing to leave the desert as a result, not thinking himself worthy of living with Peter gone. And of Tony getting hit by another airplane while on one of his missions, only this time not making it home.

It was a good thing Steve didn't need to sleep all that much. Just like Peter and Tony, he often didn't like what he saw when he did.

Shaking his head, Steve turned his attention back to the canvas, swiping his brush along one final line before stepping back, admiring his work. It was finally ready.

As Steve gathered up his brushes, intending to take them into the bathroom to wash them, his ears suddenly picked up the sound of Tony's raised voice coming from the living room. Tony had said he was going into the office that morning after he dropped Peter off at school, so Steve hadn't been expecting him back until later that afternoon.

"JARVIS, who is Tony speaking with?" Steve asked.

"It is Obadiah Stane, Captain," replied JARVIS. "And if you don't mind, I would recommend that you make your presence known. Mr Stane seems to be quite agitated."

Steve's heart immediately started to thud. Tony had mentioned something the previous night during dinner about having a meeting that day with Obadiah Stane, but the fact that Stane had left the office and followed Tony home to continue whatever argument they had apparently started worried him. Steve trusted his instincts, and they did not at all trust Obadiah Stane.

"Do you think I need my shield, JARVIS?" Steve asked quickly, eyeing the round weapon sitting against the wall on the floor. He always kept it right by the door, just in case.

"I do not believe so, Captain," JARVIS replied. "While Mr Stane has a tendency to be rather loud, I have never known him to become violent. But I do believe that Mr Stark would appreciate your presence."

"I do not believe so, Captain," JARVIS replied. "While Mr Stane has a tendency to be rather loud, I have never known him to become violent. But I do believe that Mr Stark would appreciate your presence."

"He hasn't become violent yet, at least," muttered Steve. "But he's still no better than another backalley bully."

"I cannot believe that you've allowed this to progress as far as it has, Tony!" Stane was bellowing as Steve stepped into the hallway. "I mean, all the people in the office are already talking about it, which means it's gonna hit the gossip pages within the next couple of days, which means even more bad publicity for the company, which means—"

"And just how in the hell does my relationship with Steve Rogers equal bad publicity for the
company?" Tony snapped back. "There is absolutely nothing in the Stark Industries employee handbook that dictates who any of its employees are allowed to date, and that includes me!"

"Oh, come on, Tony! You're not just some chick typing up reports all day down in one of the data offices!" Stane shouted. "You're the goddamn CEO! You need to set an example! Can you imagine how your father would feel about this if he were still alive? About you parading around all of New York City holding another guy's hand? If nothing else, think about the example you're setting for that damn kid of yours!"

Damn kid? Oh no you didn't just call Peter a damn kid!

"Don't you dare bring my father or Peter into this, Obie!" Tony stated, his voice shaking as he tried to stay in control. "My father cared more about Steve Rogers than he ever did about me, so that argument simply doesn't fly here. And as for my son, I couldn't think of a better person to share him with than Steve, and that's all you need to hear about that."

"Tony?" Steve said as he stepped into the living room, walking right up to Tony and grabbing his hand. "Mr Stane, is there something I can help you with?"

Stane's mouth opened and closed a few times as he struggled with how to respond. He obviously hadn't realised that Steve was at home.

"No, thank you," Stane finally responded, practically spitting out the words. "Tony and I were just having a… discussion. It doesn't concern you."

"It sure didn't sound like just any discussion," Steve said firmly. "It sounded like you were berating him about me, Mr Stane, so I'd say yes, it does concern me."

Throwing Steve a glare that could've melted ice, Stane stepped closer to Tony, placing his hand on Tony's shoulder and leaning in uncomfortably close.

"Look, Tony," he said, his slimy tone causing Steve's stomach to flip. "I'm gonna tell it to you like it is. There are a few members of the Board who think that ever since your little incident in Afghanistan that you've gone and lost your mind. I mean, first you come home and immediately shut down the only division of the company that turns a decent amount of profit, then you disappear for days at a time, feeding Pepper a bunch of lame excuses about doing research on something that you still haven't seen fit to tell me about, and now you're going all over New York City and being photographed kissing Captain fucking America with your kid standing right next to you? I mean, what the hell, Tony? It's like when Howard died all over again with how irresponsible you're acting!"

Little incident in Afghanistan? Steve thought, gritting his teeth. As if Tony and Peter were just taking a vacation there or something?

Tony's upper lip curled into a sneer as he twisted out of Stane's grip. "I told you, Obie," he said, his voice pulsing with anger. "Do not mention my father ever again. And as for the rest, I think I have a few questions of my own that I'd like you to answer. The main one being how in the hell did the Ten Rings manage to get their hands on not one, but two of the Jericho missile prototypes after the weapons division was shut down?" He stepped closer to Stane, looking him straight in the eye. "Is someone at the company double dealing, Obie? Are they? 'Cause if that's the case, that crosses a line that I didn't think we were at all capable of crossing. And if you knew about it and didn't say anything or try to stop it, then that makes you an accessory to murder."

Stane's face flushed so red that Steve was surprised it didn't explode. "Don't you dare make
accusations like that with no evidence to back them up, Tony!" he shouted, wagging his finger right in front of Tony's nose. "Shipments have been known to get diverted before, but if you think that I had *anything* to do with what happened over in Goldana or wherever-the-hell that place is called, then you're an even bigger idiot than I thought you were!"

Steve was fuming, and he tugged on Tony's hand, backing him slightly away and fighting the nearly overwhelming urge to step in front of him. "There's no need for raised voices here, Mr Stane," he said in his Captain's voice. "If you have a problem with that, then you're more than welcome to leave."

Stane's nostrils flared as his eyes flicked between Tony and Steve. "You know what, Tony?" he said. "You really haven't changed at all. You're still as big of a goddamn child as you were when you took over the company. And I should've stopped you then, like I wanted to, but I didn't because I respected that your father would've wanted you in that top position." He took a step back, adjusting the knot of his patterned silk tie as he let out an evil grin. "But now I don't give a shit anymore about what your father wanted for you. Because all you've done since you've been back is to spit on what he built for you, and that is something I can no longer tolerate."

"Is that a threat, Mr Stane?" Steve said as he stepped forward. He really should've grabbed the shield.

"Call it whatever you want, *Captain*," Stane sneered, not taking his eyes off of Tony. "But I'm filing an injunction against you with the Board of Directors as soon as I leave here, Tony, citing a mental breakdown. And once they vote to kick you out, then we'll see just how long your hot blond boyfriend sticks around to leech off of you."

Steve clenched his fists and took another step forward, stopped by Tony's palm against his chest. "Don't, Steve," Tony said in a low voice. "I got this."

Turning back to Stane, Tony squared his shoulders. "You go ahead and try, Obie. But I highly doubt that you'll get that particular injunction or whatever-the-hell you think you're trying to fly too far. I've already put in the paperwork to transfer the position of Stark Industries CEO over to Pepper Potts, which means she'll be allowed to assemble her own upper-level staff members as she sees fit. And I believe," he paused to check his watch, "that the Board is voting to accept that transfer right now, as we speak."

Stane's eyes went so wide they nearly popped out of his head. "You can't do that!" he yelled. "That's not possible! How in the hell—?"

"Your motion has just been passed, sir," JARVIS piped up. "Unanimously."

"Oh, thanks J," Tony said innocently, quirking an eyebrow. "I guess you're a bit too late, Obie, sorry 'bout ruining all of your big plans. Now, get the hell out of our house before Steve throws you out."

With a murderous look in Steve's direction, Stane snapped his mouth closed and spun on his well-polished heel, stomping towards the elevator. As he stepped inside, he turned to face them again.

"This isn't over yet, Tony," he said just as the doors started to close. "Not by a long shot."

As soon as Steve heard the elevator start to move, Tony glanced up at the ceiling. "JARVIS, you locked all of Obie's codes out of all the Stark Industries buildings, yeah?"

"Indeed I have, sir," JARVIS replied. "They are no longer active."

Steve's heart was thudding against his ribcage, and he gripped Tony's shoulders, turning him to face
him. He'd had his suspicions about Obadiah Stane since the very beginning, and now he was worried that lighting a fuse underneath the man would only cause him to blow up rather than burn. "Tony, are you sure this was such a good idea? Stane... he seems dangerous! He could go after Peter, or Pepper, or come after you, how could you just let him leave? We should call the police, or Director Fury, or—"

But Tony only shook his head as he cupped Steve's cheeks, tugging Steve's head down to silence him with a kiss. "It's okay, Steve. Obie may be a lot of things, but I don't think he's dangerous. The dude barely knows how to run a computer, you're better at it now than he ever was. He's always been a finance guy, only concerned with dollars and cents. And Peter's fine, he's sitting safely in his physics class right now. I had two extra security guys assigned to the school this morning just in case, and JARVIS assured me that he's none the wiser."

Frowning, Steve wrapped his arms around Tony, with Tony dropping his forehead against Steve's shoulder. He was shaking; it had been a long time since he'd felt this rattled. "Even so, a little heads-up about something like this would be nice next time. If there even has to be a next time, which I really hope there doesn't."

"I'm still getting used to sharing that kind of stuff, Steve," Tony mumbled against his neck. "Forgive me?"

"Of course I do," Steve answered. "I just..." his voice trailed off as he squeezed his eyes closed, his heart beating a staccato rhythm against his ribcage. "I just worry about you and Peter, and now—, I —, I love you, Tony. I love you, and I love Peter so much, and I don't want to see either of you get hurt. I don't—, I don't know what I would do, I don't think I could survive it."

Tony pulled back to look up at him, his brown eyes glassy and his lips stretching into that quirky half-smile that Steve adored.

"You do?"

"Yes," Steve whispered. He pressed his forehead against Tony's, tightening his arms around him. "I thought that was pretty obvious to you by now."

"Well, people have often told me that I have a tendency to be oblivious, so..." His voice trailed off as he sucked in a deep breath, his brown eyes vulnerable but with none of the hauntedness that Steve always dreaded seeing. "I love you too, Steve. I do. And I've never said those words to anyone except to Pete and my mother."

Steve's eyes filled with tears as his body flooded with warmth. Those were the words he'd been waiting to hear for the last three months. Those were the words he'd needed to hear before they progressed any further. Peter had told Steve that Tony loved him, but hearing it from Peter and hearing it from Tony himself were two completely different things, and Steve had still been too afraid of getting his heart broken to go any further without hearing it from Tony first.

"Thank you, Tony," he murmured. He slid his fingers under Tony's chin, tilting his head up so he could kiss him.

"Can we pick Peter up at school together today?" Steve asked once they broke apart. "It would—, I know you said that he's fine, and I'm sure he is, but it would just make me feel a bit better."

He felt Tony smile against his chest. "Sure thing, Papa."
I'm on tumblr at geekymoviemom and geeky-writes, stop by and say hi! :)  

Chapter End Notes

Lots of progress made here, and we knew Obadiah couldn't stay out of the picture for too long. ;)

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of the wonderful feedback, I'm so glad you're enjoying the
tory! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Tony, I'd really feel better if we could keep the extra security people assigned here for the time
being," Steve said as Tony pulled into the back parking lot of the school. "I know you probably
think I'm being paranoid, but… I just want to make sure that Peter's protected as much as possible
when he's not with either one of us, especially now that—"

"It's already done," Tony replied as he cut the car's engine, turning to Steve and placing a hand on
his knee. "I've already assigned them here until further notice. Two guys stationed inside the school."

"And they're your own personal security guards?" Steve asked. "They don't work for Stark
Industries? They don't work for Obadiah?"

"No, Steve," Tony said firmly. He reached for Steve's hand, squeezing it gently. "They're my guys
who I pay out of my own pocket, and they fall under Happy's jurisdiction, whom I trust with my own life. And Peter's, and yours, for that matter.

Steve swallowed hard, his jaw tight and twitching like it often did when he was nervous or uncomfortable. "Well… good. Then I guess it should be okay."

"You're really worried about Obadiah for some reason, aren't you?" Tony asked after a short pause.

"Yes," Steve whispered. "I am."

"Mmm, okay. Can you tell me why, exactly?" Tony asked gently. He'd meant what he said back at the Tower, that Obie was pretty much all bark and no bite, but he wasn't about to just dismiss Steve's concerns out of hand either.

"I don't know," Steve answered, huffing in frustration. "It's just… an instinct, what you'd call a gut feeling, I guess. And in the Army we were taught to always trust our instincts because they might just be the one thing that would end up saving our asses."

"Ah, ah, ah, language there, old man," Tony said, trying to lighten up the leaden mood, but Steve was having none of it.

"Tony—"

"I'm sorry, Steve," Tony said, trailing a fingertip across the back of Steve's large hand, feeling his long fingers clench around his own. It was still surprising—and also a bit frightening, he had to admit—just how much Tony craved touching Steve. Whether it was holding his hand while they walked down the street or cuddling up with him on the couch in the evenings while they watched movies with Peter, Tony had never been this affectionate with anyone else except Peter, and he always assumed that was because Peter craved his constant reassuring familial touch. But maybe it really was him all along.

And if it was this difficult now to keep his hands relatively to himself before they'd even slept together, then Tony could only imagine how much more intense his touch craving was going to get once they did. Which, despite Steve's desire to take things slow, Tony was really hoping would be sooner rather than later.

"I'd tell you that I have a tendency to joke around at very inappropriate times," he said. "But you've probably noticed that already."

That at least drew a slight smile from Steve. "Yeah, I have. It's a bit hard to not notice."

"Okay, so… what I'm trying to say is that I am in no way discounting your gut feeling, all right. Not at all. And I'm absolutely serious that I'll take whatever measures you want me to take. No questions."

\textit{Even if I think it's a bit overkill. Especially now that SHIELD thinks that they've discovered goddamn aliens for Christ's sake.}

Steve's shoulders sagged a bit in relief, and he brought Tony's hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles. "Thank you. I don't like how callously Stane spoke about Peter, Tony, and I don't like that he threatened you. Not at all."

"You don't need to thank me," added Tony. "Now, are the two extra security guys inside the school enough for you?"
"For now," Steve answered. "You said that you've locked Stane out of all the Stark Industries buildings already, right?"

"Yep."

"And that includes the Tower?"

"Absolutely," replied Tony. "Especially the Tower. And no one has access to the penthouse elevator except you, me, Pete, Hap, Pepper, and Rhodey anyway, so that shouldn't be a problem. Obie was only up there today because I told JARVIS it was okay to let him in."

"Mmm," mumbled Steve. "Is it okay to ask why you let him in, then?"

Tony's lips stretched into a sly smile. "Well… I may have known that you were home, and I may have just wanted you to be present when I told him about the changes I'd made to the company's hierarchy."

And maybe, just maybe, there was a little bit of fear there too.

All right, maybe Steve's not wrong to be a bit paranoid.

"Well, I'm glad that you did," Steve said. "It was probably better to have a conversation like that away from the offices anyway." He drew his full bottom lip between his teeth. "And when you defended me to him? That was really nice, I have to admit."

"And you go right ahead and admit it, hon," Tony replied, smiling. Peter had told Tony that Steve was still a bit nervous about possible public backlash to their relationship, so Tony was more than willing to try and put those fears to rest as much as possible. "I don't mind that at all. In fact, I'll even call a press conference if you want. Or I can rent one of those skywriting airplanes, have it spell out 'I love Steve Rogers' up there right above the Tower for everyone to see."

Steve chuckled as he shot Tony a confused look. "There're airplanes that… write?"

"Oh, sure," answered Tony. "I'm surprised you haven't seen one of 'em yet. They're pretty popular for marriage proposals during baseball games, if I remember correctly. A bit awkward for the proposal recipient if the answer turns out to be 'no', but I think you get the picture."

"We haven't even been to a baseball game yet," Steve said. "I'd like to go sometime though, maybe next spring? Peter told me last summer that he's never been to one."

Tony tilted his head, trying to think of a time when he himself had ever been to a baseball game and couldn't recall a single one. "Yeah, and he's not the only one."

"Really?" Steve asked, crinkling his eyebrows. "You've never been to a game either?"

Tony shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "Baseball games were never really on Howard Stark's list of approved leisure activities."

A flash of sadness swept across Steve's bright blue eyes. "Mmm. Well, Director Fury mentioned being able to get tickets for the Mets way back when they first found me, so maybe I'll take him up on that offer this spring. I think it'd be fun."

"Honey, I can buy us all season tickets if it'll make you happy," Tony stated. "Hell, I can buy out one of their fancy-schmancy luxury boxes if you want. We don't need to rely on old Fury for anything."
Steve smiled widely, revealing his dimple and sending a bolt of warmth across Tony's chest. God, he was such a sucker for that dimple.

"As someone who was usually forced to watch the games through the holes in the stadium walls, I think just sitting inside the stadium itself will be fine, Tony," he said. "As long as you and Peter are with me it'll be plenty of fun. Besides, aren't we going back to California for the summer again?"

"Well, yeah," Tony said slowly. "But we could always just fly back for the games…"

His voice trailed off as he noticed Peter coming out of the school building with Ned by his side. Ned was talking and gesturing wildly as he often did, and while Peter was listening to him, he seemed to be just a bit more subdued than his usual to Tony's eyes.

"Hey, Mr Stark, Captain Rogers!" Ned said, poking his head inside the car as soon as Peter opened the backseat door. "How're you guys doing today?"

"Hello, Ned," said Steve.

"Doing well, Mr Leeds," Tony said with a wink. "You got a ride home there, kid?"

"Oh yeah, my mom's on her way," replied Ned. "In fact, she just pulled into the parking lot here. See ya tomorrow, Peter?"

"Uh huh, Ned," Peter answered. "See ya tomorrow."

As soon as Ned closed the door, Peter tipped his head back against the seat, rubbing at his eyes under his glasses.

"You all right, Pete?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, just got a bit of a headache," answered Peter. "Ned was talking a bit more than usual today, and I think he's gotten louder as he's gotten taller or something 'cause he just seemed really loud. And I'm really, really hungry. Like lunch seems like a thousand years ago hungry."

Steve shot Tony a worried look, and Tony shook his head, trying to be reassuring. It wasn't all that unusual for Peter to be worn out after a school day, and it definitely wasn't unusual for him to be hungry.

"Mmm. Your lungs aren't misbehaving again though, are they?"

"No, Dad," Peter said pointedly. "I didn't need to use my inhaler at all today, actually."

"Oh, well that's good. Steve and I will try not to talk too much on the way home then, all right?"

"Nah, I don't mind when you guys talk," Peter said. "And I feel better now anyway. I think I might need some new glasses though, Dad. My eyes have been acting a bit wonky lately."

"Wonky?" Steve asked, glancing at Tony in alarm when Peter shrugged.

"I dunno, just… weird," Peter said. "Almost like my eyes are getting better or something. I can even see when I take my glasses off, but not all the time."

"Yeah, okay, bud," said Tony. He reached into his pocket for his phone. "JARVIS, get ahold of Pete's ophthalmologist, will you? Tell her we'll take her first available appointment. Or even better, ask her if she'll make a house call."
"Very good, sir," JARVIS replied.

"You don't think we should have him seen by someone now, Tony?" asked Steve. "I mean, this isn't normal, is it?"

"No, please!" Peter whined. "I'm fine, really! My headache is almost gone already and I just really wanna go home. I'm starving!"

"Honey, if the kid says he's starving then he's pretty much fine," Tony said, giving Steve's hand a reassuring squeeze. Steve was probably still rattled from the confrontation with Obadiah. "Do you wanna stop and pick up something on the way, Pete?"

"Yes, please," Peter practically moaned. "I don't really care what, I just need something."

Thirty minutes later, loaded down with enough burgers and fries to feed an entire army squadron, they arrived back at the Tower.

"Welcome home, sir, Captain, Master Peter," JARVIS said as soon as they stepped off the elevator, with Peter making an immediate beeline to the kitchen to start eating. "Miss Potts has left you three messages, Director Fury from SHIELD has left one message, and Master Peter's ophthalmologist appointment has been scheduled for tomorrow at 3:30 pm."

"Right after school, that sounds perfect," Tony said. "Thanks, J."

"Tony, we should tell him what happened here today," Steve said quietly. "I don't want to keep Peter in the dark about Obadiah."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," answered Tony. "Just let me see what Pepper needs first and then we can sit down with him."

At Steve's nod, Tony headed into his lab and tapped his monitors to life, pulling up Pepper's messages just as JARVIS announced that she was on the line.

"Put her through, J."

"Tony!" Pepper shrieked as soon as she'd blinked into focus. "Obadiah called me about an hour ago saying that you'd thrown him out, and—"

"I did, Pepper," Tony said firmly. "Obie's done. He's out. That was my final swan song as CEO of the company. And you're welcome, by the way."

"Welcome?" asked Pepper. "Why would I be happy about this? You ask me to take over a multi-billion dollar corporation and then you expect me to do it with no CFO? Are you nuts?"

"Jury's out," Tony replied. "Seriously though, Pep, you just gotta trust me on this. Obie came over here raining fire and brimstone and threatened to outst me right before I told him about the Board vote, so—"

"Hold on, he did what? But… why on earth would he do such a thing?"

"'Cause he's still pissed at me for shutting down the weapons division," said Tony. "Obie's always been of the mindset that weapons were the only decent thing that we made at Stark Industries, and since we can't exactly sell a single smartphone for millions of dollars, he then assumed we were just gonna up and go bankrupt. And then he even dared to insult Steve to my face too, the asshole."
Pepper frowned as she ran her perfectly manicured hand down her ponytail. "Well, I just wish you would've told me about this before the Board vote, Tony. Now I have to get interviews set up for a new CFO, and I still don't have any decent leads on those sales invoices you asked me to find, and —"

"Look, forget about the invoices right now and just concentrate on structuring your command team," Tony said. "I… um… I think I've already taken care of the rogue weapons, so that hopefully shouldn't be a problem anymore."

"Yeah, about that," Pepper said sharply. "Colonel Rhodes called looking for you as well, saying he needed to speak to you as soon as possible."

Tony's head snapped up in surprise, his eyebrows knitting together. "Huh? Why would he call the office looking for me when he could just call me personally? That doesn't make any sense."

Pepper pursed her lips as she fumbled through a pile of papers on her desk. "Well, he might've mentioned something about having to go through official military channels, but I'm not sure what he meant by that exactly, so—"

"Oh, great. And that's probably why Fury called too," Tony muttered, his right hand instinctively wrapping around his left forearm. The deep bruises left by the Raptor hit had long since healed, but the arm still ached from time to time, and it was already starting to get annoying.

"Yeah," Pepper agreed. "Look, I know I'm not completely up to speed with everything that you've been doing, and that's actually okay with me, but it doesn't look like you're gonna be able to keep whatever it is a secret for too much longer."

"Yeah, not if Fury's already all up in arms about it," agreed Tony.

Shit.

"So you might want to think about how you're gonna explain yourself, Tony," Pepper continued. "Because this… personal vendetta of yours seems to have just gotten a whole lot bigger. Especially if SHIELD's trying to get involved."

"Yeah, when are they never not involved," grumbled Tony. "I'll take care of Rhodey and Fury, Pep. You just worry about getting your staff in place. I'll approve anyone that you think you need to run smoothly."

"All right. And have you thought about what your new title should be? I mean, you're still the majority shareholder, so technically you still call the shots, I'm just—"

"Nah, I'm sure you can think of something," Tony said. "Just so long as I don't have someone like Obadiah breathing down my neck every three minutes looking for specs, I should be good."

Pepper slumped back into her leather chair, blowing a stray piece of hair from her eyes. "All right, then. Thank you, Tony. Thank you for having so much confidence in me. This opportunity, well, Happy and I both appreciate it."

"Ah, you earned it," Tony said, rather dismissively. He'd never really learned to take compliments well, especially sincere compliments. "The company deserves someone like you to run it. And tell Happy you're welcome for me, yeah?"

"I will," Pepper said with a wide smile. "Talk to you soon."
As soon as she clicked off Tony huffed out a sharp breath, running his palm down his face. "JARVIS, did Fury say what he wanted when he called?"

"He was not specific in his message, sir," answered JARVIS. "Only that it was rather urgent."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Tony. "Go ahead and call him, might as well get this over with."

"Very good, sir."

"Tony," Nick Fury's booming voice said as soon as he appeared on the monitor.

"Yeah, Nick," Tony said with a sigh. "What do you want now?"

Fury tilted his head, his one good eye narrowing. "I don't really appreciate your tone, Tony," he said. "Especially since I've been working my ass off all day trying to cover yours."

"Trying to cover my… what the hell for, Nick?" Tony asked in surprise. "What are the proverbial 'they' saying that I did now?"

"The proverbial 'they' are saying that you took out a multi-million dollar Air Force fighter jet with your iron suit when you were out there flying one of your revenge missions, Tony," Fury stated. "And from what I understand, the proverbial 'they' are correct."

"What?" exclaimed Tony. "That was months ago! Why the hell is this just coming up now? Or maybe I should say, again? And I made sure that pilot got out safely, thank you very much, which is more that I can say for myself."

Fury leaned closer to the screen, steepling his hands under his chin. "Because it appears that someone in the Air Force didn't quite buy the whole bullshit 'training exercise' excuse, and now they're wanting to investigate. And you know what happens when the military wants to investigate, don't you, Tony?"

"Goddamnit," muttered Tony. "So that's why Rhodey called the office looking for me instead of here. He was trying to buy me some time."

"That's likely an accurate assessment," answered Fury. "Which is why I need to meet with you and Captain Rogers as soon as possible. Colonel Rhodes may have quite a bit of clout in his position, but even he has superiors, and their patience is likely a lot thinner than his."

"Yeah, superiors who probably want to confiscate my tech," Tony grumbled. "Well, they can't have it. It's personal property."

"You did kind of leave them a bit high and dry when you shut down your weapons manufacturing division," Fury said. "And from what I understand, they still haven't found a replacement company that they think is suitable."

"I'm not surprised. Our designs were the best in the business, it's gonna be impossible to top them."

"And that's exactly the kind of thing that makes people like the Joint Chiefs very cranky," said Fury. "And cranky generals tend to look for people to pass the buck too, hence Colonel Rhodes' telephone call."

Tony let out a heavy sigh, tapping his fingers on the counter. "So… what're you proposing?"

"That's not something I wish to discuss over the phone, Tony," answered Fury. "I'd rather discuss it
in person, with both you and Captain Rogers. When are you free?"

"I suppose tomorrow would work, once we get Pete off to school," Tony said, scowling. "You mind coming here? We have to take Pete to the eye doctor in the afternoon, so…"

"I suppose that would be easier for you and Captain Rogers," Fury replied. "Yeah, I can do that. Ten o'clock work for you?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll make sure JARVIS knows to let you in."

"I appreciate that. I'll see you both tomorrow."

As soon as the screen went blank, Tony rolled his eyes. He supposed he should've realised that the military would try to come after his tech, but he had been hoping to at least root out the rest of the remaining Ten Rings' bastards before it happened. And he wasn't honestly sure that allowing SHIELD access to it would be any better. SHIELD was just another government agency, with their own goals and agendas, and while Tony had softened a bit towards Nick Fury over the years, he still didn't fully trust him.

He found Steve and Peter sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by discarded burger wrappers, with Steve helping Peter with his history homework. Tony's heart gave a lurch at the sight of their two heads bent together over Peter's textbooks, one blond and one brunet, as Steve told Peter yet another one of his war stories. Tony knew that Steve adored the opportunities he had to help Peter with his schoolwork, especially since most of the rest of Peter's school subjects still zoomed over Steve's head.

"Did you know, Pete, that Steve actually got to meet General Patton once?" Tony said as he came up behind them, laying a hand on each of their shoulders. "And that he was even grumpier than he always looks in his pictures?"

Peter's eyebrows shot up as he grinned. "Yikes! He must've been pretty grumpy then!"

"Well, war tends to make some people a bit grumpy I guess," Steve said, smiling as he ruffled Peter's hair. "And Patton didn't really fit in with the rest of the political mould at the time either, so…"

"Goddamn politicians," Tony muttered under his breath. "Always thinking they know what's best for everyone. Are you feeling any better now, Pete?"

"Oh yeah, loads," Peter answered. "My headache went away once I started eating, so I'm fine now."

"I can't believe how much he ate, Tony," Steve said in amazement. "I don't think even I could've eaten that much. I even had to tell him to slow down a couple of times so he didn't choke!"

"Mmm. Better start packing a snack or something that you can munch on between classes then, buddy," Tony said. "Don't want you getting a headache every afternoon just 'cause you're hungry."

"Uh huh."

Steve looked up at Tony with questioning eyes, placing his hand on Peter's arm when Tony nodded. "Hey, little guy," he said. "Your dad and I have something we need to talk to you about, okay?"

"Um… sure? Is everything okay?" Peter asked, gulping as Tony slid into the chair next to him.

"Yeah, bud," answered Tony. "There's just been some changes to the hierarchy at Stark Industries that Steve and I want make sure that you're aware of."
"Oh, is that all?" Peter said with a relieved smile. "You made it sound like it was something serious or scary or something."

Tony and Steve exchanged glances. "It's not scary, Pete," Tony said. "I stepped down as CEO today. Pepper's gonna run the company for me for the foreseeable future, which means I'll be able to concentrate on designing things and developing new tech. Now, this doesn't change anything regarding your inheritance or anything like that, so—"

"Oh my God, Dad, that's so awesome!" Peter exclaimed as he leaped from his chair, throwing his arms around Tony's neck. "You were never happy doing all that administrative stuff, Dad, you really weren't! You've always liked being down in the workshop building stuff a lot better than sitting in Board meetings. And Pepper's way more organised than you are anyway, so I bet she's gonna be really good at it."

"All right, all right, all right, I get the picture," Tony muttered as he patted Peter's back. "And like I said, this doesn't change anything regarding your inheritance, buddy, just so—"

"Dad, you know I don't care about that either," said Peter as he pulled back, scowling behind his glasses. "I never have."

Tony's throat tightened as he glanced up at Steve, giving his head a slight shake. Peter had always told Tony that their money didn't matter to him, but it was never something that Tony could completely wrap his mind around until Steve came along. Listening to Steve's stories of growing up with practically nothing had changed both he and Peter for the better, and while Tony knew that Stark Industries was in absolutely no danger of folding or anything, it still filled him with pride to know that Peter had escaped the hook of being obsessed with his monetary worth, something that Howard Stark had never managed and Tony still struggled with.

"Yeah, I know, buddy," replied Tony. "Even so, with the new things that we're planning to start focusing on, I don't think you'll need to worry about Stark Industries going under anytime soon. In fact, I'm looking forward to having your help with a few of those projects, if you don't mind."

"You know I don't mind!" Peter exclaimed. "I love helping you come up with new ideas! What are we gonna start on first?"

Tony let out a wide grin. He absolutely loved how much Peter loved working with him. "Well, buddy, I've been thinking, since the big arc reactor has done such a spectacular job of powering our factory out in California, that we could—"

"Tony," Steve suddenly cut in, clearing his throat. "We need to tell him."

"Huh?" asked Peter. "Tell me what? Is something wrong?"

"No, Pete," Tony said quickly. "Just… Obadiah came by earlier today, and… well… we kinda had an argument, and I fired him. He's out."

Peter wrinkled his nose as he glanced between Steve and Tony. "Oh. Was he trying to convince you to start making weapons again?"

"Among other things, yes," answered Tony. "He took a couple of pretty big digs at Steve too, and you know that's just not okay with me."

"And it shouldn't be," Peter stated. He leaned against Steve's arm, smiling when Steve wrapped it around his shoulders. "It's not okay with me either. But why do you look so worried about it?"
"We're not worried, buddy," Tony said. "Call it… being cautious. You know how uppity Obadiah tends to get sometimes, and since this was one of the first times that Steve saw him like that, he just…"

"Let's just say that I'm glad we're not going to have to deal with him anymore," Steve said.

"Well, it's probably not very nice of me to say, but I'm not too sorry that he's gone either," said Peter. "I know he never liked me very much."

Steve's head snapped up in alarm. "Why do you say that, little guy?"

Peter shrugged, biting his lower lip. "Oh, I dunno. Just the way he would always look at me. His eyes would get all narrow, like he was mad or something, and his upper lip would curl up like he was sneering. You know, like those faces that Governor Tarkin always makes in the first Star Wars movie? Like he's just tasted something really sour? Obie always made those kind of faces whenever he looked at me."

Tony's belly swooped, and he glanced over at Steve to see his lower jaw doing the twitching thing again. "Buddy, why didn't you ever say anything about this before?" he asked. "And how in the hell didn't I ever notice it?"

"It's not like he never did those things to anyone else," Peter said with another shrug. "I just always thought that he was only nice to people who he thought could do things for him."

"Some people can be that way, Peter," Steve said sadly, his blue eyes still shooting darts in Tony's direction. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to be that way around you, though."

"Well, like Steve said, now we don't have to worry about being around him anymore, Pete," Tony said, hoping Steve was catching on to his 'we'll talk about it later' look. "He's gone. And now it's probably time for you to get back to your homework, isn't it?"

"Yeah, probably," answered Peter as he scrubbed at his eyes. "Are you gonna go to the lab now?"

"Mmm, maybe in a bit," Tony said as he reached for Steve's hand. He knew he should use the time before dinner to work on his newest suit, but he just didn't feel like tearing himself away at the moment. "I'm kinda wanting to listen to Steve tell you a few more of his stories first. I've grown rather fond of them lately."

"That's 'cause you've grown rather fond of him lately," Peter said with a sly grin. "Right?"

"Yeah, I'd say that's a pretty fair assessment," agreed Tony, delighting in the pink flush that slowly crept up Steve's cheeks. "C'mon, Captain, tell us another war story."

"Is he okay?" Steve asked, looking up from his sketchbook as Tony reappeared in the living room. Tony had been just tucking Peter into bed, like he always did whenever he was home in the evenings, but Steve was still so unnerved by Obadiah's outburst earlier that his soldier-paranoia seemed to be working overtime.

"Peter's fine, Steve," Tony said, his tone reassuring rather than impatient as he sat down next to Steve on the couch. "He's even already asleep, so I'm suspecting that a growth spurt is on the way. He always gets extra hungry and tired when he's going through a growth spurt."

"Mmm, all right," Steve said warily. "You're not too concerned about what he said about his eyes earlier? Does he usually get headaches during his growth spurts?"
"No, not typically, but the eye thing isn't all that unusual either," answered Tony. "He's had glasses since he was five, so I suppose it would make sense if he's starting to hit puberty now that his eyes would change too."

Steve's jaw twitched again, and he reached behind him, scratching at the back of his neck, letting out a slight shiver when Tony's fingers curled around his wrist, stilling his movements.

"Hey," Tony murmured. "Pete's fine, Steve. He probably just needs some new glasses, it's not a big deal. And once he does he'll be as good as new."

"I hope so."

"Steve, he's gonna be fine," Tony repeated, almost like he was trying to convince himself as well as Steve. "You saw how much he perked up again after he ate, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"And Obie's gone now," Tony continued. "He's not gonna be around to sneer at Pete ever again."

"Tony—"

"Look. If it'll make you feel better, I can ask Fury tomorrow if he can have some of his SHIELD lackeys put a tail on Obie for awhile. Would that help?"

Steve slumped down into the cushions, tipping his head back. "You think Director Fury would actually do that?"

Tony quirked an eyebrow. "Mmm, if I asked really nicely he would, especially if he knew it was for Pete. Pete's got Fury wrapped around his little finger, even if the old pirate would never admit it. Plus, he owes me big, so yeah, he'll do it."

"Nick Fury owes you? What's he owe you so much for?"

A flash of pain swept across Tony's brown eyes, and he bit his bottom lip. "Oh, it's a long story, and not really all that interesting. Maybe sometime when you're having trouble sleeping or something I'll tell you more about it."

"Tony," Steve said with a frown, the rest of his words jamming in his throat at the look on Tony's face, a horrible mix of pain and embarrassment that Steve immediately decided he never wanted to see again.

"So, what do you think Fury wants to talk to us about?" he said instead.

"He didn't really say, which I'm not at all surprised about," Tony replied. "But I do know that at least part of it has something to do with my suits."

"Your suits? Why?"

"'Cause he thinks the military's gonna try and come after them," Tony spat out. "And for once, he and I are in agreement. I should've known this was coming after the incident with the Raptor."

"You mean after you were hit by an airplane and nearly killed?" Steve said, clenching his fists.

"Yeah, that. I've already got Pepper working on the patent paperwork for the miniaturised arc reactor though, so they at least won't be able to get their grubby little hands on it, and I'll throw as many fits as it takes all over Washington D.C. before I let the military confiscate my suits. There're still plenty
of politicians who owe me favours down there, and I'll force 'em to listen if I have to."

"And you think Director Fury will be able to prevent that from happening?"

Tony huffed out a sharp breath. "Not without something in return, Steve, that's just now how Fury works. And it's the something in return that's worrying me right about now. If it has anything to do with what happened down in New Mexico or Virginia, then—"

"They we'll deal with it together," Steve said gently, cupping Tony's cheek. "Right?"

"Yeah," whispered Tony. He leaned his head against Steve's palm, briefly closing his eyes. "I'm… I'm gonna go to the lab for a bit, okay? Tomorrow's pretty booked up and I don't wanna get too behind."

"Behind on what?" asked Steve. "More armour?"

Tony shot him a sheepish look that quickly hardened into determination. "The job's not done yet. Steve. Those Ten Rings assholes are still out there. Sure, I took out another one of their camps, but they're still around, and I can't rest until they're completely gone. Obliterated, eliminated, whatever-the-hell it is that you military guys say. You can understand, can't you?"

Of course Steve could understand. He'd gone after HYDRA during the war with as much of a single-minded determination to see them destroyed as Tony now carried for the Ten Rings. A determination that grew even stronger after he lost Bucky.

"Yes," he whispered, tracing the pad of his thumb across Tony's cheekbone. "I understand. Just… be careful, please? Peter needs you, Tony. And so do I."

"I'll admit you guys are a pretty good incentive to be careful," murmured Tony as Steve leaned in for a quick kiss, with Steve's body screaming for more even as Tony pulled away. "Goodnight."

"'Night," Steve murmured to Tony's retreating back, throwing his arm across his eyes once Tony disappeared into the lab and fighting the urge to chase after him and kiss him again until they were both senseless. He'd explained to Tony that he wanted to take their relationship slowly, saying it was for Peter's sake—and okay, Tony's playboy past did intimidate him a little, he couldn't deny that—and Steve knew it was a testament to how much Tony cared for him that he hadn't pushed Steve into anything he wasn't comfortable with. Tony had allowed Steve to take the lead with pretty much everything they'd done so far, which, from what he understood from his internet research and the stuff his Army friends used to talk about, didn't really amount to much more than making out. He understood all the mechanics of sex, again thanks to his Army friends, but the fact that he was a ninety-year-old virgin in love with a man who obviously knew what he was doing didn't help to soothe his rattled nerves about it at all. And while deep down he knew that his inexperience didn't bother Tony in the least, it was still there, hanging over his head like those neon signs that hung in the store windows.

But eventually, he was going to have to throw caution into the wind and just go for it. The sexual tension between them had been ratcheting up to an almost unbearable level lately, and it was only a matter of time before one—or both—of them snapped.

With a heavy sigh, Steve pushed himself up off the couch and headed for his bedroom, flopping down on the bed and grabbing his latest book. It was unlikely he'd get too much actual reading done, not with his worries over Peter and curiosity about Director Fury's visit, but he supposed there was no harm in trying.
"Good morning, gentlemen," Director Fury said as he stepped off the elevator into the penthouse.

"Director," Steve replied while Tony nodded. "Is Agent Coulson here too?"

"Nope," Fury replied. "Coulson's working on another assignment at the moment, so you two are stuck with just me this morning."

"Okay, so on that note, what exactly do you want with us?" Tony asked.

"Oh, a bit impatient, are we?" Fury said as he sank down onto the living room loveseat. "Well just a minute, Tony, and I'll get to it."

Opening his black bag, Fury pulled out a file folder with the words Avengers Initiative written in bold letters across the top and placed it on the coffee table, with Steve reaching for it as Tony sat down next to him.

"Avengers Initiative?" Steve asked, throwing a questioning glance at Tony and receiving only a shrug in response. "What's this?"

"It's an idea, Captain," Fury answered. "An idea I've had for almost twenty years now. An idea to bring together a group of remarkable people to see if they could become something more. To work together to fight the battles that we can't fight on our own."

"Yeah?" Tony asked warily. "And who's 'we'?"

"We," answered Fury, extending his arms. "Us regular folks."

"And it would be a part of SHIELD?" Steve asked.

"The Avengers would technically fall under SHIELD's purview, yes," Fury said. "But in any given situation you'd be given the latitude you would need to conduct yourselves as you would see fit, not too unlike your work against HYDRA during the war, Captain. As long as there was a proper chain of command that was followed, I'd be fine."

Frowning, Steve placed the folder back on the table. "What brought this on all of a sudden, Director?"

"New Mexico," Tony said quickly, throwing a Fury a cold look when Fury raised his eyebrows. "What, you didn't think I wasn't gonna investigate why you sent Coulson out there, did you?"

"No, I know you better than that, Tony," answered Fury. "So why don't you tell Captain Rogers what you think and save me the trouble?"

"They basically got caught with their pants down," Tony stated. "Big dude gets beamed to Earth from another planet, SHIELD goes out to investigate, then the dude's disgruntled brother shows up or something and they get into a fight."

"A fight that nearly leveled a small New Mexico town," Fury barked. "And yes, as you so emphatically put it, SHIELD was caught with our pants down, and that is something that I'm not prepared to ever allow to happen again."

"And so you think they'll be coming back?" Steve asked, still trying to wrap his brain around the fact that this… person had come from another planet, like in one of Peter's beloved science fiction movies.
Fury threw up his hands. "If not them then someone else, I'm afraid it's only a matter of time at this point. Regardless, the next time this happens we cannot afford to be unprepared."

"And you want us both," said Tony. "/Cause there's no way in hell I'm letting anyone else use my tech, just so we're clear on that."

"Yes, Tony," Fury said. "From what we've discovered about your incident with the Raptor, it seems like you can handle yourself pretty well in that fancy new armour of yours."

"He nearly got himself killed!" Steve cut in as his belly gave a violent swoop. "Tony could've been killed by that airplane, Director, so how can you—?"

"Steve, I've made three separate upgrades to the suit since that happened," Tony protested. "I've told you, that's not gonna happen again."

"But, you can't know that, Tony!" Steve sputtered. He knew Tony was trying to placate him, but the image of Tony standing in the kitchen all bruised and bleeding and battered still haunted him too much for him to be placated. "What if next time—?"

"You're not gonna do this alone," Tony said firmly. "I won't—, I won't let you. Together, right? That's how we're best, isn't that what you're always telling me?"

"I'll have you know," Fury said, the smirk on his face causing Steve's jaw to twitch. "That there's no way we would've even considered Tony for this initiative a year ago."

"What?" Tony yelped, tearing his eyes away from Steve to glare at Fury. "Why not?"

Fury leaned back on the loveseat, crossing his legs. "Oh, I think you know, Tony."

It took less than a split second for Tony's expression to transform from irritated confusion to complete and utter rage. "Are you telling me that my son and I had to get fucking kidnapped and nearly killed for you to finally see my goddamn worth to your organisation?" Tony shouted as he launched himself off the couch towards Fury. "Fuck you, Nick!"

"Tony!" Steve said firmly as he grabbed onto Tony's arm, hauling him back onto the couch. "That better not have been what you meant, Director."

"It's not," Fury said, seemingly nonplussed by Tony's reaction.

"Then I suggest that you explain yourself, and that you do it right now," demanded Steve in his Captain's voice. Tony was still trembling in anger next to him, his hands clenched into tight fists in his lap.

"What I meant," Fury continued. "Was that we, or more specifically, I, needed to see that you could work for something other than yourself, Tony. That you could be—"

"That I could be what, Nick, a team player?" Tony asked, his voice laced with such intense bitterness that Steve winced. "Just another one of the guys?"

"No," said Fury in a low voice. "That you could be one of the guys. The Avengers needs the both of you. Captain America and… whatever it is that you're calling yourself in that flying suit of yours—"

"Iron Man," Tony stated, squaring his shoulders. "I'm Iron Man."

"Iron Man," Fury repeated softly, nodding. "All right, I kinda like that."
"When do you need our answer?" Steve asked.

"Before the first of the year would be nice," replied Fury. "And if it helps in your decision-making process at all, Tony, accepting my offer would mean not having to bow down to the demands of the Senate Armed Forces Committee. I know you're not too big a fan of that Senator Stern guy, and I can't say that I blame you too much on that one."

"That's 'cause Stern is a first-class asshole," muttered Tony.

"We would need assurances that Peter would be taken care of if we were called out on a mission," said Steve. "And we don't mean just a couple of guards, we mean full SHIELD protection. The best you could offer."

"You'd have it," Fury said without hesitation.

"And I want something else, too," Tony said, looking Fury square in the eye. "I want you to assign some of your people to look into Obadiah Stane."

Fury jerked his head back in surprise. "Your CFO?"

"Former CFO, as of yesterday afternoon," Tony said. He looked over at Steve, the corner of his mouth curling into the slightest of grins. "Just… call it an instinct."

"All right," Fury said a few seconds later. "I'll assign some agents to investigate Stane. Is there anything else?"

Steve looked over at Tony, who gave him an almost imperceptible shake of the head. "No, Director."

"Good," said Fury as they all got to their feet. "Then I'll see myself out."

"That goddamn son of a bitch always knows how to push my buttons," Tony grumbled as soon as the elevator doors had closed. "I don't know why I let him get to me like that."

"I'm pretty sure he knew exactly what he was doing, Tony," said Steve. He curled his arms around Tony's waist, pulling him close, reveling in the way Tony's tense body relaxed as it moulded against his own, like they were made for each other. "He was testing us both, to see how I'd react to your reaction."

Tony dropped his forehead against Steve's collarbone, his palms gliding up and down Steve's back. "Mmm. Then I guess the fact that he still wants us to consider this whole Avengers thing must mean that we passed. But he better not pull anything like that again or I'll blast out his other eye."

Steve chuckled. "And I think that's one of the main reasons why he wants you."

"Yeah, maybe," Tony said. He tilted his head to kiss the underside of Steve's jaw, a short sweet kiss that sent a shock of heat hurtling across Steve's chest. "I'm gonna go work for awhile before we pick up Pete, okay?"

"Uh… sure," Steve replied in a hoarse whisper, his breath hitching when Tony grinned wickedly and kissed him again in that same spot, nearly sending him to his knees.

"Seems like I've found one of your sweet spots there, Captain," Tony murmured, letting his hands slide down to briefly squeeze Steve's ass just before he released him.
"Tony," Steve rasped as he locked his arms, holding Tony in place. "Please, I'm trying to be a gentleman here, and—"

But he was stopped by Tony's fingers brushing gently across his lips. "It's all right, honey," he whispered. "You know I'm okay waiting. Just... don't fault me for wanting to tease you about it. Or at least don't fault me too much. I just can't help it when you're so damn sexy."

"Uhh... okay," murmured Steve, just before dipping his head and pressing his lips to Tony's. Tony let out a soft whimper as Steve deepened the kiss, his fingers sliding up Steve's back to tangle in his hair.

He was close, so close to just picking Tony up and carrying him back to his bedroom, but now wasn't the time. He wanted to make sure that Peter's eyes were okay, and he and Tony needed to discuss the Avengers thing, preferably soon while it was still fresh in their minds. Plus, he still needed to do some more research, because the absolute last thing he wanted was to lose control of himself during the heat of the moment and possibly hurt Tony. Tony wasn't exactly small, but he was definitely smaller than Steve and not souped up on super-soldier serum, and Steve was more than a little afraid of hurting him.

"I'm going to the lab now, old man," Tony said once they broke apart, his voice a bit breathless and so barely audible through the blood rushing past Steve's ears. "We'll have to leave in about two hours to go get Pete."

"Yeah," Steve breathed. "I'll... um... I'll be ready."

As it turned out, Tony was right about Peter's eyesight. After a thorough examination, probably even more thorough than usual due to Steve's nervousness, Peter's eye doctor announced that it wasn't unheard of for an adolescent boy's eyes to self-correct once he started puberty, and that from now on Peter would only need to wear his glasses for reading or when he was especially tired. After picking out a new set of frames, which turned out to be Captain America blue, they all headed back to the Tower to find that the massive, twelve-foot Christmas tree Steve had ordered had been delivered. Peter let out such a squeal of delight at the sight of the bushy tree that Tony couldn't help but feel a sharp pang of remorse. He'd never bothered with decorating for Christmas before for a few reasons, not the least of which was the fact that his parents had died in December, and so Christmas had never really a time that he particularly enjoyed.

And of course Peter, being the awesome kid that he was, didn't say a single word about it. He just helped Steve get the tree set up in a corner of the living room and immediately started in on the decorations. Steve even lifted Peter up onto his shoulders so he could help string the lights at the very top, while Tony made sure to have JARVIS record the whole thing.

They made hot cocoa once the tree was done, on the stove with hot milk and melted chocolate of course, and Steve even accented the mugs with the little peppermint candy canes just like they did in magazines. And as the three of them sat cuddled up together on beanbag chairs under the gorgeously lit tree carefully sipping their cocoa, Tony, who had always just grimaced his way through the entirety of the Christmas season, actually found himself looking forward to Christmas for the first time since he was very, very young.

Christmas Day itself dawned like something out of one of those sappy old movies Tony's mother used to watch, with the bright winter sunlight bouncing off the coat of freshly fallen snow covering the outside landing pad, and the scent of vanilla and cinnamon wafting through the penthouse as Steve prepared a Christmas breakfast fit for a king and his prince.
Or rather, for two kings and their prince.

Peter and Tony had barely had time to finish eating before Steve was dragging them into the living room, where he'd set up his Victrola to play Christmas music while they spent the next two hours opening the literal mountain of gifts piled underneath the huge tree. Lego sets, some new beakers and flasks for Peter's chemistry set, more of the geeky science t-shirts and hoodies that Peter adored in the next size up—Tony had been right, the kid had been growing like a weed lately—and a new baseball glove from Steve since Peter had already outgrown the one he'd gotten the previous summer. The joyous surprise on Steve's face when he unwrapped the small box containing the keys to a brand-new pickup truck was nearly priceless, as was Peter's pure childlike elation when he unwrapped the 1940's-era Gilbert's erector and train set, which he immediately asked Steve to help him set up in his room, giving Tony some time to put the finishing touches on his Mark VI armour before Happy and Pepper arrived for Christmas dinner.

"I'm not sure exactly what you put in those cookies of yours, but the kid was asleep almost before I could kiss him goodnight," Tony said later that night as he slid back down onto the oversized beanbag chair next to Steve, who was busy sketching a picture of the Christmas tree. "I wouldn't be surprised if he's even got the visions of sugarplums dancing in his head or however the hell it is that story goes."

Steve smiled as he turned to Tony, setting his sketchbook and pencil down on the floor. "Well, if anyone deserves it, it's him." He reached for Tony's hand, interlacing their fingers. "Thank you, Tony. This was… this was the best Christmas that I've ever had."

A knot the size of a marble rose in Tony's throat at Steve's words. Steve had done almost all the work that day, with plenty of help from Peter of course, but even so… and then there was that absolutely exquisite painting he'd given Tony of he and Peter asleep on the couch in Malibu, and now he was telling Tony that it was the best Christmas that he'd ever had?

"You know, you really should start tucking Pete in with me," Tony finally choked out. "I know he'd love it if we did it together."

Steve smiled that soft smile of his that Tony adored, the multicoloured lights of the Christmas tree illuminating his blond hair and glinting off his eyelashes. "I wouldn't want to intrude, Tony," he said softly. "I know how special that time with him is to you."

Tony glanced down at their intertwined hands, swallowing hard. "That's just 'cause it was always just us," he whispered. "Just me and Pete. But that's not really the case anymore, is it? Now you're here, and you're… Steve, you're just as much of a father to him as I am, and I know you love him as much as I do, anyone with eyes can see it, so… we should do it together. He's a damn lucky kid to have you." He paused for a moment, inhaling a deep breath.

"We're both damn lucky to have you. I don't—, I don't know what I would've done—, knowing those assholes who took us were still out there but having no way to get at them because I'd be too terrified to leave Pete—, and then you saved him, Steve." His chest was heaving now, his heart pounding and his breaths coming only in stuttered gasps. "You saved him when I couldn't—, but what you really did was save both of us, because—, because there's no way I could've—, not without him—"

"Tony," Steve cut in as he wrapped his arms around Tony, pulling him flush against his body and brushing his lips across Tony's temple. "It's okay. I've got you."

"Yeah, you've got me," Tony gasped, grabbing a fistful of Steve's shirt. "You've got me and now you're stuck with me, you're stuck with both of us, 'cause I don't know—, I don't know what we
would've done—, what I would've done—"

"Shh," whispered Steve. "You've got me too, Tony. You've got me forever if you want me." He tangled his long fingers into Tony's hair, massaging his scalp and Tony let out a moan that was almost embarrassingly loud. Damn, it felt good.

"God, yes," he whispered reverently, tilting his head up just as Steve lowered his. The kiss started out slow and sweet, like they always did, but quickly turned more passionate as Steve's tongue slipped inside Tony's mouth and his hands slid down to Tony's hips, lifting him so he was straddling Steve's lap.

"Steve," Tony moaned as Steve started trailing his lips down Tony's jaw to his neck, sucking on the slightly stubbled skin of his pulse point. His entire body sizzled with current, almost as if the arc reactor was overloading. "Steve, I——"

"Tony," Steve rasped as he took Tony's face into his hands, pressing their foreheads together, his blue eyes lust-blown as they bored into Tony's, not quite covering the underlying insecurity hidden inside them. "Will you—, will you come to my bed with me tonight?"

"Tonight," answered Tony, as clearly as he was able to through the intensity of the sensations coursing through him. "Tonight and every night, if you'll have me."

"Every night," murmured Steve. "I'll take every night."

"Every night," Tony said, peace washing across him like a wave as Steve cupped his palms under Tony's thighs and lifted them both off the beanbag chair in one swift movement. Steve's lips latched onto Tony's neck as he walked them down the hallway to Steve's bedroom, where he laid Tony on the bed, looking down at him with such reverence and unabashed love that Tony's eyes filled with tears.

No one had ever looked at Tony like that, like he was their everything, and as Steve tugged his t-shirt off over his head and crawled onto the bed to hover over him, Tony grabbed onto his shoulders, gliding his palms up to cup Steve's face.

"I love you, Steve," he said, as clearly as he was able, hoping those words would be enough to blast away any lingering self-consciousness that Steve might be feeling. "I love you."

Steve's lips twitched slightly, his eyebrows knitting together as he nodded, his thumb brushing softly across Tony's cheekbone. "I love you too," he whispered. "Let me make love to you"

Tony had heard people talk sometimes about those moments that helped to define them, that helped mould them into the people they were. He had even experienced a few of those moments himself, namely the death of his parents and the discovery of his son.

And now here with Steve, he had another. Because for how many times Tony Stark had experienced sex over the years, he had never, ever experienced sex with someone that he knew loved him with every fibre of his being. And as Steve's hands and mouth explored and mapped every inch of his body, as Tony's palms glided across Steve's soft, smooth skin and hard muscle, as they moved together, their arms and legs tangled together and whispered promises falling from their lips, Tony nearly choked on the realisation that while he and Steve had both had to experience their own separate versions of absolute hell, somehow, in some sick and twisted way, it had all been worth it for them to wind up in this moment, here with each other.

Together.
And when they were finished, their bodies sated and spent, after they'd stumbled into the shower to
get cleaned up and changed the torn sheets on the bed, they laid down on the fresh blankets with
Steve's strong arm wrapped around Tony, with his back pressed right up against Steve's broad chest
and Steve's breath warm against his neck as he drifted off to sleep.

And when the nightmares came, as they inevitably did, instead of suddenly jerking awake and
finding himself frightened and alone, Tony instead felt Steve's hand slide gently up his body,
cupping his shoulder as he whispered in Tony's ear, "It's all right, Tony. I'm here."

Come find me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there.

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I can’t thank you enough for all of the kudos and comments! I’m so glad you guys are enjoying the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was the light of the morning sunbeams shining across his face that woke Steve from the deepest sleep he could remember in a long, long time, probably since he’d woken up from the ice. His sixty-plus years’ slumber aside, sleep had always been rather difficult to come by for Steve. Whether it was struggling to breathe against asthmatic lungs as a child and young adult, hearing every single tiny little nighttime noise amplified by a thousand after the super soldier serum, or trying to get comfortable in hastily dug foxholes during the war, sleep had never been something that came easily to him. And after the serum it never seemed to be all that much of a priority. Steve had decided a long time ago that he would much rather spend his free time sketching than attempt yet again to sleep through the nightmares that constantly plagued him.

As such, every single morning since he’d moved in with Tony and Peter, JARVIS had woken him—or not, as was usually the case—at 0600 so he could go out for his morning run, allowing him to
return in plenty of time to get breakfast ready for the three of them.

On this morning, though, things were different. On this day, what Steve's British friends—including Peggy Carter—had always called Boxing Day, Tony was lying next to him in the bed, still asleep, perhaps even blissfully so if the relaxed set of his jaw and the lack of worry lines marring his beautiful face were any indication. And because of that, JARVIS must have decided to forgo Steve's usual morning alarm and simply allow the windows to naturally brighten instead.

Breathing in a deep, contented breath, Steve slowly propped himself up on his elbow, taking care to not disturb Tony who was curled into his side, his arm thrown haphazardly across Steve's bare chest. He was bare-chested too, the bright blue light of the arc reactor reflecting off of the pale sheets and Steve's skin. A shiver raced down Steve's spine as he recalled his first tentative touches of the arc reactor, and how Tony's breath had hitched when he'd first kissed the slightly puckered skin that surrounded the glowing metal circle. Steve hadn't been sure at first if Tony would allow him anywhere near the reactor due to all of the trauma associated with it, the fact that his very life depended on it. But Tony had laid all of those fears to rest with just a simple nod of his head as he'd guided Steve's fingers to touch it, whispering a soft, "I trust you," into the dim light of the bedroom.

Their bedroom.

A smile stretched across Steve's face as the room grew brighter, the beams of light now highlighting the love bites he'd left across Tony's neck and collarbones. All of them were low enough to be covered by clothing, Steve had at least been of sound enough mind to think of that, but even once they were covered up by one of Tony's threadbare eighties rock band t-shirts or expensive button-downs, Steve would still know they were there. Because he had made Tony his last night, just as Tony had done the same for Steve across his own neck and chest, even if Steve's marks were likely already healed.

"Good morning, Captain Rogers," JARVIS said, quietly enough to avoid waking Tony. "Master Peter has awoken and is currently watching Wall-E in his room. Would you like me to inform him that you are awake?"

"Is he all right, JARVIS," Steve asked, just as quietly, squirming slightly as heat bloomed across his chest and up his neck to his cheeks. A part of him felt like he should be embarrassed, knowing that JARVIS likely saw and heard everything that went on in that room the previous night, while another part of him, the more possessive part, was rather proud. He may not be as experienced as Tony in the bedroom, but his passion and enthusiasm more than made up for his lack of experience, especially if the way Tony had responded to him was any indication.

And, as Steve's eyes swept along the expanse of Tony's beautiful body laid out next to him, he was definitely looking forward to more… practice.

"Master Peter is in good health, Captain," JARVIS replied. "However, my suggestion that gummy worms were indeed not the healthiest of breakfast options has seemed to have fallen on rather deaf ears, as Mr Stark would say."

Steve chuckled as he carefully wiggled out from under Tony's arm, sliding his pillow into place instead. "Thanks, JARVIS. Can you please tell Peter I'll be out in about ten minutes? I'm gonna let Tony sleep."

"Very good, Captain."

Eleven minutes later, freshly showered, shaved, and dressed with the destroyed sheets from last night carefully disposed of, Steve poked his head around the doorway to Peter's room, smiling as he
noticed that Peter was still in his pyjamas and building what appeared to be a replica of the Matterhorn rollercoaster with his new erector set, the Wall-E movie playing quietly on the television screen in the background and a discarded gummy worm bag sitting next to his polar bear.

"Good morning, little guy," Steve said fondly. "Ready for some breakfast?"

"Morning, Steve," Peter answered, not looking up from his work as he attached one more piece into place. "There, I think I'm done. Wanna see if it works?"

"Absolutely," Steve said. He padded into the room, sitting down on the floor next to Peter. "I'm ready when you are."

With a nod, Peter picked up the control panel and pressed a button, letting out a whoop of delight as the train began to move around the circles and loops of the track, picking up speed as it went.

"This is so cool!" exclaimed Peter once the train came to a stop. "I can't believe they had this stuff way back in the thirties and forties, it's just awesome!"

"They were all the rage back then," said Steve. "I couldn't believe it when I found out they were still available." Even if for not exactly the 1940's cost.

Peter sighed happily as he set down the control panel, looking up at Steve with his huge brown eyes. Steve was still getting used to Peter not having to wear his glasses.

"Is my dad still asleep?"

"Ah, yes," Steve answered, clearing his throat. "I didn't—, I didn't want to wake him."

"No, that's good," Peter said quickly. "He doesn't get enough sleep anyway." He paused for a moment, swallowing hard. "You love him, right?"

"Yes, I do," Steve answered without hesitation as he wrapped his arm around the boy's shoulders, his throat tightening as Peter snuggled right up to him, laying his head on Steve's chest. "I do, Peter. And I love you as well. You and Tony, you're my family."

"Then everything's gonna be fine," Peter said with a sniff, rubbing his nose on Steve's shirt. "We're all gonna be fine. You and me and Dad."

"We are if I have anything to say about it," Steve stated. He kissed the top of Peter's head. "You don't have to worry, little guy. I'm not going anywhere."

"Mmm, that's good." Peter tightened his arms around Steve's waist, pressing his head even further against Steve's chest. "I like the sound of your heartbeat," he said softly. "My dad's, his is gone now, and—, well, the humming noise of the arc reactor is pretty nice too, and it's definitely unique, but… sometimes I just miss hearing a heartbeat."

Steve bit his bottom lip as he patted Peter's back. "I'm so sorry, Peter. It's not fair at all that you and your dad had to go through such a horrible time." And that you're now still continuously reminded of it.

Peter shrugged as he sniffed again. "Yeah," he whispered. "But that time brought us you, so it wasn't all bad."

"That's a very brave way to look at it," Steve murmured past the lump in his throat.
"Mmm, maybe," replied Peter. He sucked in a long, shaky breath. "Can we go eat breakfast now?"

"Absolutely," Steve answered. "How does a cheese omelet sound?"

"And some bacon too?" asked Peter with a rather cheeky grin. "I'm really hungry."

"Sure thing," Steve said with a laugh, ruffling Peter's already messy hair. "C'mon."

They got to their feet, with Peter reaching for Steve's hand as they headed for the kitchen. Once there Steve rummaged around in the refrigerator, pulling out eggs, milk, bacon, and a block of sharp cheddar cheese that he set Peter to start shredding.

"Steve?" Peter asked tentatively a few minutes later as Steve started cracking eggs into a bowl, adding just a bit of his requisite vanilla extract.

"Yeah, little guy?"

"Um…" Peter stammered, twisting his hands. "It seems wrong for me to be calling one of my dads by his first name, so… I was wondering… what should I call you now? I mean, I call my dad 'Dad' already, so calling you 'Dad' would just get confusing I think, and I don't really like 'Father', that sounds too formal, or like I'm mad at you, and I can't really imagine being mad at you, so…"

Steve hadn't thought it possible for his heart to swell any more than it already had, but apparently he'd been very wrong.

"Well, if my father had lived I would've called him Papa," he said softly, placing his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Plus, I guess I'm technically old enough to be your grandfather anyway, so…"

Peter smiled, his brown eyes sparkling in the bright light of the kitchen. "Papa," he said. "I like that. But I am glad that you're not a grandpa, I like you much better as a dad."

And just like that, Steve was officially a father.

"Me too, little guy," Steve managed to say. He bent down to kiss Peter's forehead. "Me too. Now, let's see if we can bribe your dad out of bed with some breakfast, yeah?"

"Sounds awesome."

Tony woke with a start, the echoes of an already half-forgotten nightmare seeping from his mind as he blinked against the brightness of the sunlight streaming through the windows. Instinctively he reached out his hand, searching for the warmth of Steve's body but finding only his pillow, which he quickly clutched to his chest so he could breathe in Steve's lingering scent, that intoxicating, heady, masculine scent that was all Steve.

"JARVIS, what the hell time is it?" he asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

"The time is now 10:17am, sir," JARVIS replied. "Master Peter and Captain Rogers are currently in the kitchen. Captain Rogers did not wish to disturb you when he woke."

"Yeah, okay," mumbled Tony, burying his nose further into the pillow and inhaling as deeply as he possibly could. He'd half expected—or maybe even more than half, if he was completely honest—to have his usual mild-to-moderate freakout when he woke up, much like he always did whenever he woke up in someone else's bed. That awkward disentangling that always occurred after sex, the mumbled sentiments as clothes were hastily thrown back on and the requisite promises to call again
were made, promises that Tony had never had any intention of keeping because relationships were for fools, and Tony Stark would be damned if he would ever allow himself to be fooled again.

And Tony had been fine with that. He'd been completely fine with the fact that it was just he and Peter, completely fine with pouring everything that he had into his son and banking his entire life's happiness on Peter's well-being and future.

At least, he had until some stubborn military superhero with a heart of literal gold showed up in the middle of the godforsaken Afghanistan desert when Peter was only seconds away from slipping from Tony forever, and proceeded to immediately save Peter's life without question or hesitation. And by extension, Tony's life as well.

He should've guessed it would happen this way, should've realised way back in the beginning that of course the one person who could truly save Tony Stark from himself wasn't Peter, or Rhodey, or Pepper, or Peggy Carter, or even Edwin Jarvis.

It was the one person Tony once thought that he hated more than anyone else in the world.

It was Steve Rogers. It was Captain America.

And while that realisation was a bit overwhelming—and even more than a bit, if Tony was honest with himself—it was also liberating. It was, in a word, peaceful. And Tony Stark, who had joked more than once that peace would put him out of a job, now found himself craving more of it with every single cell in his body.

He craved Steve. Even now just inhaling his scent, Tony felt stirring deep within him, desire he never thought he was capable of surging up inside him once again, and he found himself wishing that Steve had chosen to wake him before he left instead of letting him sleep, so Tony could've tried to convince him that maybe it just wasn't time to get up quite yet.

Closing his eyes, Tony basked in the warmth that crept over his body as he remembered the previous night, the feel of Steve's hands and lips caressing his skin, the husky sound of his voice as he demanded between his laboured breaths for Tony to look into his eyes, nearly blown black. "Look at me. Look at me, Tony. I love you. God, I love you so much!"

Steve Rogers was a thing of beauty, with a body that would've made all the ancient Roman sculptors mad with jealousy. But if there ever was such a thing as true absolute beauty, it was Steve Rogers' gorgeous face in the throes of passion, and out of all of the billions of people that inhabited the Earth, only Tony had ever been lucky enough to see it.

And then, once they were finished, with Steve's heavy arm anchoring Tony to him, came a whispered, "you're mine, and I'm yours," as they both allowed sleep to pull them under.

"Yes, Steve," he'd murmured in reply, barely able to form all the words. "I'm yours."

I'm yours, Tony thought again, bringing his arms slowly up over his head to stretch. And you're mine.

And still the freakout didn't come.

"Would you like me to inform them that you are awake, sir?" asked JARVIS.

"Nah, I'm getting up," Tony mumbled, not moving an inch. "Soon."

"Very good, sir."
Several minutes passed, and Tony found himself nearly dozing off again until the scent of brewing coffee finally roused him enough to push himself up on the bed, followed directly on its heels by the smell of frying bacon. Tony’s stomach rumbled in protest, and he scowled even as he let out a chuckle. Before Steve came along he was lucky if he ate one real meal a day, using coffee and the occasional green smoothie to keep himself fueled enough to continue working through the night or the day or whatever the case may have been. But he’d apparently grown so used to Steve’s cooking in the past few months that his body now knew to expect it.

"I guess the way to a man's heart really is through his stomach," Tony grumbled as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, slipping into his sweatpants and reaching blindly on the floor for his discarded t-shirt, pulling it over his head as he stumbled towards the door.

"So then," Peter was saying as Tony headed down the hall. "I said that we needed to wait another fifteen minutes before we added the reagent or otherwise the whole thing would explode, but Flash didn't wanna listen to me and just did it anyway."

"Uh oh," Steve replied. "So then did it explode?"

"Yep," Peter answered through a mouthful of something. "At least it was in the fume hood so no one got hurt, but still. He just shoulda listened."

"Well, some people just don't like to think they need to listen to anyone else, little guy," Steve said. "Some people—"

"Just think they know everything," Tony cut in, causing Steve’s head to whip around, his tentative smile stretching wider as Tony made a beeline for him, sliding right into his lap. "And then it's the smarter person's job to show them that they don't."

"Good morning," Steve murmured as one arm curled around Tony’s waist, his breath tickling the hair on the back of Tony’s neck and causing him to shiver. He slid a large mug of coffee across the table, followed by a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast. "Strong and black, just like you like it. And some food too, so the coffee doesn’t eat your stomach out from the inside."

"Happy Boxing Day, Dad," Peter said after chugging most of the orange juice in his glass. "Papa told me today's Boxing Day."

"Yeah, I remember Mr Jarvis talking about that when I was a kid," Tony said as he bit into a piece of toast. "Something about the servants getting the day off or something after working all the big Christmas parties."

"Uh huh," said Peter. "Papa also said that it's a day when people would box up stuff for the poor, and I was thinking, I have a lot of toys in my room that I don't really play with anymore, so do you think I could donate those somewhere? I haven't done that in awhile, not since—"

"Actually, bud, I'll do you one better than that," Tony said quickly. "One of the new projects I've been talking over with Pepper is a foundation that would help fund relief efforts in various places around the world. You know, like after natural disasters and stuff like that? It's been something I've been wanting to do for awhile, but Obie always made that horrible constipated face whenever I brought it up before, so I always ended up just tabling it. But now—"

"Now we don't have to worry about Obie anymore," Peter finished. "That sounds awesome, Dad. The Stark Relief Foundation, I like that."

"Oohh, I definitely like the sound of that," Tony said fondly. He took a sip of his coffee, which was
"Perfect. "Nice one, Pete."

"But I'm sure we could still find some things in your room that you could donate, Peter," Steve said. "I'll even help you if you like."

"Yes, please," said Peter as he shoved his last piece of bacon into his mouth, washing it down with the rest of his orange juice. "I think I'm gonna go start now."

"I'll be there soon, little guy," said Steve as Peter stacked up his dishes.

"Uh huh."

As soon as Peter was safely out of earshot, Tony cupped Steve's jaw, angling it up so he could kiss him, breathing in the wonderful scent of his aftershave. It just now hit Tony that he hadn't even bothered to brush his teeth before leaving the bedroom, but thankfully either Steve didn't seem to mind or was just too polite to say anything.

"Mmm," Steve murmured once they broke apart for air. "It is definitely a good morning."

"Yeah, it is," Tony replied. "I don't remember the last time I slept like that. Or this late. Must be because someone kept me up half the night last night."

Steve tilted his head, feigning hurt, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "I don't recall hearing any complaints, and my hearing is pretty darn good, if I do say so myself, so—"

Tony silenced him with another kiss. "No," he whispered. "No complaints. And I know my hearing isn't as good as yours, super soldier, but I distinctly heard that boy call you Papa twice just in the last few minutes."

A wide smile stretched across Steve's lips, revealing his dimple. "He asked me, Tony. Said he didn't feel comfortable calling me Steve anymore. I'm pretty sure he knows—"

"Course he knows," Tony said, waving a dismissive hand. "Pete's not blind. And even less so lately it seems. Have you even seen him wear those new glasses of his at all since he got them?"

"No, I haven't, now that I think about it," Steve answered with a slight frown. "The doctor did say they were only for reading and if he got tired, but—"

"Well, maybe once school starts up again," Tony said, running his palm down his face. He knew Peter disliked having to wear his glasses a lot of the time, especially since he couldn't seem to hold onto a pair for longer than a month, and he'd never tolerated contact lenses very well. And it wasn't that Tony wanted him to not be able to see, especially after his eye doctor hadn't seemed too concerned. It still just seemed… odd.

"Anyway, I'm sure he's fine," Tony added. The last thing he wanted was for Steve to worry about Peter even more than he did already. And Tony had thought he was bad about that. "Besides. Fury's probably pacing back and forth in his office right this second waiting for our answer on the Avengers thing, so—"

"I think we should do it, Tony," Steve blurted out. He shifted Tony slightly on his lap so they were facing each other. "I don't like the idea of you going off on these missions of yours alone, so maybe if we do this, Director Fury would assign someone else—"

"No!" Tony barked. "I don't want anyone else assigned to take care of the mess that I created. I need to do this. I'm the one who needs to fix this."
"Not alone!" Steve shot back. His arms tightened around Tony's waist, burying his face in Tony's neck. "Please, just not alone. Having backup is so important, Tony. Even your armoured suits aren't indestructible, and there's no way you can be aware of all of your surroundings all of the time when it's just you out there."

"Steve, there's no one else that I can trust to fly the suits," Tony protested as he got to his feet, huffing out a sharp breath. "So I can't really—"

"Peter mentioned Colonel Rhodes back in California," Steve cut in. "And he's your friend, why can't he help you? I thought the military wanted to get rid of these terrorists anyway?"

"They do, but—"

"Then what's the problem?"

Tony shook his head, letting out a heavy sigh. "If I let Rhodey get ahold of one of my suits, then his Air Force superiors are gonna wanna confiscate it so they can weaponize it to their specifications instead of mine, and that's not something I'm prepared to allow just yet. I just quit making weapons, Steve. I'm not gonna allow the military to take over my tech just 'cause they're still sore about it."

Steve narrowed his eyes as he got to his feet, leaning against the table. "Then we make sure Director Fury tells the military that your tech is off-limits. He can say it falls under the Avengers Initiative, and then they won't be able to touch it."

"I'm pretty sure the whole Avengers Initiative is supposed to be a secret," Tony grumbled. "Not too unlike your whole Project Rebirth thing."

"Okay, then Fury doesn't have to tell them about the Avengers Initiative, he just needs to tell the military that they can't have it," Steve insisted. "I'm sure he can think of a decent enough excuse."

"Oh, I know he could think of an excuse," Tony muttered, his upper lip curling into a sneer. "That old bastard can think of excuses to justify just about anything if you give him enough time."

"Then, let him," Steve said gently, reaching for Tony and drawing him close. "Please? I know you think you need to do this alone, but you don't. I'm here, and Colonel Rhodes is here, and we can help you as long as you'll allow it."

Tony tipped his head forward against Steve's chest as Steve's palms glided up his back. If it was just him he wouldn't even be giving any of this a second thought, but it wasn't. And because of that Tony knew he had to at least consider what Steve was saying. Steve Rogers was lauded as one of the best military strategists in the world—even aside from the fact that he was Captain America—and there wasn't a single current member of the upper military hierarchy who hadn't studied his HYDRA raids during the war. It's not like he didn't know what he was talking about.

No wonder Nick Fury wanted him for the Avengers.

"All right," he finally said. "We can talk to Fury about it."

"Thank you," whispered Steve. He dug the pads of his fingers into Tony's shoulders, his arms pinning Tony to him. "I don't—, I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you, Tony. Even the thought of it is enough to terrify me. I just… I couldn't…"

"Mmm," Tony mumbled against Steve's chest. He wasn't quite sure when he'd get used to hearing that he was important to someone besides Peter. "So do you wanna talk to Fury, or should I?"
"We should do it together," Steve stated. "Don't you think?"


"Good." Steve pulled back and grinned mischievously, pecking Tony on the nose as his hand slipped down to squeeze Tony's ass, causing Tony to yelp.

"You are not as innocent as you seem, mister," Tony murmured as he kissed a trail across Steve's neck. "And I have a feeling that's all my fault."

"Who, me?" Steve asked, waggling his eyebrows, smirking as he leaned down to kiss Tony on the lips. "I better go find Peter before he comes looking for me."

"Cool." Tony picked up his forgotten piece of toast, piling the eggs from the plate on top of it. "I'm heading to the lab for a bit."

"Okay. More armour?" Steve asked, trying and failing to sound casual.

Tony shook his head as he stuffed half the piece of egg-laden toast into his mouth. "Nope, not this time. JARVIS and I are starting on the specs for the new arc reactor for the Tower. I'm hoping to have it built and wired in before we leave for the summer. If my math is right, and it always is, once it's up and running we should be able to take the Tower off of the city's power grid."

"The entire Tower?" Steve asked with wide eyes. "Wow! That's... incredible!"

"Yep," Tony said as he took a sip of his coffee. "And I could use Pete's help with some of it, so if you don't mind sending him into the lab once you're done pilfering through his room, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure thing."

"Thank you, honeybunch," Tony said, his lips twitching in amusement at the faint blush that crept up Steve's neck. Tony absolutely loved how easy it was to make Steve blush.

"You keep doing that and we won't make it out of this kitchen," Steve said in a low voice, his blue eyes darkening. His arms curled around Tony's waist again as he planted a firm kiss on Tony's mouth, nearly causing Tony to drop his coffee.

"No, no," Tony breathed against his lips. "As much as I would love to, I think Pete literally would go blind if he were to come in here and catch us."

"Tonight, then?" Steve asked, and Tony's heart lurched at how tentative he sounded all of a sudden. He set down his coffee cup, taking Steve's face in his hands and kissing him soundly.

"Every night," he said firmly.

"Peter!" Papa called from the hallway, poking his head around the doorway to Peter's room. "Hey, little guy, it's time to head to school. Are you ready?"

"Uh huh, just getting my shoes on," Peter answered, sliding his shaking foot into his left shoe, the warmth from his hot shower all but gone already. He cringed at how loud Papa's voice seemed. Papa never raised his voice unless he thought it was absolutely necessary, and he'd never yelled at Peter for any reason, but for some reason that morning he was so loud it sounded like he was shouting at Peter through a megaphone.
"Is everything okay?" Papa asked as he stepped into the room, crouching down in front of Peter. "You're not still feeling sick from last night's ice cream mess, are you?"

Peter let out a shudder as he shook his head, his jaw clenched tight to keep his teeth from chattering. Ned's mom had had an appointment or something the previous day, so Ned had come home with Peter after school. They had been working on their physics homework after dinner when Ned suddenly declared that he was still hungry and somehow talked Peter into making ice cream sundaes, sundaes that included three huge scoops of peppermint ice cream, chocolate chips, gummy worms, chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and even a few graham crackers crumbled on top for good measure. Peter had eaten his entire sundae and then, to his horror, proceeded to throw the whole thing right back up again about fifteen minutes later.

And of course as soon as Peter got sick Papa immediately called Dad. It had taken nearly an hour and all of Peter's strength of persuasion to convince his father that he was already feeling much better, and had probably just shocked his body with too much sugar.

"No, but I don't think I'll be letting Ned talk me into doing that ever again," Peter said, suppressing another shudder. "That was… really gross."

"Well, there was probably an entire week's allotment of sugar in that sundae, so I'm not surprised that it upset your stomach," Papa said, smiling as he ruffled Peter's hair. "Are you just missing Dad, then?"

Peter bit his bottom lip, hating how easy he was to read sometimes. It's not like Dad hadn't ever gone on business trips before, but this was the first time since Afghanistan that he'd been away for longer than an evening, and Peter had been extra jumpy the entire time.

"Yeah."

Papa's eyebrows knitted together, and he patted Peter's arm. "Me too, little guy, me too. He told me last night that he's hoping to finish up with the committee today, so hopefully he can come home tonight."

"Mmm. That's good," Peter mumbled as he grabbed onto the shoelaces and pulled them tight, suddenly jerking backwards as one of the laces ripped right off into his hand, almost as if it had been cut in half.

"Oops," Peter said, glancing up at Papa with a sheepish look. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to… I guess these shoes are getting too small for me."

Papa frowned as he as he took the broken shoelace from Peter's hand, examining the torn end. "It's all right, little guy. But didn't you just get these shoes not too long ago?"

"Yeah," Peter murmured. "I'm sorry, I guess my feet are still growing or something, so—"

"There's no need to be sorry, Peter," Papa interrupted, still eyeing the shoelace suspiciously. "But we do need to get going or you'll be late, so you might want to grab another pair, okay?"

"Uh huh," mumbled Peter, already kicking off the offending shoe and hopping over to his closet. He'd been sort of hoping—actually, more than only sort of hoping—that he might get a little less clumsy as he got older, but so far that hadn't happened at all. In fact, it seemed like he'd only gotten worse, especially since the end of Christmas break. He had even dumped an entire ten milliliter test tube full of hydrochloric acid all over his chemistry textbook during class just the other day, earning a rather harsh glare from his grumpy teacher and plenty of laughs and teasing from his classmates,
especially Flash Thompson.

And to make things worse, that incident had been immediately followed by another one of what Peter was now calling his shaking sessions, those times when he got so freezing cold all of a sudden that he couldn't seem to get warm no matter what he tried. The fact that the winter they were just starting to crawl out of had been one of the coldest winters New York City had seen in decades had only helped to make that problem worse, with below-freezing nighttime temperatures that had lasted until well into April.

Peter's replacement pair of shoes thankfully went on without any further trouble, and as he and Papa made their way down to the Tower garage, Papa placed his hand on Peter's shoulder, guiding him over to the motorcycle parked in the corner.

"Wanna take the bike this morning?" Papa asked with a grin. "The sun's pretty nice today, and I think it's finally warmed up enough."

"Heck yeah!" Peter exclaimed, fighting the urge to jump up and down as Papa unlocked Peter's helmet from its locker. "It's been way too long!"

"It really has," agreed Papa as he secured Peter's backpack in the bike's storage compartment and swung his leg across the seat, scooting backwards so Peter could climb up in front of of him. "You're almost too tall to ride like this now, Peter," Papa added as Peter slid on his helmet. "I'm thinking I'll have to teach you how to ride behind me this summer if you keep growing like you have been."

"That'd be fine," Peter answered. "Isn't that how we're supposed to do it anyway?"

"Once you're big enough," Papa said as he started the bike, revving the engine a few times. "Hold on now, here we go."

Peter grinned as Papa eased the bike towards the garage exit, looking forward to feeling the bright sunlight and the crisp spring air against his skin again. The brutal winter temps combined with a lot of days spent sequestered inside the penthouse because of Dad and Papa's seemingly innumerable meetings with Director Fury had not allowed for very many trips outside in the last few months, and Peter was more than a bit tired of it.

In fact, Dad had been down in Washington D.C. with Director Fury for the last three days, arguing again with some Senator who thought he could take away Dad's Iron Man suits and give them to the military.

"Oh, yeah," Peter whispered as they exited the garage onto the street. Papa had been right, the sunlight did feel nice on Peter's skin, and the air while still cool, had that fresh, spring-y feel to it rather than the thick, heavy dampness of winter that always managed to burrow deep into his bones no matter how many layers he was wearing.

As Papa pulled up to a stoplight and prepared to make a left turn, his hand resting on Peter's waist as it always did, a cloud that had been partially covering the sun suddenly moved past it, flooding the street with light so bright it seemed like it was coming from a thousand stars instead of just one. Peter gasped in shock as he slammed his eyes closed, jerking his head back and managing to thump it right into the middle of Papa's chest.

"Peter?" he heard Papa say into his ear. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Peter managed through his clenched teeth, fumbling to pull down the tinted visor tucked inside his helmet. "Just… the sun's really bright today. Got into my eyes for a second."
The light changed then, with the car behind them honking less than a split second later in true New York fashion. Peter felt Papa sigh in annoyance as he made the turn, thankful that the street the school was on was surrounded by skyscrapers that could partially block out the bright light.

"You're sure you're all right?" Papa asked again once they arrived, his face etched in concern as Peter slid off the motorcycle and handed him his helmet, still squinting against the blinding sun. "Maybe it's not such a good idea to be in school today since you got sick last night."

"I'm fine, Papa," Peter said, trying to not sound as impatient as he felt. He was struggling to keep himself from visibly shivering, and his abdominal muscles were as stiff as Papa's vibranium shield from the effort. "I guess I'm just not used to the brightness yet. I'll be okay once I get inside."

"Mmm," Papa said warily, narrowing his eyes. "All right, if you say so. Now, you've got all your homework? And your inhaler, and your snacks, and your glasses, and—"

"Yeah, I've got all of it," Peter answered as he swung his backpack over his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around his papa's waist, smiling as he picked up the sound of his heartbeat. Papa's heartbeat was both loud and strong, and Peter loved it.

"I love you, little guy," Papa said, bending down to kiss the top of Peter's head. "I'll see you after school."

"Uh huh. Love you too," Peter replied, giving him one final wave as he entered the school. As soon as the door closed behind him Peter wrapped his arms around his front and hurried towards his locker. He had dressed in three separate layers that morning in addition to his jacket, but apparently it still wasn't enough. He was grateful that he'd thought to sneak a couple of extra hoodies to store in his locker after he came back from Christmas break, or there'd be no way he'd be able to concentrate on anything besides how cold he was until the shivering decided to go away.

Arriving at his locker, Peter set down his backpack, cursing under his breath when his shaking fingers wouldn't cooperate enough to dial the combination. He curled his fingers into his palm, tightening his fist until his knuckles went white and inhaled a deep breath. It was just a freaking locker dial that he dealt with multiple times a day, why the hell couldn't he open it?

His phone buzzed in his pocket then, causing Peter to jump. He immediately reached for it, cursing again for forgetting to put it in his back pocket instead of his front when he glanced down and realised it was just a text from Dad, telling him that he was going to be home later that night, hopefully before Peter went to bed.

*Good,* Peter thought as he tapped out a quick reply. *That must mean my new JARVIS override is working.* Dad wasn't the only person who knew how to tinker with JARVIS's programming, and with his shaking sessions coming on more and more frequently lately Peter had taken the opportunity while Dad was away to program in an override that prevented the UI from picking up on his temperature drops unless he happened to pass out, which had never happened. Dad and Papa were both already overprotective of him enough as it was, Peter didn't need them hovering over him every single time he had the shakes. They had plenty of other things to worry about.

Like aliens from other planets bringing their bitter sibling rivalries down to New Mexico, and huge green and orange rage-monsters fighting each other in Harlem, leaving trails of destruction in their paths. Things their brand-new, super-secret superhero club was supposed to deal with. And while nothing else had happened in the months since those two seemingly unrelated incidents, Peter had a feeling that it was only a matter of time before something came up and both of his dads were called in.
Pocketing his phone, Peter tackled the locker dial again, huffing out a sharp breath when he was finally able to get the thing to open. Slowly, he unzipped his backpack and emptied his books into the locker. Just last week Peter had ruined the zipper on his last backpack, torn it almost completely off as he tried to zip it closed at the end of the school day. He'd ended up telling his dads later that his backpack had just gotten misplaced, which given his track record for losing things didn't cause either of them to even bat an eyelash. But Peter had a feeling that "losing" two backpacks in as many weeks wouldn't go over quite as well, so he tried to be extra careful.

Finally getting his books sorted, Peter pulled out one of his extra hoodies, zipping it up as far as it would go and willing his teeth to stop chattering. His jaw was so tight he was starting to get a headache, and the fact that his eyes had been acting weird again all morning—not to mention the blindingly bright sun on the drive in—was only making it worse.

"Hey, Peter!" Ned exclaimed as Peter shuffled into their homeroom classroom, wincing as his chattering teeth nearly bit through his bottom lip.

"Hey, Ned," Peter replied, trying to keep his voice down. Ned's usual over-exuberance wasn't helping his pounding head at all, but given Ned's track record of ratting Peter out to his father there was no way Peter could mention that anything was wrong without being in danger of his dads finding out.

"You feeling all right?" asked Ned, his round face falling as he looked Peter over. "You kinda look like crap, dude."

"Yeah, well, I'm not the one who insisted that we eat almost an entire bucket of ice cream last night, am I?" Peter snapped, a bit too harshly when Ned's eyes went wide. "Sorry, dude. I… didn't sleep all that well. Just… missing my dad I guess. Papa misses him too, so we're both kinda grumpy. But he's coming back home from D.C. tonight so I should be better tomorrow."

"Oh," replied Ned. "Well, that's good."

Peter was saved from any further conversation by the arrival of the homeroom teacher, who immediately clapped her hands to get the class's attention. Peter winced with each sharp strike of her palms, the sound echoing through his head as he fought against the urge to cover his ears. Why in the hell was everything so loud today?

"Dude!" Ned hissed once the teacher finished her morning announcements and dismissed the class. "What the hell is wrong with you? You're acting all twitchy!"

"Just got a bit of a headache," Peter said through his clenched teeth as he gathered up his books. "Didn't sleep so great. It's no big deal, okay?"

Ned shot him a wary look. "Mmm, okay. If you say so."

"I do say so," Peter insisted, even as his head throbbed with every beat of his heart. "I'm fine, Ned."

They walked down the hallway in silence, with Peter desperately trying to drown out the noise of the other students milling about by concentrating on the slight squeak of his feet as they hit the polished linoleum floor. Stepping into his math class, Peter carefully slid into his seat, bracing himself for the bell he knew would be ringing soon. The other day he'd just about jumped out of his skin at the harshness of the ringing bell, and he didn't really care to repeat that again. Especially since Flash was still teasing him about it.

As soon as the bell rang Peter opened his textbook, glad that at least his hands had stopped shaking
for the most part. He picked up his pencil, trying to listen to the drone of the teacher as he went on
and on about the Pythagorean Theorem, but all he could seem to focus on during the entire class was
the scraping noise of his pencil against the paper of his notebook, the squeak of the teacher's marker
against the whiteboard, and the ticking of the wall clock above the classroom door, the ticking that
was so loud it sounded like the clock was actually inside his head.

Being aware of the clock, Peter was at least able to brace himself when the bell rang to signal the end
of class, breathing out a small sigh of relief that the period was over as he and Ned gathered up their
books and headed for the door. The hallways were always noisy between classes, and it took nearly
every ounce of Peter's strength to ignore the dozens of conversations going on around him and focus
only on whatever Ned was rambling about, but lunch was only two hours away, and Peter always
felt a bit better after he ate something.

"So do you think I could come over sometime this weekend and talk to Captain Rogers about our
history paper that's due next week?" Ned asked as he and Peter exited the lunchroom. "I mean, it's
kinda not fair that you pretty much have a walking and talking encyclopedia for a dad. I bet he could
probably even teach this stuff better than the real teacher does."

"I'm sure we could figure something out. Papa loves telling stories about how things were when he
was a kid," Peter replied, suppressing another shiver as they turned a corner into the older section of
the school building that housed the History and English departments. The old part of the school was
always much colder than the rest, and while Peter had eaten his fill at lunchtime, the food hadn't
helped get rid of his shivering like he'd hoped. This was by far the longest that one of his shaking
sessions had ever lasted, and so far there hadn't been any indication of it letting up.

"Don't you think that's kinda weird, in a way?" Ned asked as they entered the classroom. "I mean,
your papa had it pretty rough when he was a kid, didn't he? Being all scrawny and sick and
everything? I guess I wouldn't think he'd wanna remember too much of that stuff after he became a
superhero."

"Yeah, man, he did have it pretty rough," Peter answered. "But I mean, he's Captain freaking
America, and he's not ashamed of where he came from or how he had to struggle to get where he is
now. He says he thinks it's inspiring, actually."

And Papa was absolutely right about that. Being scrawny and sickly and bullied was definitely
something that Peter could relate to, and while Peter knew the chances of him winding up as a
superhero someday were pretty much nonexistent, he at least knew that Papa could understand
Peter's struggles. Even better than his dad could understand them.

"Oh. Yeah, he's probably right," Ned said. "So, when can I come over? I kinda wanna see where
you guys are with your new power source too. When did you say that's going live again?"

"About three more weeks if it goes according to schedule," Peter said. "Dad's still waiting on
approval from the City Council to make the connections to the lines that he needs under the water.
And let me ask him about this weekend when he gets home tonight, okay? I don't know what plans
we've got yet."

"Okay. Just let me know."

"Uh huh," said Peter as the bell rang to signal the start of class, the sound piercing through Peter's
head like a spear and causing his heart to jump into his throat. He wrapped his arms around his front
and tried to draw in a deep breath, but the tightness in his abdomen didn't allow for anything other
than a gasp. He reached a shaking hand to his pocket and pulled out his inhaler, nearly gagging as
the disgusting medicine hit the back of his throat. Gritting his teeth, Peter tried again, forcing himself
to inhale as deeply as he could to get the mist down into his lungs instead of his stomach. The absolute last thing he needed right now was to throw up all over the floor of the classroom because his stupid asthma medicine made him sick.

Thankfully, the inhaler seemed to help calm Peter's breathing enough for him to open his eyes again and attempt to listen to the teacher's lecture. Peter had to bite his tongue when a couple of the teacher's points directly contradicted things that Papa had told him, and if he'd been feeling more like his normal self he might've even raised his hand and tried to debate with her, but he was in no way feeling up to even talking at the moment, much less debating.

Plus, for some reason, the long fluorescent lights lining the ceiling seemed to be emitting a very strange, high-pitched hum that day, a hum that was growing louder with every torturous minute that passed.

A hum that soon became so loud that it was nearly overwhelming, blocking out the drone of the teacher, the sound of his pen against the paper and his heel tapping against the floor, even the sound of the clock ticking, until it became literally the only thing he could hear, and so piercing in its intensity that Peter had no choice but to squeeze his eyes closed.

_What the hell is wrong with me?_ Peter thought, sliding his hands under his legs so he couldn't clap them over his ears. _Why is this happening?_

"Mr Stark?" the teacher said suddenly, breaking through the fog filling Peter's head and causing him to whip open his eyes. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Uhh…" Peter stammered, now blinking against the harsh brightness of those same evil lights, the combination causing his stomach to violently lurch as he pushed himself up to his feet, his trembling legs barely able to hold him upright as he took off towards the door. "Uhh… I'm not—, I'm not feeling so good. I think—, I think I need to get the bathroom… gonna be—, gonna be sick—, I need…"

It was pure luck that the restroom was only two doors down from the classroom, or Peter would've never made it. As it was, he was barely able to push the door open and step inside before barfing his entire lunch into the trash can next to the door. As soon as he was done a wave of dizziness washed over him, so strongly that he collapsed into a heap right onto the freezing cold floor, not even able to make it to the sink to attempt to rinse out his mouth. With a shaking hand and the last ounce of strength he could muster, Peter reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out his phone.

"JARVIS," he grunted through his chattering teeth. "What's happening to me? Something's wrong —, I feel—"

"Stay where you are, Master Peter," JARVIS replied in a soft voice. "I've already alerted the security team to place the school on lockdown, and Captain Rogers is on the way."

"No!" Peter cried pathetically, drawing his knees up to his chest in a futile attempt to get warmer. "Please, don't call Papa! I just need… I just need…"

"As I said, Master Peter," JARVIS said. "Stand by. Captain Rogers is on his way."

Peter wasn't sure how long he laid there, curled into a tight ball on the filthy restroom floor, his teeth chattering so violently they felt like they were going to vibrate right out of his head and his heart thudding madly against his ribcage. It wasn't until he heard the scrape of the opening door and felt a pair of strong arms wrap around him, pulling him into a warm, broad chest that his rigid, frozen body finally began to relax.
"It's all right, little guy," said the soothing voice of his papa, so softly that Peter was shocked he could even hear it. "I've got you. You're safe."

"P-papa!" Peter stuttered, his frozen hands scrabbling wildly at Papa's shirt. He pressed his ear to Papa's chest, hearing the soothing sound of his heartbeat. "S-so c-cold, and l-loud. The l-lights, they w-were j-just s-so loud, and I couldn't—, I j-just couldn't t-take it anymore!"

"Shh," Papa whispered as he kissed Peter's forehead. "It's all right. You're gonna be all right. Dad's already on his way home, okay? We'll get this figured out, don't you worry."

"Oh no," groaned Peter, even as he burrowed further into Papa's arms. "Don't tell Dad, please! He always freaks out so much when I'm sick, do we have to tell him?"

"I'm afraid it's too late, Peter," Papa said as he hooked his arm under Peter's knees, picking him up. "JARVIS alerted Tony at the same time as me, and he was in the air less than five minutes later."

As Papa stepped into the hallway, Peter was relieved to see that it was completely empty save for the two security guards usually stationed inside the school building. At least the only witnesses to Peter's complete nervous breakdown would be limited to his own classmates, and knowing Dad, he'd just order them never to speak of it again, just like he did after Afghanistan.

Peter was surprised to find Happy waiting in the driver's seat of Dad's black Audi sedan once they got outside. In all the months that Papa had lived with them he'd only had Happy drive him places less than a handful of times, and not once since they'd been in New York. Papa had always insisted on driving either his motorcycle or his truck himself.

"Here we are," Papa said, easing them inside the backseat of the car, where the heater was going at full-blast. There was even a folded-up blanket sitting on the seat, which Papa tucked up around Peter before wrapping his arm around Peter's shoulders and cuddling him as closely as their seatbelts would allow. Papa was always so warm; Dad liked to joke that Papa was his own personal space heater, but it wasn't really a joke at all. Something about his fast metabolism made him always run warm, and Peter had never been more grateful for it.

Peter was still shaking when Happy pulled the car into the Tower garage, so Papa carried Peter up to the apartment, with Peter resting his head against Papa's chest like he was still three years old. As soon as they arrived inside Papa set Peter down on the couch, tucking the blanket tighter around his shoulders. "I'm just gonna run into the kitchen for a minute," he murmured, kissing Peter's forehead. "I'll be right back."

"Uh huh," Peter replied, blinking back the tears threatening to spill over. Why had he thought he'd be able to hide what had been happening over the last several months? His dad had always been able to see right through him, and Papa never missed much of anything either. What had he been thinking?

"Here," Papa said softly as he sat down on the couch next to Peter, a mug of steaming hot cocoa in his hand. He brought the mug to Peter's lips, tipping it carefully. "Just small sips, little guy. Don't want you to burn your mouth."

The hot cocoa felt wonderful against Peter's frozen lips, and after three or four sips Peter finally felt some warmth creeping back into his bones for the first time since he'd woken up that morning.

"Better?" asked Papa.

"Loads," Peter whispered. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me, Peter," Papa said as he tucked Peter under his arm. "I do need you to
tell me what happened, but if you want to wait until Dad gets home and just tell us both at the same
time, I'd be fine with that too. Is that what you'd like to do?"

Peter inhaled a shaky breath, nodding against Papa's chest.

"All right then," Papa said. "Just try and relax, okay? You're still shivering."

"I was so cold," Peter mumbled. "I just couldn't get warm, no matter what I tried."

"Shh, it's okay," whispered Papa. "It's gonna be okay."

"And Dad's gonna be so mad at me!" Peter croaked, the tears he'd been holding back finally
breaking free, trailing down his cheeks and wetting through Papa's shirt.

"Oh God, Peter," Papa said, crestfallen. He took a corner of the blanket, blotting it against Peter's
tears. "Of course he's not, why would you think that?"

"'Cause I tinkered with JARVIS behind his back," Peter whimpered. "And the last time I did that,
well… Dad didn't like it very much. And the timing pretty much sucks too. All the crap going on
down in D.C., and we're trying to get the arc reactor online, and—"

"You were trying to hide what was happening," interrupted Papa. "Is that right?"

Peter nodded against his chest. "Uh huh."

Papa frowned as he let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know why you felt you had to do that, Peter, but
I'm at least glad that you've told me now. And you know you're more important to us than anything
going on down in D.C., or anything else, right? There should be no question in your mind about it."

"There isn't," Peter said, sniffing. "I just—, I've been so weak and sick my whole life, it just gets…
old sometimes."

"I can understand that," said Papa. "But trying to hide it isn't the answer either, because all that
usually does is just make things worse. All right?"

"Uh huh."

They were quiet for several minutes, with Peter sipping his hot cocoa until he heard the sound of an
approaching helicopter.

"Mr Stark has landed at the Tower," JARVIS announced a moment later.

"Thank you, JARVIS," Papa said, just as Dad came bursting into the living room from the direction
of the lab and took Papa's place next to Peter, his face etched in worry.

"Hey, buddy," Dad said in a low voice as he drew Peter into a hug, the hum from the arc reactor
soothing his frazzled nerves. "Tell me what's going on."

"Um…" Peter stammered. "It just got to be too much. I was so cold, and then the sun was so bright it
felt like a thousand spotlights were shining right on my face, and then the lights were so loud that I
couldn't—, I couldn't hear anything else, and—"

"The lights were loud, buddy?" Dad asked, throwing Papa a loaded glance. "Can you give me some
more details on that one?"

"I could hear a humming noise," Peter said, cringing at the memory. "And it just kept getting louder,
and louder, and louder, and it was so high and piercing, like the arc reactor on steroids or something. And I just—, after awhile I just couldn't take it anymore, and I threw up in the bathroom." He let out a hard shudder. "It was so gross!"

"Tony," Papa said, quirking an eyebrow in Dad's direction. Dad pursed his lips, quirking his eyebrow in return as he shook his head.

"Yeah," muttered Dad. "Um… JARVIS?"

"I have scheduled appointments with Master Peter's pulmonologist, allergist, ENT, and general pediatrician, sir," JARVIS said. "The first is set for 9am tomorrow at Mount Sinai with the rest following sequentially."

"Good. Tell them it might be a good idea to do a confab, JARVIS, if you don't mind," Dad said. "Would sure save everyone a lot of time."

"Very good, sir."

"What?" Peter demanded. He usually thought his dads' little silent language thing was cute, but now was not one of those times. "What're you guys thinking?"

"Nothing yet, Pete," Dad said quickly. He wove his fingers into Peter's hair, kissing the top of his head. "We're just gonna get you thoroughly checked out first and then go from there. Okay? And you're gonna stay home from school the rest of the week, just in case."

"But—!"

"Please, Pete," Dad said, and Peter's heart gave a lurch at the intense guilt clouding Dad's voice. "Just trust us, okay? We're gonna get this figured out no matter what, I promise. You just gotta try and be patient. Now in the meantime, I need you to tell us how long this stuff has been going on, all right?"

Peter huffed out a sharp breath, burrowing further down into his blanket. "All right."

The next three weeks were a whirlwind of activity, with Peter's team of doctors putting him through pretty much every test they—and Tony—could think of, reminding Steve a lot of the weeks after his serum procedure when he'd felt like little more than a human pincushion.

And so far it had all been for naught. Both Peter's lung and allergy doctors announced that his lungs were the healthiest they'd ever been, with only a minimal amount of the inflammation related to his severe asthma remaining. This was corroborated later by the Ear, Nose, and Throat doctor, who ran a completely separate barrage of tests when he didn't believe the initial results, all of which only served to make both Tony and Steve even more frustrated and anxious that there no apparent answers that would explain Peter's symptoms.

Finally, when Peter just happened to go into one of his shivering sessions right there in the pediatrician's office and still no one could figure out what was causing it, Tony demanded to see a geneticist, confessing to Steve later that night that he was now convinced that the Ten Rings were responsible for what was happening to Peter. He had told Steve about the time their kidnappers dragged Peter away right after Tony's surgery and injected him with something, something that Tony hadn't ever been able to identify since all the tests done at the base hospital in Afghanistan had come back negative for toxins.

"Goddamnit!" Tony cried as the screen clicked off from yet another conference call with Peter's
doctors, raking his hands through his hair. "These are some of the best specialists in the entire world, how in the hell can they not figure this out? The geneticist says that Pete's DNA is normal, but how can that be possible? There's just no way!"

"Tony," Steve said gently, even as his own heart dropped to his knees. Tony had been counting on the geneticist being able to tell them something. "We're gonna figure it out, we just need more time —"

"More time?" Tony snapped. "More time for Pete to nearly freeze to death? More time for the damn lights at the school to drive him insane?"

Steve grabbed Tony's shoulders, turning him to face him. "Tony, this isn't helping anything. Peter's been doing a lot better with the new earplugs and glasses that you made for him, and his body temp hasn't been dropping as low since he started wearing those new undershirts we got him. He's doing better, we just need to try and be patient."

"But you told me yourself that the whole noisy lights thing happened to you after your serum procedure," Tony protested as he dropped his forehead against Steve's chest. "So if he's been given something that's enhancing his senses, then why can't we figure out what happened to him? The SSR scientists were able to see changes in your blood chemistry pretty much right away, and that was back in the goddamn forties!"

"I don't pretend to understand all the science behind this, Tony, and we don't even know for sure if that's what happened," Steve said. "Medicine has come a pretty long way since the forties."

"That's true," Tony admitted. "But still… if those Ten Rings fuckers really did shoot him up with whatever's causing this, I just can't understand why we can't find it. Those guys, they weren't exactly set up for running genetic experiments, Steve. They were just a bunch of terrorists who got their hands on some big fucking guns and thought they were hot shit because of it."

"Big guns tend to make small men feel powerful," said Steve, trailing his palms up and down Tony's back, feeling Tony shiver in his arms. Steve knew he loved when he did that.

"That's pretty profound," Tony murmured, suppressing another shiver as his tense body practically melted against Steve. Tony hadn't been sleeping well at all since Peter's sensory overload—neither had Steve, for that matter—and he was so exhausted that he looked like his very bones were aching. Much like he'd looked in the hospital in Afghanistan after he and Peter were rescued.

"You need to rest," Steve whispered. "You've been spending so much time combing through medical research that you're gonna drop if you don't get some sleep soon."

Tony inhaled a shaky breath as tears spilled down his cheeks. "I can't. I can't until I know he's gonna be okay. This is all my fault, if I hadn't been so goddamn weak those assholes never would've been able to take him away, and—"

"Tony, you can't do that," Steve said gently. "You can't think like that. None of this is your fault, you had no idea—"

"But I should have!" Tony snapped. "I should've known, I should've been able to do something. He's my son, and I couldn't protect him! What the hell kind of man does that make me?"

"The best kind," Steve said firmly. He slid his fingers under Tony's chin, tilting his head up to look at him. "You were so strong that you survived open heart surgery in a cave. You were so strong that you made those terrorists bow down to every demand that you made, and by doing so, allowed both
you and Peter to get the hell out of there. You didn't give up for one single second, Tony. That's how
strong you are."

Tony's lower lip was trembling as he gazed up at Steve, anguish radiating from him in waves.
"Steve, I—"

"No more arguing," Steve murmured. "We have to pick Peter up from school in about two hours,
and then we need to get the Tower's arc reactor ready to turn on, don't we? I know Peter's looking
forward to it."

"Yeah, he is," Tony replied, his mouth curving into a slight smile. Peter had been nearly vibrating
with excitement when he and Tony had dropped him off at school that morning, and Steve had a
feeling that he would be even more bouncy when they picked him up. Tony had asked him to be in
charge of monitoring the reactor's energy levels at the Tower while Tony did the final connections
in the Hudson, and Steve was very much looking forward to watching Peter work. Peter's exuberance
when he was working was so similar to Tony's it was uncanny, and something that Steve never tired
of watching.

"Come and lie down with me for awhile," Steve suggested. "We don't even need to sleep, just…
rest. We have a big night ahead of us, and I know I could use some rest too."

"Yeah, yeah, okay, Mr Mother Hen," Tony muttered after a short pause. "Lead the way."

"Thank you," Steve whispered. He pressed his lips to Tony's forehead before taking his hand and
leading him down to the bedroom. They cuddled up close on the bed like they always did, with
Tony's head resting on Steve's shoulder, and it wasn't even three minutes later that Tony was fast
asleep.

"Okay, Pete, how's it looking up there?" Tony asked over his comm, sounding like one of those old-
fashioned deep-sea divers.

"You know, you kinda sound like Darth Vader right now, Dad," Peter replied, winking up at Steve
as he tapped the various coloured lights on his monitor. "It's pretty cool!"

"Hey now, we've discussed this! I am way cooler than Darth Vader. Now, will you please look at
the screen in front of your face and tell me how the numbers are doing?"

"Um… just double-checking," Peter said, squinting at the screen. "I think we're good, Dad, go ahead
and seal it."

"Cool. Just got two connections left and I should be done," Tony replied.
A few seconds later all the lights cut out, with Steve automatically reaching for Peter as they
flickered back to life.

"It's working, Dad, it's working!" Peter exclaimed, looking up at Steve with the biggest smile he'd
seen in a long time. "The lights just went out for a couple seconds and came right back on!"

"That is awesome, buddy," Tony replied, full of pride. "Especially since it means I can now get out
of this disgusting harbour. Be back in five."

"Sounds great!" Peter replied. He wrapped his arms around Steve's waist. "We did it, Papa! The
Tower's now completely off the city power grid!"
"That's incredible, little guy," Steve said, grinning widely as he kissed the top of Peter's head. "I'm so, so proud of you guys."

"This is so huge!" Peter continued. "It's gonna completely revolutionise the power industry! An entire New York skyscraper that's completely self-sustaining, and this is only the prototype! And Dad told me that Pepper's already working on the zoning for another Stark Industries building in D.C., so that's probably what we're gonna do next."

"Long as we can get the folks in D.C. to give us the go-ahead," replied Tony as he touched down on his landing pad, walking towards the entrance as his complicated robotics system removed his armour. "Which after tonight shouldn't be too much of an issue." He stepped inside, a huge grin lighting up his face as both Steve and Peter practically tackled him.

"Sir, Agent Coulson from SHIELD is on the line," JARVIS cut in, just as Steve was about to suggest that Peter start getting ready for bed. Both he and Tony had woken up pretty refreshed from their nap earlier, and so Steve had suggested that they have one of their dessert dates out on the landing pad after Peter went to sleep. With everything that had been going on with Peter lately, it had been far too long since Tony and Steve had taken some much-needed time for themselves.

"What?" Tony cried as Steve's belly swooped. "What the hell does he want this late? No, on second thought, just tell him we can talk to him tomorrow. We're celebrating tonight. Stark Tower has just become a beacon of self-sustaining, clean energy, and," he winked as his hand slid down to pinch Steve's ass, causing Steve to grab Tony's waist, "I thought we had a date."

"Darn right we do," Steve murmured into Tony's ear.

"Sir," said JARVIS. "I'm afraid Agent Coulson is insisting. My security protocols are being overridden—"

"Can they do that?" Steve asked, alarmed.

"What?" barked Tony. "No, absolutely not—!"

"What's going on?" Peter asked just as their secured, private elevator doors opened and Agent Coulson stepped into their living room, carrying what appeared to be a large black folder.

"Gentlemen," Agent Coulson said, wearing his ever-present smirk as he headed directly into the lab. He attempted to hand the folder to Tony, who immediately backed away, holding up his hands. "We need you both to come in. I'm here to escort you in now, Captain, with Mr Stark following once he's looked over these materials."

"Why now?" Steve demanded as he grabbed the folder, allowing Tony to take it from him. "What has happened?"

"What's going on, Agent Coulson?" Peter asked, curling his hands around Steve's arm.

"I'm afraid I can't give you any further details until we meet with Director Fury, Captain," Coulson replied. "But suffice it to say that we require your services."

"Hold on!" yelped Tony, causing Peter to jump. Steve immediately wrapped his arm around the boy's shoulders, drawing him to his side. "I'm not going anywhere until I know why?"

"We've had a breach," Coulson said in a loud whisper, and for the first time, Steve could see that he wasn't exactly his cool, unflappable self. There was real fear in the man's eyes, and his usual smirk seemed almost plastered to his face. "Something of great value has been stolen, something with
which Captain Rogers is quite familiar."

Tony's eyebrows knitted together as he glanced up at Steve, who could only shake his head. "I'm not sure what you're referring to, but—"

"Fury knows that Steve and I can't go anywhere until Pete's been settled," Tony interrupted. "And so far I haven't seen anything—" "Members of our STRIKE team are standing by in the lobby right now to escort the boy to our headquarters in D.C.," Coulson said. "And Agent Rumlow is the best of the best, I can guarantee that no harm will come to him."

"Dad, no!" Peter cried. "I don't wanna go to D.C., why can't Uncle James just come out here and stay with me again?"

"That's not a bad idea, Tony," Steve said. "We could have Colonel Rhodes meet up with Peter in D.C., I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled Tony. "JARVIS?"

"Very good, sir."

"Regardless, time is of the essence, gentlemen, and I must insist that we depart in the next few minutes," said Coulson. "Director Fury is waiting."

"Papa, please?" Peter cried. "I don't wanna go!"

Peter's cries pierced Steve's heart like a knife, and he bit his lip, looking over at Tony to see him peeking inside the folder, shaking his head slightly as his face drained of colour.

"Tony?"

"Yeah, hon," Tony replied, clearing his throat. "This is the real deal."

Steve nodded as he let out a heavy sigh. He absolutely hated the thought of leaving Peter, especially with all of his medical questions still mostly unanswered, but if he was reading Tony's expressions correctly neither one of them could afford to be distracted right now.

"I know you don't want to leave, Peter," he said softly. "But this time it's better that you do. Can you get packed up real quick?"

"Mmm, fine," Peter grumbled, his shoulders sagging. "Just give me a few minutes."

As soon as he'd walked away, Steve turned to Agent Coulson. "You trust this STRIKE team of yours?"

"I sure wouldn't want to be on their bad side," replied Coulson. "Peter will be safe, I can assure you."

"He damn well better," muttered Tony. "'Cause this timing really fucking sucks."

"Director Fury did ask me to tell you that he's been in touch with Dr Helen Cho, a geneticist from South Korea who might be able to shed some light on your son's current medical issues," Coulson added. "From my understanding she is quite busy and does not usually see individual patients, but is willing to make an exception in this case."
"And you're just telling us this now?" Steve demanded. "Why?"

"Oh, don't waste your breath, Steve," Tony said, his upper lip curling into a sneer. "Fury always holds onto things like that until he can use 'em for leverage. I'm not sure he knows any other way to operate."

"I'm only the messenger, gentlemen," said Coulson as Peter reappeared in the lab, his backpack filled to the brim and carrying Steve's shield, looking so forlorn that Steve's heart lurched. "And we need to get going."

"All right," Steve whispered, taking the shield as Tony held out his arms toward Peter, gulping when Peter walked right into them and ducked his head underneath Tony's chin. "You'll be all right, buddy. This will hopefully be over in just a couple of days."

"Uh huh," Peter mumbled against Tony's chest. "Be careful. Please?"

"We will." He kissed the top of Peter's head, nodding towards Steve. "You go with your papa now, he'll make sure you get where you're supposed to be going. And Uncle James is gonna meet you in D.C. as soon as he can, all right?"

"Uh huh. Love you."

"Love you too, bud," said Tony, releasing Peter and reaching for Steve, tugging his head down to kiss him firm on the lips, long enough to make Coulson squirm.

"You be careful too," he whispered. "I'll see you soon."

Steve nodded as he gripped the shield tightly in his hand, running his thumb along Tony's cheekbone. "See you soon." Then he turned towards the elevator, placing his free hand on Peter's shoulder.

"All right, Agent Coulson, lead the way."

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*Come and find me on tumblr, I'm *geekymoviemom* and *geeky-writes* there! :)*

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)*
Papa was silent the whole way down to the lobby, his jaw twitching and his hand gripping Peter's shoulder. Peter could tell Papa was nervous, that both he and Dad were nervous, which scared Peter more than he wanted to admit. He had told Ned not too long ago that he thought it was pretty cool to have two literal superheroes for dads, but now it didn't seem so cool anymore. Now it only seemed dangerous.

The loud *ding* of the elevator startled Peter from his gloomy thoughts, the doors opening to reveal at least fifteen SHIELD agents standing in the lobby, with one of them, a tall man with cropped dark hair and broad shoulders stepping forward as soon as they exited the elevator, a rifle in his hand that was at least half Peter's size.

"Captain Rogers," the man said, extending his free hand towards Papa just as a weird ice-cold shiver raced down Peter's spine. "I'm Agent Rumlow of the STRIKE team. It's an honour to meet you, sir."
"Agent Rumlow," Papa replied in his Captain's voice as he shook the man's hand. "I understand that you're going to be in charge of my son during this… exercise?"

"That's correct, Captain," Agent Rumlow replied. He looked towards Peter, giving him a creepy sort of half-smile as another freezing-cold bolt shot down Peter's back, almost as if someone had dumped ice cubes down his shirt. "Our orders are to transport the boy down to HQ. I believe Mr Stark knows the location."

"He does," said Agent Coulson.

"All right," said Papa. "Colonel James Rhodes will be arriving there sometime tomorrow as well, and he's the only person aside from your team who's allowed access to Peter until this is over. Is that understood?"

"Understood," said Agent Rumlow.

"Good," Papa said with a firm nod. He crouched down in front of Peter, placing his hand on his shoulder as tears welled up in Peter's eyes. It hadn't hit him until he was getting packed up that the one-year anniversary of he and Dad's ill-fated trip to Afghanistan had come and gone—another last-minute trip—and now he was being forced away from his dads when all he wanted to do was stay as close to them as possible.

"Hey, little guy," Papa murmured. "It's gonna be all right, okay? This should all be over soon."

"Uh huh," Peter whimpered, biting his lip as he tried desperately to hold in the tears. Agent Rumlow didn't seem like the type of guy who would tolerate a crying kid very well, plus Papa seemed to be okay with him, which probably meant that Peter was just being extra twitchy. "Just… be careful. Please?"

"We will, Peter," Papa said, kissing Peter's forehead. "It's just like I've always told you, it's always better to have a backup. And I promise that Dad and I are gonna have each other's backs out there, okay? You don't need to worry about us."

"Okay," Peter inhaled a shaky breath as he threw his arms around Papa's neck. "Love you."

"I love you too, Peter," answered Papa, squeezing Peter to him. "We'll see you soon."

"We need to head out," Agent Rumlow said. "We've got a plane waiting at LaGuardia and the pilot's starting to get antsy."

"And our ride is this way, Captain," said Agent Coulson.

They stepped outside where three black SUVs were lined up on the street against the curb. As he adjusted his backpack, Peter felt Agent Rumlow tap his shoulder.

"We're over here, kid," he said, pointing to the front SUV. Peter looked up, barely suppressing another shiver as both of his arms pebbled with goosebumps under his hoodie. For how often his shivering sessions had been occurring lately, Peter knew he shouldn't be surprised that he was starting another one now. They always seemed to be worse when he was stressed out or tired.

"Uh huh," Peter choked out, glancing back for one last glimpse of Papa as their SUV backed up and took off in the opposite direction.

"Hey, don't worry, kid," Agent Rumlow said as he climbed into the backseat next to Peter, looking him over with his beady black eyes. "I'm pretty sure that Captain America can take care of himself."
Peter winced as he wrapped his arms around his front, trying to keep from shivering as Agent
Rumlow's eyes practically bored into Peter's skull. This seemed to be different than just another one
of his run-of-the-mill temp drops. It was almost as if his body was trying to tell him something.

"I know—, I know he can," Peter choked out, turning to look out the window as the car drove away.
He squeezed his eyes closed, wishing that Uncle James could get to D.C. faster than tomorrow
morning. Peter didn't often think of people that he'd just met as creepy, he always preferred to think
the best of everyone unless proven otherwise, something his father had always said was a pretty rare
trait. But there was something about Agent Rumlow that just seemed… off, and right then Peter
wanted nothing more than to get away from him as soon as possible.

"JARVIS," Tony grunted as he poured himself yet another cup of coffee. It was nearly four in the
morning, and Tony had been working pretty much nonstop ever since Steve and Peter left. "Pull up
the specs on the tesseract, will ya? I wanna look 'em over again."

"As you wish, sir," replied JARVIS as a holographic image of the glowing blue cube appeared next
to Tony's workstation. "And may I remind you that you have consumed exactly 3.375 litres of coffee
in the last seven hours."

"Is that all?" muttered Tony as he plunked himself down onto his chair, cursing under his breath
when some of the burning hot liquid sloshed over the sides of his cup and onto his fingers. "Nothing
I haven't done before, J."

"That is true," agreed JARVIS. "However, the fact that your excessive caffeine consumption has not
caused you bodily harm in the past does not mean that it is indeed healthy."

"Yeah, yeah. Leave me alone, I'm trying to concentrate," Tony grumbled as he set down his cup,
shaking the coffee from his fingers and picking up the hologram, turning it over in his hand.

Tony had heard of the tesseract before, of course. According to Howard's records it had been the
power source for pretty much all of HYDRA's super weapons during the war, searched out from its
long-standing hiding place in Norway by none other than the Red Skull himself, Johann Schmidt.
After Steve defeated Schmidt and crashed his massive plane into the arctic ice, Howard himself had
recovered the cube during one of his many searches for Steve, and according to the SHIELD
briefing materials it had been in their custody ever since, being studied as a potential source for clean,
sustainable energy.

"And of course they didn't invite me in on their little soirée," Tony mumbled under his breath.
"Figures."

Scowling, Tony drew his hands apart to expand the schematic, smirking as he imagined how
frustrated Howard must have been trying to study this remarkable object given the limitations in the
technology of his day.

"JARVIS, how much available info is there on Project PEGASUS?" asked Tony.

"Aside from the limited notes and equipment left behind by your father, there is one small database
located in SHIELD's records that is associated with that particular project. However, it requires a
clearance level of nine to access, which I believe you do not possess."

Tony rolled his eyes, releasing the hologram. "Of course. Can't allow SHIELD's most intelligent
consultant access to too many of their secret projects now, can we?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."
"Yeah." Tony huffed out a sharp breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "JARVIS, what's Peter's current location?"

"Master Peter is currently located on the third floor of SHIELD headquarters, sir," replied JARVIS. "Which is precisely the same location he was in the last three times you inquired."

"Yeah, yeah. Is he still asleep?"

"It appears so, sir, based on his vital signs. However, without visual confirmation, I cannot—"

"Yeah, all right, I get it," Tony interrupted. He wouldn't be at all surprised if Peter was just lying there twiddling his thumbs, and Tony's heart ached at how frightened and lonely he must be. Peter had tried hard to hide it, but Tony could tell that he was scared, and he knew Steve had sensed it as well. This was the first time that both of them had had to be away from Peter for longer than the length of a school day.

"When's Rhodey supposed to get there?" Tony asked.

"Colonel Rhodes stated that he will depart Edwards Air Force base at 0500 pacific time," replied JARVIS. "That would put him arriving in D.C. at approximately noon local time."

"Good. Let me know as soon as he gets there, yeah? And make sure that SHIELD team and Pete all know that he's coming."

"Very good, sir."

Taking a sip of his coffee, Tony swiped his fingers across the monitor, pulling up the section that discussed Dr Bruce Banner. Apparently having the tesseract swiped from under their very noses was enough to make SHIELD desperate enough to enlist the help of someone who many thought had no business being around other people.

Oh well, Tony thought. Banner's at least gotta be better than that asshole Thunderbolt Ross.

And despite the fact that Banner's rage-monster fight with the Abomination or whatever-the-hell SHIELD was calling him had occurred just a bit too close to Stark Tower for Tony's comfort, Tony couldn't deny that he was actually looking forward to meeting him. Tony always enjoyed meeting other scientists, especially brilliant ones, and if nothing else at least he could get Banner's autograph for Peter once all of this blew over.

"Sir, Agent Coulson is on the line," JARVIS announced just as Tony pulled up the information on Thor, the self-proclaimed god of thunder.

"Go ahead and put him though," Tony answered. He took another sip of his coffee as Phil Coulson's face appeared on the monitor. "What's going on, Coulson?"

"We've managed to track down the location of the Asgardian, Loki," Coulson began. "He's over in Stuttgart, Germany, apparently trying to hide in plain sight. Director Fury has sent Agent Romanoff and Captain Rogers to retrieve him."

Tony's heart immediately leapt into his throat. "Already? Why the hell didn't you call me before they left?"

"The tesseract is not currently on Loki's person, Stark," Coulson replied. "And Director Fury didn't think that you were needed. He wishes for you to report to the helicarrier."
"Yeah, and 'didn't think' being the keywords in that sentence," snapped Tony. And Steve's always going on and on about needing backup... Tony had heard Agent Romanoff's name before, and Fury himself had mentioned that she was quite good, but still...

"I'm heading to Germany," he said. "I'll meet them there."

"But—" Coulson started.

"See ya later, Coulson," Tony said, swiping across the monitor to end the call. He quickly gulped down the rest of his coffee and headed towards the landing pad, inhaling a deep breath as his armour assembled around him.

"JARVIS," he said as soon as his faceplate closed. "Secure the Tower, and get going on the diagnostics for the Mark VII just in case. Can't be too prepared."

"Very good, sir. And good luck."

"So," Agent Natasha Romanoff said from the copilot's seat, shouting to be heard over the engine roar of the SHIELD aircraft. "Has Coulson had you sign his Captain America trading cards yet?"

"What?" Steve asked, trying to hide his annoyance with the fit of his new uniform, which reminded him way too much of the dancing monkey version he'd worn during his USO shows. "Trading cards? You mean like baseball cards?"

"Oh yeah," replied Natasha. "They're vintage, he's very proud. I thought he was gonna swoon the day they found you in the ice."

"I see," answered Steve. He tugged on the tight fabric covering his thigh, trying to get it more comfortable. "Where did this uniform come from?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure Coulson had some design input into that as well," Natasha said, smirking. "He even spent some time at your bedside giving you heart eyes while they were thawing you out."

Steve scowled, giving up on adjusting the suit for the time being. He didn't particularly enjoy being reminded of his time in the ice. It wasn't as though he could remember it exactly, it was more like certain things would trigger small pieces of echoes buried deep inside his head. The slide of ice cubes against each other in a drink cup, the groaning sound of metal straining against itself at a construction site, the feeling of being completely submerged, unable to breathe. It was the main reason why he could never put his head under the water in the pool at the Malibu mansion. He had tried one time, the first time he went swimming with Peter, and had immediately felt like he was suffocating.

Thankfully, Peter never seemed to notice. Or if he did he just didn't say anything, which, once Steve thought more about it, was more likely the case since he knew that Tony struggled with it as well. Peter had confessed to Steve shortly after they moved into the Tower that Tony had had all of the penthouse bathrooms remodeled the previous summer to remove all of the bathtubs, with Peter's bathroom being the lone exception. He simply couldn't tolerate being submerged in water at all after being tortured in Afghanistan unless he was wearing his armour.

The two of them definitely made quite a pair.

"So, you're comfortable just leaving Dr Banner alone on the helicarrier?" Steve asked. He had gone over the information on Banner's incidents at Culver University and in Harlem with Tony, and while Dr Banner himself hadn't seemed like much of a threat when they were introduced, Steve was not hoping to meet his large, green, and angry alter-ego anytime soon.
"It's not like he's completely alone," Natasha answered. "He's surrounded by dozens of highly-trained SHIELD agents."

"Yeah. And I'm sure that's exactly what the Army thought during that fight in Harlem," Steve pointed out.

"Dr Banner showed no hostility during his retrieval, Captain," said Natasha. "And Fury thinks he's worth the risk. Banner's the world's foremost expert on gamma radiation, and we need the best of the best working on this mission."

"All right," muttered Steve. He supposed he really had no choice but to trust Fury's judgement on that one. "How well do you know this Agent Barton?"

Natasha bit her lip, her expression a bit tenuous. "Well, Captain, we've worked together for a long time, and I'd trust him with my life. In fact, I have trusted him with my life more times than I can count. I owe him a debt."

"I see," Steve said softly, thinking of his Howling Commando squadmates, all of whom he had trusted with his own life. "I can definitely understand that."

"We're nearing the drop zone, Cap," Natasha said a few minutes later as the Quinjet started to descend. "You ready?"

"Yep," replied Steve as he pulled on his helmet—which felt like little more than a rubber head covering—and grabbed his shield.

"We'll be right behind you," Natasha stated.

"Copy that," Steve said as he jumped out the back end of the Quinjet, landing about a block away from where a crowd had gathered outside of an opera house. Loki, the Asgardian god of mischief, stood in front of them, wearing an elaborate horned helmet and carrying a long, golden staff that housed a glowing blue light at the top, not too unlike the blue glow of Tony's arc reactor.

Racing into the crowd, Steve jumped in front of an elderly man just in time to block a blast from Loki's staff with his shield, the resulting shockwave knocking the so-called god off his feet.

"You know the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else," Steve said. "We ended up disagreeing."

Loki got to his feet, sneering in Steve's direction. "The soldier," he spat out. "The man out of time, isn't that what they call you?"

"I'm not the one who's out of time," replied Steve as Natasha maneuvered the Quinjet into an attack position, hovering over the street.

"Loki," came her voice over the intercom. "Drop the weapon and stand down!"

With a maniacal grin, Loki instead raised his staff, sending a blast charge towards the Quinjet that Natasha was barely able to avoid. The blast was enough to momentarily stun Steve, as it sounded so similar to a HYDRA weapon that he felt himself starting to slip into another flashback. Gritting his teeth, Steve launched his shield directly at Loki, his eyes widening as he watched it bounce off Loki's chest as if it had been made out of nothing more than styrofoam. It was like he was fighting the Red Skull all over again.

"Kneel!" rasped Loki as he held the end of his staff against the back of Steve's head, having knocked
him down at least twenty feet away from his shield.

*He's nothing more than another backalley bully,* Steve thought, panting for breath. *I can do this all day.*

"Not today!" grunted Steve as he flipped back up, slamming both of his feet against Loki’s jaw just as his ears picked up the sound of another approaching aircraft. Both Loki and Steve looked up as Tony swooped down from the sky in his flying armour, blasting Loki backwards with his hand repulsors. Loki crumpled against a set of stone steps with a *crunching* noise that was so loud and creepy it made Steve's teeth itch as Tony landed next to him, hard enough to crack the cobblestone street.

"Make a move, reindeer games," Tony said, aiming what looked like an entire portable weapons armada at Loki, who raised up his hands in surrender as Steve got to his feet.

"Tony, what're you doing here?" he asked.

"Watching your back, babe," Tony replied, holding his arms steady. "Thought you could use a hand. And what the hell is that thing you're wearing, by the way? You look like a goddamn Ken doll. I mean, it's not that I mind it *too* much, it does show off your glorious ass in all of its glory. But really, it's just a bit—"

"Tony!" Steve snapped. "Can we just concentrate on this right now?"

"Huh? Oh sure, hon," Tony replied, and Steve could just picture the smirk lighting his face under his helmet.

Tony kept his weapons trained on Loki as Natasha cuffed his hands together, handing Steve the staff.

"You must be Tony Stark?" she asked as they headed back to the Quinjet.

"In the flesh," Tony answered as he removed his metal helmet. "Or should I say, gold/titanium alloy-encased flesh. And you are?"

"Agent Natasha Romanoff."

"Ah yes, the infamous Black Widow," Tony replied. "Heard quite a bit about you."

"I'm sure you have," Natasha said warily. "I've heard more than a few things about you too, Stark."

"I hope one of 'em wasn't that I don't play well with others," said Tony. "'Cause that's just completely inaccurate."

"Can't imagine where Fury would get that idea," she muttered, quietly enough that only Steve could hear her. She secured Loki to one of the seats on the jet, turning to Tony and Steve with a frown. "So, how's this gonna work with you two?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Tony.

"I mean, you two," Natasha repeated, pointing to each of them in succession. "Fury told me that you guys are—"

"Yes," Steve cut in. "Is that a problem?"

"Not unless you make it one," said Natasha.
"We will not," Steve said firmly. He glanced over at Tony, who was still eyeing his uniform with barely-concealed disgust. "Right?"

"Nope, no problem, hon," Tony answered, his lips twitching slightly. "I just… that outfit's really gotta go. What the hell happened to your old one?"

Steve huffed out an impatient breath as Natasha raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. This what they gave me when I got to the helicarrier. I didn't really have time to ask any questions about it."

"Well, who made your old one? You know, maybe we can—"

"Your father made it, Tony," Steve said evenly, trying to ignore the fact that Loki was now smirking at them as well. "Now, just let it go. Please."

"Hmph," Tony grumbled under his breath. "I bet I could make a better uniform for you than Howard ever could. You know, he didn't even wanna teach me how to sew? Said it wasn't manly enough or some other such bullshit, even though he knew how 'cause his mom was a seamstress. I had to ask Mr Jarvis to teach me."

"Language," replied Steve, trying desperately to hold onto his patience. "And maybe when we're done here we can talk more about it, but for right now let's just concentrate on the mission, all right?" 'Cause I know Peter is probably anxious for us to get back already, and I really don't like being away from him."

"All right, Captain," Tony said, and Steve couldn't honestly tell if he was being snarky or serious. "If you say so."

"No problems, gentlemen?" Natasha asked again after a short pause.

Steve glanced over at Tony, who only shook his head. "No ma'am," he said. "No problems."

"Papa!" Peter yelped as he lunged forward, trying to reach his papa who was at least fifteen feet away, unconscious and with blood pooling across his abdomen from several machine gun rounds. He was going to die if Peter didn't get to him.

"No! Peter, don't!" screamed Dad, stuck behind a massive pile of fallen debris, the thundering sound of explosions still piercing the dust-filled air, the smell of burning rocket fuel so strong it was nearly suffocating. "Peter!"

"I gotta get to him!" Peter cried as he inched closer to his fallen papa, the pain from his bleeding fingers radiating up and down his arms like burning hot spikes. "I can't let him die!"

"Buddy, you gotta get out of there!" Dad yelled. "This whole thing's gonna collapse!"

The sounds of splintering plaster and cracking wood filled Peter's ears just as he reached Papa's limp body. "Papa, wake up!" he pleaded, tugging on Papa's bloodstained shirt, the fabric tearing off into his hands. "You gotta wake up, we gotta get out of here!"

A loud knock on the door startled Peter from his latest nightmare, his hands clenched into such tight fists that his fingers were cramped. He could still hear the explosions echoing through his head, still smell the firing guns. And the blood, lots and lots of blood. Way, way too much blood, just like there'd been in Afghanistan, and Peter hated the smell of blood. Grunting, he slowly propped himself
up on his elbows, licking his dry lips.

"Um… come in?"

There was a loud *clang* as the metal door was unlocked, swinging open to reveal the tall, dark silhouette of Agent Rumlow, who in the dim light emanating from the hallway looked just as creepy and menacing as he had the previous night. There was someone else behind him, another man by the shape of his shadow, but Peter couldn't make out anything more than that. Almost immediately another one of those weird ice bolts raced down Peter's spine, causing him to shiver.

"Morning, kid," Agent Rumlow said in his smirky, gravelly voice. "Doing okay?"

"Um… sure?" Peter choked out past his dry throat. He hadn't slept well at all, which was no surprise. The room he was in had no windows, and so was pretty much pitch black with all the lights turned off. Peter had never been a big fan of the dark, so he'd at first tried to sleep with the lights on. But after only a few minutes their hum grew too loud for him to handle and he had to switch them off, gripping the scratchy sheets of the narrow, barracks-style cot he was on to try and anchor himself and wishing that he'd thought to bring his polar bear.

Agent Rumlow stepped further inside the small, square-shaped room and flipped on the light switch, flooding the room with such blinding light that Peter let out a loud gasp, throwing his clenched fists up to cover his eyes.

"Too bright, too bright!" he squeaked as another jagged bolt of ice ran down his back. "Please, turn it off!"

The light switched off again, once again plunging the room into its near-complete darkness.

"Sorry, kid," said Agent Rumlow, and Peter could've sworn he was trying not to laugh. "Didn't mean to blind ya there. It's time to head down to the mess hall for some food. I'm sure you have to be hungry."

Peter pressed his fist to his chest, trying to take a deep breath. His lungs felt tight, but it wasn't the same tightness he was used to dealing with from his asthma. This felt more like a lead vise had been clamped around his chest.

"Did you hear me, kid?" Agent Rumlow asked. He took another step into the room, and Peter instinctively shrank back, nearly hitting the back of his head on the cement-block wall.

"Um… is m-my Un-Uncle J-James here yet?" he stammered.

"Who's Uncle James?" asked Agent Rumlow, frowning.

"C-Colonel Rhodes," Peter answered. "He's supposed to be coming out here to stay with me."

"Oh, yeah. We got word this morning that he's on his way." Agent Rumlow paused, checking his watch. "ETA is in about ninety minutes."

"Okay," Peter murmured. He pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them in a vain attempt to stop the now almost painful shivers. "If it's okay, I'd r-rather wait until he g-gets here. I'm still p-pretty t-tired."

Agent Rumlow leaned into the hallway, listening as the other man whispered something to him that was too quiet for Peter to catch. "All right then, suit yourself," he finally replied, shrugging. He jerked his head towards the opposite wall, indicating the small metal table shoved into the corner. "If
you need anything before Rhodes arrives just pick up that phone and one of us will answer."

"Uh huh. Can you please send Uncle James up here as soon as he gets here?" Peter asked, wincing at how pathetic he sounded. He was twelve for heaven's sake, not five.

"Will do, kid," Agent Rumlow said as he exited the room. "See ya."

"Thank you," Peter murmured as the door clicked shut, plunging him into darkness once again. Pursing his lips, Peter fumbled around in the dark for his backpack, pulling out his phone.

"JARVIS, where're my dads?" he asked. "Are they all right?"

"Captain Rogers is not currently carrying his phone, Master Peter," replied JARVIS. "However, Mr Stark's current location is approximately three hundred miles off of the New York coast, and I believe it is reasonable to assume that Captain Rogers is with him."

"What?" Peter exclaimed. "They're out over the water? Where'd they go?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss their mission parameters, Master Peter," JARVIS said. "I am sorry."

"But, why?" Peter cried. "I just wanna know if they're gonna be okay, and I can't know that unless I know what they're doing!"

"Captain Rogers does not wish for you to be aware of their mission parameters, Master Peter. Now, as I said, Mr Stark's current location is approximately three hundred miles off—"

"Yeah, yeah, nevermind," Peter grumbled. He turned the phone off and laid back down, trying to concentrate on taking deep breaths.

Nope, he thought. *This whole dads-as-superheroes thing is definitely not so cool anymore. 'Specially if they're both gonna be hiding stuff from me the whole time.*

"JARVIS?" he asked after a short pause, swallowing hard.

"Yes, Master Peter?"

"Um… could you turn on the rain sounds for me? Please?" Peter had been trying to avoid using anything extra to help him fall asleep lately, thinking that since he'd be turning thirteen soon he was old enough to start falling asleep on his own. It was bad enough he still felt the need to sleep with a stuffed animal. But here, lying in the pitch dark in a strange place being watched by a creepy agent while his dads were off fighting some super-villain, he supposed it was okay to ask for a little help just this once. Maybe it would help keep the nightmares away until Uncle James arrived.

"Of course, Master Peter," JARVIS replied, his room filling with the soothing noise of falling rain less than a second later.

"Thank you," Peter whispered as he rolled onto his side, curling into a tight ball.

"You are most welcome."

Steve stared across the spacious laboratory, filled with nearly every technical gadget that Tony could've asked for, watching as he and Dr Banner bantered back and forth as they worked. He was still very uncomfortable with the idea of being so close to someone that he considered to be such a high threat, but there was also no way he felt comfortable leaving Tony alone with Banner either, so there he remained, just trying to stay out of their way.
There really wasn't anything else for him to do at the moment anyway. Loki was secured in his cage —although he seemed far too content to be there for Steve's comfort—Thor was talking to Director Fury and Agent Coulson, and Tony and Dr Banner were still searching for the tesseract, speaking in their genius-level science gibberish. And Steve was just… worrying about Peter and waiting for the next thing to happen.

Which, he supposed, would likely be the arrival of the army from outer space that Thor had mentioned.

An army he could handle. It was the "from outer space" part that he was still struggling to wrap his mind around.

It was as if they'd stepped right into one of Peter's movies.

"You know, babe," Tony said, tapping his chin as he studied the monitor in front of him. He tossed Steve a rather sly wink. "I'm pretty sure Banner and I are good here."

"I know," Steve replied automatically. "I'm just… watching." He sucked in a deep breath, trying to keep from scowling. "Do you know if Colonel Rhodes has arrived in D.C. yet?"

"Yep," answered Tony, stuffing one of his dried blueberries into his mouth. "At least it's not more coffee. JARVIS told me he got there about forty-five minutes ago."

Steve breathed out a slight sigh of relief. "That's good. I bet Peter was happy to see him."

"Yeah, I know he was," Tony muttered. "Damn SHIELD team had him stuck in a goddamn box from what Rhodey told me, and they hadn't even fed him yet either."

"A box?" exclaimed Steve. "Surely not—"

"Not an actual box, but it may as well have been," replied Tony. "Rhodey raised some hell and got it taken care of, and he said Pete was doing as well as could be expected."

"Um… who's Peter?" asked Banner, looking at Tony over the top of his glasses.

"Our son," both Tony and Steve said at the same time.

"Oh," said Banner, raising his eyebrows as he glanced between Tony and Steve. "Ahh…"

"Mine by birth," Tony explained. He jerked his head in Steve's direction, giving Steve that little half-smile that he loved. "And his by choice."

"I see. So you two are…"

"Yep," Steve said firmly. "Any news yet on the cube?"

"Not yet," Tony replied. "And Steve, honey, I'm serious. We're fine here. You have to be bored out of your gourd just standing there. I'm sure there's some books or something around here somewhere that you can—"

"You know I don't mind watching you work," Steve interrupted, frowning. "Besides. There's not really much else to do until we find the cube, so…"

Tony quirked an eyebrow, shaking his head as he turned back to Banner. "You know, you should come and work for me. We've got a great setup there at Stark Tower. There's ten entire floors devoted to research and development, not to mention the best accommodations in the entire city of
New York. I'm sure it would beat treating measles victims in Calcutta, plus I know Pete would love to meet you. He's got a thing for superheroes."

Steve's eyebrows shot up as his heart lurched. He didn't like Banner even being around Tony, there was no way he was going to allow him around Peter.

"Um, Tony, don't you think we should discuss that kind of stuff first before you—"

"Why?" Tony asked innocently. "Banner seems to have a pretty good lid on things."

"Because," Steve stammered. "Ahh, because—"

"It's okay, Captain," Banner cut in. "I'm pretty sure I know what you're referring to, and it's all right. I wouldn't have come aboard if I had thought it was unsafe."

"See?" said Tony. "He's got a lid on it. Watch this!" And he proceeded to poke Banner in the side with one of his tools.

"Ow!" yelped Banner as Tony leaned in, presumably to watch for any sign of Banner threatening to transform.

"Tony!" Steve exclaimed, completely dumbfounded. "What are you doing?"

"Just demonstrating to you that he's safe to be around," replied Tony.

"Well, pardon me if I don't think that being able to poke Dr Banner with a stick is quite enough reason to introduce him to our son!" Steve snapped, clenching his hands into fists. "No offence of course, Dr Banner."

"You really think that I'd expose Peter to someone that I considered a threat?" Tony barked as hurt blared from his brown eyes, hitting Steve like a punch to the gut. "That's just your over-the-top soldier-paranoia coming out again! How in the hell could you think I would do that?"

Steve inhaled a shaky breath, wondering how in the world the conversation had managed to derail so quickly. "Tony," he said carefully. "That's not what I meant at all. I only meant that—"

"Look, it's okay, Captain," Banner said, holding up his hands. "Why don't we all just get back to the problem at hand, hmm?"

"That's probably a good idea," Steve said with a nod. He looked over at Tony, who was still shooting darts at him with his eyes.

"All right," said Tony. "Then here's what's bugging me. Why did Fury wait to call us in until after the tesseract was taken? Or specifically, why'd he wait to call me in until after the tesseract was taken?"

"That is a pretty good question," replied Banner. He removed his glasses, fiddling with them in his hands. "From what I read, you're kinda the only name in clean energy right now. I mean, the story about the arc reactor at Stark Tower was all over the news."

"That's right. I flew over an entire gaggle of reporters after I got done connecting it," Tony said proudly. "See, Steve, it's bugging him too."

"So you think Fury is hiding something?" asked Steve.

"Wouldn't be the first time," said Tony, just as that haunted look that Steve absolutely deplored
flashed across his eyes. He still needed to ask Tony about that sometime. "He's the spy, old man. His secrets have secrets."

"Okay," Steve said after a short pause. "So, then what do we do about it?"

"Well, I just might've placed a decrypting bug as soon as I hit the bridge," Tony said. "So JARVIS is working on it. In a few hours we should know every dirty little secret that SHIELD has."

Steve's belly gave a violent swoop. "Tony! You think that's such a good idea? I mean, Peter's down at the SHIELD headquarters right now, and—"

"I do," Tony stated. He looked straight into Steve's eyes. "Call it an… instinct."

"All right," Steve said softly. He had passed a long hallway on the way to the lab that had seemed to be just a dead end at the time, but now… maybe Tony was right. Maybe Director Fury was trying to hide something. "Then I guess I'll leave you guys to it. But our first priority should still be finding the cube."

"Agreed," replied Banner.

"Yep," said Tony. Hurt was still pouring from his brown eyes, causing Steve's heart to clench. He should've known better than to get into an argument now of all times. "We'll let you know as soon as we find something."

"Good." And with that, Steve exited the lab.

"C'mon, Peter, I know you gotta be more hungry than that. And I thought you wanted to try and get some of your schoolwork done this afternoon," Uncle James said as Peter picked aimlessly at his food. It was lunchtime already, and he'd completely missed breakfast while waiting for Uncle James, but he was so scared for his dads that his stomach felt like nothing more than a big ball of lead.

"You were the one who said I should do my homework, remember?" Peter muttered. "It wasn't my idea."

"Well, it probably beats just sitting around here and moping," said Uncle James. "Don't you think? Besides, the lady who helped me find you earlier said that she was going to arrange for a better room for us, 'cause there's no way in hell that I'm staying in that closet they put you in last night."

Peter shrugged as he picked up a French fry, biting off the end and grimacing at how cold it was. It just figured that the SHIELD mess hall would serve the kind of French fries that he didn't really like. Peter far preferred the skinny kind of fries, like they had at his favourite burger place. The thick ones tasted way too much like potatoes for his taste.

"Look. They probably just got called in to answer some questions, don't you think?" Uncle James said. "Isn't that what your father usually does for SHIELD anyway? And Captain Rogers is a damn good military strategist, so it would make sense that they'd want his input too."

"Yeah," Peter whispered. It didn't help at all that not even Uncle James knew what was going on. Peter knew Uncle James was aware of Dad's suits because of the incident with the airplane, and had in fact testified on Dad's behalf against the Senate Armed Services Committee. But other than that it seemed like he was just as much in the dark as Peter.

"Eat, Peter," Uncle James insisted, nudging Peter gently with his elbow. "I'm not taking you out of this mess hall until you clean your plate, and you know I mean it. I don't need Tony snarling at me if
you pass out from hunger again."

Rolling his eyes, Peter stuffed the entire French fry into his mouth, glaring at Uncle James while he chewed. He had just managed to swallow the final lukewarm fry when a tall, blonde-haired lady dressed in a suit that reminded Peter of Pepper walked up to their table.

"Colonel Rhodes," she said, the ID badge clipped to her suit jacket reading Agent Carter. "I'm here to escort you and the boy to your new quarters, if you're ready."

"Yeah, we are," answered Uncle James. "And I'd also like to know whose bright idea it was to put the boy in nothing more than a brig cell in the first place? I mean, a room with no windows and a door that only locked from the outside? I highly doubt that Tony Stark and Captain Rogers are going to be very happy when they hear about this. I sure the hell know that I'm not."

"I can't speak for that, sir. All I was told was that there was a mixup with the room requisition," said Agent Carter. "But I do believe you'll enjoy your new quarters. It's a VIP room with plenty of windows, a television, and—"

"Yes, thank you," Uncle James said. He picked up Peter's backpack, handing it to him. He'd insisted on Peter taking his things with him to the mess hall, saying there was no way in hell he was going to allow Peter to return to that tiny, windowless room.

Their new room on the twelfth floor was a lot better, outfitted with a computer, a few board games, and a fairly large stack of books along with a mounted television screen and two queen-sized beds. There was even a refrigerator stocked with snacks and drinks in the corner.

"Yeah, this is more like it," Uncle James said approvingly. "I'm getting too damn old to be shoved into boxes."

"Just let me know if there's anything else that you need," said Agent Carter. She handed Uncle James a piece of paper with a phone number. "That's my direct line."

"Thanks," said Uncle James, turning to Peter as soon as Agent Carter left. "All right, kid. How 'bout you do your schoolwork for a couple hours while I work on some paperwork, then we can see if you've upped your chess game any since we played last. Sound good?"

Despite himself, Peter grinned. Uncle James had never, ever beaten Peter at chess, not even once. Dad had taught him how to play when he was three years old, and ever since then he had been the only person who could beat him, and that was only occasionally. Papa had come close a few times, but even he hadn't ever beaten Peter. Not yet at least.

"Okay," Peter said, feeling lighter than he had since Agent Coulson broke into their apartment the night before and commandeered both of his dads. Uncle James may be a bit gruff on the outside, but he really was nothing more than a secret softie when it came down to it.

"Good." He clapped a hand on Peter's shoulder, squeezing it gently. "It's gonna be okay, Peter. Both Tony and Steve are damn smart, too smart to let anything bad happen to each other. All right?"

"Okay," Peter murmured, stifling another shiver. That nightmare was still haunting him. "Thank you."

"No problem. Now, get started on your homework, yeah? I got some of my own I need to get done."

"Uh huh."
Steve's heart felt like it had been shrouded with a lead veil as he sat at the helicarrier's large command table, the very same table that still bore smears of blood from Agent Coulson's Captain America trading cards, and the very same helicarrier that had nearly been blasted out of the sky by Agent Barton. Steve supposed he should go and check on how Agent Barton was doing—the last thing he'd heard was that Agent Romanoff had taken him to the medbay after literally knocking him free of Loki's mind control—but he needed to talk to Tony first. Tony had walked away in a huff after Director Fury's speech about Phil Coulson still believing in heroes when he died, and Steve was counting the seconds until he felt it was safe to go and approach him. They desperately needed to regroup after everything that had happened in the last hour or so, but he also knew that Tony needed a few minutes to collect himself or he wouldn't hear a word Steve was saying.

It had all happened so fast that Steve was still trying to understand what exactly had happened. Discovering the hidden cache of weapons. The argument in the lab, where he'd completely snapped at Tony for reasons that still escaped him. Tempers had been running high throughout the entire group right before the explosion that crippled the helicarrier, but that was still no excuse for him to have yelled at Tony like he had. Even if he was sick to death of Tony making such rash decisions, like flying off to take on Thor alone and nearly getting shredded by the helicarriers' rotors because he didn't want to wait for Steve's help. Not to mention all the stupid comments about Steve's "spangly" uniform.

Inhaling a shaky breath, Steve pushed himself up from the table, heading off in the direction that Tony had escaped. He found him propped up against a wall next to the gaping hole left behind by Loki's—or Hulk's—destroyed cage, his head tipped back and his eyes closed, his right hand wrapped around his left forearm. Steve hadn't seen him look so defeated since they were in the hospital in Afghanistan.

"Tony," he whispered, barely loud enough for him to hear. He reached his hand out towards him, letting it drop to his side when Tony didn't respond. "Tony, please talk to me."

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, looking up at Steve through narrowed eyes that did nothing to hide the intense sorrow clouding them. "What's there to say?" he murmured. "Fury just said we were dead in the water up here, and for once, I'm inclined to agree with him."

"Tony," Steve said, his voice tense as he looked over at the bloodstained wall. He still had no idea what Coulson had been thinking, trying to take on an alien like Loki alone, without proper backup. "I know you knew Agent Coulson for a long time, and there will be a time to mourn him, but now's not that time. We still need to finish the mission."

"Finish the mission," Tony scoffed. "Spoken like a true soldier. Well, let me tell you something, Captain. We are not soldiers. I'm not marching to Fury's fife. Not anymore. That man's been a pain in my ass for long enough."

"Neither am I," Steve said firmly. He reached for Tony again, placing one hand on his arm and nearly choking with relief when Tony didn't flinch away. "Fury's got the same blood on his hands that Loki does. But right now we have to put that behind us and get this done. We have to. Loki's out there again, and he's looking for a power source. And if he's able to find one then he's gonna be able to unleash that army of his that Thor mentioned, and I'm not sure that we'll be able to stop him."

"Well, that's encouraging," Tony muttered. "I thought you were supposed to be the optimistic one."

"I'm trying to be realistic, Tony," Steve said. "We're all way out of our league here, and now that Thor and Banner are gone, it's gonna be up to us to—"

"Banner will be back," Tony cut in. "I know it."
Steve pursed his lips. "All right. If you think so, then I believe you. But even still, it would help a lot of us could figure out where Loki's heading next."

Tony glanced off to the side, where Phil Coulson's blood was still drying on the wall. "He made this personal, Steve."

"Maybe so, but I don't think that's the point here—"

"No, no, that's exactly the point. He brought his glowstick of destiny here, used it to turn one of Fury's most loyal agents against him, and then we just all happen to be standing around it almost coming to blows right when the ship's attacked?" Tony paused, his throat bobbing as he gulped. "He was trying to hit us where it hurt, Steve. He made it personal."

"You're saying he was trying to tear us apart?" Steve asked. It did make sense, he had to admit. Divide and conquer was one of the oldest military strategies ever, and still one of the most effective.

"Just about worked, didn't it?"

Steve's heart gave a painful lurch, and he curled one hand around Tony's waist, cupping his cheek with the other. It still amazed him that someone who could project such a strong aura of confidence could be so deeply insecure. "No, Tony, it didn't. Just because we have an argument doesn't mean that we're tearing apart. And if what you're saying is true, then it seems like we were being influenced in that direction anyway."

Tony's bottom lip was quivering as he dropped his forehead against Steve's chest, his hands clutching Steve's arms. "I don't—, I just don't really know how to do… this very well, and I guess I just assumed that—"

"It's all right," Steve whispered. He squeezed his eyes closed, sliding his palms up and down Tony's back. "I'm sorry too."

"He still made it personal," Tony said again.

"I know that. But we still need to figure out where—"

"No, that's what I mean, Steve. Loki doesn't just want to beat us, he wants to be seen doing it. He wants an audience." He drew in a shaky breath, his head snapping up. "Holy shit, Steve. He's heading home!"

Steve's eyebrows knitted together. "Home? Who's home?"

"Our home! He's gonna tap into the arc reactor at Stark Tower, it's the only power source out there that's strong enough to do what he's wanting to do. That's where the son of a bitch is heading!"

Tony was right. That was personal.

"All right," Steve said, his jaw tightening in determination. "Then we have to stop him." He took Tony's face in his hands, planting a quick, firm kiss on his mouth, running his thumb along his cheekbone. "Suit up, Iron Man."

Tony's lips twitched as he nodded. "Yes, Captain."

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Tony was barely aware of the whirlwind of activity around him as he worked to repair his damaged helmet, gritting his teeth at the thought of the goddamn god of mischief daring to try and set up shop
on his Tower.

That asshole better not touch any of our stuff! he thought as his helmet finally lit up. He set down the soldering iron and wiped his hands, pulling out his phone when he was done.

"JARVIS, how're the diagnostics coming on the Mark VII?"

"Still in progress, sir," answered JARVIS. "This is a rather complex design, and one minor malfunction could result in the armour wrapping around the nearest lamppost or mailbox instead of around your person."

"Well, it'd at least be a damn good-looking lamppost," Tony muttered as he headed down the hall to where his Mark VI was stored. Steve was off collecting Agents Barton and Romanoff and had said that they would meet Tony at the Tower, with Tony hoping against hope that his instincts regarding Banner were right. If what Thor had said about Loki's army from outer space was correct, having a Hulk was going to come in pretty handy very fast.

"We're in position, Tony," Steve's voice said over the comm. "Heading out now."

"Gotcha," Tony replied as he started pulling on his armour. "Don't start the party without me."

"Copy that," said Steve.

"JARVIS," Tony grunted as soon as his helmet was on. "What's Peter's current location?"

"Master Peter is currently located on the twelfth floor of SHIELD headquarters, sir," JARVIS replied. "As is Colonel Rhodes."

"Good. I don't want him to know about what's going on, you got that? Steve and I can tell him after the fact."

"Very good, sir."

"And speed up your diagnostics, yeah? I'm gonna need the VII, this Mark VI has been beat to hell thanks to those goddamn rotors."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"That's usually good enough," he said as he arrived at the hangar just in time to see the Quinjet carrying Steve, Barton, and Romanoff take off.

"Babe?" he said as he launched himself out of the hangar, noting that his boot thrusters were malfunctioning. It was definitely time for an upgrade.

"Yeah, Tony?" answered Steve.

"I'm right behind ya."

"That means you've got my back."

"Damn right," Tony said, grinning behind his mask. "And it's a damn pretty sight, too."

"Are they always like this?" another voice suddenly asked.

"Worse," replied Agent Romanoff. "It's kinda sickening, actually. I almost like it better when they're fighting."
"Great," groaned the first voice, who Tony assumed must be Barton. "Just what we need when we're gonna be battling an alien army. Guess I shoulda left my hearing aids back at the barn."

"I am absolutely sure that it's going to be necessary for you to be able to hear us out there, Agent Barton," said Steve. "Especially if things get as busy as I'm thinking they'll get."

"Yeah, yeah. Just keep the sweet talk to a minimum, okay? Too much sugar makes me sick."

"No promises, Barton," replied Tony.

"Hey, I don't even know you!" protested Barton.

"Tony Stark. Aka, Iron Man, aka Steve's very significant other, and father to the cutest, sweetest, most brilliant boy in the world. There, now you know me."

"All right, enough chatter," Steve said. "We'll see you there."

Tony's grin grew even wider. "Copy that, babe."

Despite everything that had conspired against them up to that point, Steve wasn't too surprised when he and Tony managed to completely gel together when it mattered most, once all hell broke loose. And, despite his reservations with some—or most, if he was truly honest—of Tony's methods, Steve couldn't help but admit that he was darn good at what he did, keeping the skies relatively clear while Steve and Natasha worked to get the panicking civilians to safety. Even if he could still feel the imprint of his heart in his throat from Tony's terrifying swan dive off the top of the Tower.

Even Tony's instincts about Banner had been right all along. And as soon as the Hulk made his appearance, literally punching one of the massive flying alien creatures so hard that it upended itself, allowing Tony to destroy it, Steve actually felt a bit of his fear ebb away as the tide of the battle began to turn.

The aliens—and Loki—were beatable, it was just going to take all of them working together to do so. And when Tony stood next to him, surrounded by Barton, Natasha, Thor, and Hulk, and said, "Call it, Captain," Steve couldn't help but let out a grin. They had officially become a team.

It wasn't until they had tried everything they could possibly think of to close off the portal linking Earth to space without success that Natasha suddenly announced that she could seal the portal using the gem housed inside Loki's staff. Steve had just ordered her to do so when Tony's tenuous voice came over their comms.

"Hold on, we got a nuke coming in," he said. "And I know exactly where to put it."

His words registered logically with Steve at first. There was a bomb coming in, a very powerful bomb from the sound of it, and since Tony was likely the team expert on bombs, plus the fact that he could fly, it made the most sense for him to take care of it.

It didn't really hit him when he watched Tony fly overhead, his thrusters going at full speed, right up to the actual bomb itself and literally lift it onto his back.

But it hit him like a rifle blast to the chest when he saw Tony skim the surface of the Tower and head directly for the portal, the bomb still very much attached to his back.

He was flying the bomb into space. Tony was flying the bomb into space.
"Tony!" Steve choked out, his throat as tight as if he were having an asthma attack, barely registering that Thor was now standing next to him. "Tony, what're you doing? You know that's a one-way trip!"

"Not necessarily," Tony replied, although with little conviction. It sounded more to Steve like he was just trying to placate him.

"Tony, don't!" Steve croaked, his voice weak as his heart thudded madly against his ribcage. He felt frozen in fear, his feet rooted to the broken and debris-laden street. "Please, don't go!"

"Steve," Tony said with a heavy sigh, one that caused Steve's heart to literally crack in two. "It's okay, honey. You'll be okay. Pete'll be okay. He won't understand, at least not at first, but he'll have you. You can help him understand. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

No longer able to speak, Steve could only shake his head, his entire body trembling so violently he was shocked he was still upright. He was the one who was supposed to make the big sacrifices. He was the one who was supposed lay down on the wire or jump on the grenade.

Not Tony. Anyone but Tony.

Tony, please! Don't do this!

But then, he was gone. There was nothing in Steve's ear except static.

"Tony?" Steve shrieked. "Oh God, Tony, please, come back!"

His only answer was an explosion, barely visible through the portal, followed by a rapidly growing fireball.

"There is a chance that Stark could yet survive, Captain," Thor said. "His armour is quite formidable to be able to withstand the power of Mjolnir."

"Cap?" Natasha said from the Tower's rooftop. "Um…?"

Summoning every ounce of courage he had left, Steve sucked in a sharp breath through his burning lungs, the rest of his body gone completely numb. If they waited any longer, the fireball could escape through the portal.

"Close it," he said, and immediately pitched forward, only vaguely aware of Thor's hand wrapping around his arm, keeping him from falling flat on his face.

How am I going to explain this to Peter?

How could you leave me like this?

How?

Why?

"Copy that," Natasha said softly.

Steve's tear-filled eyes were still trained on the street, his ears buzzing and his chest heaving with barely suppressed sobs when Thor suddenly yanked on his arm so hard that it hurt.

"Captain!" he said, letting out a triumphant whoop as he pointed his magic hammer towards the sky. "Look! Stark returns!"
"What?" Steve squeaked, his head snapping up just in time to see Tony now plummeting back to Earth, escaping through the collapsing portal with not a second to spare.

"He's not slowing down!" Thor exclaimed, and Steve's stomach dropped to his knees. The man he loved was falling to his almost certain death, and once again he was powerless to stop it.

It was like watching Bucky slip from his grasp all over again.

"Thor!" stammered Steve. "You gotta—, you gotta—, can you catch him?"

Thor immediately began swinging his hammer, preparing to take off when Hulk suddenly leapt onto a nearby building and caught Tony in his arms, sliding down the side of it and jumping to the ground, grunting as he tossed Tony down onto the street as if he were nothing more than a rag doll.

Sprinting towards them on shaky legs, Steve skidded to a halt next to Tony as Thor flipped him over, ripping off his face plate. Tony's eyes were closed, his face pale and lifeless.

"Tony!" Steve shrieked, cupping Tony's cheek with one hand and pressing his other over the arc reactor, glowing only a faint bluish grey instead of its usual more vibrant hue. "Oh God, Tony, please! Don't leave me like this!"

"I am sorry, Captain," Thor said from behind Steve, his voice sounding like he was half a world away as Steve's chin dropped to his chest and the tears finally broke free, trailing down his grimy face in hot, salty rivulets.

The team may have won the battle, but he and Peter had just lost everything.

How could you leave us like this?

An ear-splitting roar from Hulk suddenly shook the ground, and Steve felt the metal under his hand jerk, followed by a loud, choking gasp. Slowly, Steve raised his head, just enough to see Tony's brown eyes looking quizzically into his.

"Holy shit!" Tony breathed. "What the hell just happened?"

Steve immediately surged forward, pressing his lips to Tony's in a bruising kiss, ignoring Hulk and Thor and the dozens of news cameras that had already gathered nearby. Tony's armoured fingers slid up to tangle in his hair as their lips touched over and over again, wet and salty from Steve's tears.

Tony was alive. Hulk had literally roared him back to life.

"I'm all right, honey," Tony said a few seconds later, grasping onto Steve's arms so he could haul him into a sitting position. Steve was still shaking, his ears buzzing from the noise of the battle, the foul stench of broken buildings and streets and fallen aliens filling the air around them.

"Oh my God, Tony!" Steve rasped. "Don't ever do that to me again!"

"Sorry, babe," Tony murmured, still looking up at him in awe. "But I'm pretty sure we're in the wrong line of work if you think I'll be able to follow that order."

"We're not finished yet, gentlemen," Thor said with an amused expression. "We still must take care of Loki."

"Mmm," mumbled Steve. He and Tony would have to have that conversation another time, because Thor was right. Now that Tony was okay, they needed to finish the job. Loki was still somewhere,
the team would have to be medically cleared and debriefed, and they both needed to talk to Peter. Judging by the number of reporters already on the scene it was very likely that Peter had already heard about what happened, and Steve wanted to reassure him that both of his dads were okay as soon as possible.

"We need—, we need to talk to Peter," he said, pressing his forehead into Tony's temple and inhaling his scent, sweat combined with a faint trace of his shampoo. "He's gonna be wondering what happened, and—, God, Tony, I almost lost you!"

"We can call him from the Tower, babe, and you didn't lose me. I'm right here," Tony said, grunting as he curled an arm around Steve's shoulders, allowing Steve to help him to his feet. Steve kept his arm around his waist as they walked towards the battered Tower, the feeling slowly returning to his limbs with each step.

They found Loki embedded into the floor in Tony's lab, dazed and moaning like he'd been hit with something very hard. Director Fury and Agent Maria Hill arrived shortly after to take him into custody, along with the tesseract and Loki's staff. Thor informed them that he would require the tesseract to return with Loki to Asgard, but that the staff could be kept in SHIELD's custody for the time being, something that seemed to make Fury quite pleased, saying it would help make up for him disobeying the World Security Council.

As soon as Tony was cleared from his quick medical exam, Steve pulled him into the living room.

"JARVIS, call Peter, please," he said, clutching Tony's hand as tightly as he could without crushing it. In fact, Steve had barely let go of him ever since Hulk had roared him back to life, terrified if he did that Tony might up and disappear.

Not three seconds later Peter's tearstained face filled the monitor, with Colonel Rhodes sitting right next to him. He looked so sad and pathetic that Steve wanted nothing more than to reach through the television screen and hug him, and judging from Tony's expression, he was feeling the same way.

"See, Peter? I told you they were both okay," Rhodes said, patting Peter's shoulder.

"What happened to you guys?" Peter cried, sniffling between every word. "I saw you on the news, and it looked like Daddy was dead and Papa was crying, and—"

"I'm not dead, buddy," Tony said firmly, squeezing against Steve's tight grip, his hand shaking slightly. Tony was a lot more spooked than he was letting on. "I'm right here."

"Uh huh. That's good."

"We're both fine, little guy," Steve said. "Things got a bit… intense, but we're both okay now. There's no need to worry. Are you doing okay? Staying warm enough?"

"As well as can be expected," Rhodes replied when Peter didn't answer. "I haven't noticed him shivering at all or anything, and we've kept the sound pretty low on the TV. I will admit he's a lot harder to distract now than he was when he was three, though."

"Kid's too smart for his own good," mumbled Tony. "Look, we're gonna head down there and pick you up as soon as we can, okay, bud? We still gotta answer some more questions before they'll let us go anywhere."

"Nah, Tony, don't worry about it," Rhodes said. "I'll bring him up there myself. Even the busted-up Tower's gotta be better than this place."
Steve glanced over at Tony, who nodded. "Thank you, Colonel."

"James," Rhodes replied. "Please, call me James so I don't feel like I have to salute every time we talk to each other. It gets old after awhile."

"All right," Steve answered. James had been Bucky's given name too, although Steve couldn't remember ever actually calling him that. "Thank you, James. I can't tell you how much we appreciate you being there with Peter."

"Don't mention it," Rhodes answered, ruffling Peter's hair. "I can think of worse company. I'll arrange for us to leave around 0900 tomorrow."

"That's just one more night, okay buddy?" Tony said in a choked voice. "Only one more."

Peter nodded, wiping his sleeve across his face. "Uh huh. I guess we'll see you tomorrow."

"We'll be waiting for you, little guy," said Steve. "We love you."

"Uh huh. Love you too."

Natasha approached from off to the side as soon as the screen went blank. "Fury asked me to tell you that you guys have been dismissed for the time being," she said. "Clint and I went ahead and answered most of his questions already, and Banner is off… decompressing somewhere, so…"

A wave of relief washed over Steve, so strong that he nearly tipped over as Tony's arm curled around his waist. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," Natasha replied with a slight smile. "Fury still has some things he'd like to ask you both specifically, but he said he can do that tomorrow. He says there's a conference room here we can use?"

"Ah, yeah," replied Tony. "Twelve floors down."

"Great. Then we'll see you tomorrow at 0900, and get out of your hair."

Steve and Tony stood there clinging to each other as everyone filed out of the penthouse. A knot rose in Steve's throat as he watched Natasha and Barton enter the elevator, both still covered in dust and grime from the battle. He had come so close, so close to losing Tony that all he wanted to do in that moment was get them both cleaned up and go to bed. And not even for sex, Steve just wanted to hold him. Wanted to watch his chest rise and fall and feel his breaths against his neck, reminding him that Tony was alive. That he wasn't holed up in some morgue somewhere because he'd chosen to fly a bomb through a portal into space, saving Steve's and countless others' lives in the process.

They were definitely going to have to discuss that at some point, but now wasn't the time.

"Steve," Tony said as soon as the elevator doors closed. He cupped Steve's dusty cheek in one hand, running his trembling thumb along Steve's lower lip. "Babe, we're okay."

"I know," Steve murmured as he kissed Tony's thumb, pressing their foreheads together. "I know we are."

And they were.

At least for now.
Come find me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :)

Chapter End Notes

Whew! I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! 😊
Thank you so much for all of the kudos and comments! I'm so glad you guys are enjoying the story!

And I can't believe we're so close to Endgame! I'm not ready! Mr geeky and I will be seeing it next Monday, so next week's chapter will be posted a bit later on in the day than my usual.

This chapter contains a conversation that is indicative of homophobia. It's in Peter's POV and is located about 2/3 of the way through the chapter if you would like to avoid it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Tony, please! Don't go!" Steve pleaded, his voice so thick with emotion that Tony felt his grip on the huge missile threatening to break. "Please!"

I'm sorry, he said, inside his head because he couldn't trust himself to speak anymore. I'm sorry,
Steve, but I know it's better this way. You're too good to go out like that.

I love you.

And then not a second later he was through the portal and into space. His eyes were immediately drawn to a light shining against the curtain of harsh blackness, a choked gasp tearing from his throat as he realised that the aliens the team had been fighting in the city were only just the beginning, only the scouts, as Steve would call them. The rest of them were still out here, just waiting for the signal to invade.

Hell no, he thought. You can't have Earth.

As his HUD began to flicker, Tony released the missile, struggling to keep his eyes open long enough to watch it hit what Peter would've called the Mother Ship and explode, the resulting fireball taking out the rest of the surrounding aliens as the shockwave knocked Tony backwards, towards the shrinking portal as he fell…

Tony woke with a loud, stuttered gasp, his heart racing as his hand frantically searched for the warmth of Steve's body, managing only to find the crumpled up sheets. He immediately grabbed for Steve's pillow, burying his nose in it and inhaling deeply, letting out another shuddering breath as he felt the tension slowly start to ebb away. The pillow smelled like grapefruit shampoo and vanilla and spearmint toothpaste, mixed in with a touch of sweat since Steve always ran warm, and Tony always found the combination eerily calming.

He still far preferred the real Steve to just smelling him, though. And since the windows were dark and the surrounding skyscrapers were still lit up, it was likely very early in the morning, which meant that Steve was either out running or down in the gym.

"JARVIS," Tony rasped. "What time is it?"

"The time is currently 4:23am, sir," replied JARVIS.

"Gah," muttered Tony. That was early even for Steve. "Then where the hell is Steve?"

"Captain Rogers' current location is the boxing gym, sir."

"Yeah," Tony said as he huffed out a sharp breath, his arms flopping back to his sides. "Makes sense."

He highly doubted that Steve had been able to sleep at all. As soon as the rest of the team left the previous evening, Steve had dragged Tony into their bathroom and proceeded to undress him with the clinical eye of someone expecting to find a mortal wound hidden within the depths of Tony's undersuit. Finding nothing of the sort, Steve then guided Tony into the shower, not taking his eyes off of him as he washed Tony's hair and body as gently as if he were a newborn baby, only allowing Tony to do the same for him once he was convinced that Tony was in fact uninjured.

They had headed for bed immediately after, dressed in nothing but underwear to maximise skin-to-skin contact. Tony curled up on Steve's shoulder like he always did, with Steve's arm around Tony's waist, pressing him so tightly to him that it was almost hard to breathe. After a couple of minutes Tony had cupped his cheek and kissed him, trying to remind him yet again that he was in fact okay when Steve pressed his fingers to Tony's lips.

"Shh," he'd whispered, his voice gravelly. "Not now. Please, just let me hold you like this while you sleep."
And Tony had let him. Steve could be damn stubborn when he wanted to be, and Tony hadn't really been in the mood to protest.

Scrubbing at his eyes with his palm, Tony stumbled out of the bed, grabbing a t-shirt—which turned out to be Steve's, their clothes had already gotten mixed together in the dresser—and a pair of sweats as he headed for the elevator.

"Boxing gym, JARVIS," he said.

"Very good, sir."

The thud, thud, thud of landing fists greeted Tony as soon as the elevator doors opened. Steve was at the far end of the gym, hitting the hanging punching bag like it had personally offended him, his jaw clenched tight and his teeth bared, with his white t-shirt plastered across his knotted shoulders with sweat. Tony winced as Steve landed a right hook that was particularly harsh, the sound of his knuckles cracking echoing across the gym. He wasn't wearing gloves, only the thinnest of wraps which were already stained pink with blood, and a knot rose in Tony's throat when Steve paused just long enough to adjust his stance and hit the bag again, biting back a soft whimper of pain.

He wanted to hurt. He was craving the pain radiating in hot waves from his fists up his arms and into his tight shoulders the same way Tony craved caffeine and driving too fast around sharp corners. The pain was driving Steve, pushing him past whatever limits he thought he had and at the same time, reminding him that he was still alive.

Steve was literally fighting against his demons.

It was something that Tony understood all too well.

He took a single step forward, halting when Steve's next punch sent the bag flying off its chain and crashing into the wall, spilling sand as it went. Steve stood there staring at it for a few seconds, his chest heaving as he gulped air and his blue eyes filled with disappointment. Apparently the bag had given in too easily for his taste that morning.

Swiping his bruised and skinned hand across his forehead, Steve turned to retrieve a replacement bag, landing three more frenzied punches before Tony couldn't take it anymore and hurried up to him, grabbing onto his right arm. It was a very rare occasion that someone could get this close to Steve Rogers without his noticing.

"Hey, big guy," Tony said carefully. "Why don't we step back for a sec, yeah?"

Steve's eyes went wide at the sight of him, frantic as they swept across Tony, almost as though he was scanning him.

"Are you all right?" he gasped.

"Am I all right?" Tony asked, still clutching Steve's shaking right hand between his own, trying to coax open his tight fist so he could remove the wrap and examine his fingers. "I woke up and you were gone, so I come down here and find you literally busting your hands open, and you ask if I'm all right?"

Steve's jaw twitched as he shook his head. "I'm—, I'm sorry. I thought you were asleep, and I tried —, but all I could see whenever I closed my eyes was you flying through that portal, and I just—, I just couldn't take it anymore—, I just couldn't—" His scraped fingers curled around Tony's hand, tightly enough to make his knuckles crack. "How could you do that?"
"How—, how could I?" stammered Tony. "Honey, how could I not? That missile, it was gonna take out the entire city with you included, and I was the only one who could stop it. And Fury knew it."

"They could've done something," Steve insisted. "They could've gotten another plane in the air, done something else that wouldn't have required you to sacrifice yourself. I know—"

"There wasn't enough time, Steve," Tony said gently, finally getting his fingers to loosen a little. "They didn't seem to be broken at least, and the scrapes and bruises would likely be healed by the end of the day. "Those missiles move pretty fast, too fast to have gotten another plane in the air. I should know, I used to make 'em."

Steve bit down on his bottom lip, hard enough to make Tony wince. "I just—, I watched you fall, and I couldn't—, I couldn't do anything to help you, and then—, I thought you were dead. I thought —, I thought I'd lost you. I thought I was gonna have to tell Peter that we'd lost you, and I couldn't —, I couldn't imagine how in the hell I was gonna be able to do that." He sucked in a deep, shuddering breath. "I've never been so scared in my life, Tony. Not ever."

"Mmm. And this is coming from the guy who still shaves with a straight razor," Tony muttered, instantly regretting his words when Steve gave him what he'd coined a few months ago as the eyebrows of disappointment.

"Tony—"

"I'm sorry, babe. You know I have a—"

"Tendency to joke at very inappropriate times," Steve finished, his lips twitching slightly. "Yeah, I'm well aware of that particular attribute. And that razor belonged to my father, so…"

"So it's even older than you. Yeah, I get it. But you're still not teaching Pete how to use it. Or if you do, I'm not gonna watch."

"We'll see," said Steve as Tony wrapped Steve's arm around his waist, dropping his forehead against Steve's still-heaving chest.

"I'm still here," Tony whispered, running his palms up and down Steve's sweaty back. Tony wanted —no, more like needed—to tell him about what he'd seen out there in space, but now wasn't the time. "I'm still here, Steve. We're okay. There's no need to try and break your hands."

"I wasn't trying to break my hands," Steve protested. "I was just trying to…"

"Fight your demons," Tony finished. "Yeah, I might know a thing or two about that." He tilted his head, looking deep into Steve's azure eyes.

"I don't know if I could stand watching something like that again, Tony," murmured Steve, trailing his thumb across Tony's cheekbone. "I just—"

"And there is no way in this hell or any other possible hellish location that you're gonna be doing this Avenging thing alone," Tony said, his heart starting to thud. "You hear me? No possible way. It's either both of us or neither of us, that's the deal. We'll just… have to get used to the stakes I guess, if and when something else like that happens."

"Tony—"

"That's the deal, Steve," Tony repeated. "I'm not gonna sit idly by and watch you fight against Loki or whoever else supervillain that comes along. There is no goddamn way. I'm not—, I'm not half as
good at anything as I am when I do it next to you."

Steve's eyebrows knitted together, his eyes still radiating pain and worry as he nodded. "Same here."

"Good," said Tony. "Glad we got that figured out." He tugged on Steve's neck, pulling him down for a slow, sweet kiss, coaxing Steve's lips open with his tongue. Warmth bloomed across his chest as Steve's tense body slowly began to unravel against him, moulding to him, splintering apart so Tony could remade him.

"Steve," he murmured when they broke for air. "Please, come back to bed?"

"I'm all sweaty, Tony," Steve whispered, his lips quirking into the slightest of smiles. "I need a shower first."

"All right, you know I don't mind if we start in the shower," Tony said as he trailed his lips across the salty flesh of Steve's neck, pulling a soft groan from his throat as Steve's fingers dug into his sides. "I'm all for that. Sex tends to be easier when you're naked anyway."

"You're incorrigible, you know," said Steve, chuckling softly. His hands slid down to grip Tony's hips, his long fingers curling around to his ass. "This was not part of my plan for this morning."

"Then change your plans, babe," breathed Tony. "I'm sure you can handle it just this once."

Grunting, Steve hiked Tony up, with Tony wrapping his legs around Steve's waist as he began walking them towards the elevator. He never in a thousand years would've thought that he'd love getting carried around as much as Steve seemed to enjoy carrying him, but there was something about it that was just so damn sexy. He absolutely loved when Steve showed a bit of his darker side, when his eyes turned navy and his face twisted into that possessive look that was only for him.

"That's right, baby," Tony whispered as Steve backed him against the wall in the elevator, attacking his neck with his lips and teeth. He slipped his hands underneath Steve's sodden shirt, craving the feel of his burning hot skin beneath his palms. "I want everyone to see."

"You're mine, Tony," Steve moaned against his jaw. "Mine. God, you scared the hell out of me. I love you so much, please don't scare me like that again."

"I'll try not to, babe," whimpered Tony, tangling his fingers into Steve's damp hair as Steve tugged on his too-big t-shirt collar, trailing his lips across Tony's collarbone. "God, whatever you do, don't stop."

But I'd do it again if I had to.

Because if there had ever been anything that he and Howard could've agreed upon, it was that Steve Rogers deserved the world. And Tony was more than determined to give it to him.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Director Fury said as he slid into his seat at the head of the conference room table. Most of the streets surrounding the Tower were still covered in debris and news vans, so Pepper, with Tony's approval, had given all of the Stark Industries employees the rest of the week off.

It was just as well. While the Tower itself was still functional, the damage mainly limited to Tony's lab and the outside lettering, Steve knew from experience that civilians tended to need some decompression time following a battle, especially a battle as intense as this one had been, so better to have the time off than to try and force themselves to continue on as if nothing had happened.
"Good morning, Director," Steve replied, nodding at Agents Barton and Romanoff as they took their seats opposite he and Tony. "Is this everyone?"

"For now," Fury answered. "I thought it prudent to stick with just the SHIELD personnel for this meeting."

"Why?" Tony asked. "Banner and Thor were in the thick of the fighting just as much as we were."

"I'm well aware of that, Stark," said Fury. "However, since this meeting is mainly to go over business pertaining to SHIELD, their presence is not necessary. I've already debriefed them both."

"What SHIELD business is there to discuss, Director?" Steve asked. "It would seem to me that this would be more Avengers business."

"And the Avengers technically fall under SHIELD's purview, Captain," Fury replied. "As such, the first item I'd like to discuss is the permanency of the Avengers themselves, and if any of you have any thoughts regarding that."

The table was silent for several seconds, with both Barton and Natasha looking at Steve as if they expected him to answer. "Well," Steve said, clearing his throat. "Is the understanding that this… incident with Loki was not an isolated event?"

"As much as I'd like to believe that it's possible, I would have to say 'no'," said Fury. "As I said on the helicarrier, ever since Thor showed up in New Mexico we've been trying to plan for whatever came next, and once again we saw ourselves hopelessly outgunned, so much so that the World Security Council saw it fit to order a nuclear strike on a civilian population in order to put a stop to it."

"A goddamn short-sighted plan," Tony grumbled, glancing nervously at Steve. "'Cause it wouldn't have even worked. The nuke might've been able to get rid of the aliens that were already inside the city, but it wouldn't've stopped them completely." He paused for a moment, now looking at Steve head-on. "There was an entire army out there in space, just waiting to invade. I saw it. What we were fighting against, that was only the beginning."

"Holy shit, are you serious?" Barton exclaimed as Steve's belly gave a violent swoop. "We barely escaped with our asses intact!"

"Oh my God, Tony," Steve said, horrified as he reached for Tony's hand under the table, squeezing it as hard as he dared. "Why on earth didn't you say anything?"

Tony shot him one of what Peter always called his duh looks. "Just waiting for the right time, babe."

"All right, so I'm thinking that's a 'yes', then?" Fury said.

"It would seem so, Director," answered Steve, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. He'd been wallowing so much in his own fear and anger that he hadn't even stopped to think about how the experience of actually flying into space might have been for Tony.

"Good. Then consider the Avengers Initiative your new full-time assignments until further notice. And with that comes more questions, such as location, training requirements, equipment—"

"We can be based here, at the Tower," Tony interrupted. "I've got plenty of room, and I'm sure we can modify one or two of the floors to make a training area that would fit Steve's specifications."

Fury leaned back in his chair, smirking slightly. He'd been wanting Tony to volunteer to house the
Avengers, which only served to increase Steve's irritation. It felt way too manipulative for his taste. "I'm fine with basing the Avengers here," he said. "But I don't think Tony should be expected to finance us."

"He's not," Fury said.

"Steve, it's all right," said Tony, glowering at Fury. "I know I can come up with a lot better tech for us than SHIELD could anyway."

"I don't really give a rat's ass where my arrows come from, just as long as I got plenty of 'em," said Barton as he leaned back in his chair. Steve had noticed that he tended to stare at people's mouths when they spoke, which he assumed was so Barton could lip-read.

"We can discuss that further later on, Agent Barton," said Fury. "Are you okay with relocating here to the city?"

Barton shrugged, jerking his head towards Steve and Tony. "As long as I wouldn't have to watch these two sweet talking each other all the damn time, it would sure beat being constantly on the go."

"You'd have your own goddamn floor, Barton," Tony said, scowling. "Plenty of space to do… whatever the hell it is that you do when you're not being a royal pain in the ass."

"All right, all right," Fury said. "Agent Romanoff?"

"Sure," Natasha said. "Like Clint said, it'd be nice to have an actual base of operations."

"Banner will be here too," said Tony. "I've asked him to come and work for me, so he'll be moving in here once I can get a lab set up for him. Should be about a week or so. I can have Barton's and Romanoff's apartments ready by then too."

Fury raised his eyebrows, glancing at Steve, who nodded. His views on Banner had definitely softened quite a bit after Hulk had ended up breaking Tony's freefall the day before.

"Good. I'm sure Dr Banner appreciates that, given where he was when we found him," said Fury. "And Thor informed me that while he needs to return to Asgard for the time being, he'll be keeping an eye on us through his gatekeeper, whatever that means, and will return if we need him."

"I'd bet that Pete knows what he means," Tony muttered, causing Steve to chuckle. He and Tony had spoken to Peter right before the meeting, and he was very much looking forward to possibly getting to meet the actual god of thunder that he'd been reading about since he was old enough to read.

"Sounds like we're all set, boss," said Natasha. "When's Thor planning to leave?"

"Later today," answered Fury as he got to his feet. "And I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you guys came to see him off. Tony, you'll let us know when the facilities are ready?"

"Yep. Shouldn't be longer than a week."

"Sounds good, Stark, Captain," Natasha said as she and Barton headed for the door. "See you guys then."

As soon as Barton and Natasha were out of the room, Fury turned toward Steve and Tony, raising an eyebrow. "I might've asked Thor to stick around long enough for a certain boy to get to meet him. I thought Peter might appreciate that. Don't you agree, gentlemen?"
"Yeah, he probably would," Tony said, confused. "But why—?"

"Thank you, Director," Steve cut in. "I know Peter will be thrilled to meet Thor."

"You're welcome," said Fury. He leaned back against the table, crossing his arms. "I do have a couple more items to discuss with you two specifically."

"It wouldn't be you without a 'something else', Fury," Tony grumbled. "What is it now?"

"I'd appreciate it if you could lose the attitude, Tony," Fury said with a scowl. "I'm trying to do you a favour here."

Steve reached for Tony's hand, squeezing it gently. "What is it, Director?"

Fury let out a heavy sigh. "It seems as though the U.S. Government isn't too happy about the decision to launch a nuclear missile against an American city," he began. "As such, they are… less than thrilled about SHIELD being directly involved with the cleanup from the battle."

"You weren't the one that ordered the launch, though," Steve said. "I thought it was the World Security Council's decision."

"It was, and it was a very stupid-ass decision," said Fury. "Be that as it may, the World Security Council does oversee SHIELD, so… I think you know where I'm going with this, Tony."

"You want me to supervise the cleanup?" Tony said, confused. "Why? It seems like I'm gonna have my hands pretty full with all the Avengers stuff."

"Because I may have been able to negotiate a deal with the Joint Chiefs that would allow your friend Colonel Rhodes—and only Rhodes, mind you—access to one of your flying suits in exchange for you spearheading a new agency that would oversee and catalogue the alien artefacts left behind. Those aliens were some pretty big bastards, gentlemen, with some pretty damn big guns, and there are quite a few people out there who'd be itching to get their hands on them. I wouldn't be too surprised if some of them already have."

"So, this would be a Stark Industries thing, not a SHIELD thing?" Steve asked. He understood where Fury was coming from, as he remembered seeing civilians pilfering through battlefields back during the war, looking for anything they might be able to use or sell. And with how powerful these aliens were, their weapons could potentially do some very serious damage if they fell into the wrong hands.

"That's correct," Fury said. "However, if Tony happened to see any potential use for any of the artefacts recovered during the cleanup, then I would hope he'd be willing to share it with the rest of us."

"Of course you would," mumbled Tony, only loud enough for Steve to hear. "Why me? Just so the Air Force can get their hands on my suit?"

"Because frankly, Tony, I don't really trust anyone else to get it done the way it needs to get done," answered Fury. "And you'd have full control over everything. Personnel, equipment, you name it. And like I said, only Colonel Rhodes would have access to the suit."

"Yeah, yeah, fine," said Tony. "But I'm not storing any of that alien stuff here at the Tower."

"SHIELD owns a secure warehouse in Maryland that's at your disposal," Fury said. "So, is it safe for me to tell the Joint Chiefs that this arrangement is a go?"
Tony gave him a hard look. "No one touches the suit except Rhodey."

"You have my word," replied Fury. "Colonel Rhodes is a pretty highly regarded officer, or this never would've flown."

"All right," Tony said, glancing sheepishly at Steve. "I'll do it. Is that everything?"

"Not quite," Fury said. "I also heard from one of the agents assigned to monitor Obadiah Stane this morning. He informed me that Mr Stane was killed in an airplane crash yesterday, shortly before the alien attack."

"What?" Tony exclaimed as Steve's belly gave a violent swoop. "But—, we haven't heard anything, are you sure? I know Pepper would've said something if she had heard about it."

"It was a small aircraft that crashed shortly following takeoff out in a pretty remote area of northern California, so not likely to make national news," Fury said. "From what I was told, Stane's body was burned beyond recognition and they had to identify him using dental records. I'm sorry, Tony."

"Yeah," whispered Tony, his face ashen and his eyes trained on the carpeted floor. Steve curled his arm around Tony's shoulders, unsure exactly how to react at the unexpected news. If he was truly honest he couldn't bring himself to be that upset, given how Stane had acted at their last meeting, but he knew Tony had known Stane for pretty much his entire life, and regardless how things had gone down, his death still had to sting.

"Thank you, Director," Steve said quietly. "For not announcing that in front of the others."

"Mmm. Despite what you may have heard, Captain, I'm not as ruthless as some may think," said Fury. "Now, if there's nothing else, then I'll be on my way."

"Actually, there is one more thing," Tony said in a flat voice. "Before all this started, Coulson mentioned something about a Dr Helen Cho who might be able to shed some light on what's going on with Pete?"

"Ah, yes," Fury said. "I've been in contact with her, and she's willing to run some tests on the boy when she's able to break away from her work."

"And when will she be able to do that?" Steve asked.

"Hopefully sometime in the fall," answered Fury.

"The fall?" Tony yelped. "That's still months away! If she's that busy why can't we just bring Pete out there to her?"

"Because most of her work is classified, Tony, and that's the earliest that she's available," Fury said firmly. "You're lucky she even agreed to see the boy at all, she never sees individual patients."

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled Tony. "That's what we were told."

"Thank you, Director," Steve said. "We do appreciate your help, we're just… worried about Peter, as I'm sure you can understand."

"Believe it or not, I can," Fury said. "And I dare say that her expertise should be worth the wait."

"It damn well better be," grumbled Tony, and Steve squeezed his shoulder. It was so hard on them both to see Peter suffering and not be able to truly help him, but Steve knew that Tony's guilt only
compounded his fear even more, no matter how many times Steve had tried to tell him otherwise.

As soon as Fury exited the room, Steve turned Tony to face him. "Hey. Are you okay?"

"Of course," Tony said quickly, his shoulders sagging when Steve raised an eyebrow. "All right, I will be."

"It's okay if you're not, Tony," Steve whispered. "We've had a pretty rough few days."

Tony scoffed, dropping his forehead against Steve's chest as Steve slid his palms up his back. "I don't—, I'm not really sure how I'm supposed to be feeling right now. I mean, Obie was just always around, for as long as I can remember. He was the one who encouraged me to start designing weapons way back when… but then, I don't know. In the last few years he just turned… different. Greedier, more suspicious or something. And I can't believe I never noticed it before Pete said something, but looking back, I can see what Pete meant. Obie never really liked him."

He paused, letting out a morbid chuckle. "The night I got the call from the hospital about Pete, I was so drunk, way too drunk to drive there myself, so I called Obie and asked him to drive me. And you know what he did? He just laughed at me. Said it was just another extortion attempt and that I was a damn fool if I fell for it. I ended up having to call for a goddamn cab, and I despise cabs."

"I take it that the… extortion attempts had happened before?" Steve asked, his jaw twitching. The possessive part of him didn't particularly enjoy being reminded about Tony's promiscuous past.

"Yeah, a few times," Tony admitted. "But it was never a call from a hospital, always from a lawyer claiming that I'd gotten some girl pregnant." He paused, looking straight into Steve's eyes. "All of which turned out to be false, by the way. I may have been a playboy, Steve, but I was at least a careful one."

"Except for Peter?" Steve said softly, his heart lurching when Tony gulped, shuddering in his arms. "Tony, please. Tell me?"

"I've told you… there's really nothing to tell," Tony murmured after a short pause, his brown eyes radiating such sadness and embarrassment that Steve had to fight the urge to look away. "I… just… the playboy got played. It's really that simple."

"No, it's not that simple. Not if it's still eating you up inside almost thirteen years later."

"But it's not," said Tony, gripping Steve's biceps. "Not anymore. Now there's you, and… it doesn't matter anymore that Pete's mother decided to fucking abandon him and disappear after she'd already fucked me over and abandoned me. It just doesn't matter."

Steve flinched, drawing in Tony closer, brushing soft kisses along his temple. He had suspected it was something like that, and he also suspected that there was still more to the story than what Tony was telling him, but now wasn't the time to press the issue. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, like I said, I'm not," Tony replied, his voice laced with bitterness. "Not anymore. Now Pete's got you, and—, it doesn't matter anymore. It's all her loss."

"Peter's got us both, Tony," Steve said. "Not just me. And you were there first."

"Yeah, but you were there when he needed you the most," said Tony. "He's a damn lucky kid."

"Pardon me, sir, Captain," JARVIS suddenly said. "But Colonel Rhodes wishes to report that he and Master Peter should be arriving at the Tower in approximately fifteen minutes."
"Thanks, J," Tony said. He grinned up at Steve, mirroring Steve's own elation. Their boy was almost home.

"Steve," Tony said as they made their way back up to the penthouse hand in hand. "I don't—, I don't want to tell Pete about Coulson or Obie until tomorrow or something, okay? He's already spooked enough as it is from the battle, so can we just take a day to—"

"It's all right," Steve said. "I agree. Let's just be glad that he's home. We can talk to him about everything else tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," agreed Tony.

"Hey, Peter, you might wanna settle down a little on the approach. You're bouncing around so much that you're gonna interfere with our landing," Uncle James said into his headset as the Air Force chopper entered the airspace over Midtown. Peter had been extra fidgety all morning, no longer able to contain his nervous energy. Between his shaking sessions and the new nightmares he had hardly slept at all the entire time he'd been in D.C., and was now running purely on adrenaline and a whole lot of Lucky Charms.

Shooting him one of his duh looks, Peter leaned towards the window, his eyes widening in shock at the streets covered in destroyed building parts and burned-out taxicabs. As the Tower came into view, Peter let out a gasp, audible even over the near-deafening noise of the chopper's rotors. Most of the lettering from the front had been knocked away, leaving only the big A, with the roof covered in the charred pieces of what must have been the equipment used to open the wormhole into space.

*My dads both fought against aliens. From space. That came through a wormhole.*

It sounded like something out of an episode of Stargate SG1.

As they flew closer, Peter also noticed that the entire block in front of the Tower was covered with news vans and reporters, probably straining to get a glimpse of one of the superheroes who were able to beat back the aliens. Peter gulped at the sight of them, all crowding around each other, their phones and cameras in hand. He'd always hated reporters, hated the way they shouted questions with no regard to how personal or invasive they were, hated how they thought they could poke their noses into everything that involved Peter or his dads, and he had a very bad feeling that things were only going to get worse. Even earlier that morning before they had left D.C., Uncle James had turned off the TV in disgust after someone from some ultra-conservative religious group was featured on one of the morning news shows, commenting about how inappropriate it was for Captain America to be caught on camera kissing the new hero known as Iron Man.

And the most ironic thing about it? The lady in question lived in New York City.

"Two minutes until the approach, sir," came the voice of the pilot over the headset.

"Copy that," Uncle James said. He tapped Peter on the shoulder. "You need to keep your head down as we head inside, all right? I told your dad that I'd hustle you right in, but then I gotta head right back out again."

"Aww, why do you have to leave right away?" Peter asked. "Can't you stay with us at least til the weekend?"

"I wish I could, kiddo," said Uncle James. "But since this trip wasn't exactly an officially sanctioned Air Force leave, I need to get back ASAP."
"Uh huh," Peter said sadly. "Then you need to come back again soon." He shuddered to think how he would have survived the last couple of nights if Uncle James hadn't been there. Being stuck in that tiny little room with no windows had reminded Peter all too much of he and Dad's cave prison in Afghanistan, and that Agent Carter lady had sure been a lot nicer than Agent Rumlow, who Peter strangely never saw again after they moved rooms.

"You guys will be back in California again soon enough," Uncle James added. "We always see each other more when you're out there."

"Uh huh." Even though he missed seeing Ned everyday during the summers, Peter couldn't deny that he was excited about getting back to California this time. Swimming and playing catch with Papa and working down in Dad's workshop were all things he was looking forward to. He even missed his little robots.

Plus, since it was so much warmer there, he hopefully wouldn't have to wear so many clothes all the time. He was already getting tired of having to wear three or four layers every single time he went anywhere, especially since Flash Thompson had taken it upon himself to start teasing Peter about it.

As soon as the chopper touched down on the landing pad, Peter smiled as he saw Dad and Papa waiting for them just outside the entrance. After sliding off his headset and grabbing his backpack, Peter braced himself for the rotor gusts as Uncle James opened the door, his hand on Peter's neck as they raced past the shattered windows of the lab and Peter jumped into the waiting arms of both his dads.

"I was so scared for you guys!" Peter murmured into Dad's chest, who'd somehow managed to get to him just in front of Papa. Tears filled Peter's eyes as he allowed himself to be sandwiched between them, only vaguely aware of Uncle James shouting a quick goodbye and the chopper taking off. "Those aliens were so scary, and then—, when I saw Daddy lying on the ground, I thought he was —, that he was—"

"It's okay, Pete," Dad said, his voice thick. "We're all okay."

Peter nodded as he sucked in a shuddering breath, allowing Papa to take his backpack as Dad led him inside to the living room where all three of them piled onto the couch. Peter grabbed onto one of Papa's hands, noticing that his knuckles were scraped up and bruised but that he seemed to be otherwise fine, such a sharp contrast to what Peter had seen in his nightmare. That image of Papa lying bleeding and unconscious on the floor while whatever building they were in seemed to be collapsing around them still haunted Peter. Just reason three thousand four hundred and twelve why he wasn't able to get much sleep while he was gone. Not even JARVIS's rain sounds had been enough to get rid of that picture from Peter's head.

"Pete?" Dad asked. "You okay, buddy? Those SHIELD folks didn't give you too hard a time, did they? You were able to stay warm enough?"

"I'm better now," Peter mumbled into Papa's side. "I'm really glad Uncle James was there with me, though. He made sure we got moved into the nicer room."

"We're lucky he was able get away on such short notice," Papa said.

"Mmm. It's probably just 'cause the Air Force is trying to stay in my good graces," Dad grumbled. "But still, whatever works. I'm still gonna have words with whoever messed up your room assignment, though."

"Well, anyway," Papa said, shooting Dad an odd look. "Director Fury told us this morning that Thor
will be leaving for his home later today, and that if you're feeling up to it, we can all go out there and see him before he leaves."

"Really?" Peter exclaimed as he shot up, nearly bopping Dad in the chin with his head. "Oh, that sounds awesome! Can we go? Oh wow, Ned's not gonna believe this!"

"As long as we can get past all the goddamn birds of prey parked outside the Tower," Dad said as he pulled out his phone. "I'll get Happy on it now, make sure that at least the garage exit is clear."

"That should give you plenty of time to unpack, Peter," Papa said. He patted Peter on the shoulder. "And maybe do some more of your homework? All of the schools in the city are closed until next week, but you still need to keep up with your work."

"Mmm, okay," Peter said with a slight pout. "Do you think it would be okay if I asked Mr Thor for his autograph?"

"I can't imagine why not," Dad said as he ruffled Peter's hair. "Nothing like meeting a fanboy to feed a god's ego. Now, go on and unpack, bud. I need to get in touch with the contractor before we head out."

"Once you're done unpacking come and help me make lunch, okay, little guy?" Papa added. "I'm sure you have to be hungry."

As if on cue, Peter's stomach growled, so loud that Papa started laughing. "I'll take that as a yes," he said as he pushed Peter up off the couch.

"I'm always hungry!" Peter said over his shoulder, already halfway down the hall. Stepping into his room, he flung his backpack towards his bed without thinking, cringing when the backpack flew completely over the bed and hit the wall on the far side of the room.

"Peter? You okay?" Papa called from the living room.

"Sorry!" Peter answered, hurrying to pick up the offending backpack and grateful that the walls were steel-reinforced. "I'm okay, didn't break anything! Just… tripped!"

"Be careful there, bud! This Tower's seen enough shattered glass for awhile!"

"Uh huh," Peter said. He carefully picked up the backpack, frowning as he unzipped it. He hadn't tossed it with any more force than he usually did, so why had it seemed like he'd launched it from three blocks away rather than just from across the room?

Shrugging, Peter piled his dirty clothes into the laundry hamper and brought his toothbrush and comb into the bathroom, keeping the lights off to avoid blinding himself. Dad had made him a new pair of glasses that helped with the brightness from the lights, but Peter still preferred to go without them as much as possible.

He returned to the kitchen to find Papa making macaroni and cheese while Dad sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and working on his tablet. It seemed almost too eerily normal the day after literal aliens had invaded Earth, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. Both of his dads were superheroes, after all.

Which likely meant that Peter had better start getting used to the "new" normal. Even if that had to include the mass of reporters crowding around the base of the Tower.

They headed out right after lunch in Papa's truck—a bit less conspicuous than one of Dad's sports
cars—after verifying with Happy that he'd managed to get the garage exit clear of news vans. Peter's eyes widened as they arrived near Washington Square Park, finding it surprisingly clear of pedestrians. As Papa parked the truck along the curb, Peter let out a loud gasp as a tall man with long blond hair and wearing a flowing burgundy cape stepped out of one of SHIELD's black SUV's, leading another, black-haired man wearing chains on his wrists over to the pillars near the park entrance.

"Dad!" Peter exclaimed, elbowing Dad in the arm. "Is that Thor?"

"It sure is, bud," Dad answered. "And that sorry-looking fellow next to him is Loki, the cause of this whole mess."

"Whoa!" Peter breathed, snapping his jaw closed as he and Dad slid out of the truck, with Papa taking his place on Peter's opposite side as they headed over to join the others. "Oh my God!" Peter squeaked as three more people stepped out of yet another black SUV. "Dad, is that—, Dr Bruce Banner?"

Dad let out a huge grin, winking at Papa, who only smirked and shook his head. "That's exactly who it is, Pete. And I know he's excited to meet you."

"He is? But he's like one of the greatest scientists to ever live! I mean, they've even got a picture of him up on the wall at school!"

"Yep. And you'll have plenty of time to tell Dr Banner all about it," Dad said proudly. "He's coming to work for me."

"Really?" squealed Peter, clearing his throat. If his voice got any higher, it was going to start breaking windows.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," a lady with red hair said as they arrived on the sidewalk near the pillars. "This must be Peter?"

"Natasha Romanoff," Papa said, placing his hand on Peter's shoulder. "This is our son, Peter."

"Hello, ma'am," Peter said, offering his hand, which Ms Romanoff took with a smile.

"You were right, Stark," she said. "He's definitely a cutie."

"Yeah, he gets that from me," Dad replied with a cheeky grin. "But his manners are all Steve."

"This is Clint Barton, Peter," Ms Romanoff said, indicating the man standing next to her, who was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses and a bright blue earpiece in each ear.

"Hello, Mr Barton," Peter said.

"Hey, kid," replied Mr Barton. "Call me Clint, yeah? Mr Barton makes me sound too old."

"Um, okay," answered Peter, a bit awkwardly. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Ah ha!" a loud, deep voice suddenly said from off to the side, causing Peter to whip around. "This must be the young Starkson that I've heard so many numerous tales about?"

It was Thor, dragging his brother by the arm over to where Peter was standing. Peter gulped at the sight of him. Easily as tall as Papa and even broader across the shoulders, Thor cut a very imposing
"Hello, sir," Peter said, glancing nervously over at Loki, who was glowering at pretty much everyone. "It's really nice to meet you."

"As it is pleasant to meet you, Starkson," Thor replied, tucking his silver hammer under his arm so he could shake Peter's hand. "You must be so proud to have such formidable warriors for your parents."

Peter nodded, smiling proudly up at his dads. "Yes, sir. I am."

"The kid probably knows as much about Asgard and your family as you do," Dad said. "He's been reading about it since he was three."

Thor smiled widely, clapping a hand on Peter's shoulder and nearly knocking him to his knees. "Good to see that you're teaching your boy well, Stark," he said. "Perhaps when I return you can enlighten me with some of your study materials?"

"Yeah!" Peter exclaimed. "I'd love to!"

"Very good." Thor looked around at the group gathered in a circle around the two gods as Dr Banner handed him a storage device containing what Peter assumed to be the tesseract, the powerful energy cube that Loki had used to open up his portal into space. Dad had told Peter that Thor was taking the tesseract back to Asgard for safekeeping.

Nudging Loki with the device, Thor glared at him until he grasped the other end, turning to nod at the group gathered around the circle. "My friends, until next time, I bid you all farewell."

And then they were gone, in a flash of brilliant blue light, almost like they were beamed up.

"Oops," Peter muttered, just loud enough for Papa to hear. "I forgot to ask him for his autograph."

"You can ask him next time, Peter," Papa said. "Thor told me himself he enjoys visiting Earth when he can, so I'm sure he'll be back."

"Yeah, and hopefully not because of another global crisis," Dad muttered as he reached for Papa's hand. "C'mon, Pete, let's go introduce you to Dr Banner."

Unfortunately, adjusting to the "new" normal turned out to be a bit more difficult than Peter would have hoped. He was thrilled when Dad and Papa told him that the Avengers were now going to be based in the Tower, with the Tower itself being renamed Avengers Tower since the Avengers weren't exactly a secret anymore. Dad even had Peter help him with the apartment designs for Dr Banner, Mr Barton, and Ms Romanoff, as well as the designs for new uniforms for the entire team and new armours for him, saying that he needed to make sure to have backup suits available should one of his get damaged like it had during the battle against the aliens.

While all of that was fun, as well as getting to tell his entire school class that he got to meet Thor—the actual god of thunder—in person, the rest of the fallout from what the news was calling The Battle of New York was not nearly as exciting. The reporters were relentless in their hounding, both of Dad and Papa as well as the rest of the team members, going so far as to even block the driveway to Peter's school a couple of times trying to get comments from them. It got to the point where Dad finally had to arrange for a police escort every morning to get through the crowd just so he and Papa could drive Peter to school.

And things got even worse when Dad had to go down to D.C. to meet with the Department of
Defence about a week later, after Agent Coulson's memorial service. He and Papa explained to Peter that Director Fury had asked Dad to supervise the cleanup from the battle, which then led to the formation of the Department of Damage Control. Peter knew that Dad hated having to meet with government officials—he had once joked that repeatedly banging his head against a brick wall would be more fun, and get more accomplished—but had agreed that it was better than risking the Chitauri weapons falling into the wrong hands.

One of the problems with Dad being gone was that Papa then had to take Peter everywhere by himself, and while Papa was more than capable of fending off nosy reporters while he walked Peter into the school, Peter knew that it still rattled him more than he wanted to let on. Papa just wasn't as used to the modern-day press as Dad was, and he especially wasn't used to how loud they could be. Even wearing his earplugs, Peter still had to cover his ears with his hands sometimes, and he knew it was just as bad for Papa as it was for him.

But by far the worst part was the evening that Papa and Peter went to the grocery store.

It was just a regular Tuesday evening. Papa had picked Peter up at school like he usually did, they'd gone home so Peter could do his homework while Papa worked out in the gym, and then they'd eaten dinner, inviting Clint, Natasha, and Dr Banner—Bruce—to join them. Both Peter and Papa were grumpy; Papa had gotten accosted again on his morning run by a particularly insistent reporter, and Peter was just plain exhausted. He never slept well when Dad was away, and his nightmares had only gotten worse since the Battle of New York, requiring Papa to sit with him for at least half the night on most nights and causing his senses to be even wackier than they already were. So when Papa suggested a trip out to one of the suburban grocery stores once everyone else left, Peter had jumped at the opportunity to get out of the Tower and do something normal for a change.

The shopping trip started out fine, with Peter and Papa talking about new things they wanted to try as they selected fruits and vegetables and made sure to stock up on plenty of Dad's favourite gourmet coffee since he was coming home in a couple of days. Peter had noticed the lady staring at them from near the banana display, shopping with her son—who looked to be around six or seven—and toddler daughter, with the little boy jumping up and down and yanking on his mother's sleeve when he realised that it was Captain America himself right there in the store.

"Yes, dear, I see him," the lady said as she shot Papa a rather curt look, which Peter knew Papa saw but chose to ignore, like he usually did when people were less than polite.

They continued on to the cereal section when they saw the lady again, approaching from the opposite end of the aisle. This time as soon as the boy saw Papa he took off running towards him over his mother's protests, stopping directly in front of Papa and asking him for an autograph. Smiling, Papa crouched down in front of the boy and was just asking him his name when his mother came up and grabbed him by his jacket, yanking the boy behind her.

"No, Joshua," she said harshly, looking up at Papa with contempt. "This isn't Captain America. Captain America was pure and wholesome, and understood proper family values. This man here is nothing but an imposter." Then she glanced over at Peter, her upper lip curling into a sneer as she said, "Your poor mother should be ashamed."

"My mother?" he blurted out, before his mind even registered what he was saying. "You mean the mother that I've never even met? The one that abandoned me as soon as I was born and never looked back? Is that the mother you mean? Are those the kind of family values that you mean?" He grabbed onto Papa's hand, squeezing it hard, so angry that he was literally seeing red. "This is my father, just like Tony Stark is my father, and he loves me. And if that's not good enough for you, then that's your
problem. Not ours."

"All right, that's enough," Papa said in his Captain's voice as he drew Peter close to his side, with the lady just standing there gaping at the two of them like a sick fish. "If you have something to say to me, ma'am, then go ahead and say it. But you will not say another single word to my son. Is that clear?"

Pursing her lips, the lady gave a quick nod, trying to keep her son from poking his head around her to watch.

"Good," Papa continued. "Then if you'll excuse us, we'll be on our way."

Gripping Peter's shoulder, Papa guided him out of the aisle and towards the back of the store to the coffee shop, which was thankfully nearly empty. Peter had had enough of people at the moment.

"Here, little guy," Papa said gently as Peter sat down at one of the tables, still shaking with anger. Papa knelt down in front of him, taking both of his hands.

"I can't believe someone could say something like that!" Peter spat out, the tears he'd been trying to hold back spilling down his cheeks. "How can some people be so mean?"

"That lady was nothing more than just another bully, Peter," Papa said, a slight hitch in his voice as he brushed Peter's tears away with his thumbs. Peter knew her words had to have stung Papa just as much as they'd hurt Peter.

"But, why?" Peter cried. "How does our family being who we are have anything to do with her or her family? Just because I don't have a mom doesn't mean that we're not a family!"

"No, it doesn't," Papa answered, letting out a heavy sigh. "Some people just don't like what they don't understand. It's been like that since I was a boy, and unfortunately I don't see it changing anytime soon."

"Well, she's lucky that Dad wasn't here with us," Peter grumbled. "He would've given her an earful or three. And maybe even gotten her banned from the store."

Papa gave him a sad smile. "You're probably right, but I think you handled her pretty well on your own, Peter. I was very proud of what you said, and how you said it."

"Really?" Peter asked, sniffing. He'd meant what he'd said about Dad as sort of a joke, but Peter knew there was at least some truth behind it. Dad did not take kindly at all to anyone insulting either of his boys.

"Absolutely. You stood up for both yourself and for me, and that's what real heroes do." Papa cupped Peter's cheek with one hand. "You ready to go home now?"

"Uh huh," replied Peter. He got to his feet, taking Papa's hand almost defiantly. "I'm gonna be glad when school's over next week and we can go back to California. Maybe we can go to a baseball game when we're out there since we never made it to one here? I know it's not the right team, but—"

"Well, actually, the Dodgers were my original team," Papa said with a grin. "They're just based in Los Angeles now instead of Brooklyn, so yeah. I think that'll work just fine."

"Uh huh."
Steve's heart was thudding madly as he angled the massive airplane towards the icy arctic water, the voice of Peggy Carter telling him that he wouldn't be alone, that they'd find him as soon as they could echoing inside his head. He knew that he was doing the right thing, knew that his sacrifice would save countless of American lives.

But, as the glaciers grew closer and closer and Steve's ears began to pop from the rapid descent, one thing that Steve never really stopped to consider until that moment was the impact his loss would have on those who were left behind.

Because up until then, he'd always been the one who was left behind.

Steve woke with a start, his chest heaving and covered in sweat, glancing frantically around the pitch-dark room as he tried to regain his bearings. He was in bed, the sheets smooth and cool against his overheated skin, but Tony wasn't with him. The room was never this dark when Tony was with him.

"Are you all right, Captain Rogers? Your heart and respiratory rates are slightly elevated," JARVIS said, startling Steve enough that he let out a yelp.

"Where's Tony?" Steve gasped. He didn't sleep well when it was so dark, likely a product of being frozen in darkness for so many years. "JARVIS?"

"Mr Stark is currently down in his workshop, Captain," JARVIS answered. "Would you like me to contact him?"

Steve flopped back onto his pillow, shaking his head. It was starting to come back to him now. He was in Tony's bedroom—their bedroom—and they had arrived in Malibu only a few days ago.

So much had changed since they'd last been to California. Gods, aliens, other dimensions. Peter's still-unexplained sensory enhancements.

He and Tony.

"No, thanks," Steve answered as he inhaled a shaky breath. "I'll um... I'll just go down and see him. Is Peter okay?"

"Master Peter is currently asleep, Captain, and his vitals are normal. Wall-E and Eva are standing guard at his bedside."

"Good. Thank you."

"You are most welcome."

He decided to forgo a shirt as he headed downstairs. The Malibu weather was just a bit too warm for his taste, and they had been keeping the common areas of the house warmer than usual lately for Peter, hoping to avoid too many more of his uncomfortable temperature drops.

In a way, Steve could understand how it felt to be so freezing cold that you couldn't imagine ever being warm again. His defrosting process had been one of the oddest sensations that he'd ever felt in his life, even more strange than his abrupt transformation from short and skinny to super soldier. He hadn't been exactly conscious, it was more like he'd been just on the fringes of semi-consciousness, hearing small echoes of conversation and feeling flashes of warmth as the scientists worked to free him from his prison of ice, almost like he was dreaming.

The only thing he could remember, in almost excruciating detail, was the panic he'd felt at not being
able to move. Panic which didn't begin to subside until the scientists were finally able to free his limbs.

And even now, after all the time that had passed, Steve still had nightmares about being trapped, unable to move, but still fully aware of his surroundings and everything going on around him.

As he descended the circular stairs to the workshop, Steve could see Tony through the glass wall, sitting on the floor with a needle and thread in one hand and working on one of the leg seams of a new Captain America uniform, with DUM-E standing guard over him like he always did. For someone who either owned or could build any technological gadget that Steve could imagine—and many that he could not—seeing his love using something so old and simple as a sewing needle both amused Steve and brought tears to his eyes at the same time.

"Working late?" Steve asked as he stepped inside, sitting down about a foot or so away.

"Don't you mean, early?" answered Tony, pausing his stitching just long enough to shoot Steve one of his patented half-smiles that never failed to make Steve shiver, even despite the dark purple circles under his eyes and the mass of coffee cups littering the counter.

"Whatever," said Steve. "Why aren't you up in bed?"

"Oh, just trying to get this done," Tony replied. "'Cause I'll be damned if I'm letting you wear that spangly thing again the next time aliens attack."

Steve let out a heavy sigh. Tony had already made him a new uniform, to which Steve had given a very enthusiastic stamp of approval after he'd tested it out during one of their Avengers training sessions before they had left New York. Tony had already made new uniforms for the rest of the team as well, in addition to not one, but three new suits of armour for himself and a new armoured suit for Colonel Rhodes.

And it had only been less than two months since the battle.

"Tony," Steve said gently. "The uniform that you already made for me is just fine. I don't need another one."

"Yeah, well, I thought so too, but then I decided to increase the Kevlar thickness in the abdominal panels by two more millimeters, and while I was doing that it just seemed easier to add a touch more stretch to the fabric to reduce the risk of chafing, and then—"

"Tony!" Steve cut in. He curled his fingers around Tony's wrist, halting his stitching. "And why can't you work on this when it's light outside? You've been awake for over twenty-four hours already!"

"Twenty-nine hours, fourteen minutes, and fifty-seven seconds," interjected JARVIS.

Tony rolled his eyes, avoiding Steve's gaze until Steve scooted forward, tilting Tony's chin up so he'd look at him. Tony's lower lip was quivering slightly, something that Steve knew usually meant that he was torn between just trying to brush something off or telling Steve the truth.

"Because," he finally whispered. "I can't—, I can't sleep, Steve. Not really—, not since—"

"Not since the battle?" Steve murmured, his heart clenching when Tony nodded. "Oh, sweetheart, why didn't you say anything?"

"Why would I? It's not like you sleep any more or any better than I do. And Pete—"
"Peter's doing better, Tony," interrupted Steve. "And no, he doesn't sleep as well when you're not home because he misses you when you're gone. We both do, you know that. But I can survive on only a few hours a night, or even less. You… shouldn't."

Tony shrugged. "Never hurt me before."

"I doubt that it's helped you."

"It doesn't matter!" Tony snapped. "We can't be caught unprepared again, Steve, not like that! We were ambushed! Loki fucking ambushed us when he took the tesseract, just like Pete and I were fucking ambushed in Afghanistan, and I cannot and will not allow it to happen again! Not ever!" He paused, sucking in a shuddering breath. "I need to make sure that you're protected. Both you and Pete, because I can’t—, I can't live without either one of you. I just… can't, so I need to do whatever I can to keep you both safe."

Carefully, Steve took the sewing needle from Tony's hand and set it down on the floor, lifting Tony onto his lap and wrapping his arms around him.

"You're not gonna have to live without me," he whispered, burying his fingers in Tony's messy hair. "Or Peter."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, babe," murmured Tony. "We don't exactly have desk jobs."

"No, not exactly," Steve agreed with a soft chuckle. "But we always have each other's backs. Right?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Then we'll be fine, sweetheart," Steve interrupted, almost to convince himself as much as Tony. "I know it."

Tony let out a heavy sigh. "You say that like you just know it's gonna happen. How can you be so sure?"

Cupping Tony's face, Steve pressed their foreheads together, looking deep into Tony's worried eyes. "Because I love you. And you love me. And we can trust each other out there. During a battle there's nothing more important than trusting your teammates, Tony. I trust you with my life, just like I hope you trust me with yours."

"I do," Tony said without hesitation. He covered Steve's hand with his own, his eyes fluttering shut. "You know I do. But that still doesn't mean we can't have the best equipment that I can build."

"No, it doesn't. But there has to be a difference between what's best and what's just obsessive, doesn't there?"

Tony snorted out an almost hysterical laugh, his entire body shaking with it. "I think Pete would say that I don't really know the difference."

"Well, I think Peter would be right about that," Steve agreed. He brushed a kiss across Tony's temple. "Can you come back upstairs with me? Please? I don't—, I don't like how dark it is without you there."

"Mmm. And they say that blue light is supposed to be detrimental to good sleep," Tony mumbled against Steve's chest.
"Are those the same 'theys' who say that there's no such thing as aliens?" asked Steve, smiling when Tony lifted his head to smirk at him. "'Cause if so, 'they' would be wrong."

"Yeah, 'they' definitely would," Tony murmured, sliding his rough palm up Steve's bare side, causing him to shiver and stoking the desire that was always there, smoldering in the background into an absolute conflagration. "God, you're so goddamn hot."

"Tony," Steve rasped as his hands slipped under the back of Tony's tank top, gliding up the smooth skin of his back. "Please, come back to bed with me. The uniform can wait, right now I need you. Just you."

Tony stared at him, his brown eyes glassy and that little crinkle between his eyebrows that only Steve ever saw. Steve knew Tony still wasn't used to hearing him say things like that, which is why he tried to say them as much as possible. He tilted Tony's chin, leaning down for a deep kiss that he kept up just long enough for Tony to whimper.

"All right, babe," Tony whispered as he trailed a fingertip down between Steve's pecs. "You know, it's not even fair of you to come down here with no shirt on. I mean, how in the hell am I supposed to be able to resist that?"

"Hmm. Maybe that was part of my plan," Steve murmured as he started trailing kisses along Tony's jaw, reveling in the scratchy feel of his facial hair against his lips.

"You… and your… plans," Tony stuttered, shifting so he was straddling Steve's lap, his hands resting on Steve's shoulders. "Does your plan also include carrying me upstairs?"

"Oh, I don't know. Do you want it to?" Steve asked, wagging his eyebrows.

"Hell yes. There's no way I would've agreed to this otherwise." He scraped his blunt nails down Steve's back, pulling Steve impossibly closer, so close Steve could feel the arc reactor pressing into his own sternum. "And I'm ready now, hot stuff, in case you hadn't noticed."

Steve growled against Tony's neck, cupping his hands under Tony's thighs so he could lift him. "Believe me, I've noticed."

"Steve?" Tony said once Steve had laid him on the bed, hovering over him, the blue glow of the arc reactor illuminating Tony's olive skin as Tony curled his hands around Steve's neck, tugging him closer.

"Yeah?"

"I'm… um…" Tony's voice faltered as he huffed out a sharp breath, the usual smooth talker at a rare loss for words. But Steve didn't need to hear them, he could read them in Tony's eyes just as plainly as if they were written across his forehead.

"I'm a mess," they said.

To which his eyes responded, "Yes, but you're my mess."

"It's okay, sweetheart," Steve murmured. He took Tony's hand, interlacing their fingers. "I love you. You make me whole."

"I love you too," Tony said, his voice tight, squirming slightly as Steve settled over him, careful not to pin him too firmly. They both had issues with being pinned down too hard. "God, I don't know what I'd do—"

*Chase the demons away, at least for tonight.*

Because fighting demons was always easier with someone watching your back.

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*Come find me on tumblr, I'm [geekymoviemom](http://example.com) and [geeky-writes](http://example.com) there! :)*

Chapter End Notes

I'm always eager to hear what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)*
"Okay, babe, it's just three more steps until we're at the bottom," Tony said, clutching Steve's hand as he and Peter led him down the stairs to the garage. Steve was blindfolded, which had taken more than a bit of convincing on both Tony and Peter's parts as he didn't much like having any of his senses dampened. But Tony knew Steve could see into the garage far too easily from the stairs, and he wanted to keep Steve's gift a surprise for as long as possible.

"I feel ridiculous," Steve grumbled playfully, squeezing Tony's hand just a bit harder as they descended the final step. "This is not how I imagined celebrating my birthday."

"Yeah, well, you also wanted to bake your own birthday cake," Tony replied. "Which is just not okay on way too many levels to even mention, so…"

"That's because the last time you tried to bake something you almost set the kitchen on fire, Dad," Peter piped up from Steve's opposite side, practically vibrating with excitement. He had helped Tony to pick out Steve's gift, almost managing to blow the surprise at least three times. "I think DUM-E is still recovering."
"Then it's a damn good thing that your papa here has taught you how to bake, buddy. That way I don't have to," retorted Tony as he opened the door to the garage, placing his palm on the small of Steve's back. "And, since you only turn ninety-two once, I wanted everything to be as perfect as possible."

"You know, Tony, technically I'm only turning twenty-eight today, so—"

"Yeah, but we don't need to get technical now, do we?" Tony interrupted. He had just turned forty a little over a month ago—and had been completely spoiled rotten by his boys for the entire day, as much as he'd allowed it, anyway—and while Tony would never willingly admit it out loud, he did tend to feel just a touch self-conscious sometimes at how much younger Steve seemed to be. No frown lines marring his beautiful face, no sneaky greys in his hair, or at least not yet. Just pure blond and blue-eyed perfection.

Perfection that somehow thought Tony was worthy of his love.

Apparently there were still some things that science couldn't explain.

"Are we there yet?" Steve asked as Tony guided him over to the brand-new 1958 Harley Davidson Duo Glide parked at the very end of the garage. It was Peter who had suggested to Tony that they get Steve a vintage motorcycle, and the two of them had searched long and hard to find this one, finally purchasing it from an estate sale down in Texas where it had been sitting nearly perfectly preserved since it had been bought by some cattle rancher the year it was built. A rancher who'd then had a fatal heart attack before he could even take it out for a drive, and apparently never informed his family where he had stored it.

"Yep," Tony answered as they came to a stop in front of the gorgeous sky blue bike, the colour almost exactly matching Steve's eyes. "Are ya ready?"

"I'm ready!" Peter exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm ready," answered Steve, barely hiding his impatience.

Removing the blindfold, Tony tried to contain his smile as Steve blinked a few times before he was able to focus in on the motorcycle in front of him, his jaw dropping open when he realised what it was.

"Oh… wow…" he breathed as he curled his arms around Tony and Peter's shoulders, drawing them both to his sides. "This… this is gorgeous!"

"She is a real beaut, isn't she?" Tony said proudly, nudging Steve towards the bike. He glanced down at Peter, winking as he whispered, "I think he likes it."

"I think you're right," Peter whispered back, smiling as wide as his round cheeks would allow. "You did good, Dad."

"We did good, buddy," Tony said, grinning even wider as he watched Steve run his palm lovingly along the soft leather seat, that was unfortunately only big enough for one person. There would be no driving to date nights on this bike, but that was okay. It was more than worth it to see the look of pure joy on Steve's face. They'd never properly celebrated Steve's last birthday since they were still trying to adjust from their experience in Afghanistan, so Tony wanted to make up for it this year.

"You wanna take it out for a quick spin, babe?" Tony asked, dangling the keys from his index finger. "Pete and I still need to finish some stuff upstairs before everyone else gets here." Everyone meaning Happy, Pepper, and Rhodey. Tony had invited the rest of the Avengers team to come out to
Malibu for the festivities, even offering to send the jet to pick them up, but Barton and Romanoff were off on another separate mission for Fury at the moment and Bruce had declined, not wanting to take time away from his work. In addition to working for Tony, he was also doing some consulting work for SHIELD, helping to decipher some of the data from the study of Loki’s sceptre.

"Oh yeah, I do," answered Steve. He cupped Tony's cheek, giving him a quick but hard kiss on the lips, whispering a quick, "Thank you," then leaning over to kiss the top of Peter's head. "Thank you, little guy."

"You're welcome, Papa," Peter said as he wrapped his arms around Steve's waist.

Tony watched with barely concealed want as Steve swung his leg over the bike and settled in on the seat, throwing Tony one of his million mega-watt smiles as he started the engine.

"Not too long of a spin now," Tony called over the rev of the engine. "We have a party to get to."

"Just long enough to get a good feel for her," Steve replied with a wink.

"Yeah, as long as that's the only girl you're going about feeling," Tony mumbled under his breath, startling when Peter snorted next to him. He wasn't quite used to Peter's enhanced hearing yet.

"I don't think you have to worry about that, Dad," Peter said as Steve drove out of the garage and down the driveway, giving Tony a rather cheeky grin. "I'm pretty sure the only girls that Papa likes are motorcycles."

Keeping with Steve's wishes to not have a too over-the-top birthday party, Tony had decided against the catered dinner he had initially planned and asked Rhodey to man the grill instead, promising to stay as far away from the food prep as possible. He did, however, arrange for a volleyball net—what better way for Steve to show off the spiking skills Tony didn't even know he had, and who knew that Pepper was such a good volleyball player?—and a fireworks show on the beach once the sun went down, all red, white, and blue of course. A huge bonfire followed, where they all roasted marshmallows and made S'mores and drank beer, or apple juice in Peter's case. Tony couldn't remember the last time that he'd seen Peter so happy, laughing and carefree as a kid should be, splashing around with Steve in the ocean and tossing a frisbee back and forth with Rhodey, with none of the heavy weight on his narrow shoulders that he'd had ever since they'd left for that fateful Afghanistan trip.

Peter had such a good time, in fact, that after nearly eating his weight in marshmallows he ended up crawling onto Tony's beach chair and cuddling up next to him, laying his head against Tony's chest just like he used to do when he was little.

"Have fun today, buddy?" Tony asked, brushing the curls off Peter's forehead so he could kiss him. His hair smelled like sand and sunscreen, with a hint of the green apple shampoo that Tony had always loved.

"Oh yeah," Peter murmured, grabbing a handful of Tony's shirt as he tried to get comfortable, his eyelids already at half-mast. "How come we never used to do anything like this on the Fourth before?"

Tony shrugged, as much as he was able to with a nearly thirteen-year-old boy sprawled all over him that was all skinny arms and legs. "I don't know, bud. We never really had a good reason to, did we?" He didn't feel like telling Peter that he'd always hated the Fourth of July for pretty much the very same reason why they were celebrating it now. Now he could willingly embrace all the cheesy and patriotic stuff that he'd avoided for so many years because it made Steve happy to be celebrated,
and Tony loved making Steve happy.

"Yeah, I guess not," Peter answered with a happy sigh. "I'm glad we do now, though."

"Me too, buddy, me too," Tony said, forcing the words past the knot in his throat, feeling the cool and salty ocean breeze blow through his hair, carrying the sound of Steve's laughter with it.

*God, I love this child. And I love that man.*

It had been a long time since Tony had allowed himself to feel this relaxed, this *content* with his life. Steve and Happy were a few yards down the beach tossing a football back and forth, Rhodey was regaling Pepper with what he was calling his "first official War Machine story", some mission he went on to reclaim something that had been stolen from someone in some other country, or something like that, and Tony was just sitting and cuddling with his boy, something they hadn't done in far, far too long.

It was taking nearly everything he had in him to not wonder when the other shoe was going to drop. Things were going almost *too* well, and in Tony's experience that was usually when the rug got pulled out from under him. The Ten Rings were still out there—the military had made pretty much zero headway on flushing out their new hiding place after Tony had beaten them back at Gulmira—and now there were new threats coming from goddamn *space* of all places, threats that blanketed Tony's mind so much that sometimes he could barely think about anything else. And Tony was trying, trying so hard to keep up with building his suits—he was up to twelve now, with four still in New York and the eight new ones that he'd built since they'd been back in California, but it still didn't feel like enough—and Steve's uniforms and not worry that Peter was dying every time that he sneezed and keep up with Pepper's requests that he show his face around his own company from time to time and—

A soft moan against his neck shook Tony from his spiraling thoughts, and he glanced down to see that Peter had given up the ghost and fallen asleep against him, his hand fisted into Tony's shirt. With a light sigh, Tony shifted Peter slightly and tipped his head back against the chair, closing his eyes. He had absolutely no intentions of falling asleep—the lack of his usual coffee intake for the day notwithstanding—and so was startled when he felt Steve's large hand gently shake his shoulder.

"Hey," Steve whispered as Tony scrubbed at his eyes with his palm, shocked to find the beach completely cleared out of both people and most of the evidence that there had even been a gathering. "Ready to head back to the house?"

"Where'd everyone else go?" asked Tony, still trying to get his bearings. The waves were crashing along the shoreline just a few yards away, and Peter was conked out on his chest, so hard that his mouth was hanging open, his hand curled up around Tony's neck.

"Home. It's almost midnight," answered Steve. He held up his phone, smiling as he showed Tony a picture of he and Peter sleeping. Steve never seemed to pass up a chance to photograph Tony and Peter when they were sleeping.

"Cute," Tony remarked, even as he tightened his arms around Peter. He knew these opportunities to cuddle with his boy were getting fewer and far between now that Peter was almost a teenager, and he was going to enjoy them for as long as he possibly could.

"Think you'll have to take the kid, hon," Tony added as he flexed his toes, which had gone numb. "Because I am fairly certain that I can't move at the moment."

"You know I don't mind that," Steve said. He dropped a quick kiss on Peter's head, sliding his arms
underneath him and lifting him up so gracefully that Peter barely even wiggled, curling into Steve as if he'd been carrying Peter his entire life.

They managed to brush most of the sand out of Peter's hair and clothes and get him into bed without waking him, a testament to how tired he really was. Peter's sleep lately had been just about as choppy as both Tony and Steve's, but the evening's festivities seemed to have completely worn him out. As soon as they got him tucked in Steve grabbed Tony's hand, pulling him not-so-subtly towards their bedroom.

"Are you too tired?" Steve asked as soon as he'd closed the bedroom door, his blue eyes already darkening in the pale moonlight filling the spacious room. Tony had had JARVIS adjust the window settings a bit after Steve's confession that he didn't like it so dark, and Tony had to stifle a gasp at how utterly breathtaking Steve was in that moment. The tiny beams of soft light were glinting off the lighter blond strands in Steve's hair, giving it an almost halo-like effect, accented beautifully by the blue glow of the arc reactor that was visible through Tony's loose shirt.

"Hell no," Tony rasped, gliding his palms up Steve's sun-kissed arms to his shoulders. "I've been waiting all damn day to get my hands on you."

"Oh, thank God!" Steve said as he cupped Tony's cheek and claimed his lips, stealing Tony's breath as he curled his free arm around Tony's waist and pressed their bodies flush together. Steve's hands were everywhere as they stumbled towards the bed, tearing at Tony's clothes with such desperate urgency that Tony felt certain he heard a couple of his shirt buttons pop free.

"You spoiled me too much today, Tony," Steve said, practically growling the words as he kissed down Tony's neck to his chest, carefully circling the arc reactor with the pad of his index finger. "Now it's my turn."

"Oh yeah, like you didn't spoil me rotten on my birthday," Tony managed to huff between his strangled breaths. He gulped in a lungful of air, trying to clear his mind enough so he could press against Steve's shoulder, urging him to lie down on his back. Tony crawled over him, peeling his clothes off slowly, playfully, straddling his hips once he was done and trailing his fingertips along Steve's sweat-slicked pecs down to his abs, smiling at Steve's sharp inhales as they contracted at his touch. Tony had always thought that he was a generous lover, and had even been told as such by several of his former lovers. And because of that, there was no way that he was going to allow Steve to try and spoil him in bed when it was his birthday.

He leaned down, his fingers tangling into Steve's hair as he kissed that spot behind Steve's ear that always made him shudder. "Let me take care of you tonight."

"Tony," Steve said, in that needy, desperate tone that never failed to made Tony want to melt into a big puddle of goo, his hands splayed across Tony's back. "Please!"

"Don't you worry, babe, I've got you," Tony murmured, trailing kisses down the tendon in Steve's neck to his chest, sucking marks into his burning hot skin and reveling in Steve's heady, masculine scent that Tony would jump at the chance to bottle if he ever felt like actually sharing it with anyone else. He dragged his lips back up to Steve's mouth, kissing him deeply. "And, Steve?"

"Mmmhmm?"

"No holding back tonight, baby," Tony whispered into his ear, feeling Steve shudder beneath him. "No biting your lip, no stuffing your knuckles in your mouth or anything else of the sort. You don't have to worry about waking up Pete or anything, so tonight I wanna hear everything. I wanna hear that sexy-as-hell Brooklyn accent of yours in all of its glory telling me just how much you're
enjoying yourself. Okay?"

He pulled back to look at Steve's flushed face, his expression so full of love and want that a bolt of pure heat raced through Tony, a rush of such strong desire that he felt his skin grow even hotter. Tony had been trying to get Steve to be more vocal in bed for weeks now, telling him that there was absolutely no reason for him to try and keep so quiet, like he was afraid they were going to get caught or something. The bedroom walls could be soundproofed, after all, and JARVIS knew enough to warn Peter away if that need ever arose.

"Okay," Steve whispered, sliding his calloused palms up Tony's sides, his fingertips digging into Tony's skin as his nearly blackened eyes bored into Tony's, reaching into the very depths of his soul. "I love you. I love you so much."

"I love you too," Tony answered, softly kissing the tip of Steve's nose. "Now, let me show you."

"Sir, it appears that two additional news helicopters have taken positions about two miles out from the house," JARVIS announced over the beat of Tony's music, turned down quite a bit to accommodate Peter's more sensitive hearing. "That brings the total to three."

"Goddamnit," Tony grumbled, rolling his eyes when Peter quirked an eyebrow at him from over by his chemistry setup. He was working on the latest formulation of his superglue recipe, which he'd already gotten so strong that Tony had started using it in some of the tech he was building for the Avengers, as well as for hanging Steve's paintings up around the mansion. There was even a Steve Rogers original now hanging in the lobby of the main Stark Industries building.

"Why are there so many helicopters flying around lately?" Peter asked as he gave his lead beaker a quick stir. "I mean, it's not like they can really see anything from that far away, right? Not even the telescopic camera lenses can see that far."

"I don't know, Pete," Tony said, running his palm down his face. He was so sick to death of being hounded by reporters. It hadn't been as bad in Malibu as it had been in New York, but it was still rare for them to be able to go anywhere in public without being approached at least once. "They're just vultures who don't have anything better to do apparently than try to watch an unmoving house. Don't worry, they'll move on to the next house soon enough."

"Uh huh," Peter said, sounding not quite convinced.

"The news people don't know which house is ours, buddy," Tony added. "They're just going down the line, hoping they'll get lucky."

"It's not gonna be hard for them to figure it out, Dad," said Peter. "Our house is the biggest one around here."

"Yeah, well..." Tony's voice trailed off as he scowled. Peter was right, it wouldn't be difficult for the news people to guess which house was the right one. There were only about five houses along this patch of shoreline, and theirs was the largest. "JARVIS, get ahold of Happy, will ya? See what he can do about the goddamn vultures outside, they're scaring Pete. And get in touch with Pepper too, it seems like someone at Stark Industries might've leaked our location to the press or something."

"And by 'vultures', I'm assuming that you're referring to the helicopters, sir?" JARVIS asked as Peter shot Tony another funny look. "And not actual vultures?"

"Yeah, yeah, the helicopters," grumbled Tony. "And who made you such a smartass, anyway?"
"Am I required to answer that question, sir?"

"Nope. It was rhetorical."

"I thought so, sir."

"It's a bit weird that they're flying around today though, don't you think?" Peter asked. "I mean, we've been out here for over two months already. Why are they just coming around now?"

"Who knows, Pete," replied Tony, shaking his head. "I've been around news people for pretty much my entire life, and I still don't understand 'em."

"So have I," Peter said, causing Tony to wince. There was no reprimand in Peter's words, he was simply just stating a fact, but it still hit Tony a lot harder than he knew Peter had intended. Peter had been pretty much doomed from having a so-called "normal life" from the very moment that Tony claimed him as his son, and while Tony had never regretted that decision even for an instant—Peter had pretty much saved his life, after all—it still made him feel guilty from time to time, and even more often lately. The fallout from the Battle of New York and the subsequent deeper public look at Tony and Steve's relationship had been difficult on all three of them, but Tony knew it had been the hardest on Peter most of all, if only for the simple fact that he was just a kid who shouldn't have to deal with such close scrutiny.

A kid that was going through a pretty rough time aside from everything else going on around him.

"Mr Hogan reports that he is attempting to contact the news agencies now, sir," JARVIS said. "He will keep us informed of his progress."

"Thanks, J," Tony answered. He gave Peter what he hoped was an encouraging smile. "See, Pete? Happy'll take care of things. Nothing to worry about."

"Uh huh," Peter said as he poured an opaque yellow liquid into a test tube. He glanced over at Tony when he was done. "Why're you building another suit? Don't you have enough of them already?"

"No," Tony said, a little too quickly as he tightened a bolt on the knee joint of his latest suit, one that he had specially designed to withstand actual space flight. His Mark VII had actually performed pretty well during his quick venture into space at the end of the Battle of New York, but since his thrusters had malfunctioned once they got into the zero-gravity environment, Tony knew he needed to tweak their design just in case he was ever needed to fly into space again. Unfortunately, getting to actually test the new design was not something that he was planning on attempting anytime soon. Tony had seen enough of space in that minute or so he was there to know that he really had no desire ever to return.

"Which one is that now?" asked Peter.

"Um… it's the Mark XV," replied Tony, taking the soldering iron from DUM-E's outstretched appendage. "I'm just trying to be prepared, Pete, nothing more than that. Even Papa says it's a good idea to be prepared."

"Mmm. And Papa told me that he thinks you're working too hard, and I think he's right," Peter said. "He says that you're down here most of the night every night building stuff, and—"

"Yeah, and how would he know that if he wasn't down here with me?" Tony retorted. He was going to have to have yet another talk with Steve about this, one that hopefully didn't turn into another argument. "I'm fine, Pete. You don't need to worry about me, and neither does Papa."
"Yeah, right," Peter muttered under his breath.

"What was that, child?" Tony said, trying to keep his temper intact. He was not at all ready for the teenage sarcasm that had already begun, and especially not about trying to keep said sarcastic almost-teenager safe. "I didn't quite hear you."

Peter shot him a scowl, one that was so non-menacing that Tony had to bite his lip to keep from chuckling.

"Nothing."

"Ah huh. That's what I thought."

They worked in silence for awhile, with DUM-E's various whirring noises and the music in the background the only sounds until Peter's head suddenly snapped up, his eyes wide and filled with such terror that Tony's heart leapt into his throat.

"Pete?" Tony asked. "What's wrong?"

"Where's Papa?" Peter gasped, his hands already starting to shake. "Daddy, where's Papa?"

"Um, I'm pretty sure he's just upstairs, Pete," answered Tony. He set down the soldering iron, wiping his hands on a rag. "In his studio. Why?"

Peter squeezed his eyes closed, wrapping his arms around his front as he shook his head, prompting Tony to hurry over to him. "Pete? Buddy, tell me what's happening?"

"It's—, it's happening again!" Peter choked out. "It's like it's trying to tell me—, it's like something—, something bad's gonna happen, but I—" His voice broke off as his eyes flew open, his pale face draining of colour. "Daddy! We gotta get out of here! Now!"

"JARVIS?" Tony called, his heart already starting to thud. He grabbed onto Peter's shoulders, rubbing his palms up and down Peter's arms. "JARVIS, what's going on?"

"I am unsure, sir," replied JARVIS. "There is nothing out of the ordinary that I can detect—, wait. Two of the news helicopters appear to have broken away from the other and are now aiming directly for the house."

"What?" Tony cried, his stomach dropping just as Peter tore free from his grasp, heading directly for the stairs and yelling for Steve. "No, Pete! Don't go up there!"

"Papa!" Peter screamed, skidding to a halt in the living room just as Tony reached the top of the stairs. "Papa, we gotta go!"

"Peter!" Tony said, gripping Peter's shoulders, turning Peter to face him. "Buddy, tell me what's wrong! Is it the helicopters?"

"Peter?" Steve asked as he hurried down the steps from the second floor, his arms and ratty t-shirt covered in paint smears. "Tony? What's going on?"

Peter glanced frantically between Tony and Steve, tears of panic welling in his eyes as he raced over to Steve, yanking hard on his arm and actually forcing him to move. "Please, we gotta go! Something bad's gonna happen and we gotta get out of here!"

"Hey, hey, hey, little guy," Steve said soothingly, even as he looked over at Tony with questioning
eyes. "Just stop for a second and tell us what's wrong!"

But by then Tony's gaze had been drawn towards the huge, floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the ocean, and at the now three huge helicopters that were aiming directly for the house, watching in horror as a missile suddenly launched from the lead aircraft.

"Oh, shit!" he cried, lunging for Peter at the same time as Steve grabbed him and turned so that his back was to the windows, curling his broad body around their son like a human shield. The force of the impact sent all three of them flying off their feet, with Tony landing several feet away from Peter and Steve, barely avoiding slamming his head into the wall and watching in horror as the floor began to crack beneath him.

"Tony!" he heard Steve yell from somewhere in front of him, his voice laced with more panic than Tony had ever heard from him before, even more than when he'd flown through the portal. "Tony, where are you?"

"I'm here!" Tony called back, blinking just as a second missile impacted somewhere on the garage level, taking out one of the concrete and steel support beams that anchored the house to the cliff. The sound of splintering plaster rattled through Tony's head as the crack in the floor grew wider, now completely separating Tony from Steve and Peter.

"Peter!" Tony yelled, trying to get to his feet and slipping on the thick layer of dust already covering the floor as bits of ceiling rained down around him. "Steve, where is he?"

"I've got him!" Steve replied as the third missile hit, sending both Steve and Peter flying off to the side towards the inner wall, with Peter immediately sliding down towards the crack in the floor that was rapidly growing into a gaping chasm.

"Peter!" Steve shrieked, scrambling to his feet before Tony could even move.

"JARVIS, get the Mark XIV up here now!" Tony commanded. The Mark XIV was his newest completed suit, and one that was most similar to his old Mark VII in that he could summon it via an electronic signal. He'd taken to wearing his bracelets pretty much constantly ever since the Chitauri invasion, only removing them when Steve insisted upon it, saying that not even he wore his dog tags all of the time.

"I am attempting to, sir," replied JARVIS over the nearly deafening roar of the choppers and splintering wood. "But it is currently buried under heavy debris."

"Well, attempt harder, I'm pretty much useless out here without it!" Tony snapped, nearly sobbing with relief when Peter managed to latch onto the side of the crack in the floor just before he would have fallen through, screaming in pain as the broken plaster and concrete dug into his fingers. Steve immediately slid towards the crack, intending to reach for Peter when Tony recognised the pht pht pht sound of heavy machine gun rounds a split-second before they ripped through the windows, sending razor-sharp bits of glass and plaster shooting throughout the room. Tony ducked down behind a section of the upended couch just as another missile impacted the level below, causing the floor Steve was standing on to suddenly tilt backwards. Steve turned, trying to brace himself, and was immediately hit with at least six bullets in rapid succession, sending him hurtling onto his back and slamming his head against the floor with a sickening crack.

"Papa!" Peter screamed, the sound tearing through the air and Tony's heart. "Papa!"

"Gah!" Tony gasped, trying not to look at Steve as blood from the gunshot wounds began to pool across his belly and chest. The impact had knocked him unconscious, and Tony sucked in a deep
breath, nearly choking on the dust-filled air as he realised that there was now no possible way that he could save both of his boys without his armour.

It was one of Tony's worst possible nightmares coming to life.

"JARVIS!" yelled Tony, dodging yet another chunk of falling ceiling. "I need the goddamn armour!" It was still possible for Tony to grab Peter in one hand and Steve in the other before the entire section broke off, but each second that ticked away meant that he was one second closer to saving neither of them.

"I am currently attempting to reboot power to the Mark XIV, sir," replied JARVIS. "Please stand by. Keep in mind that the suit does not yet contain your usual armament."

"There's no fucking way that I can stand by!" Tony rasped, ducking his head as more bullets pierced the wall behind him, watching in horror as the floor slanted even more and Steve's body began sliding closer and closer to the jagged windows, further away from him.

"This is completely un-fucking-acceptable!"

"Papa!" Tony heard Peter scream from where he had somehow managed to crawl back up from the chasm onto Steve's side of the floor, now tilting so badly that it was precariously close to crumbling off the side of the cliff.

"No, Peter!" shouted Tony as Peter began crawling towards Steve, dodging the rapid-fire bullets as he went, his bleeding hands leaving bloody handprints on the quaking floor. "Buddy, the whole thing is gonna collapse, you gotta get out of there!"

"I can't let him die!" Peter sobbed as he reached Steve's side, yanking so hard on his bloodstained t-shirt that the fabric tore off into his hands. "Please, Papa, you need to wake up!"

"System reboot successful, sir!" JARVIS shouted over the endless sound of falling debris, the rolling and pitching floor jerking Tony in every which direction. "Stand by for Mark XIV deployment!"

He managed to get to his feet, standing in preparation for the armour to wrap around his body, half-hidden behind a pile of crumbled ceiling with his eyes firmly trained on Peter, still trying to get Steve to come around.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!" Tony grumbled, his hands twitching impatiently just as yet another missile impacted the upper floor of the house, causing the ceiling support beam directly over Steve and Peter to splinter, showering them with bits of plaster and concrete. Tony's belly swooped as Peter looked up, crying out in panic as the beam began to break off.

"No!" screamed Tony, so hard that he felt his throat tearing as the beam cracked completely, watching helplessly as it fell towards his beloved and his beloved son, preparing to crush the life out of them both.

And then, to Tony's complete and utter disbelief, Peter pushed himself up onto his knees next to Steve, raised his arms up over his head, and proceeded to catch the ceiling beam as if it weighed nothing more than one of his school textbooks.

Less than a second later, Tony picked up the tell-tale whooshing noise of his approaching armour. Gulping, he held out his arms as the suit wrapped around his body, barely giving his faceplate a chance to lock into place before he was shooting off towards his boys, arriving just in time to aim a repulsor blast into the underside of his mother's old grand piano and send it through the windows, directly into the path of the lead helicopter.
"Take that, you assholes!"

"C'mon, Pete, let's get outta here," Tony said as he landed next to him, lifting the beam from Peter's trembling hands and heaving it aside. He curled his armoured fingers around Peter's rigid upper arm, shaking him slightly to get his attention. Peter's eyes were wide, unblinking, and his round cheeks were so ashen that Tony was surprised he was still conscious. "I need you to grab onto me as tight as you can, okay, buddy? As tight as you can, just like a baby polar bear." *Just like you did when we escaped from that cave.* Steve was starting to stir, his eyelids fluttering as his face screwed into such an expression of agony that tears welled in Tony's eyes, stinging the small cuts and scrapes that surrounded them.

"Uhh—" Peter stammered, finally blinking his eyes. "Uh huh."

"As tight as you can. Okay buddy?" Tony repeated, turning to shield Peter and Steve from the nearly continuous machine gun fire as another tremor shook the floor beneath him. There were still two more helicopters out there, and they were firing with everything that they had. He quickly armed the lone gauntlet missile that he'd installed, launching it towards the outer edge of the right-hand helicopter. The resulting explosion sent the aircraft careening directly into its partner, taking them both out in one fell swoop.

*There. That's better.*

"All right, Pete, time to go," said Tony, holding his left arm open so Peter could latch onto him. As soon as Peter was in place Tony grabbed onto Steve's waist, grunting as he hauled him up over his right shoulder, trying to ignore Steve's cries of pain that he could almost feel more than he could hear.

"JARVIS, you need to fly us outta here," Tony commanded as the floor pitched dangerously beneath his boots. "Right now, just get us outside!"

"Yes, sir," JARVIS responded as Tony's boot repulsors fired, lifting the three of them up just as the floor broke completely off, crashing against the cliffs below with a thunderous roar. "I have alerted the authorities as well. There is an ambulance en route."

"Yeah, okay," grunted Tony as they flew directly through the front windows and onto the circular front driveway, with Peter releasing from him as soon as his feet hit the ground.

"I'm okay, Daddy," Peter squeaked, his voice trembling. "Take care of Papa."

It wasn't exactly true; both of Peter's hands were bleeding, his face and neck were covered with scrapes and bruises, some of them deep, and he was obviously in shock, but there were no broken bones or other internal injuries that Tony could see, which after Peter's death-defying catch of the ceiling beam didn't make any sense at all. But Peter was right, Steve was in far worse shape. Tony quickly patted Peter on the shoulder before lining up his HUD with Steve's bloody chest and abdomen, allowing JARVIS to scan him.

"JARVIS, how bad is he?"

"There are seven entry wounds that I can detect, sir, with only three exit wounds," answered JARVIS. "And two of the shells are lodged in his right lung, which has completely collapsed."

"Holy shit," Tony whispered, his HUD listing out the locations of Steve's wounds just as Steve's eyes flew open and he coughed up a huge mouthful of blood. Tony quickly manoeuvred him into a reclined sitting position with his head slightly to the side, raking his armoured hand through his hair
as Peter tugged off his hoodie, balling it up and pressing it against the worst of the bleeding wounds on his papa's chest. "It's all right, babe, we've got you. Help's on the way."

"Where's Peter!" Steve gasped, his every gurgling breath sounding like it was being pulled through a dozen layers of cheesecloth and his blue eyes hazy with pain. "Tony? Where is he?"

"I'm right here, Papa," Peter said, gently taking Steve's hand as tears streamed down his face, tracking through the dust and grime. "I'm okay."

"Try not to talk, honey, you've got bullets wedged in your lung," Tony said. He popped open his faceplate, pressing his lips to Steve's forehead and drawing back with a gasp at how icy-cold his skin felt. Super soldier or not, they needed to get Steve fixed up ASAP. "How much longer, JARVIS?"

"I can hear the sirens, Daddy," cried Peter before JARVIS could answer. "They're coming."

"Yeah, okay, buddy," mumbled Tony. He kissed Steve's forehead again, trying desperately to not to give into the panic threatening to overtake him. "You're gonna be okay, Steve. I'll make sure of it, 'cause there's no way in hell I'm letting you go."

"Don't!" Steve choked out, coughing up more blood as his entire body started to tremble, tearing Tony's heart into tiny little pieces. "Don't let me go!"

"Not a chance, babe," Tony assured him, letting out a small sigh of relief as a fire engine pulled into the driveway, followed directly by an ambulance. "Not a chance in hell."

Steve Rogers was no stranger to pain. As a child and adolescent, pain was pretty much a constant in his life. The struggle to breathe against lungs that rebelled at nearly every possible opportunity was an ever-present reminder that he would likely die before he reached the age of thirty. As a teenager and young adult, the beatings he received on a near-daily basis only reinforced that viewpoint. There was no point to keeping your mouth shut if there was nothing to lose, and while Bucky could never seem to see things quite the same way that Steve did, he at least knew Steve well enough to only come to his rescue when Steve was truly in danger. As such, Steve endured more than his fair share of bruised and broken ribs, dislocated fingers, and enough scrapes and bruises to mar his pale skin to last at least three lifetimes. It eventually got to the point where his ma didn't even ask any questions as she worked to wrap up his ribs or stitch up his knuckles, only that he was lucky that he didn't get himself killed, and learn to duck a bit faster next time.

And then, after she succumbed to the tuberculosis that had plagued her for so many months, Steve just started wrapping up his own ribs and setting his own broken fingers, doing such a poor job one time on his left pinky that not even the super-soldier serum could completely fix its perpetual crookedness.

The pain didn't stop once he received the serum, though. Aside from trying to adjust to being able to see so clearly that the edges between colours were almost too sharp, and hear so well that even the slightest, smallest noises were amplified to almost deafening levels, the horrors of the war itself were such that Steve sometimes found himself wishing that he hadn't been so persistent in his desire to join the Army.

And then, he lost Bucky.

Even when Steve had had nothing, he'd still had Bucky.
Until he didn't.

The pain was coming in waves, crashing so strongly against him that they threatened to pull him under, back under the frigid Arctic water, back into the ice, rendering him completely frozen and unable to move. Steve gasped against the agonising sensations, the push and pull as fingers and instruments poked and prodded at his wounds, leaving him unable to breathe with any depth, his lungs burning cold with each torturous inhale. His hands and feet were tied down, immobilised, followed by someone placing a mask over his mouth and nose, flooding his senses with a gas that smelt so sickly-sweet that he would have vomited if he'd been able to contract any of his abdominal muscles. All around him people were shouting, their voices blending into a torturous cacophony of noise as Steve strained to decipher what any one of them were saying through the blood rushing past his ears.

"Can't put him under, his metabolism's too fast—"

"His blood pressure's too high, we need to—"

"Give him a paralytic! We need to stop the bleeding or none of this is gonna matter!"

"No, we can't just paralyse him! We need to—"

"Mr Stark! Mr Stark, you can't be in here, this is—!"

And finally, a familiar voice that cut right through the rest, one that both startled Steve and relaxed him at the same time.

"You're not gonna do a damn thing to him without me here, so get that goddamn mask off his face and let him see me!"

The mask was slipped off, and a rough palm cupped Steve's cheek, turning his head slightly so he could look into Tony's worried brown eyes. His face was covered in scrapes and bruises, with a deep cut over his left eye—why was it always his left eye?—but he was here. With Steve.

"I'm here, honey," he said, pressing a quick kiss to Steve's forehead. "I've got your back."

A choked gasp tore from Steve's throat, his hands clenching into such tight fists that he felt his fingernails pierce his skin.

"Tony!"

"Yeah, it's me," Tony murmured. He raked his fingers through Steve's hair, trying to soothe him. "I'm not going anywhere."

"But—, where's Peter? Is he safe?"

"Pete's okay, honey. He's with Happy and Pepper one room over, and Rhodey's on his way. Don't try to talk anymore, okay?"

"Mr Stark," another voice said, one of the people working on him. "I'm afraid that I cannot allow—"

"You're gonna allow it," Tony barked. "You're gonna allow it, or I'm gonna take it up with the medical board and see to it that you never practise medicine ever again. Now, you just do whatever it is that you've gotta do to fix him while I stand here and hold his hand."

"Tony!" Steve gasped, the words cutting through his damaged lungs like scissors through tissue
A slight smile tugged on the corners of Tony's lips as he worked the armoured fingers of his other hand into Steve's clenched fist. "You're not gonna hurt me, babe, so go right ahead and squeeze as hard as you have to."

And Steve had never loved him more as he did in that moment.

Steve woke with a start, his eyes flitting rapidly around the strange room, the smell of blood and strong antiseptic and the sounds of beeping monitors assaulting his senses. He was in a strange bed with stale, scratchy sheets—nothing like the cool, silky-soft sheets on he and Tony's bed—there were tubes sticking out of both his arms and his chest, and his left arm seemed to be propped up on something. He was shivering slightly, but the entire left side of his body was warm, much warmer than his right, which was covered in a thick layer of bandages and throbbing with every beat of his heart.

"Hey, hey, hey," a soft, gravelly voice said, a voice that he loved, soothing him as calloused fingers stroked the back of his hand. "It's okay, big guy. We're here."

Turning his head, Steve blinked as his eyes focused in on Tony, sitting in a very uncomfortable-looking chair next to his bed, a cup of coffee clutched in one hand. His face was pale and drawn, with deep purple circles under his eyes that blended right in with the bruises left behind from the battle.

No, that wasn't right. They hadn't been in a battle.

They had been attacked. He, Tony, and Peter had all been attacked, in their own home. Someone had been blatantly trying to kill them.

"Tony," he whispered, with even the single word sending another shockwave of pain rippling throughout his body, the prickling sensation of his wounds slowly knitting together that still made his skin crawl. "Tony, I—"

"Shh, don't try to talk too much," Tony murmured as he set down his coffee, his Adam's apple bobbing as he gulped. His fingers curled around Steve's hand, squeezing gently. "You were shot, babe. Multiple times. If you hadn't been… who you are, they would've killed you."

Steve breathed in through his nose, as deeply as he could against the shooting pain in his side, which still didn't feel like quite enough. "You saved me," he said. "You didn't let me go."

Tony's jaw clenched, his brow furrowing into what Steve had come to call his give 'em hell expression. "No, babe, I didn't save you." He jerked his head towards Steve's left side. "He saved you."

Tears sprang to Steve's eyes as he turned his head again, glancing down to see that Peter was lying in the bed next to him, curled up against him and sound asleep. Both of his hands were wrapped in thick white bandages, and there were several cuts and bruises littering his boyish face that to Steve's untrained eye looked far too well-healed to have just happened.

"Tony!" Steve gasped, gently brushing the hair from Peter's forehead. "Is he all right? His hands—"

"He's gonna be fine, Steve," Tony said gently. "There were a few pretty deep cuts on the inside of his fingers, but the rest are mainly superficial, and already starting to heal, so he's in a lot better shape than you are at the moment."
Steve's eyebrows knitted together. "Already healing? You mean, like—?"

"Yeah, babe. Just like you. And, the doc says with your enhanced healing we should be able to take that massive hose out of your chest sometime tomorrow. He just wants to make sure that your lung doesn't re-collapse overnight."

"Okay," Steve whispered. He closed his eyes briefly, trying to breathe through the siren-like pain and his rising panic. He could handle most injuries pretty well—or at least so he thought—but even a minor hit to his lungs was still enough to make him feel like he was suffocating all over again, and having a huge tube sticking out of his chest wasn't helping at all.

"It hurts," he finally said, cringing at how weak he sounded. Captain America wasn't supposed to be weak.

"Yeah, honey, I know it does," Tony replied, his voice tender. He reached over to one of the nearby medicine pumps and pushed a red button, flooding Steve's veins with painkillers that he knew would be gone within a matter of minutes. "The docs say that you're on the highest dose of pain meds they can give you, and I tried to tell them it wasn't enough but they won't listen, they're too afraid of giving you too much… but it should be a lot better once that tube is out. Pete had to have one a couple of times when he got real bad, and his doctors had to knock him out completely to keep him from squirming around and pulling it out."

"Poor boy," Steve murmured.

"Yeah," agreed Tony. "That pretty much sucked big time. Try and rest now, babe."

Nodding, Steve closed his eyes, trying to relax but only managing to see Peter screaming as he clung desperately to the broken floor of the living room, with Tony stuck helplessly on the opposite side of the chasm, followed by the fiery feel of the bullets as they pierced his body.

"Tony!" he gasped, his eyes flying back open. "How—, how could Peter have saved me? He was—I was stuck, and I was trying to get to him, but—"

"Shh, honey, it's okay," Tony whispered, squeezing Steve's hand. He sucked in a sharp breath, pursing his lips. "And I don't know exactly how he did it. One second I'm seeing you and Pete about to be crushed by one of the ceiling beams, and the next second Pete was catching the thing in his hands like it was nothing. Just like he'd catch a goddamn frisbee or a football. I can't—I can't explain it, but I sure as hell am relieved that he did."

Steve's hand stiffened on Peter's back, his heart clenching when Peter sniffed in his sleep, burrowing in even closer to him. He knew those ceiling support beams in the Malibu house had to weigh hundreds of pounds, so how could it have been possible for Peter to catch one without being crushed?

Unless… could it be possible…?

"Tony, do you think—?"

"Right now I don't really know what to think," Tony interrupted. He scrubbed his free hand down his battered face, hard enough to make Steve wince. "I'm not exactly firing on all cylinders at the moment, but if I had to guess, I'd say that it seems like Pete's developed some enhanced strength that's similar to yours. I mean, adrenaline could've explained some of it, but there's no way in hell it could explain all of it. It was almost like he knew he could do it, but it still surprised him at the same time. I've never seen anything like it before."
"That's how it was with me," Steve said softly. "Back in the beginning."

"Yeah, I figured."

"There was something else, though," added Steve, the memories crashing through the haze of the pain and painkillers. "Before the first missile hit. It was almost like Peter knew that something was coming."

"Yeah, there's that too," said Tony, shuddering. "I don't think I ever wanna see a look like that on Pete's face ever again. He was completely terrified, kept asking over and over where you were, telling me we had to get out..."

"But how could he have known what was coming?" Steve asked. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Just one more question to ask Dr Cho when we finally see her," Tony said, reaching over to stroke Steve's cheek with his thumb. "No more talking now, hon, okay? You need to rest. And I've already called Fury, he's gonna send Barton and Romanoff out here as soon as they can be recalled, shouldn't be any later than tomorrow."

"Mmm. You need to rest too," replied Steve. "You look like hell."

Tony's eyebrows immediately shot up, and he winced, rubbing at his sore eye. "Language, Captain. And I'm fine, for Christ's sake. You don't need to be worrying about me when you're the one lying there all shot to hell."

"You don't look fine. You look like you're about to drop."

"I've had my fair share of hospital vigils," Tony said. He leaned over the metal bed railing, pressing his lips Steve's forehead. "I'm fine, babe. Please, try and go back to sleep."

Steve's throat tightened as Tony pulled away. At that moment he wanted so badly to have Tony crawl into bed with them so they could all get some rest, but he knew that Tony would protest. There was no space, there was a tube sticking out of Steve's right side, and Tony wouldn't be able to sleep anyway until he was okay. It was just like it had been in Afghanistan, when Peter was so sick following their rescue and Tony stayed awake for three-plus days after having been awake for who knows how long before that, planning their escape. There was no way that Tony could allow himself to rest when someone he loved was in pain.

And he loved Steve, there was no doubt in Steve's mind about it. It was tangible, etched into him physically, something that Tony couldn't hide even if he wanted to. His eyes spoke volumes with every look, and his fingers and lips burned it into Steve's skin with every touch.

And Steve loved him just as much, if not more, and wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with him. However long that might be.

"Marry me," Steve blurted out, shocking himself almost as much as Tony, whose eyes went so wide that they nearly popped out of his head. Steve had never intended for it to be like this—he was the man with the plans, after all, and had already spent way too much time thinking in the last few months about how he might propose when the time was right—but suddenly, it just made sense. Even though they had just lost their house and probably everything in it, even with all the demons they fought against on a daily basis, there was everything Steve had ever wanted sitting right there, in that tiny hospital room. A man who he loved to share his life with, and the child he'd always desired but never dreamed he would actually have.

"You're delirious," Tony answered, an amused smirk playing on his lips. "Too many painkillers. Go
"No, I'm not," insisted Steve. He dug the heel of his hand into the thin hospital mattress, grimacing against the bolting pain as he tried to prop himself up without disturbing Peter. "I love you, Tony, and I love the family we've created together, and I want it to be official." He reached for Tony's hand over the railing, interlacing their fingers and bringing them carefully to his lips, kissing Tony's knuckles. "Peter told me that we could get married if we wanted to, and I want to marry you. Will you marry me?"

Tony's lower lip started to shake, and he looked down at their intertwined hands, insecurity roiling in his brown eyes.

"Steve… I—"

"No," Steve interrupted. "Don't. I can see what you're thinking, and just… don't. Don't try and tell me that you're not good enough, or worth it, or it's not the right time, or whatever other nonsensical is going through your mind right now, 'cause none of it's true. Absolutely none of it. You said yourself that we don't exactly have desk jobs, and so there's no way of knowing how things might go in the future. But what I do know, as sure as I know that I love you, that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I want to do that as your husband." He paused, pressing his lips to the back of Tony's trembling hand. "Please, Tony. Don't make me ask again."

Tears welled in Tony's eyes, with a single tear escaping to track down his cheek as Steve waited for his answer with bated breath.

"Yes," Tony finally whispered, so softly that Steve had to strain to hear it. He cleared his throat, giving his head a slight shake as a huge, wide, almost hysterical smile broke out on his exhausted face, and Steve's heart swelled almost to the point of bursting. "Yes," he repeated, a bit louder this time. "What the hell, I'll do it. I'll marry you."

"Oh my God, thank you!" Steve rasped as Tony leaned over the railing again, pressing a short but firm kiss to his lips that was almost ruined by both of their smiles.

"Why don't you thank me by getting some rest now, okay?" Tony whispered against his lips. "That's an order, soldier."

"Yes, sir," Steve said with a nod, still giddy as he settled back against his pillows, his hands tightening around Tony's and on Peter's back, the throbbing pain in his side all but forgotten, pushed into the dark corners of his mind so pure elation could take its place.

Steve had just proposed to the love of his life, and Tony had accepted. The pain could take a backseat for awhile.

"Hey, Pete, Natasha is gonna take you down to the cafeteria now, okay? It's about time that you had something to eat," Dad said, shifting nervously on his feet as another nurse took his position next to Papa's bedside. They were getting ready to take out Papa's chest tube, and Peter had overheard Papa asking Dad to take him out of the room during the procedure. Dad, of course, had refused, saying that there was no way that he was leaving, but that he'd get Natasha to take Peter instead.

Sometimes both of his dads seemed to forget that Peter could hear a lot better now than he used to, but that was okay. It just made it harder for them to hide things from him.

"Yeah, okay," Peter answered. He didn't really want to leave, but he knew Papa would tolerate his procedure better if Peter was out of the room. Papa didn't like anyone seeing him in pain, especially
"Thirty minutes or so should do it," Dad said to Natasha as he handed her some money. "And make sure the kid eats enough, yeah?"

"Oh, don't worry," replied Natasha, shooting Peter a quick wink. "I can be pretty persuasive when I need to be."

"Mmm," Peter grumbled. "I'm not really all that hungry. Especially for hospital food."

"Maybe not, but the last thing we need is for you to pass out on us. Especially when you're still trying to heal," Dad said warily. He gave Peter's hair a quick ruffle. "Go on now, buddy, and try not to worry. I'll be here with Papa the whole time."

"Uh huh," said Peter. He leaned over the railing on Papa's bed, giving him a quick but gentle hug. "Love you."

"Love you too, little guy," Papa answered, patting Peter's back. He looked nervous, which didn't help Peter's mood at all. Peter had had chest tubes before, and remembered with far too vivid detail how painful they'd been. "We'll see you soon."

"Your papa seems like a pretty tough guy, Peter," Natasha said once they were seated in the cafeteria, a pile of French fries and two grilled ham and cheese sandwiches in front of them. "I'm sure he'll be able to bounce back from this."

"I know he will," Peter replied, fumbling with his bandaged hands as he took a tentative bite of his sandwich. It wasn't nearly as good as the hot sandwiches that Papa made, but it wasn't too horrible. "It just sucks because they won't give him any drugs to help it hurt less. Papa metabolizes them too fast, and the doctors are too scared to give him more than what they're used to giving, so he just has to squeeze Dad's hand really hard and hope for the best. It's not fair."

"No, it's not fair," agreed Natasha. She stuffed a fry into her mouth, washing it down with a sip of her drink. "I actually have some questions to ask you, if don't mind. Your father said it was okay, but I wanted to double-check with you first."

Peter paused, holding a fry halfway to his mouth. "Um… sure? What kind of questions?"

"Well, for one thing, Clint and I were wondering if you happened to get a look at any of the helicopter pilots during the attack? He's out at the house site right now with Agent Hill and your Mr Hogan, and he's found a couple of things that are… suspicious, shall we say, so—"

"More suspicious than us getting attacked in the first place?" Peter exclaimed, immediately clapping his hand over his mouth, wincing as pain shot from his stitched fingers up the length of his arm. He really should be trying to keep his voice down. "I wanna know why we were attacked!"

"That's what we're trying to figure out, Peter," Natasha said softly. "And in order to do that, it would help us a lot of you happened to get a look at any of the helicopter pilots. I've already asked both of your dads if they managed to get a look and they said no, so now I'm asking you."

Peter huffed out a sharp breath, shaking his head as the events of the attack replayed again in his mind, like they had been on a practically continuous loop ever since it had happened.

"I know this has to be hard, Peter, especially on you," Natasha added. "But it would really help us figure out who did this if you could remember seeing anything."
"I did see a couple things," Peter said after a moment's pause. He let out a hard shudder, tears welling in his eyes as he remembered Papa's lifeless body heading directly for the shattered windows, and Dad's panic at not being able to reach them. "It all happened so fast, and everything was so loud, and —"

"Shh," Natasha whispered, reaching for his arm and squeezing gently. "It's gonna be all right, kiddo. Just tell me what you saw."

"Well," Peter began in a shaky voice. "There was something a bit weird about the pilot of the first helicopter, the one my dad hit with the piano."

"Okay, weird… how?" asked Natasha.

Peter shrugged, pushing his plate away, any appetite he'd had all but gone. "I dunno, at first I thought it might've been just the sun reflecting off of the helicopter's door or window or something, because it kept getting into my eyes, but then I saw it again, just real quick before the piano hit it and it crashed, and it almost looked like…"

"Like… what?" prompted Natasha.

"Like the pilot was wearing a shiny jacket or something, and the sun was reflecting off of it, only… it was only on one of his arms."

Natasha's eyebrows shot up. "Only one arm? Are you sure?"

"That's what it looked like. But like I said, it happened so fast that I—"

"Okay, Peter, I need you to concentrate very carefully, all right?" she interrupted. "Could it have possibly been a metal arm that you saw, instead of just a jacket?"

"Um… I guess?" Peter said, confused. "Yeah, I suppose that would make sense since it was just one, but… why would someone have a metal arm? People don't just have metal arms, do they?" Yeah, and aliens don't usually attack Earth either, but hey, they did, so…

"Not usually, no," answered Natasha, her face pale. "But if it's who I'm thinking it is, this person does." She reached into her pocket for her phone, pulling up Agent Barton's number. "Clint, it's me."

"Yeah?" Peter heard him reply.

"How're things going at the site?"

"Oh, just swell, you know how much I enjoy digging through piles of wreckage," he said, causing Natasha to wince in Peter's direction.

"Clint, I've got Peter here with me, so you might wanna tone it down a little," she mumbled. "He can hear everything that you're saying."

"Well, shit, maybe next time let me know that first, yeah? Anyway, you can tell him that we found Cap's shield. That Happy guy took it, saying he was gonna lock it up somewhere. And a whole shit —, I mean boatload of bullets. We haven't made it any further than the first floor, though."

"All right. Any ballistics on those bullets yet?"

"Not yet, Hill was gonna run 'em when we got back."

"Okay. I'm gonna pull the ballistics off the bullets that they recovered from Steve too, but Clint, I
think we need to call some more people in for this one. I'm gonna get in touch with Fury as soon as we hang up."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Natasha inhaled a deep breath, reaching again to pat Peter's arm as Peter felt his stomach drop to his knees. Something was very wrong here.

"Because I'm almost certain that I know who was involved in this attack," said Natasha.

"Okay, Nat," Clint said slowly. "Who was it?"

"The Winter Soldier."

Come and say hi to me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! My blogs are not spoiler-free but I always use tags, so if you have spoiler tags blocked you should be okay. :)

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)
"What?" Peter exclaimed, his heart starting to thud. "Who's that? Natasha, who's the Winter Soldier? Is he part of the Ten Rings?"

Natasha only shook her head, still listening to Clint yammering on the phone, telling her he was going to bring some of the bullets he'd pulled from the house up to the hospital so they could compare ballistics.

"Yeah, okay. We'll see you soon," she said in a shaky voice that did absolutely nothing to calm Peter's already frazzled nerves. Natasha looked rattled, and based on a few of the stories she'd told when they'd all gotten together for dinner in New York, she didn't get rattled all that often.

"Please, tell me what's wrong!" Peter pleaded as soon as she'd hung up with Director Fury. "Is my papa gonna be okay?"

"He's gonna be fine, Peter," Natasha said quickly. She took another sip of her drink, checking her watch. "We can't go back upstairs yet, so why don't you try and eat some more."
"And how in the hell am I supposed to do that?" Peter yelped, once again clapping his hand over his mouth, managing to hit one of his still-healing bruises in the process. "Please, Natasha," he pleaded in a softer voice. "Can't you tell me what's going on?"

Natasha let out a heavy sigh. "Look, kiddo, I don't know if your dads would want you to hear any of this, and if they do, then I'd rather just say it all at once and be done with it. Okay? Now, the last thing I need is to get yelled at because you didn't eat, so please, try and finish your lunch before we head back."

"Mmm, fine!" Peter grumbled, stuffing nearly half of his sandwich into his mouth and almost choking as he tried to chew. His stomach felt like a big ball of lead, and it was all he could do to finish all of his food without wanting to just barf it all right back up again.

They returned to Papa's hospital room to find him sitting on the side of his bed eating lunch, his right side covered in a large square bandage that was visible through his thin t-shirt. Dad was on the phone in the corner, talking to Happy from what Peter could tell, gesturing so wildly that the coffee was almost sloshing out of the cup he was holding. Papa's face fell as soon as he saw Peter, and he held out his left arm, which Peter practically dove into.

"What's wrong, little guy?" Papa asked, his eyes narrowing as he looked up at Natasha. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"That might not be too far from the truth, Cap," Natasha said. She huffed out a sharp breath as Dad finished up his phone call and crossed back over to Papa's bedside, a worried look on his face.

"What's not too far from the truth?" Dad said, sounding immensely frustrated. "Please tell me you have better news for me than what Happy just told me?"

"Why? What did Happy just tell you?" Papa asked. He pulled Peter a bit closer so Peter could lay his head on his chest, letting his strong heartbeat attempt to soothe him.

"Happy says that the entire garage level is covered in heavy debris," said Dad. "Which isn't too surprising given what happened, but it also means that I won't have access to any of my suits—or your new suit, for that matter—until the contractor is able to get a bigger crane out there to move some of it, and he said the earliest he can do that is three days from now."

"Okay, but you still have the suit that you used to fly us out, don't you?" asked Papa. Always the optimist was Papa, even after nearly getting blown up and shot to death.

"Yeah, and the ones that are out in New York," added Dad. "But they're way the hell out in New York, and the one here got pretty much beat to hell during the attack, and—"

"Tony," Papa interrupted, gently but firmly. "It's okay. It's only three days, I'm sure that we can—"

"Oh, you're sure, are ya?" snapped Dad, scrubbing a shaky hand down his face. He was so exhausted that Peter was surprised he could still stand, much less even think semi-coherently. "You're sure? Well, I'm sure that there's no way I can protect the two of you out there without my suits, so if I can't get at my suits, then I can't—"

"Tony!" Papa said in his Captain's voice. "It's gonna be all right. You said that you were able to take out all three of the helicopters, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, but it's not like they were just out there 'cause they felt like taking some target practice, Steve!" Dad shot back, rubbing at his temples. "They had to have been sent by the Ten Rings, or someone else who—"
A loud knock on the door halted Dad mid-rant, and he scowled. "Who the hell is it?"

"Just your average everyday SHIELD agent," called Clint Barton from the hallway. "Is everybody decent?"

Dad rolled his eyes, causing Peter to let out a giggle despite himself. "What the hell is wrong with you, Barton?"

"I'm already half-deaf, damnit," Clint said as he opened the door, poking his head cautiously around it before stepping inside the room. "I don't need to be going blind too." He glanced around the room, his expression softening a bit as his eyes landed on Peter and Papa. "Doing okay there, Cap?"

"I'll be all right," Papa answered, his arm tightening around Peter.

"Yeah, well, that's good." He cleared his throat, looking over at Natasha. "Hill was actually able to run some preliminary ballistics there at the site, Nat, and it's looking like you were right. Soviet slugs, no rifling."

"Right about what?" Dad demanded. "What does that mean?"

Clint shifted uneasily on his feet. "Well… um…"

"We think we may know who did this," Natasha stated. "But I wasn't sure how much you wanted Peter to hear, so…"

Her voice trailed off as her gaze flitted between Papa and Dad, who proceeded to have one of their silent facial-expression conversations over Peter's head that tended to either make Peter laugh or drive him mad. Or often both.

"Go ahead, Natasha," Papa said as Dad sat down on Peter's opposite side, taking his bandaged hand carefully between his own.

Natasha nodded, drawing in a slow, deep breath. "Most of the intelligence community doesn't believe he exists," she began. "The ones that do call him the Winter Soldier. He's been credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last fifty years. One of the Soviet Union's finest." Her gaze dropped to the floor, and she let out a sort of morbid chuckle. "We even studied some of his hits when I was in the Red Room."

"Fifty years?" Papa asked. "That sounds like a ghost story."

"You might say that." Natasha paused, choosing her next words carefully. "Five years ago, I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran. Should've been a simple, by-the-book mission until somebody shot out my tires near Odessa. We lost control, went straight over a cliff. I managed to pull us out, but the Winter Soldier was already there. I was covering my engineer so he shot him, straight through me." She pulled up her shirt, just far enough for Peter to see the knobby scar on her side, right above her waistband. "It was a Soviet slug, no rifling. And that evidence plus what Peter told me about the glimpse he caught of one of the chopper pilots, well, I don't see how it could be anyone else."

"He had a metal arm," Peter mumbled, gulping. "I—, I saw the sun glinting off of it when I was trying to get to Papa."

"Oh my God, Pete," Dad murmured, burying his nose into Peter's hair as Papa patted his back. "This is just way too much." He kissed the top of Peter's head, then looked up at Natasha, his jaw tight. "So if all this is true, then what the hell do we do now? I took out all three of those goddamn
"That'd just be a waste of time, Tony," Clint said. "You're not gonna find him. From what we've seen, this guy's pretty much indestructible."

"No one's indestructible," said Papa. "And even if we don't find a body, there might be other evidence down there in the wreckage that could be useful."

"This guy is, Steve," Natasha insisted. "Or at least as indestructible as a man can be. You can go ahead and look for bodies on those cliffs, but I can guarantee you that you won't find him, or any evidence that he was even there. Like you said, he's a ghost."

"All right," Papa said after a short pause, glancing furtively at Dad. "So... then we go after him. I'm sure SHIELD—"

"Can't, Cap," Clint said. "SHIELD's tried numerous times, and all we've done is hit dead ends every damn time. Lost quite a few good agents in the process, too."

Scowling, Papa shook his head. He didn't like being told that something wasn't possible, especially after the Chitauri invasion. "Well, do you think he's working for the Ten Rings?"

"Not likely," replied Clint. "I doubt they could afford him, but I've never seen the Ten Rings up close either."

Papa let out a heavy sigh, looking over Peter's head at Dad, his expression tentative.

"Tony?"

"It could go either way," Dad said, carefully squeezing Peter's hand. "Those assholes seemed pretty well equipped. I mean, they either had or were able to get every single thing that I asked for, and had stockpiles of my weapons that were easily worth millions of dollars. But... from what I saw, none of their stuff was Russian-made. Everything was either American or European." He paused to kiss Peter's temple, ruffling his hair. "Even their peanut butter was American."

"Okay, so if he wasn't sent by the Ten Rings, then how do we find out who sent him?" asked Papa. "And why?"

"I think it's pretty damn obvious why this ghost was sent, hon," Dad muttered. "He wanted us dead. All three of us. The big question is who sent him."

"All right," said Papa. "Then if it wasn't the Ten Rings, who was it?"

"Since the fall of the Soviet Union the Winter Soldier has been mainly an assassin-for-hire," said Natasha. "A good place to start would be to make a list of who out there could possibly afford his services."

"I can get going on that," said Clint. "Have you guys thought about where you're heading once you get outta here?"

Again, Papa looked over at Dad, raising an eyebrow. "I guess I just assumed we'd go back to New York."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Cap," Natasha said. "Peter told me that your Malibu address was supposedly a secret, and the Winter Soldier still managed to find you. If you go back to to New York everyone will know where you are."
"SHIELD HQ might be a better idea," added Clint. "There we'd have the STRIKE team available to stand guard, and—"

"No!" Peter yelped, shrinking back when both Papa and Dad looked at him in alarm. He let out a hard shiver, curling even further into Papa's side. The absolute last place that Peter wanted to be was in the vicinity of Agent Rumlow and the SHIELD STRIKE team. "I mean, no. I'd rather just go back to the Tower. Dad always says that it's the most secure building on the East Coast, so why can't we just go back there?"

"Peter?" Papa asked, tilting up Peter's chin when Peter adamantly refused to meet his eyes. "I shouldn't've said anything, I shouldn't've said anything! "Little guy, look at me. Did something happen with the STRIKE team while you were down there with them?"

It would've been so easy to just tell Papa the truth about what had happened during the Chitauri invasion. So easy to just explain that the same icy-cold bolts down his back Peter had felt right before the house attack was the same thing he'd felt whenever he was around Agent Rumlow, and that Agent Rumlow was one of the creepiest people that Peter had ever laid eyes on and that he had no desire to ever see him again.

It would've been so easy, and everything probably would've been fine after that.

But then would come the questions, which would then likely lead to even more questions because Peter didn't really have any real answers, which would then lead to even more hovering by both of Peter's dads, and for heaven's sake, Peter was turning thirteen in less than a month, he didn't need his fathers hovering over him all of the damn time anymore. They had enough stuff of their own to worry about, and already worried about him more than enough.

So instead, he decided to lie.

"No," Peter choked out. "I just… really wanna go home. The Tower is home, why can't we just go back there? I don't—, I don't wanna miss the start of school." That was another lie; Peter didn't really care all that much about missing school as long as he could see or talk to Ned from time to time, but… He raised his head, pleading with Dad with his eyes. "Please? We would've been going back there in a few weeks anyway."

"Yeah, all right, buddy," Dad said quickly, holding up his hand when Papa opened his mouth to protest. "I'll triple the security, and even set up a police perimeter if I have to. The kid's been through so much already, Steve. He deserves to at least be in his own home while we try and figure this out."

Papa was silent for several seconds, that deep furrow between his eyes that he always had when he was particularly anxious. Finally, he nodded.

"You're absolutely sure about the Tower's security?" he asked Dad.

"I am, babe," Dad replied. "There's no way I'd let you guys near the place if I wasn't."

"It's definitely not as isolated as that house was, so should be less likely to invite a sneak attack," said Clint. "Plus the rest of us are there too, which can't hurt. Nat and I are at least somewhat used to guarding people, and Bruce… well… I highly doubt that he'd take too kindly to getting bombed."

"I agree," said Papa. "All right, we can go back to New York. But until we figure this out I don't think any of us should go anywhere alone outside of the Tower, and I always want at least two of us with Peter at all times. Is that understood?"

A sharp pang of guilt shot through Peter as everyone nodded their assent, and he buried his face in
Papa's side, hoping that no one would notice. Why did he ever think that lying was the better choice than the truth?

"All right. Then if you guys are done playing CSI, I'll have Happy start getting the plane ready," Dad said. "The doc said that Steve could hopefully be discharged in a few hours."

"There's a few more things I'd like to check out at the site," Clint said. "And Hill's still out there, so I'll head back now and finish up and we can meet you guys at the airport."

"I'll go with you," Natasha said.

"Sounds good, guys," said Papa. "Thank you."

"Yeah, yeah, don't mention it," said Clint, waving a dismissive hand. "Makes me feel too good about myself."

Dad's shoulders sagged as soon as Clint and Natasha left the room, his tired eyes fixed intently on Papa. "I'm gonna call Rhodey, get him to come with us out to New York as an escort. He still has two functioning suits, and I built in a safety protocol that would allow me to take them over if I have to, so—"

"Tony," Papa interrupted gently. "Sweetheart, you're exhausted. Why don't you lie down until we're ready to go? I can call Colonel Rhodes myself if you think it's necessary."

Dad scoffed, his eyebrows knitting together. "There's no way in hell I'd be able to sleep on that… cot," he said. "And I told you, I'm fine. I can sleep once we get back to the Tower."

"No, you're not fine," Papa said firmly. He pushed himself up to his feet, reaching for Dad's elbow. "Lie down, Tony. And you too, little guy. I know you haven't been sleeping all that great either, and you're still trying to heal."

If Dad hadn't been so obviously dead on his feet, Peter might have thought about trying to protest, as he was far too wired up to feel much like sleeping. But he was already feeling plenty of guilt over his fib earlier and thought it would be best for him not to argue.

Besides, he'd already discovered through trial and error that trying to argue with Papa whenever he used his Captain's voice was pretty much useless. He only wished that Dad would figure that out.

"Uh huh," Peter mumbled, giving Papa a quick but careful hug before climbing up onto the bed, scooting over to the side to allow Dad to follow suit. Dad rolled his eyes as he turned to Papa, who only quirked an eyebrow as he jerked his head towards Peter.

"C'mon, Tony. Just for a couple hours."

"Damn stubborn soldier," Dad muttered as he settled in next to Peter, keeping his eyes trained on Papa as he eased himself slowly onto Dad's chair. Peter immediately pressed his ear to Dad's chest, listening to the comforting hum of his arc reactor, his eyelids already growing heavy.

"Yeah, that's right," Papa said, rather triumphantly. "But I'm your stubborn soldier."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Dad. "Speaking of that, did ya tell the kid yet?"

Peter's eyes flew open again, and he lifted his head, looking up at Papa. "Tell me what?"

"I haven't exactly had a chance," answered Papa as a huge grin split his face. He placed his large
hand on Peter's shoulder. "I asked your dad to marry me, Peter. And he said yes."

"Really? Oh, that is so awesome!" Peter exclaimed, shooting up off the bed so fast that Papa was barely able to catch his tackling hug, only remembering Papa's sore side when Papa let out a grunt of pain. "Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you!"

"I'll be okay, little guy," Papa said, hugging Peter tightly to him. He kissed the top of Peter's head, ruffling his hair. "Go on and rest now."

Nodding, Peter squeezed Papa one more time before snuggling back down next to Dad. "I'm so happy for you, Daddy," he whispered.

"Me too, bud," Dad murmured as he cuddled Peter to his chest. "Seems a bit weird to be thinking about planning a wedding with all this—, I mean, crap, going on, but hey. What the hell, right?"

"No, not weird," replied Peter. "I think it's the best time. Helps us forget about all the bad stuff." Like almost getting blown up twice in less than two years.

"Mmm, maybe you're right, buddy," answered Dad, barely still conscious. "You always were the smart one."

Despite all of Dad's paranoia, the trip out to New York proceeded without any hiccups, and they all were able to settle back into the Tower with relative ease. They celebrated Peter's thirteenth birthday at Coney Island with Ned and his parents, where Papa was finally able to ride on the Cyclone without throwing up afterwards, and Peter started the eighth grade a couple weeks later with little fanfare. In fact, it was Papa who found their return to be the most annoying. Used to going out for a solitary daily ninety minute morning run along the New York or Malibu streets, Papa quickly grew frustrated with having to confine himself to the Tower's indoor track and ended up revising his order that none of the Avengers go outside alone after only a couple of weeks.

He still insisted that Peter always be accompanied by at least two of them, though, which Peter honestly didn't mind all that much. He far preferred the company of his dads or the other Avengers to being alone, and it was worth it to see the jealous look on Flash Thompson's face whenever "Auntie Nat" and "Uncle Bruce" or "Uncle Clint" were there waiting to pick him up at school if one or both of his dads were busy.

"Man, what's it even like to be so tight with the Avengers?" Ned said one afternoon during lunch, around the second week of October. "I mean, are all those rumours about Black Widow really true?"

"What rumours?" Peter asked around a mouthful of Doritos, his third bag. Despite a resurgence of his post-Afghanistan nightmares, Peter's appetite had skyrocketed since they had returned to New York, and he'd already grown another inch and a half since the first day of school, requiring Dad and Papa to take him out shopping for new pants.

Ned leaned closer, lowering his voice. "My mom said she read in a magazine that Black Widow actually keeps a collection of mounted black widow spiders somewhere in a secret case, one for each of her kills. Is that really true?"

Peter snorted out a laugh. "Dude, no!" he said as he licked some orange cheese dust from his fingers. "That sounds like something that Marie Claire would make up for one of their gossip columns!"

"Well, yeah," Ned said sheepishly. "I'm pretty sure that's where my mom read it, actually. So it's not true, then?"
"Nope," Peter replied, stuffing another Dorito into his mouth and shuddering. "Auntie Nat doesn't even like spiders. She thinks they're gross, which they are." A sly grin stretched across his face as he added, "One of her very favourite things to do is help me build my Lego sets."


Peter shrugged, like it was no big deal. "She says she finds it relaxing. She's pretty good at it, too. Doesn't even need the directions a lot of the time."

"Oh, man! You gotta invite me over for that sometime! Please?" begged Ned.

"I will as soon as my Dad lifts the embargo on visitors," said Peter. "Right now the only people allowed in the Tower are the vetted Stark Industries employees and the Avengers. And me."

"Aww! But when's that gonna be?"

"I dunno," Peter said, placing the chip bag back on his tray and squeezing his eyes closed, his appetite suddenly vanished. He was able to try and forget about the fact that he'd almost been blown up twice in as many years about half of the time, but it was the other half of the time that haunted him. And despite Ned being Peter's very best friend, he often tended to unknowingly say things that triggered Peter's bad memories.

And it didn't help at all that Peter's senses were always even wonkier during those times. Right then, for example, he could hear someone smashing up a plastic water bottle across the cafeteria almost as if the person was sitting right next to him, the horrible scrunching noise raising all of the hair on the back of his neck and causing him to shiver.

"Peter?" Ned asked, his worried voice poking through the fog filling Peter's mind. "Are you okay? Do you need your inhaler? Do you need me to call your dad?"

"No, I'm okay," Peter choked out, slitting open his eyes so as to not blind himself. "Just… another one of those days where everything is just… too much." Too loud, too cold, too bright, not to mention the hand-sized dent he'd managed to put into his locker door that morning when he was only trying to push it closed. Thankfully no one had been around him when it happened, but it was getting harder and harder to hide all of his symptoms all the time, especially when he kept having his stupid shaking sessions right in the middle of his freezing and ear-splitting history class every damn day, no matter how many earplugs or layers he was wearing.

"Mmm," Ned said sympathetically. "And didn't you say something about needing some more allergy testing or something coming up? That has to suck with everything else going on."

"Yeah, it does," muttered Peter. Dad had told Peter just that morning that Dr Cho would be arriving in New York by the end of the month for his genetics testing, and Peter's nervousness about that was only making everything worse. "I might be out of school for a couple of days because of it."

"A couple of days? What the hell kind of allergy testing takes that long? I thought it was just a poke, poke, poke, wait till ya itch, then you're done kinda thing?"

"Dunno," Peter said with another shrug, wishing Ned would just shut up about it already. It was hard enough keeping all of his changes a secret without all of Ned's questions. "Apparently this kind takes longer. Dad's really going all out this time, so…"

"Yeesh. I'm sorry, dude. That sounds so not fun."

"Nope."
"So… have your dads made any of their wedding plans yet?" Ned asked after a short pause. "At least there's that to look forward too, right?"

"Oh yeah, I'm definitely looking forward to the wedding," Peter answered. He grabbed his chip bag, stuffing another Dorito into his mouth. "And yeah, they've done some stuff already. We all went and got fitted for our suits just last night. Dad's having the fabric imported from Italy, so they're gonna take awhile to make."

"Mmm. Your papa's not gonna wear his Army uniform?"

"No. He thought about it, but he and Dad decided to go with matching suits instead. They're a really nice medium grey, and they're gonna wear light purple ties, and—"

"There gonna be any red, white, and blue in there?" interrupted Ned.

"Yeah, a bit. Can't have Captain America without some red, white, and blue," Peter said, his lips curling into a wide smile. JARVIS had teased Dad mercilessly for having an actual tailor take their measurements when he could have done it in mere seconds like he always had, but Papa had wanted it done the old-fashioned way, and Dad couldn't say no to him. "It's kinda cheesy, but hey. It's them, so—"

"Nah, not too cheesy," said Ned through a mouthful of potato chips. "It fits them."

"Yeah, it does," said Peter, still grinning widely. "They're so stupidly in love it's not even funny. You should've seen them flirting with each other last night at the tailor's."

"But then again, it kinda is funny," Ned said. "I swear, if anyone ever told me a year ago that I'd see Captain America with actual googly eyes, I would've thought they were nuts."

"Yeah, and Dad's googly eyes are even worse. It's almost sickening sometimes. Uncle Clint even makes these goofy gagging noises when he catches them being mushy."

"Yeah, I can see that," replied Ned. "Mr Barton seems like a pretty funny guy."

"Oh, Uncle Clint is hilarious," Peter said. "And he's teaching me how to throw darts." Peter didn't add that just the other night he'd managed to throw one of the darts so hard that it went completely through the dartboard and into the wall behind it, opening a nearly two-foot-long crack. After that, Auntie Nat had suggested that they forget about the darts and try watching a movie until Dad and Papa got home.

"So did they decide on the actual wedding date yet?" Ned asked as they exited the cafeteria, heading towards their history class with Peter dressed in four layers of clothing in addition to his special undershirt that Dad had made him, made from the same fabric he was using for Papa and Auntie Nat's uniforms.

"Yeah. Last Saturday in April," answered Peter as they stepped across the threshold into the classroom, his temp immediately dropping at least two degrees. He hunched down into his hoodie, trying to keep from shivering and wishing he could put on the actual hood. "Dad didn't want to wait any longer than that."

"Mmm. They gonna go on a honeymoon?"

"Yep. Two weeks, both Italy and Ireland."

"Whoa! That sounds nice!"
"Yeah," agreed Peter. "The only time Papa's been to Italy was during the war, and he's never been to Ireland. Dad's gonna take him to see where his papa grew up and stuff."

"Aww, that's so cool!" Ned said as their teacher walked into the classroom, taking her place at the podium. As the bell rang and the teacher began her lecture, Ned leaned towards Peter, whispering, "I can see why Mr Barton would make the gagging sounds."

Peter smiled, trying to keep his teeth from chattering.

"Yep."

The mood was somber at the breakfast table as Peter tried to choke down his eggs and toast under Papa and Dad's watchful eyes, his stomach churning violently. Dad at least was trying to make it look like he was working on his tablet instead of watching Peter like a hawk, but Papa wasn't as sly, and he looked about as nervous as Peter felt.

"It's gonna be all right, little guy," Papa said as he took a sip of his orange juice. "It's always better to have the answers than to not have them, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess," Peter mumbled, rubbing at his scratchy eyes. He'd hardly gotten any sleep the night before, only occasionally dozing off just to be awoken by yet another nightmare. Feeling the shockwave from the explosions in Afghanistan and Malibu. Hearing Dad gasping and choking as he was being waterboarded by the Ten Rings. Watching the bullets fired by the Winter Soldier rip through Papa's body as if he were made of marshmallows instead of solid bone and muscle. It got so bad that both Dad and Papa ended up in Peter's room around three in the morning with Peter sandwiched between them, trying to focus only on both Papa's heartbeat and Dad's hum, reminding him that he wasn't alone in this whole wacky mess.

"Pardon me, sir, Captain," JARVIS said, breaking the heavy silence. "But Dr Banner wishes me to inform you that Dr Cho is now ready."

Peter's stomach immediately dropped to his knees, and he swallowed hard, pushing his plate away. "I'm—, I'm not hungry anymore."

"Peter," Papa said gently. "You didn't eat very much last night either, don't you think you should—"

"It's all right, babe," Dad cut in. "Pete's never all that hungry before his doctor's appointments. He can make up for it once all the tests are done."

*Once all the tests are done*, Peter repeated in his head. *I freaking hate medical tests!*

Peter's entire life had been filled with medical tests, ever since he could remember. Being born premature with underdeveloped lungs meant that he had to undergo extensive pulmonary function tests every three months, and even more often when he was sick, which was nearly every month during the winters. Then there were the allergy tests twice a year, eye and ear exams every four months, a full auto-immune workup when his pediatrician suspected that he had developed lupus due to some unexplained severe joint tenderness in his legs when he was seven, which eventually turned out to just be a bad case of growing pains.

And then of course there was the full workup when all of his wonky symptoms started, requiring blood test after blood test after blood test, to the point where Peter was questioning if they were going to leave him with enough blood to live on by the time they were done.

"All right," Papa said with a sigh. He placed a reassuring hand on Peter's shoulder. "I'll make
whatever you feel like eating tonight once we're done with all of this, okay, little guy? Whatever you want."

"Uh huh," Peter whispered, trying to smile. "Thank you."

"Okay, bud," Dad said, giving his tablet one final tap. "C'mon, let's get going."

They were silent as they headed for the elevator, taking it down the six floors to Bruce's spacious lab. Bruce had offered his lab for Dr Cho's use, saying that his equipment and space was better suited to her work than Dad's. Which was true, but Peter also suspected that some of it had to do with the fact that Dad's lab was so cluttered and disorganised that only he and Peter really knew their way around it.

"Good morning, everyone," Bruce said as they entered the lab. He was standing next to a slender Korean lady, who smiled as she saw Peter. "Captain Steve Rogers, Tony Stark, Peter, this is Dr Helen Cho."

"We really appreciate you coming all the way out here, doctor," Papa said, offering Dr Cho his hand.

"Yes, well, we have a pretty interesting case here from what I've heard," replied Dr Cho. "And please, call me Helen. I think that will help make our patient more comfortable."

"I guess I don't have to tell you how much we're hoping that you can give us some answers," added Papa. "It's been pretty difficult on Peter these last few months."

"That's what I've heard, Captain. So on that note, why don't we get started?" She turned towards Peter, her kind smile relieving just a touch of his nervousness. "I'll need to start with some blood samples, then once we get those processing we can move onto some more practical tests."

Peter's mouth went dry at the mention of the blood sample. He had an incredibly strong needle aversion on a good day, which had only gotten worse after all the tests he'd already been through.

"I'll go ahead and get a sample from you as well, Mr Stark," Helen added. "For comparison purposes. You're Peter's biological father, correct?"

"Call me, Tony," answered Dad, his face clouding with guilt. "And yeah, that's right. We had all those tests confirmed when Pete was a newborn."

"I always prefer to start my tests with fresh samples, just in case," Helen said, already unwrapping a butterfly needle kit. "So, if you don't mind…"

"Here, Tony," Bruce said as he guided Dad over to a chair set up next to what looked like the fanciest PCR equipment that Peter had ever seen, much more high-tech than the equipment they'd had at the other geneticist's office. Dad sat down and rolled up his sleeve, winking at Peter as Papa placed a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"That's some pretty fancy tech you've got here," Dad said, grunting as Helen pierced his skin with the needle.

"Thank you," answered Helen, rather proudly. "And this isn't even the half of it."

"Tony, she's got something back at her institute in Korea that can actually print tissue!" Bruce exclaimed. "She calls it the Cradle. She was telling me all about it before you guys got down here."

"Mmm. Is that related to all the classified stuff you've been working on?" Dad asked.
"No," Helen said, chuckling softly as she removed the needle and labeled the sample. "I can't even talk to you about my classified work. All right, Peter, now it's your turn."

"Uhh… okay," Peter mumbled, the small amount of breakfast he'd managed to eat threatening to make a reappearance. "Um…"

"Here, little guy," Papa said as he slid into the chair Dad had just vacated. He patted his leg, indicating for Peter to sit on his lap. "Maybe this will help."

Peter tried to smile as he settled onto Papa's lap, but it probably came out as more of a grimace. His hands were trembling so badly as he tried to remove his hoodie that Papa had to help him, and the shaking only got worse when Helen took his arm, the needle ready in her other hand.

"I need you to hold still, Peter," she said gently. "I can't get the sample if you're shaking like this."

"I'm trying," Peter said in a quavering voice, inhaling a shallow, shaky breath as his heart began thudding against his ribcage. Papa wrapped his fingers gently around Peter's wrist, trying to help hold him, but that only seemed to make things worse.

"He's fighting me," Papa said a few seconds later, glancing up at Dad as his fingers clamped tighter around Peter's vibrating wrist, digging into his skin as his other arm wrapped around Peter's chest. "Tony, he's shaking so bad that I can't hold him steady! I'm afraid that I'm gonna hurt him!"

"Didn't you say that enhanced strength was one of his symptoms?" asked Helen.

"Yeah, but that one just started not too long ago, and it's been inconsistent up until now," answered Dad. He knelt down next to Peter, taking his other hand as Peter's exposed arm pebbled with goosebumps, his trembling growing even more violent. "Hey, buddy. I know this really sucks, like big time, but we won't be able to get any answers unless Helen's able to get that blood sample, all right? You just gotta try and hold still for a couple of seconds."

"I'm trying, Daddy!" Peter cried as his eyes filled with tears, hating himself for sounding so whiny. His lungs were seizing in his chest, and it was all he could do to keep from breaking free of Papa's hold and trying to climb up the wall. "I just… can't!"

No, that wasn't quite right. Peter didn't only feel like he wanted to climb up the wall. It was almost as if he just knew he could do it, and the urge to do so was suddenly so strong that it was nearly overwhelming.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"I'd say that's some strength if not even Cap can hold him steady," said Bruce, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "This is incredible, I've never seen anything like it!"

"Yeah, except that's not helping at all right now, big guy," Dad snapped over his shoulder. He cupped Peter's face in his hands, trying to meet Peter's eyes. "Pete, look at me. Look at me, buddy. I know I haven't had near as many blood tests as you have over the years, but I swear that I didn't even feel mine just now. Helen is really that good, and she's really that quick, okay? Nothing like that butcher of an allergist we took you to that one time."

A choked gasp tore painfully from Peter's throat, and he shuddered so hard that Papa nearly lost his grip on his arm. That allergy visit when he was six had pretty much single-handedly started his intense needle aversion.

"Okay, bad time to bring that up," Dad said with an apologetic glance at Papa. "But I'm serious,
buddy, you'll hardly feel it, okay? I promise." He jerked his head in Helen's direction. "Get ready to get in here as soon as he gives you the go."

"It's gonna be all right, little guy," Papa whispered into Peter's ear, the same thing he'd whispered over and over during Peter's numerous nightmares the night before. "Dad and I are both here, we've both got you. You're safe. No one's gonna hurt you here."

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, Peter buried his face into Papa's chest and nodded once. Less than a second later he felt a pinch in the crook of his elbow that passed so quickly he thought he might have imagined it. Dad had been right; Helen really was fast with the needle stick.

"There, all done, Peter," Helen said softly as she applied a pressure bandage, handing the sample to Bruce. "Hopefully no more needles for awhile."

As soon as they were able to prep the samples and load them into the PCR machine, Helen took out a pair of what appeared to be very expensive-looking headphones.

"I'm going to test your hearing now, Peter, all right? Your father told me you've had hearing tests like this before, where you just raise your hand when you hear the sounds?"

"Yeah," Peter replied, his voice still a bit shaky. "Loads of times."

"Excellent," she said with a smile. "This is just like those, only a bit more sensitive."

"Uh huh," Peter said with a quick nod. "I'm ready."

After the trauma of the blood draw, both the hearing and vision tests passed without further incident, with Helen feeding the results through a computer program that she'd developed with her colleagues at the U-GIN Institute. She also had Peter demonstrate his strength by arm-wrestling with Papa, measuring the force Peter was using to push against Papa's hand with one of her instruments.

"All right," Helen said once everything was finished. "I should be able to have some preliminary results by tomorrow morning once the PCR and computer analyses are done. Should we plan to meet back here at 10am? I'll be on a conference call before then."

"I'm sure Pete wouldn't mind getting to sleep in tomorrow," Dad said, ruffling Peter's hair. "Sounds good."

"Thank you, doctor," Papa said as he shook Helen's hand. "We'll see you in the morning."

They had barely made it into the elevator when JARVIS suddenly announced that Director Fury had arrived in the Tower's lobby. "He says that it is urgent that he speak with both you and Captain Rogers as soon as possible and is requesting penthouse admittance."

"Christ, JARVIS, what the hell for?" Dad barked, pinching the bridge of his nose. He hadn't had his usual two liters of coffee intake that day, so was probably fighting a headache. "We've all had a pretty rough day, and Pete and Steve are starving!"

"Director Fury also states that he anticipated your response and has brought along pizza," said JARVIS. "Four large pies from Antonio's, I believe."

Dad rolled his eyes, scowling in Papa's direction as the doors opened into the penthouse. "This can't be good if he's trying to bribe us with food."

"Maybe he was just in the neighbourhood and felt like bringing by dinner, Tony," Papa replied, with
"Just enough sarcasm to be obvious. "JARVIS, go ahead and let him up."

"Very good, Captain."

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Director Fury a few minutes later, the scent of delicious pizza preceding his arrival and causing Peter's stomach to audibly growl as they settled around the small breakfast table. They had only stopped for a brief lunch earlier in the day, and Peter hadn't eaten all that much due to his still-lingering nerves, so he was absolutely famished.

As was Papa, which Director Fury seemed to realise, keeping their conversation confined to small talk as Peter and Papa devoured an entire large pizza in about five minutes flat.

"All right, Fury," Dad said once Papa had started on his eighth slice. "Where's the fire this time?"

"Why's there have to be a fire every time I stop by to see my favourite consultant?" Director Fury asked, taking a sip of his lemonade. Papa made such an excellent homemade lemonade. "Maybe I just felt like dropping by."

"Felt like dropping by urgently, Director?" Papa asked pointedly. "Somehow I doubt it."

Director Fury's face fell, and he dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. "All right. There is a reason why I'm here, and unfortunately, it is rather urgent."

"It have anything to do with our house getting attacked?" Dad asked. "Cause the investigation into that seems to have come to a complete standstill, and—"

"It actually might, Tony," Director Fury answered. "If you'll let me explain."

"Hold on just a second," said Papa. "How much of this should Peter be hearing?"

Peter's stomach dropped, and he paused mid-chew, his eyes wide.

"No! Please, don't send me away!" he managed through his mouthful of pepperoni. "Please, please, please? I was in the house when it blew up too, and I'm the one who saw the Winter Soldier!"

Director Fury's eye flitted between Dad and Papa, and he raised an eyebrow. "Well, I guess that's up to you guys."

Dad pursed his lips, staring intently at Papa. "Steve, maybe we should—"

"No!" Peter cried. "I can handle it, Dad! I'm not a little kid that you need to baby anymore!"

"Especially now that I know I can beat Papa in arm-wrestling!"

"If I may," Director Fury cut in. "The boy's input might be useful. Like he said, he was able to identify the Winter Soldier."

Papa scowled, harder than Peter had ever seen him scowl before, and glanced over at Dad, getting only a shrug and a head shake in response. "All right, Director," he said. "But Tony and I would both appreciate it if you could use some discretion."

"Believe it or not, I plan to," replied Director Fury. He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his front. "There's been something that's been bothering me quite a bit ever since the Battle of New York. A thorn in my side, if you will."

"Mmm," Dad grumbled. "Could that thorn have anything to do with the fact that we were invaded by a goddamn alien army?"
"That's a big part of it, Tony, yes," Director Fury barked. "Specifically, the decision made by the World Security Council to launch a nuclear missile on the city."

"A decision that you disagreed with, correct?" Papa asked. He swallowed hard, reaching for Dad's hand on the table. Peter knew that Papa didn't like being reminded of when Dad almost died saving New York from that missile. And to be honest, neither did Peter.

"Yes, that is correct," answered Director Fury. "And one that I should've been able to stop, had I been in control of all of the agents present on the helicarrier that day."

There was a pause as Director Fury's words sunk in, with Peter's eyes going wide just as Dad barked out, "What the goddamn hell is that supposed to mean, Nick?"

"I'm not exactly sure yet, Tony," Director Fury answered. "Right now it's just a hunch, but a strong enough hunch that I felt it necessary to bring you guys into the loop."

"Okay, why only us, specifically," Papa asked warily. "Why not invite Clint and Natasha in on this… dinner? And Bruce?"

Director Fury let out a heavy sigh. "Because I needed to make sure that you thought they were trustworthy. I've known both Barton and Romanoff for a long time, and I can't for the life of me imagine why they wouldn't be trustworthy, but then again, I never thought Barton would attempt to blow up the helicarrier either, so—"

"You know Clint was under the influence of Loki's sceptre when he did that," Papa said. "He didn't know what he was doing."

"I understand that, Captain. Be that as it may, it's my job to exercise caution," Director Fury replied. "Which is all that I'm doing. The Avengers are your team. If you feel like you can trust them, then I'm good."

"I do," Papa stated. He glanced over at Dad, who gave him a nod. "We both do. They've all proven themselves multiple times."

"Good. One less thing I need to worry about," Director Fury said. "So, then that means—"

"You're wondering if you can trust the World Security Council?" Dad interrupted. "Is that it?"

"Part of it," answered Director Fury. "There's also the issue with another agent, Agent Rumlow."

"Rumlow?" asked Papa, looking over at Peter in alarm just as Peter let out a shiver. "You mean the leader of the STRIKE team?"

"And the person we put in charge of Peter's safety during the Chitauri invasion?" Dad snapped. "What the hell, Nick?"

Director Fury held up his hand. "If you'll let me finish—"

"No, I goddamn won't let you finish!" yelled Dad as he slammed his palm down onto the table, causing Peter to whimper and cover his ears. "You willingly allowed an agent that you had suspicions about access to our son? I didn't think even you could stoop so low!"

"I didn't have any suspicions back then, dammit!" Director Fury yelled back. He leaned over the table, looking intently at Dad. "My suspicions began with the missile launch in New York, and intensified with the attack on your home. And it's taken me until now to gather enough so-called
evidence to even want to mention them to you people."

"The Malibu address was supposed to be a secret," Papa said. "Is that what did it?"

"Partially," Director Fury replied. "That, the Winter Soldier sighting, and the fact that we found a scrap of fabric at the house site that contained a sliver of the STRIKE team logo. There's not too many people or organisations out there who would both have access to your Malibu location and be able to afford to hire a hitman like the Winter Soldier."

He paused again, allowing his words to sink in as Peter's eyes went wide.

"Are you saying that someone inside SHIELD hired the Winter Soldier to attack us?" Papa asked, incredulous.

"It's starting to look that way, Captain," Director Fury replied somberly. "Which now begs the questions, 'who' and 'why'?"

"And you think this Agent Rumlow guy is part of the 'who'?" asked Dad.

"I'm suspicious, Tony, that's all," answered Director Fury. "But not even Rumlow has the authority within SHIELD to do something of that magnitude, so if he is a dirty agent, he's definitely not working alone."

Another shiver wracked Peter's body, so hard that he nearly wiggled out of his chair, his eyes focused on a line in the wood grain of the table, tracing it back and forth with his finger.

Oh my God! Agent Rumlow is a dirty agent, and he had me locked in that room, and that creepy guy was in the hallway behind him, and holy shit, what if that was the Winter Soldier! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God—

"Pete? You okay?" Dad said suddenly, startling Peter, his eyes blaring alarm. "You're as white as a sheet!"

"No!" Peter choked out, his glassy eyes attempting to focus on his father's face as Papa wrapped an arm around him. "Daddy, remember when I tried to tell you we needed to leave the house, right before we were attacked?"

"Yeah, bud, I remember that in all-too-vivid detail. Why?"

Inhaling a tremulous breath, Peter looked over at Papa, a horrible pang of guilt crashing through him as he met his papa's worried blue eyes briefly before flitting away. "I had that same feeling around Agent Rumlow when we were leaving the Tower that night. Every time he looked at me or I was close to him, it was like someone had dumped ice cubes down my shirt."

Papa's eyebrows knitted together, that deep furrow between them that only formed when he was upset. "Peter, I asked you back in California if something had happened with Agent Rumlow, and you told me no. Why didn't you tell us the truth?"

Peter shook his head, now focusing on a single crumb on the floor about a meter away from the table. It seemed so stupid to have lied now, what had he been thinking? "I guess I just didn't want you guys to have to worry about me, more than you do already. Papa was hurt, and Dad was already freaking out about that and everything else, and I guess—"

"I was not freaking out!" Dad protested. "I was only trying to make sure that—"
"You were too!" Peter snapped. "You were freaking out just like you always do whenever you don't get any sleep. Why do you think that Papa made you take a nap?"

"That's still no excuse for not telling us, Peter," Papa said firmly. "And it doesn't really make any sense to me. Did you think we would've been upset if you had told us the truth?"

"Not… mad," Peter mumbled. "Just more… paranoid, overprotective, whatever you wanna call it. You guys already worry about me enough. It just—, it gets to be too much sometimes."

"We're overprotective, as you say, because you're our son and we love you," Dad said in a tight voice, turning Peter's chin to meet his eyes. "That comes with being a parent, kid, and while it may come as a bit of shock to you, that's not gonna go away just because you've grown a couple of inches and gained some sass."

"All right, I'm sorry to have to cut into the parenting lesson, but can someone please kindly explain what the kid is talking about?" Director Fury asked, only barely hiding his impatience. "'Cause I'm confused as hell, and that tends to get me cranky."

Dad huffed out a sharp breath, glowering at Director Fury. "Pete had a kind of… premonition, I guess, before the house was attacked. Kept saying we needed to get out, went yelling through the house for Steve… almost like he knew it was coming."

"Hmm, that is interesting," said Director Fury. "And you're saying you had this same… premonition when you were around Agent Rumlow, Peter?"

Peter gave him a quick nod.

"Goddamnit!" Dad cried, causing Peter to jump. "Are you telling me that the whole mess-up with Pete's room down there wasn't really a mess-up at all? That Rumlow really was trying to keep him holed up in a brig, or worse?"

"Tony—" Papa started, but Dad just kept going as if he hadn't heard him, his voice getting louder with every word.

"So what the fuck would've happened to him if Rhodey hadn't gotten there and raised hell, huh, Nick?"

"Tony, I don't think any of that matters now," Papa said, his hand gripping Dad's arm. "What we should be focusing on instead is what to do about this."

"Okay, which is what, exactly?" Dad retorted.

"Nothing yet," Director Fury replied. "Not until we have some more evidence, which now that I know where to start looking, shouldn't take as much time to gather."

"All right, then let me ask you this, Director," Papa said in his Captain's voice. "Are we safe here? Is Peter safe to go to school? Are we safe to go about our lives until this is figured out?"

"Absolutely, hon," Dad said tersely, before Director Fury could answer. "And apparently a lot more so than we would've been down in D.C."

"I would agree with Tony's assessment," said Director Fury. "Especially if the boy does have this sense for danger that you're describing, that's as good an alarm as anything that I could come up with."
"We'll have to mention that to Dr Cho tomorrow morning, Tony," Papa said.

"Yeah, babe, I know," muttered Dad, scrubbing a palm down his face. He seemed as exhausted as Peter felt.

"Well, on that note, that's all I came by to discuss, gentlemen," Director Fury said, getting up from the table. "I am sorry to have to bring such… unsettling news, but I thought it best to let you know of my concerns right away."

"We do appreciate it, Director," said Papa. "Thank you."

At Dad's stiff nod, Director Fury exited the kitchen and headed for the open elevator, with Papa turning to Peter as soon as the doors closed, his jaw set tight.

"I don't think I need to tell you how disappointed we are, Peter," he said, placing his hands on Peter's shoulders as Dad stepped up next to him, his brow furrowed in uneasiness.

Peter gulped, shaking his head, his eyes trained on Papa's knees. "No, you don't."

"And I think we've had enough excitement for one day, wouldn't you agree?"

"Uh huh."

"Good. Then I think we should all pile on the couch together and watch a movie. It might help take our minds off of everything," Papa said. "I'll even make hot chocolate. Sound good?"

Dad huffed out a sharp breath, leaning into Papa, who immediately wrapped his arm around him. "As long as you make mine with at least three-fourths coffee, babe. Or better yet, how about seven-eighths. Otherwise you'll be carrying me to bed before we're even halfway through."

Papa smiled, that smirky, sweet smile with just a touch of shyness that he reserved only for Dad, and Peter's heart fluttered.

"You know I don't mind doing that, sweetheart," Papa said as he kissed Dad's temple. Peter instinctively wrinkled his nose, but deep down he loved it. Loved seeing Dad accept affection from someone other than him, and how willing Papa was to give it. Papa really did love his father, and it was one of the most awesome things that Peter had ever seen.

And Dad loved him just as much. Dad's eyes never held anything back when he looked at Papa. No mask or shell could hide how he felt, not when he was the heart eyes emoji come to life every time he so much as glanced in Papa's direction.

They really were perfect for each other.

Dad was right; Papa had saved them both there in the middle of that barren Afghanistan desert, not just Peter. And despite everything that had happened since then, Peter wouldn't change a single bit of it.

"What about The Wizard of Oz?" Peter suggested, grinning when Dad let out an overdramatic groan. "What, Papa likes that one!"

"That's only 'cause it came out before the war even started, bud," said Dad, quirking an eyebrow. "Not because it's actually decent. It's the whole, 'flying monkey, I understood that reference' thing."

"I actually saw that film in the theatre," Papa said with a chuckle. "When it came out. Bucky and I
saved for three weeks so we could go see it."

Dad playfully rolled his eyes, pinching Papa on his side. "See? He just proved my point."

"Oh, come on, Tony," Papa said, laughing. "It's Peter's choice, and that's what he's chosen."

"Mmm, fine. But you'll probably still have to carry me to bed," Dad grumbled as he headed for the living room, plopping himself down on the couch so hard that he almost bounced right back off again. "Well, c'mon then, I'm waiting. Where's my coffee?"

It was a rare occasion for Tony to wake up before Steve.

Most of the time—or at least most of the times when Tony actually went to bed, usually at Steve's insistence—Steve was up and out the door for his run before Tony would even contemplate thinking about waking up sometime in the near future, so Tony would wake up alone, often chasing the fleeting echoes of a nightmare with nothing but the rumpled sheets and Steve's lingering scent on his pillow for company. And then he would clutch Steve's pillow to his chest, breathing in his beloved's comforting scent until his heart stopped racing and he felt safe once again.

Tony didn't begrudge Steve his morning runs, even if he couldn't fathom why someone would wish to punish their body in such ways, both by waking up at such an ungodly hour and then spending that time running, of all things. Tony understood that running was more than just exercise for Steve, though. It was a time for him to focus, time to think and work through problems without outside pressure or influence, and also a daily reminder that he could in fact run for as long as he desired without the risk of dying from an asthma attack.

But every now and then there was a morning like this. Because as much as Steve adored his morning runs, he also understood that it was important to take the occasional day off, something Tony knew that he himself could work on as well. And as such, Steve was still asleep, which meant that Tony could now oogle him to his heart's content without fear of either ridicule or recompense.

They usually slept curled around each other, either with Tony's back to Steve's chest and Steve's arm draped over him or facing each other, with Tony's head tucked under Steve's chin and their legs intertwined. That morning was the latter, and as Tony carefully extradited himself from Steve's ironclad grip, a soft smile stretched across his lips at the beautiful sight in front of him. Steve was on his side, shirtless with the sheets pulled up to his waist, one arm curled under the pillow and the other resting gently across Tony. In sleep he looked even younger, his blond hair mussed and flopping over his forehead, with all of the boyish innocence that he had when he first joined the Army back in 1943. There were no signs of distress on his face, his jaw relaxed and supple and his forehead free of frown lines. His full pink lips were even quirked into the slightest of smiles, and Tony had to fight against the urge to lean down and kiss them, not wanting to disturb his beloved's rare, peaceful sleep.

Holy shit. He's just so damn gorgeous.

They'd made love after Peter had gone to bed the previous night, so Tony was bare-chested as well, having been too boneless afterwards to do much more than pull on some underwear after they'd gotten cleaned up. Heat bloomed across Tony's chest as he recalled the slide of Steve's sweat-slicked skin against his, the sweet whispered words, the lust clouding Steve's gorgeous blue eyes until they were nearly black. Sex with Steve was always incredible, whether it was hard and fast after a particularly bad nightmare or more tender and passionate like the previous night, Steve always managed to find a way to make Tony feel like he was experiencing something incredible for the very first time.
And he was, in a way. Because even what he'd thought might have been love with Peter's mother could in no way compare with what he had now with Steve. Steve was his complement, Steve made him better, made him want to be better.

Steve was his other half, that he'd never even realised he was missing.

As the room grew steadily brighter, with sunbeams now breaking through the puffy clouds overhead and highlighting Steve's hair, Steve's eyebrows suddenly twitched, knitting together as his jaw tightened and the arm draped across Tony stiffened, his hand clenching into a tight fist as Tony was yanked flush against Steve's chest.

He was having another nightmare, and as horrible as that was, Tony loved that Steve's first unconscious instinct was to reach for him.

"Shh, baby, it's okay," Tony murmured, bringing his free hand up to rub at the junction between Steve's neck and shoulder, where he often carried a lot of his tension. He dug the pads of his fingers into the tight flesh, still whispering into Steve's ear as his face screwed into an expression of pure torture.

"Steve, it's okay, honey. I'm here, you're okay. You're safe."

Not a second later Steve's eyes flew open, flitting frantically around the room before landing on Tony, releasing his held breath in one loud, guttural puff.

"Tony!"

"Yeah, babe, it's me."

Steve's face fell, his forehead thudding against Tony's head, his entire body shuddering as he inhaled lungfuls of air, trying to reorient himself.

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"You didn't," Tony assured him, still kneading at the knots in Steve's shoulder. "I was already awake."

"You were?" Steve rasped, and Tony had to bite back a laugh at his confused expression. "And you were still in bed?"

"Mmmhmm," answered Tony with a rather cheeky grin. "I was… admiring the view, shall we say."

A shy smile stretched across Steve's lips, once again proving to Tony that Steve Rogers wasn't quite real. How could the man not know how breathtaking he was?

"Enjoying yourself?" he murmured into Tony's hair, heat radiating from his lightly stubbled cheeks. Tony adored that he could still make Steve blush, it was so incredibly cute and sexy at the same time.

"Damn right, babe," Tony said as he tilted his head up for a kiss, grunting in surprise when Steve rolled on top of him, aligning their bodies. Tony gasped at the contact, instinctively hiking his knees up around Steve's hips.

"Morning, sweetheart," Steve said, his grin turning downright wicked even as fear still flickered in his striking blue eyes.

"Mmm, good morning to you, gorgeous," replied Tony, ending on a gasp as Steve ground down
against him, Tony's hands grabbing onto Steve's ass.

"This okay?" Steve asked, and a knot formed in Tony's throat at his pleading tone. Always such a gentleman was his fiancé, even after all this time.

"You know it is, baby," Tony whispered. One hand trailed up Steve's back, tugging on his neck to bring their lips together as Steve's hands started to wander, mapping across Tony's chest and sides before slipping down underneath him, pressing Tony even closer to him. "I've got your back."

*Let's chase away those nightmares together. It's how we're best.*

"Good morning, gentlemen," Helen said as Tony, Steve, and Peter stepped into Bruce's lab, Peter clinging to both of their arms with trembling hands. It had taken all of their combined strengths of persuasion to cajole Peter into eating at least some of his breakfast that morning, with Tony forcing himself to eat to set a good example. He really had no idea what to expect from Helen's results, and that unnerved him almost more than anything else.

"Good morning, doctor," Steve replied, his steady voice belying his own nervousness.

With a kind smile, Helen led them to the small table over against the far wall of the lab, a file folder in one hand. "Shall we have a seat?"

As soon as they were all seated, Helen opened the folder, showing the printed PCR results with two sections circled in red ink.

"All right," she began, tapping the page with her pen, which displayed two sets of results one above the other. "This is your DNA, Tony. The set on the top there is what I pulled from the SHIELD database, with the set on the bottom being the sample I took from you yesterday."

"Yeah," answered Tony. "And they match."

"That is correct," agreed Helen. "They do match. But what SHIELD failed to notice was the fact that there's a very unusual component to your genetic makeup, here," and she pointed to a single gene, marking it with an asterisk. "This here is not something that we see in just your normal, everyday human. Not even in my line of work."

Tony's head snapped back in surprise, his eyebrows knitting together, too shocked to form words. *Not your everyday human? What the hell?*

"Huh?" exclaimed Peter. "Are you trying to say that my dad's not human or something?"

"No, Peter," said Helen. "Your father is human, just not your normal, everyday human."

"What exactly does that mean, doctor?" asked Steve.

"To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure until I pulled Captain Rogers' DNA scan from SHIELD's records," she answered, turning to the next page in the folder that displayed Steve's DNA, taken after he was defrosted. She pointed to another single gene, also marking it with an asterisk. "As you can see here, the gene isn't exactly the same, but I believe it's similar enough to warrant further investigation. Unfortunately, right now I'm afraid I don't have the proper clearance at SHIELD to get access to the files I'd need to begin that investigation."

Dumbfounded, Tony could only stare in confusion at the paper in front of him, finally glancing down at Peter, whose shocked expression mirrored his own.
"Is there any way you could give us an educated guess, doctor?" Steve asked, draping a comforting arm around Tony's shoulders.

Helen sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm not usually one for making guesses, Captain, but if I had to, I would postulate that Mr Stark was treated with some kind of… therapy at an early age that was strong enough to alter his genetic makeup, but not to the extent that yours was altered when you received your super soldier serum."

"What?" exclaimed Tony, shaking his head in a futile attempt to clear it. "But that's ridiculous! I'm no super soldier! I'm not even close to being a super soldier!"

"Tony," Bruce said gently. "Your father was a SHIELD scientist, correct?"

Tony scowled, as he always did whenever Howard was mentioned. "Yeah. So?"

"Well…" Bruce continued after a quick glance at Helen. "After we got these results, I did a little digging into SHIELD's files and found a bunch of projects that your father worked on before he died. The problem is that they're listed as accessible only to agents with a clearance level of nine or higher."

"Yeah, I've run into that problem a few times myself," grumbled Tony. "But I still don't know what —"

"We also know that the U.S. Government has been interested—or more like obsessed—with replicating Dr Erskine's results ever since he was killed."

"Yeah, and you'd know all about that, wouldn't you, big guy?" Tony said, a little too harshly when Bruce winced.

"Yes, I would," Bruce said evenly. "Which is why I'm thinking that your father might have also been working on some kind of super soldier-like experiment, and—"

"Are you saying that Howard treated Tony with some kind of experimental genetics therapy?" Steve asked, aghast. "I can't believe he would do that!"

"I'm not saying that his intentions would've been hostile, Steve," Bruce said, holding up his hands. "But even if we take a step back and look at this logically, there's really very little reason for Tony to even still be alive after what he's been through. I mean, I've seen his x-rays, seen the positioning of the shrapnel pieces and the depth of the arc reactor placement, and… well… I'm sorry, Tony, but either one of those things would've killed a lesser man a long, long time ago."

Tony pressed a fist to his chest, gulping as he stared at the paper in front of him, at those two little red asterisks indicating that he'd likely been experimented on at some point by his own father.

Trying to turn me into another super soldier because he couldn't stand the thought of living without the one that he lost? I didn't think even Howard could stoop that low.

"Daddy?" Peter suddenly said from beside him, causing Tony to flinch. "Are you okay?"

"Course," Tony said quickly, earning the eyebrows of disappointment from his fiancé. "Look, we can dive further into all that stuff some other time. We asked you here to help us with Pete, not with me."

"All right," said Helen. She turned to yet another page in the folder, displaying the results of Peter's DNA tests. Tony's eyes were immediately drawn to the similarities in he and Peter's DNA, widening
as he recognised the very same altered gene that he had.

"Pete's got it too," he said grimly.

"That's right," replied Helen, marking Peter's gene with another asterisk. "You passed along the altered gene to him."

"Okay, but that doesn't make any sense either," said Tony. "Pete was born almost two months premature and was tiny and sickly from the get-go. He had ear infection after ear infection as a baby, and then was diagnosed with severe asthma and allergies when he was two. So if he's got this same gene, why didn't it help him to be healthier?"

"I had that exact same question," Helen said, glancing between Tony and Steve. "Unfortunately, in order to find the answer, I had to ask Director Fury for access to some other SHIELD records."

"And?" asked Steve.

Helen shot Bruce an odd look, which only served to increase Tony's frustration.

"There's no need to beat around the bush here," he snapped. "Whatever you need to tell us, I think we'll be able to handle it."

"Peter's altered gene was in a latent form, Tony," Helen explained after a short pause. "Meaning that it was—"

"Present, but not active. Yeah, I know what latent means, thank you," said Tony. He was desperately trying to keep his temper, and would have surely lost it three times over already if Steve hadn't been there with them. "Then what the hell activated it? Something the Ten Rings shot him up with?"

"No," answered Helen. "From what I've been able to determine, Peter's latent gene was activated when he started puberty. Since puberty is a gradual process that usually spans a few years, his symptoms came on gradually, with a sort of snowball effect once they got going."

Tony's mind was swirling so wildly with all of the shocking information that a wave of dizziness washed over him, strongly enough to prompt Steve to tighten his hand on Tony's shoulder.

"Okay… so…" he croaked. "I know I'm not a genetics expert like you guys are, but I do know that latent genes usually require an activator to… well, activate them, so—"

"That's correct, Tony," said Bruce. "And Peter had one."

"Okay. Where?"

"Here," said Helen as she pointed to another of Peter's genes with the tip of her pen, a gene located on his X-chromosome.

"The activator came from Peter's mother."

Come and say hi to me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :)

Chapter End Notes
How about that Far From Home trailer! I am pretty psyched about the whole multiverse possibility! :) 

Can't wait to see what you guys think of the chapter! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment!
"My mother?" Peter asked, just as Tony's heart skipped at least three beats, a cold sweat breaking out across the back of his neck. *I should've known, goddamnit, I should've known!* "What exactly does that mean?"

"It's simple genetics, Peter," Bruce said, clearing his throat. "Your mother gave you the altered X-chromosome, and—"

"Yeah, I understand genetics, thank you!" Peter snapped. "What I don't understand is how my mother would have had a gene like this unless she was… whatever you said my dad is? It just seems like too much of a coincidence!"

Tears of shame burned in Tony's eyes, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, refusing to allow them to fall. Steve's arm was still draped across him, his fingertips rubbing soothing circles on his back, trying to provide comfort that Tony knew he didn't deserve.

Because he'd never told Peter the entire story about his mother. He had been too angry, too
embarrassed, and didn't think it really mattered anyway because for all he knew they would never see her again. His view had always been that he'd deal with proper explanations it if it ever became necessary.

Which it hadn't.

Or, at least it hadn't up until then.

"I'm sorry, doctor," Steve said, before either Helen or Bruce could answer. "But while Tony and Peter both understand all this stuff, I'm afraid that I don't. So would you mind explaining it to me?"

Tony sucked in an agonising breath, his lower lip shaking as he met Steve's eyes, receiving a simple quirked eyebrow in return. One that said, "It's okay, sweetheart. We'll deal with whatever this is together."

Something else that Tony knew he didn't deserve.

"Of course, Captain," Helen said, with Tony barely hearing her through the blood rushing past his ears. He tentatively reached for Peter's hand, breathing out a sharp sigh of relief when Peter didn't try to jerk it away.

"Males have both an X and a Y chromosome, while females have two X's. When a child is created, the male can either give an X or a Y, which determines the child's genetic gender. There are some diseases that are carried only on the X-chromosome, and since genetic males only have one X-chromosome, that then means that whatever genes are present on that X-chromosome will be expressed. Haemophilia is one example of an X-linked genetic disease that affects genetic males primarily."

"Yes, I've heard of haemophilia," said Steve. "But we're not talking about a disease here, are we? Because it would seem to me that what Peter has is the opposite of an illness."

"No, it's not a disease, Steve," Bruce said. "But the genetics are similar. Peter was given this altered activator gene from his mother, and that in combination with Tony's altered gene worked to trigger these… enhancements that we're now seeing."

"Okay, but then where did she get it?" Peter asked, his voice trembling as he turned to Tony, his huge brown eyes swimming in unshed tears. "Dad?"

Turning to face Peter, Tony gripped his hand a bit tighter, trying to swallow down the lump in his throat the size of a marble, his heart still thudding against the arc reactor and his left forearm burning with pain. The damn arm always bothered him when he was especially upset.

"Your… um…" he began, his voice shaky, with Steve's hand resting on his back like a lead weight. "When I first met your mother, she told me that she worked for one of the accounting firms retained by Stark Industries. She was an actuary, and—"

"Yeah, I know all that already," Peter interrupted, far more patiently than he should have. "You guys met at some ball and hit it off, or whatever."

"And that's what I thought too, Pete, I swear it," Tony said. "I had no reason to doubt it because I had JARVIS look into her personnel files before I—"

"Invited her over?" Peter cut in, a bit more edge to his voice. "For a drink? Isn't that how you used to say it?"
"Yeah. And then… well…"

"I'm pretty sure that we can all guess what eventually happened next," Bruce said, clearing his throat hard enough to make Steve's eyes widen. "Um… I'm really in the mood for some coffee all of a sudden, um… care to join me, Helen?"

"Oh, of course, Dr Banner," Helen replied as she got to her feet. "Would you gentlemen like anything?"

Following the chorus of mumbled no thank yous, both Bruce and Helen hurried out of the lab, leaving Tony, Peter, and Steve to themselves. Tony was grateful for Bruce's discretion, but it didn't do much to help the sense of overwhelming dread threatening to drown him. He should have explained all of this to Peter a long time ago. And to Steve, for that matter.

"Okay, they're gone now," Peter said once the three of them were alone, his voice flat. "Wanna tell me the rest?"

"Peter," Steve said gently, placing his free hand on Peter's shoulder. "Try and remember that we're all in this together, all right? And that none of this is anyone's fault."

"I know, Papa," Peter replied, not taking his eyes off of Tony. "So, what happened next?"

Tony sucked in a sharp breath. "Well, we started… seeing each other. A lot, and I kinda thought…, but then around six months later she just up and disappeared," he said bitterly. "No calls, no emails, no nothing. I went to her job, I went to her apartment, but there was nothing. It was like she'd just been erased from existence."

Like I'd meant absolutely nothing to her.

"Yeah, and you've told me all of that before too," Peter muttered, cracking Tony's heart with his self-deprecation. "And then you told me that was all there was to it. That she didn't want anything to do with me. You told me she'd already left the hospital by the time they called you."

Tony's tongue poked out to wet his dry lips as Steve gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "She had, Pete. I never even saw her. But… that wasn't all of it." He paused for a moment, wondering why in the hell he'd ever thought it was a good idea to hide the truth. "About a month after she disappeared, before I even knew about you, Nick Fury showed up out of the blue at Stark Industries, asking me to become a consultant for SHIELD."

Peter's head snapped up in surprise, his eyes narrowing. "But… you didn't start working for SHIELD until I was five, until I was already in school!"

"No, I didn't, Pete, because once I found out the truth, I told Nick Fury to go to hell and never come back," Tony said, wincing as Steve squeezed his shoulder again. I don't deserve this man. I never have, and I never will.

"And… what was the truth?" asked Peter.

"That she wasn't at all who she'd said she was," Tony said softly. "She wasn't an actuary, she was actually a SHIELD agent. Fury had sent her to… 'evaluate me', as he put it. To see if I was fit to follow in my father's illustrious footsteps, or some other such bullshit."

"Tony," Steve admonished.

"Well, it was," Tony insisted, hurt and shame piercing his heart like a spear. "The whole fucking
thing had just been one big scam. Nothing about her was like I thought. I never even knew her real name, and when I found all that out, I told Fury that I never wanted to see his goddamn face ever again. And it took him over five years to convince me to change my mind."

Peter was silent for a good minute, his cheeks pale and his hand shaking in Tony's.

"But why didn't you ever tell me?" he finally asked.

"Would it have made any difference, Pete?" asked Tony. "She was still gone, we've still never heard anything from her, she still left you without a single second thought, and I was—, I was so damn angry, Pete. So angry, and embarrassed that I'd been such a fucking fool, and—"

"Tony," Steve interrupted. "I don't think that's helping at all."

"No, it probably wouldn't have made a difference," Peter said sadly, his eyes trained on their clutched hands. "But I still wish that I would've known."

Tony's throat tightened even more, and he released Peter's hand, holding open his arms. "C'mere, buddy," he whispered, nearly sobbing with relief when Peter climbed onto his chair and curled into him without hesitation, tucking his head under Tony's chin, his tears wetting through Tony's shirt.

"I'm sorry, Pete," he murmured, over and over again, his fingers carding through the soft curls on the back of Peter's head. "I'm so sorry. I love you. I've always loved you, from the very second I saw you in that incubator at the hospital, I've loved you. You were so tiny, barely the length of my forearm, and you didn't deserve what happened, not a single damn second of it. And I sure as hell don't deserve you, but I am so goddamn lucky to have you."

"I love you too, Daddy," Peter mumbled against Tony's chest. "And Papa doesn't like it when you say things like that. And neither do I."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised, buddy," Tony answered, shooting Steve a rather guilty look, his chest constricting at the understanding in his fiancé's eyes. A lesser man would've bolted for the door a long time ago, and yet here he was, still with Peter and Tony, still offering his solid, steady, loving support.

*I don't deserve either one of them,* Tony thought. *But damn, if I'm not thankful to have them.*

"Pardon me, sir," JARVIS said suddenly. "But Drs Banner and Cho are inquiring if it is… safe to reenter the laboratory."

With a light chuckle, Tony kissed the top of Peter's head, releasing him to return to his chair. "Yeah, tell them to go ahead, JARVIS."

"Very good, sir."

About thirty seconds later Helen and Bruce arrived back in the lab, loaded down with coffee cups and pastry bags from the coffee shop around the corner from the Tower.

"Here, Tony," Bruce said, handing Tony one of the largest cups. "And we got a hot chocolate for Peter, and a Powerade for Steve, and there's doughnuts and croissants and a couple of scones in the bags, and—"

"Thank you, Bruce," Steve interrupted, clapping Bruce on the shoulder. "We appreciate it. And all of this information is helpful, but unless I'm missing something, it still doesn't explain some of Peter's specific enhancements."
"Which ones in particular are you referring to, Steve?" Bruce asked, taking a large sip of his coffee. "From what we've been able to determine, Peter now has enhancements that are pretty similar to yours. Specifically, hearing, eyesight, and strength. I mean, the only thing that doesn't really make sense are his body temperature drops."

Steve gave Tony a questioning look, which Tony answered with a nod.

"Yes, but his eyesight hasn't changed in the same way that mine did," Steve said. "Peter sees things panoramically now, which is uncomfortable for him because he doesn't know quite where to look at any given time. For me, everything just got sharper, but it's been different for him."

"It gives him headaches sometimes," Tony added. "I've made him a pair of glasses that give him some relief, but... he doesn't always want to wear them.

"And there are others that we've seen as well," Steve said. "For example, before the Malibu house was attacked, Peter seemed to have almost a premonition that something was about to happen. It was vague, not detailed enough to know what was coming, but he definitely knew that something wasn't right."

"I see," Helen said, excitement lighting her eyes. This all had to be absolutely fascinating to her, and if he was completely honest, Tony would've agreed if they'd been talking about anyone else besides his own son.

"Almost like a sixth sense, you would say, Peter?" she asked, smiling when he nodded. "Can you please describe it for me?"

"It's cold," Peter said, punctuating his sentence with a hard shiver. He wrapped his arms around his front, prompting Steve to pull him onto his lap. "Really, really cold. Feels like someone dumped a bunch of ice cubes down my shirt, only it doesn't stop. The day our house was bombed it just kept going and going, the whole time we were being attacked, and I then I thought Papa was gonna die, and—"

"Shh, little guy," Steve murmured in the soft, fatherly voice he reserved only for Peter. "It's okay."

"Interesting," Helen said. She took a sip of her coffee, turning to yet another page in the file, which was covered with harsh black lines striking out most of the text. "I took the liberty of contacting Director Fury last night in order to gain access Peter's mother's file, but this page was all that I received. Would you possibly be able to add anything, Mr Stark?"

Tony glanced at the page, which showed maybe only one clear word out of twenty. "All I know was that Regina—or Mary, I guess—was a scientist for SHIELD," he said. "And that she was married to another SHIELD scientist, but that's pretty much it. That's all that Fury told me, and I haven't ever been able to find any other information on her." Not that I've ever really looked all that hard...

"She was married?" Peter exclaimed, his nose wrinkling in disgust. "She was married while she was—?"

"Yeah, bud, she was," Tony muttered, wrapping his fingers around his left arm and squeezing, cursing the hot, radiating pain. "Course I didn't know that at the time, so—"

"Unfortunately, it doesn't give us a lot to go on," said Helen. "As you can see, this page is pretty much useless with so much of it being redacted."

"Well, can't we ask Director Fury to release more of her records?" asked Steve. "Like you said, this isn't all that helpful."
"I've already tried, Captain," replied Helen. "And I was told that Agent Parker's records are classified above Director Fury's clearance level."

"What?" barked Tony. "But that makes no sense, he's the goddamn director of SHIELD!"

"It came as a surprise to him as well, Mr Stark," Helen said. "From what he told me, apparently only the members of the World Security Council now have access to Mary's records."

Tony's eyes went wide at the mention of the World Security Council, along with Steve and Peter's.

"Did Director Fury happen to give you any explanation for such a high classification?" Steve asked, shooting Tony one of his *we'll talk about it later* looks. "That seems… odd."

"Like I said, Captain, Director Fury was just as surprised by it as we are," said Helen. "Unfortunately, without any information on the nature of what Mary was researching, I can't really give you an explanation for Peter's additional enhancements."

"Can you tell us if he'll develop any more of them?" asked Steve. "I only ask because they're pretty uncomfortable for him, and Tony and I would appreciate if there was anything we could be keeping our eyes open for."

"I'm afraid not, Captain," answered Helen. "Not without knowing more about the origin of Mary's activator gene. The only other thing I can offer is a complete sequencing of that specific gene, but I didn't bring the equipment I would need to do that here. I'd have to do it back in Korea."

"Yeah, okay," Tony mumbled, already frustrated beyond belief. All they'd managed to accomplish with all of this had been that both Tony and Regina—Mary—had been responsible for Peter's symptoms.

And the fact that Howard had most likely experimented on Tony when he was a child. Couldn't forget that.

"Would you mind just going ahead and doing that anyway?" Tony asked. "When are you supposed to head back?"

"I'll be returning to Korea a little over a week from now, after I speak at a conference in Boston," replied Helen. "And of course I don't mind, Mr Stark. I'm almost as curious as you are. Unfortunately, it will require a new blood sample from Peter, as I'll have to freeze it for proper transport."

Peter immediately froze on Steve's lap, his eyes going wide and his cheeks draining of colour. "No!" he yelped, the pathetic sound piercing Tony's heart like a spear. "No, Daddy, please! Not again! I don't wanna do that again!"

"Peter," Steve said. "I know this is hard, but if we're able to find out these answers, it'll make it a lot easier for Dad and I to help you."

"But you already help me!" Peter protested. "You've already done what you can, it's not like knowing anything else is really gonna change anything! I'll still just be a freak, just some… mutant!"

"Hey, now," Tony retorted. "No talking like that, buddy, all right? I forbid it. You are not a freak, or a mutant, or anything else that's even infinitesimally negative. You are Peter Stark, and you're my son. That's all there is to it."

"Hmph," grumbled Peter. "It's still true though. I'm still just a freak, like Flash always says."
"And I'm gonna kick that little punk's ass if he ever says something like that again," Tony stated. "The next time I see him, I swear that I'll—"

"Tony," interrupted Steve, quirking an eyebrow. "This isn't helping."

Tony frowned, glaring at Steve. He was right, of course, but that fact did nothing to quell Tony's desire to beat some sense into that idiot Flash Thompson. Even Steve used to fight against the bullies, so why couldn't he?

"I still don't wanna," Peter said. He stuck out his bottom lip, giving Tony his patented puppy-dog eyes. "Please, Dad. Don't make me."

"We're not going to make you do anything, little guy," Steve said, saving Tony from answering. "Whether you decide to do this or not, it's your decision. But I know you, Peter, just like I know your dad and knew your grandfather. And I know that you wouldn't be able to rest knowing that we could've done something but chose not to. You're a brilliant scientist, and a creator, just like your father and grandfather, and because of that, your curiosity and your bravery would eventually overcome whatever fear you're experiencing. Just like it did when you stood up for me in that grocery store, and when you saved me from being crushed. Those were such brave things, and yet you didn't even hesitate because you knew it was the right thing to do."

Tears welled in Tony's eyes at Steve's words, his heart growing the proverbial three sizes as Steve gave him one of those little aw shucks smiles that never failed to make him giddy. Steve had told him all about what that horrible woman had said to he and Peter at the grocery store, and how Peter had stood up to her, and while Tony had been absolutely furious about it, he had also been immensely proud of his boy and had told Peter as such.

"But I'm not brave," Peter murmured, so softly that Tony barely heard him, his lower lip shaking. "Not if I'm so afraid of a stupid blood test."

"We all have fears, Pete," Tony said, leaning forward and taking both of his hands. "All of us. And you're a helluva lot braver than I am. I mean, you can still take a goddamn bath without having a panic attack, right?"

"That's not the same thing," mumbled Peter. "You were tortured."

"So were you, buddy," Tony said firmly. "Your entire life has been filled with blood tests and doctor's visits and getting kidnapped and almost blown up twice, which is pretty damn torturous if you ask me. You're just a kid, and no kid should have to go through what you've gone through, and any lesser one would've completely cracked up by now, but not my Pete. Not my boy." He looked over at Steve, his heart swelling even more. "Not our boy. You know why? 'Cause our boy is made of iron, and—"

"Iron is indestructible," Peter finished. He drew in a shaky breath, biting down on his bottom lip hard enough to make Tony flinch. "Okay, Dad. I'll do it."

"That's our boy. That's our brave boy," Tony said as he clasped Peter's hands, jerking his head towards Helen. "You better get in here before he changes his mind."

Despite Peter's brave words, it still took almost fifteen minutes for him to calm down enough for Helen to get the sample, even with Steve holding his arm steady and both Tony and Steve whispering words of encouragement the entire time. As soon as Helen was done Peter collapsed back against Steve, exhausted.
"Here, buddy," Tony said, handing him one of the doughnuts Bruce had brought earlier. "You should eat something, it'll help you feel better."

"Uh huh."

"And how long will these results take?" Tony asked Helen as she packed the sample in dry ice, relieved that he'd thought to include a minus thirty-degree freezer when he was designing Bruce's lab.

"Once I'm able to begin the sequencing process, not long," Helen replied. "A couple of days. I'll contact you as soon as I know anything."

"We really appreciate your help, doctor," Steve said as they all got to their feet, Peter still devouring his doughnut. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome, Captain," answered Helen. "It's my pleasure."

"Tony, where are you going?" Steve asked in a loud whisper as Tony took off down the hall in the exact opposite direction of their bedroom. They had finally managed to get Peter into a semi-deep sleep after nearly two hours of cuddling and shushing, and if Steve was tired, he knew Tony had to be even more so.

Plus, he and Tony really needed to talk, about quite a few things.

Which was probably why Tony was making a beeline for his lab instead.

"Where's it look like I'm going?" Tony tossed back over his shoulder. "Gotta get some work done. Fury keeps pestering me about when the repulsor engines that he ordered are gonna be ready, and—"

"And you have to do this now?" Steve said, trying to hide his frustration. He knew Tony didn't enjoy talking about… well… anything that had to do with Howard, and if he was being honest, Steve wasn't really looking forward to discussing it either. But they needed to, needed to get things out in the open, needed to work through this. Otherwise it would just continue to fester, like an untreated wound.

"Not like I had any other time for it today," replied Tony as they entered the lab. He immediately tapped his monitors to life, activating the newly repaired DUM-E and pulling up what appeared to be a holographic projection of yet another one of his armoured suits. "And I want to try and get some things done in case Pete wakes up again."

Steve let out a heavy sigh. "Tony, Peter will be back in school tomorrow and we don't have anything else scheduled. Why can't it wait?"

Tony shot him a harsh look. "You know I don't like waiting," he said. "And besides the damn engines for SHIELD, I still need to catch back up after losing all those suits in Malibu, plus we also lost your new suit, by the way, and now I'm thinking that I should build one for Peter, but I can't do that until I figure out an easier way for him to summon it, which is why I'm gonna test out these new subcutaneous implants that I've been working on, and—"

"Tony!" Steve snapped. He crossed the distance between them in three strides, gripping Tony's upper arms. "Subcutaneous? As in, injections? What on earth would make you think that Peter would want something like that?"
"Not injections, exactly," answered Tony, avoiding Steve's eyes. "They're implants. I built the prototype before we left for Malibu and I've been working on the rest ever since we got back here, and now they're finally ready. And I figured you'd be happy about it. If they end up working like I think they will, I won't have to wear these clunky bracelets anymore."

Steve's jaw twitched as he tilted up Tony's chin, encouraging him to meet his eyes. "Tony, I don't think now's the best time to do this. You're tired, and upset, and I really think that we need to—"

"For Christ's sake, Steve, I'm fine," Tony said as he tried unsuccessfully to shrug out of Steve's grasp. "I'm just a bit impatient, as you've probably noticed, so if you don't mind I'd like to get going on this—"

"Yes," Steve said firmly. "I do mind. We need to talk first."

"No, we don't," Tony answered, rather petulantly. "I need to get this done first. The amount of time that I had to wait on my armour during the bombing was completely unacceptable, so I need—"

"I don't think that one night is really going to make a difference—"

"You don't know that!" retorted Tony, his brown eyes emanating such intense fear and anguish that Steve's heart seized. "There's no way you can know that. There's no way that you can predict the next time someone will try and blow us up, or the next time that aliens will attack, or—"

He was cut off as Steve wrapped his arms around him, practically crushing him to his chest. Steve had learned very quickly after he and Tony started sharing a bed that the best way to calm Tony down when he was this upset was to hold him as tightly as possible—without hurting him, of course—until he relaxed. Peter was the same way, which Tony had said he'd been like ever since he was a baby. In fact, Peter's old nanny had even taught Tony how to carry Peter on his back using a long piece of cloth, which Tony explained was often the only way he could get any work done when Peter was especially fussy. The photographs Tony had shown Steve of a baby Peter wrapped up on Tony's back, fast asleep while he worked on one of his cars or something were some of his very favourite pictures of the two of them.

"Tony," Steve whispered, threading his fingers through Tony's hair. He grunted as Tony struggled against his grip, just for a moment before melting against him, his forehead thudding against Steve's collarbone. Tony always struggled at first, but never for more than a second or two. "I've got you. We're safe."

"You can't promise that," Tony mumbled against his chest. "If there's anything I've learned over the past year or so, is that threat is imminent. And I gotta protect you, and I gotta protect Pete, and—"

"Shh, sweetheart," Steve murmured as his hand slipped underneath Tony's tank top, gliding up his back as Tony shivered in his arms. "Just… stop for a second, okay? I know you're upset about what—"

"Oh, you mean the fact that Howard used me as a human guinea pig?" barked Tony. "Yeah, you might say I'm just a bit upset about that."

Steve's shoulders sagged, and he guided them over to the couch, pulling Tony down to sit beside him, still wrapped in his arms. "You don't know that that's what happened."

Tony pulled back in surprise, his eyebrows knitting together. "You saw the same stuff that I did, Steve. It was right in front of us both, how can you think that that's not what happened?"

"Because I don't want to think it could be possible? Because I can't fathom why a father would do
"Look," Steve began carefully. "I know the Howard that I knew and the Howard that you knew were two very different people, but I still can't imagine that either one of those Howards would knowingly put you at risk just for an experiment. I think if it is true, there had to be something more about it that we don't know about yet."

"Yeah, well, you said it yourself. They were two very different people," Tony said, his voice filled with such intense self-loathing that tears welled in Steve's eyes. "And, lucky me, I got the pretty raw end of that deal."

"Stop," Steve said slowly. "Just... stop, please." He took Tony's face in his hands, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead. "I promise we're gonna get to the bottom of this, okay? It might take some time, especially with all of the roadblocks that seem to be in the way, but we will. For both your sake and Peter's, we're gonna find out what really happened."

Tony was quiet for a moment, biting his bottom lip as his mind whirled, likely calculating the odds of this or that or some other thing that could perhaps help lead them to some answers. Steve smiled slightly as he watched, admiring the sheer beauty of his love as he worked through the equations in his head, finally giving Steve a quick nod.

"I might know someone who might be able to help us, maybe," he said, swallowing hard. "But... ah... it's probably a long shot, because--"

"Who is it?"

"Peggy Carter," Tony said as he huffed out a sharp breath, glancing warily at Steve. "She's... well, she lives down in D.C., in a nursing home. It's a private facility, a really nice place, I wouldn't put her anywhere that wasn't five stars all the way, but... she's not exactly coherent most of the time. One minute she knows who I am, the next minute she thinks I'm Howard with a bad haircut." Tony scoffed. "Like I'm the one that has the bad haircut."

Steve's eyebrows shot up, a wave of strong nostalgia sweeping across him as he remembered the sound of Peggy's voice in his ears, trying to soothe him as he aimed the Red Skull's airplane towards the frigid Arctic water. The way he could hear the tears she was trying to hide, and the way her voice cracked as she said his name for the very last time.

If he were to have ever fallen in love with a gal, it would've been Peggy.

"We don't have to, Tony," he whispered. "Not if it's too difficult for you."

"Nah, I'd be okay," replied Tony. "I figured you'd be more... uneasy about it though. It's not exactly easy to see her the way she is now. She was... quite the firecracker. Never let me get away with too much, or at least the much that she knew about."

"She definitely was a firecracker," Steve said, chuckling softly as he recalled the way Peggy completely decked Hodge in front of the rest of the squadron. "She was—is—quite a lady. There's no way I would've been able to do half of what I did during the war without her help and support."

"She got married, you know," Tony said, almost too nonchalantly, like he was testing Steve. *That damn insecurity of his!* "After she got my dad back from whoever had yanked him from whatever-which-place, again. Has a son and a daughter too, they send Christmas cards and visit her from time to time, but... it's even harder on them, and they have their own health issues to deal with, so..."

"I'd be fine with it, Tony," Steve murmured. He took Tony's hand and brought it to his lips, relief
evident in his fiancé's eyes. "If you think it will help, I'll be happy to go with you."

"Couldn't hurt, at least," Tony said. "Might get us some answers faster than Fury'll be able to. He's gotta be going mad with all of his new restrictions all of a sudden."

"If they even are sudden," said Steve. "I'm honestly not quite sure when Fury would've noticed these over-his-head clearance problems if Peter's symptoms hadn't prompted these questions in the first place."

"Mmm, that's a good point. I bet he's glad that he doesn't have any hair right about now."

"No, probably not," Steve said with a laugh. "But I'm not sure I'd want you to say that to his face."

"Why not?" Tony said, grinning briefly. "It'd be pretty tame compared to some of the things I've said to him."

"Like when you found out the truth about Peter's mother?" Steve asked gently, squeezing Tony's hand. Tony's jaw immediately stiffened, his eyebrows knitting together into an anguished frown.

"You're too good to hear it, Steve," he mumbled. "It was... it was pretty damn ugly. I'm pretty sure I even broke out some of my Italian curses that night."

"No, I'm not too good to hear it, sweetheart," replied Steve. "And I'm not asking you to tell me, not really. I just want you to know that I'm here, ready to listen if you want to talk about it."

But Tony only shook his head. "It doesn't matter anymore. The only thing that matters now is how we can help Pete."

"All right, if you say so," Steve said, sighing. "Then when should we go down to D.C.?

"As soon as we can. I've let the DoD folks run loose for too long as it is," answered Tony. "JARVIS, get ahold of Agent Romanoff, will ya?"

"May I remind you that the current time is 1:21am, sir?" JARVIS replied.

"Yeah? So?"

"Would you still like me to place the call, sir?"

"I wouldn't've asked you to if I didn't want—"

"No, thank you, JARVIS," Steve interrupted, shooting Tony one of Peter's duh looks and getting an eyeroll in return. "I think we can wait until a more reasonable hour."

"Very good, Captain."

"And on that note, I think we should head to bed," Steve said. "It's been an exhausting day." While Steve was hoping that Peter would be able to sleep through the night he definitely wasn't counting on it, which made it even more important to try and get some rest now, while they were able to.

"Yeah, you go right ahead, babe," Tony replied, even as he scrubbed his palm down his face. "I'm just gonna work in here for a bit first, after I get some coffee—"

"Tony, you're exhausted. Come to bed."

"I am not exhausted, thank you very much. In fact, I'm perfectly fine—"
"Tony," Steve said, leaning in so their foreheads were pressed together. He could even smell Tony's fatigue. "You just tried to call Natasha after 0100."

"Yeah? So?"

"Sweetheart, it's Natasha."

Tony opened his mouth to protest just as realisation dawned, and he snapped it back closed, grimacing.

"Oh. Probably not one of my smartest ideas."

"Nope, don't think so."

It was a testament to how tired Tony really was that he allowed Steve to guide him into their bedroom and undress him without making even a single suggestive remark or attempt anything more than a couple of half-hearted grabby hands. As soon as they slid under the sheets together Tony immediately curled up next to Steve, laying his head on Steve's chest.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," Steve whispered, draping his arm across Tony's back, feeling his tense muscles finally start to relax. It really had been a long, exhausting day.

"Mmm, night," mumbled Tony.

"I love you."

"I know."

There was a pause, punctuated only by the sounds of their breathing until a wide smile stretched across Steve's face.

"Hey, Tony?"

"Hmm?"

"I understood that reference."

Tony snorted, nearly knocking Steve's chin with his head.

"Pete would be proud of you, babe."

Yeah, he would.

They were able to leave for D.C. a few days later, after arranging for Natasha, Clint, and Bruce to take care of Peter and Tony was able to complete the engine order for SHIELD. Director Fury, once informed of their plans, arranged for Steve and Tony to stay in an apartment on D Street that he'd kept as a safehouse ever since his early spy days, not trusting their safety at the SHIELD HQ building, the Triskelion. The apartment was small, housed in the top floor of an all-brick, five-story building that was almost as old as Steve and had a bed that barely fit him, much less both he and Tony. That prompted an absolute deluge of complaints from Tony, who threatened to move them into the brand-new Stark Industries building a few blocks away until Fury finally gave in and had a larger bed delivered.

Because it had been several months since Tony's last trip to D.C., he had several scheduled meetings with the Department of Defence officials regarding the ongoing cleanup in New York, wanting to
kill two birds with one stone, as he'd put it. This meant that Steve had the first couple of days to himself, which he decided to fill by visiting a few of D.C.’s more touristy landmarks, including the Lincoln Memorial, the World War II memorial, and the Washington Monument.

Steve had just completed his fifteenth lap around the Reflecting Pool as the sun began to rise in earnest, glinting off the smooth surface of the water, the intense brightness disrupting Steve's usual graceful stride just enough that he nearly bowled over another runner, barely getting out a breathless, "On your left," in warning.

"No problem," the runner replied as Steve barrelled past him, frustrated that he'd allowed himself to become so distracted. Sometimes it seemed that ever since Peter had started struggling with his new enhancements, Steve was once again struggling with his, nearly seventy years after the fact.

"On your left," he called as he approached the man again on the next lap, this time noticing the Air Force logo on the sweatshirt he was wearing.

"Yeah, on my left. Got it," the man replied as Steve ran by, probably a bit faster than really was necessary. Despite the larger bed, neither he nor Tony had been getting very much sleep since they'd been there, and Steve was desperate to burn off some of the nervous adrenaline that had been slowly building up ever since Director Fury had dropped his bombshell about the possible existence of moles inside SHIELD.

"Oh, come on!" the man yelped as Steve raced by yet again, huffing and puffing, trying to pound the demons back down into the sidewalk where they belonged. It wasn't until Steve had passed him two more times, his legs screaming for relief, that he finally slowed down to a more leisurely jog, coming to a stop when he noticed the man trying to catch his breath under an oak tree.

"Need a medic?" Steve asked, with a lot more levity than he felt.

"More like a new set of lungs," the man replied with a chuckle, clutching his abdomen. "Dude, you just ran like thirteen miles in thirty minutes."

"Well, I got a bit of a late start this morning," said Steve.

"Oh, well, then you should be ashamed of yourself," the man said with a smile, holding out his hand. "Sam Wilson."

Steve grasped onto Sam's hand, pulling him to his feet. "Steve Rogers."

"Yeah, I kinda put that together," said Sam. "Nice to actually meet the man behind the legend."

"Thanks," Steve said with rather shy grin. He pointed to the logo on Sam's sweatshirt. "What unit are you in?"

"Fifty-eighth pararescue, but now I'm working down at the VA," replied Sam. "I lead support groups for vets that are… having trouble adjusting to civilian life, as it were."

"So you're a counselor?" Steve asked, his mind already whirling. Despite Peter's ongoing nightmares and anxiety, Tony had adamantly refused several times to even consider the possibility of getting him someone to talk to, saying the one time that he'd attempted any sort of therapy back when his parents first died had been an unmitigated disaster. In fact, they had gotten into such a huge argument about it the last time Steve had broached the subject that Steve had been afraid to bring it up again ever since.

"Yeah, I suppose you could call it that," said Sam. "Most of the vets that I see don't really like that
kind of a label, so I just tell them I'm there for them to talk to and leave it at that. Works pretty much the same though."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Steve said with an understanding nod. Most of the soldiers he'd seen with post-combat stress during the war intensely disliked being labeled as anything resembling what General Patton had coined as "chicken shits", despite the fact that some of them had been so debilitated that they could barely remember their own names half of the time. "You wouldn't happen to ever work with any kids, would you?"

"Not too many kids down at the VA," Sam replied. "Why?"

Steve sucked in a deep breath, hesitating. He knew Tony probably wouldn't appreciate him talking about their son's issues with a practical stranger, but there was something about Sam, something about his friendly, understanding demeanor that Steve felt like he could already trust. He seemed like someone that Peter maybe wouldn't mind talking to.

And perhaps even Tony as well.

"It's my son," he finally said. "He's been having a really rough time of it lately, and…"

"Your son? You mean the Stark boy?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. I mean, technically he's Tony's son, but—"

"No, no, I get it," Sam said, holding up his hands. "I remember when he and Stark got kidnapped. You're the one who found them, aren't you?"

"Yeah," answered Steve, his gut twisting as he recalled how close to death Peter had been, lying there in the middle of that desert, and the intense panic clouding Tony's eyes, panic that he then saw again during the house bombing. "I mean, no, not just me, it was a team effort, but—"

"Yeah, I remember you saying that on the news or something," said Sam. "And I saw what happened over there in California a few months ago, too. That's pretty rough, man, especially on a kid. I'm so sorry."

"Thanks," Steve murmured. "Tony and I, we've been trying to help him as much as we can, but…" his voice trailed off as he shook his head. He was in too deep to start backtracking now. "Neither of us are in all that great of shape ourselves, and—, I'm not sure that we're doing him any good."

Sam raised an eyebrow, eyeing Steve warily. "Well, pardon me for saying so, but my suggestion would be that you and Tony try and get yourselves back 'into shape', as you put it, first. It's not such a great idea to try and help a kid be okay if the parents aren't."

"No, that makes perfect sense," agreed Steve. "I just… it hasn't been so easy to convince Tony of that. He's… reluctant."

"Yeah, most of them are at first," answered Sam. "I'm guessing that he had a bad experience somewhere along the way?"

"Something like that," Steve said.

"Yep, seen that too," said Sam with a slight grin. "Well, like I said, I don't usually work with kids, but I suppose I could make an exception in this case. Kinda hard to say no when Captain America himself asks for your help, you know?"
Steve's shoulders sagged in relief. "Oh, thank you! I'd need to double-check with Tony first, but I really appreciate—"

He was cut off by the loud honk of a car horn, and both he and Sam turned to see Tony, pulling up to the curb in the sleek silver Audi he kept in D.C.

"Hey, babe!" he called through the open window. "One of the committee members had a hangover or something, so we have a free morning. Wanna go check out that museum exhibit?"

Chuckling, Steve gave Sam a wry smile. "I guess there's an exhibit of the Howling Commandos up at one of the Smithsonian museums."

"More like Captain America and his Howling Commandos, from what I heard," replied Sam. He walked with Steve over to the car, giving Tony a friendly wave as Steve got inside.

"Tony, this is Sam Wilson, former pararescue."

"And fellow runner, I presume?" asked Tony. "Judging by the fact that you're out here at such an ungodly hour and wearing running shoes? How many times did he lap you?"

"Well, I try," said Sam. "And it was only three times, thank you very much. Or maybe four."

"Yeah, well, don't take it personal," Tony said, placing his hand rather possessively on Steve's knee. "This one's always trying to show off."

Sam shook his head, grinning. "I'm down at the VA On the Mall. You know, if you ever decide that you'd like a running buddy."

"Thank you, Sam," Steve said, offering his hand. "I appreciate it."

"No problem. Nice to meet you, Iron Man," he said to Tony.

"Call me, Tony," replied Tony as he pulled away. He shot Steve a wary look as he started weaving through the morning D.C. traffic. It probably would've been faster for them to have walked back to the apartment, but oh well. "Pararescue, huh?"

"Yeah. I almost ran him over this morning. I guess I was a bit distracted."

"So you decided to stop and introduce yourself?" asked Tony.

"I was just being nice, Tony."

"Yeah, yeah, you're always nice," Tony grumbled as he pulled into their building's parking lot, turning to face Steve. "I've got us scheduled to see Aunt Peggy tomorrow afternoon, after my last committee meeting. You sure you're still up for this?"

"I am," Steve said as he met Tony's eyes. "As long as you're with me."

"Okay," Tony said softly. "Then let's get you cleaned up so we can head out before the museum gets too busy. I brought our baseball caps with, so—"

"You know that's not really gonna hide who we are, don't you?" Steve asked. "I still got recognised when I was out sightseeing."

Tony shrugged. "Well, yeah, but it can't hurt to try, right? You know, the whole 'out of context' thing? Most people aren't gonna expect to actually see Captain America himself at his own exhibit."
"I suppose that's true."

Steve grabbed for Tony's hand as soon as they got into the apartment, turning him around to face him. "Hey," he said softly, cupping Tony's cheek. "I love you, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Tony replied, a bit too flippantly, that deep frown line between his eyebrows that always betrayed his insecurity.

"Are you sure?"

"Course."

Frowning, Steve curled one arm around Tony's waist, tilting his head up and pressing their foreheads together. "I love you, Tony."

Tony was quiet for a few seconds, his lower lip trembling. "I know, babe," he finally said. "I'm sorry, I'm just being stupid, and—"

"It's okay," Steve whispered. He pressed a soft kiss to Tony's forehead, another to his nose, finally reaching his mouth, reveling in the way Tony's hands gripped his shoulders, and the tiny whimper he pulled from Tony's throat as their tongues touched.

"Come and shower with me," he murmured once they broke apart. "We haven't exactly been taking advantage of our alone time lately, so—"

"That's 'cause that bed in there sucks, babe," Tony rasped against his neck. "My back's been aching ever since we got here."

"Then we'll just skip the bed," Steve said as he trailed kisses along Tony's temple and down to his jaw. "Please?"

"That shower isn't really all that great either. Too small," Tony said, groaning as Steve hit one of the sweet spots on his neck. "Damn, honey, you're not playing fair here."

"Nope, I'm not," Steve said as he kissed back up to Tony's lips, swallowing any further protests. If his run hadn't managed to chase all the demons away, then it was time to try something else. Something else that would hopefully quash not only his demons but Tony's as well, at least for a little while.

Talk about killing two birds with one stone.

"For Christ's sake, what're you waiting for?" Tony moaned as they broke for air, his hands slipping underneath Steve's tight t-shirt. "Get naked already."

Steve grinned against Tony's lips, tugging his dress shirt from his waistband as he guided them into the bathroom.

"You first."

Steve's hands were shaking as Tony pulled the car into the parking lot of the nursing home, if nursing home was even the right name for it. To Steve's eyes it more closely resembled a posh country club than the type of nursing facility Steve's ma had occupied in the weeks before she died.

"Okay, babe?" Tony said as they got out of the car. He reached for Steve's hand, interlacing their fingers.
"Yeah," Steve whispered. "Just a bit nervous." Or more than just a bit. Walking through that museum exhibit the previous day had dredged up all sorts of memories, and Steve was still struggling to process through them. The life-sized pictures of Bucky, lauded as the only Howling Commando to give his life in the service of his country, and the video detailing some of Steve's HYDRA raids, narrated by a slightly older Peggy and telling everyone that one of the people Steve ended up saving went on to be her husband. He wasn't sure how he would've managed to make it through without completely breaking down if it hadn't been for Tony's unwavering support.

"Me too," admitted Tony. He glanced up at Steve, giving him a sort of sad half-smile. "Glad you're with me, though. Makes it a little easier."

They checked in at the front desk, where the young college student working there proceeded to fawn all over them once they gave her their names. "I can't believe I'm actually getting to meet two of the Avengers in person! I'm such a huge fan, you guys are just amazing! If there's anything at all that you need while you're here, just let me know!"

"Thank you," Tony said, his face plastered with the fake smile he always reserved for reporters and press conferences, and government officials. "We appreciate it."

Peggy was asleep when they stepped inside her spacious room, and Steve's breath hitched at the sight of her. She looked older, of course, with her long, wavy hair gone light grey and the deep laugh lines surrounding her eyes and mouth, but somehow still exactly the same as when he'd last seen her. Even in sleep, he could still see the feistiness, the grit, the determination to break free from the gender barriers of the time and make something amazing of herself. Which, from everything Tony had told him and he'd been able to see, she had

Even now, at ninety-plus years old, she was still Peggy. And she was beautiful.

She stirred slightly as Tony slid two chairs over to her bedside, motioning for Steve to sit in the chair closest to her. Framed photographs were scattered around the room, with what he assumed to be the most important ones resting on the bedside table. A large picture of what had to be her with her husband and children, a few photographs of who Steve guessed to be her grandchildren, a photograph of Peter as a small child, standing next to DUM-E and smiling that toothy grin of his that Steve adored, and another picture, an older, grainier one that Steve couldn't quite place at first. At first glance it looked like another picture of Peter, only a lot younger, until Steve looked more closely and realised that it was in fact a photo of Tony as a young toddler, with one chubby hand holding onto the rail of a crib. An immediate smile stretched across his lips; aside from that brief home movie he'd seen with Tony as a baby, Tony had adamantly refused to show Steve any candid pictures of himself as a small child.

"Tony," he whispered, gesturing towards the picture. "You were cute!"

"Gah, I forgot about that damn thing," Tony grumbled. "I keep telling her I'm gonna take it out of here and bury it somewhere, but she never lets me."

His words caused Peggy to stir again, and once again Steve's breath stuttered as she opened her eyes, blinking slightly as she focused in on Tony.

"Hey, Aunt Peggy," murmured Tony as he took her hand, so gently that Steve's heart gave a lurch. "I'm sorry that it's been so long."

Peggy's eyebrows knitted together into a frown as she studied Tony's face. "Yes, it has been a stretch, hasn't it?" she said in her lilting British accent, her eyes flicking briefly to Steve and back again. "Where the hell have you been this time, Stark? Off galavanting around, trying to elude the
authorities? I've already informed Mr Jarvis that I won't be bailing your sorry arse out of anymore tight spaces, so—"

Her voice broke off as she dragged her gaze back to Steve again, her brow furrowing in shock as recognition slowly lit up her eyes.

"Steve?" she asked in a trembling voice. "You—, you're alive?"

"Yeah, I am," Steve breathed out. "Hey, Peggy. How's my best girl?"

"But… how? We—, I mean, Howard, he looked for you, searched for years and never found anything—"

"Dad didn't find him, Aunt Peggy," Tony said. "SHIELD did."

"SHIELD," she whispered, her eyes struggling to stay in focus as they flitted between Steve and Tony. "SHIELD found you."

"Yeah. And then he found me," added Tony, prompting Steve to place a comforting hand on Tony's knee. "Me and Pete, we were… lost, behind enemy lines, you might say, and SHIELD sent Steve to find us, and—"

"He was always good at that," Peggy said, giving Steve a smile that reminded him so much of the Peggy he knew that tears sprang to his eyes. "Always volunteering for the impossible missions, like he had so much to prove, and ruffling all the feathers as he went." She gave a light sigh. "Always so dramatic, weren't you?"

"Yeah, well, that hasn't really changed all that much," Tony said. He shot Steve one of those smirky half-smiles that never failed to make him shiver. "In fact, he's still so dramatic that he felt the need to propose to me from a hospital bed."

"Oh!" Peggy said, her smile growing even wider. "Oh, I'm not surprised in the least! That's at least a bit better than crashing a plane into the Arctic to get people's attention. Plus, now you won't ever have to learn how to talk to women!"

Steve snorted out a laugh. Peggy never failed to say things exactly how they were. "No, I guess I won't."

"I'm so happy for you both," she added. "And it's about time that Anthony settled down. Lord knows I tried to tell him that for the longest time, but he never listened to me."

"Yeah, well, you know that we Starks have a tendency for that kind of thing. Or, things," Tony muttered.

"Not your small one, though, Anthony," Peggy said fondly. "He's got a good head on his little shoulders. He's got to be what now, ten?"

"Peter is thirteen, Peggy," Steve said. "And… you're absolutely right, he's the best kid that we could ask for. Unfortunately, ever since he and Tony were lost, he's been… struggling, and Tony and I were wondering if—"

"You knew about most of Howard's projects, didn't you, Aunt Peggy?" Tony cut in. "I know you were usually more on the administrative side of things, but—"

"Oh, Howard was always bragging about this or that or the next thing," she interrupted, waving a
dismissive hand. "Why?"

"Well," Tony said in a shaky voice. Steve reached for his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "We were wondering if Howard—, if he ever mentioned anything about… giving me something, something he was working on or experimenting with or anything like that. I only ask because Pete, he's been having some trouble lately, and we think it might be related to something that happened with Howard, but no one at SHIELD will tell us, so... we're kinda stuck, but we can't really help Pete until we know what we need to help him from, so..."

Peggy was silent for a long time, glancing between Steve and Tony, and for a moment Steve was worried that they had lost her when she suddenly gestured towards the photograph of toddler Tony, which, Steve realised upon closer inspection, was actually a picture of Tony lying in a hospital crib.

Tony had been sick as a baby. Sick enough to warrant a hospital admission.

"It was late nineteen seventy-one," Peggy began, so softly that even Steve had to strain to hear her. "One of the harshest winters I'd ever experienced. There was a flu going around, half of SHIELD was out with it, another half of the rest trying to work through it like the fools that they were." Her watery eyes dragged over to Tony, her brow furrowing in such intense sadness that Steve bit his lip. "I'd never seen Howard so frightened. He'd never liked hospitals, said they were filled with the dying or some other such nonsense, so he didn't take you in right away. Not until your fever spiked up to over forty degrees, and you'd stopped breathing for a moment or two. And once he and your mother finally got you there, you were barely moving, so dehydrated that you couldn't even cry, couldn't stay awake for more than a couple of seconds. They couldn't get an IV started, tried so many times without success, and at one point the doctors tried to tell your parents that you weren't going to make it, but then—"

She stopped abruptly, the muscles in her neck working as she tried to swallow but only managing to choke. Steve quickly poured her a glass of water from a nearby pitcher, holding it carefully to her lips as she drank.

"He didn't want to lose you, you see," she finally whispered. "He always said that you were his greatest creation. He said it wasn't ready yet, but since you were so small he thought it should still work. And it did, Anthony. It saved your life. You would've died without it."

Steve glanced over at Tony. His face had gone ashen, his hand shaking in Steve's, too choked up to speak.

"Peggy," Steve whispered. "Can you tell us what it was? Can you tell us what it was that Howard gave Tony?"

But one look in Peggy's eyes was all it took for Steve to realise that she'd slipped back into the past once again. Her eyes were unfocused, blinking as she tilted her head on the pillow.

"Howard?" she finally asked, her voice harsh. "When in the hell did you grow a hippie beard?"

Tony let out a sharp breath, almost as though the air was being forcibly pulled from his lungs. "We've lost her, Steve. Might as well head out. We can come back again sometime if you want."

"Yeah, I'd like that," he replied, swallowing back his own tears as Peggy slipped back into sleep. So Howard really had given Tony some experimental something, and even though it sounded like he'd done it to save Tony's life, it still had to hurt that he'd never told Tony about it.

Plus, they really were no closer to being able to help Peter. Without a project name or formula for
what Howard gave Tony, they didn't have much to go on.

They were still going to have to find out from SHIELD. Somehow.

Getting to his feet, Steve leaned over to kiss Peggy's forehead, stepping back to allow Tony to do the same. His throat tightened as Tony carefully tucked her blankets around her, just like he always did for Peter when they tucked him in at night, or even for Steve after a particularly bad day. He was such a sweet, gentle person when he wanted to be, and Steve felt honoured that he was allowed to see this side of the "made of iron" Tony Stark.

They drove back to the apartment in silence, clinging to each other's hands, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Steve had been hoping—no, more like counting on—getting some real information that they could use to help Peter, but aside from getting to see Peggy again, they hadn't really accomplished much of anything.

And later that night, after they had called Peter to say goodnight, Steve held Tony to him as tightly as he dared, trying to soothe his beloved's fitful sleep. He was starting to think that getting Sam Wilson in touch with Peter was an even better idea, as long as he could convince Tony first. Their investigation was going nowhere fast, and all the while Peter was still suffering. It really wasn't fair to just keep him hanging in the wind while they tried to figure this stuff out.

Steve had just started to doze off himself when the dim silence was broken by the harsh squeal of a ringing telephone. Tony jerked in Steve's arms, both of them shooting up so fast on the bed that they nearly knocked heads.

"What is it, JARVIS?" Tony grunted, rubbing at his bleary eyes.

"Incoming call from Dr Banner, sir, regarding Master Peter," answered JARVIS. "He says it is quite urgent."

"Put him through, JARVIS," demanded Steve, his already thudding heart skipping a beat as Bruce's worried face filled Tony's phone screen.

"I'm so sorry to have to call you guys like this," Bruce started. "But we've been trying to get him to calm down for the last hour and nothing's worked, and now—"

"What's wrong, Bruce?" yelped Tony. "Where is Pete?"

Bruce shook his head, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "He's—, he's still in his room, Natasha's in there with him, trying to talk to him, but… He had another nightmare, and since it was Clint's night to stay up here, he went in and tried to help him, only—"

"Goddamnit Bruce, you'd better start getting to the point like right now," Tony barked.

"Clint said Peter was flailing around on his bed, and when he tried to grab onto him to calm him down, Peter accidentally kicked him in the stomach… hard enough to send him flying across the room. And then… well… he got so upset about it that he sorta climbed up the wall to the ceiling, and —"

"He did what?" Steve croaked, looking at Tony in disbelief. "He climbed up the wall?"

"Yeah. JARVIS alerted Natasha and me as soon as Peter hit Clint, and he was already up there by the time we got here. He's still up there, just perched up in the corner by the ceiling, refusing to come down."
"JARVIS, let me see him," Tony ordered, and immediately the screen shifted to Peter's bedroom. Steve's belly gave a hard swoop as JARVIS zoomed in on their terrified boy up in the corner, his knees pressed to his chest, his fingers and toes clinging to the wall.

"Peter," Tony said gently, flinching as Peter jerked violently, his tear-filled eyes wide and terrified. "Hey, buddy, what's going on?"

"Daddy!" Peter shrieked, nearly tearing Steve's heart completely from his chest. "Daddy, is Papa with you?"

"Yeah, little guy, I'm right here," Steve said, trying to keep as calm as possible. The ceilings in the penthouse bedrooms were easily sixteen feet tall, and Steve absolutely did not want Peter to fall. "Dad and I are both here, and we're gonna be home as soon as possible, okay?"

"I'm so sorry!" Peter cried. "I didn't mean to hurt Uncle Clint, he just—, he just scared me!"

"Oh, and I'm okay, by the way," Clint's voice said from somewhere off-screen, a bit more raspy than usual but still as sarcastic as ever. "The kid's got a helluva launch, though. Definitely didn't see that coming."

"Pete, it's okay, buddy," Tony said, already pulling on a pair of pants. "Uncle Clint's gonna be okay, and Papa and I will be back as soon as we can. We can all just talk this through when we get there, all right? You just gotta sit tight until then."

"Uh—, uh huh," stammered Peter. "I'm—, I'm just gonna stay right here and wait."

"Peter, that might not be the best idea—" Steve started, cut off by Tony's hand on his arm.

"Just let him be, Steve," he whispered. "Something tells me he's not gonna fall."

"What? How can you be so sure?"

Tony shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Call it an… instinct."

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Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

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"An *instinct*?" demanded Steve as soon as Tony had disconnected the call. Steve was all about trusting his instincts, but this was Peter they were talking about. "Tony, those ceilings are at least—"

"I know how high the damn ceilings are, Steve," Tony snapped. He paused with his arm halfway through his shirtsleeve, huffing out a sharp breath. "You just gotta trust me on this one, okay?"

Steve stared at him for a few seconds, his mind whirling. "All right, Tony," he finally said. "I trust —"

A soft brushing noise accompanied by a swift, shadowy movement caught Steve's attention before he could finish his sentence, and he held up his hand, grabbing for his shield sitting against the wall and motioning for Tony to get behind him. Someone else was in the apartment.

"I know you're in here," Steve called once Tony was safely in position. "You might as well show yourself."

"It's all right, soldier, I'm a friendly," came the quiet, deep voice of Nick Fury. "You can stand down."
"What the fuck are you doing in here, Nick?" barked Tony, poking his head over the shield. "Jesus, you can't ever just leave us alone, can you?"

Fury only shook his head, holding up one finger while he typed something onto his phone with his other hand, finally showing it to Steve.

**S H I E L D  C O M P R O M I S E D**, it said. **E A R S  E V E R Y W H E R E.**

"Goddamnit," Tony muttered as he took out his phone and began tapping commands, scowling in Fury's direction as three blinking red lights appeared.

"We're clear now," Tony said, his voice dangerously low as he pocketed his phone and began fumbling with his shirt buttons. "And that is the absolute last time that I ever trust a S H I E L D-owned building."

"Wasn't my fault, Tony," Fury said. "This apartment was supposed to be off the grid, so to speak, and—"

"I don't give a damn anymore, Nick," Tony snapped. "And I don't know what the hell you're doing here now, but whatever it is we don't have the time. Pete's in trouble and we need to get home."

"This is more important, Tony," Fury stated. "I know that sounds harsh, but it is."

"No, it's not," Steve said firmly. He was still clutching his shield in one hand, grateful that he'd at least managed to get his jeans on before Fury showed up. "I'm sorry, Director, but you know nothing's more important to us than Peter, and right now he needs us. Tony and I will be more than happy to discuss whatever this is another time—"

"There is no other goddamn time!" gasped Fury, and for the first time Steve could make out the cuts and scrapes littering his cheekbones and one good eye, and the painful stiffness to his movements. Something bad had happened. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. We've been compromised!"

Steve could only stare at Fury as Tony passed him his t-shirt, which he pulled on with one hand, keeping his shield at the ready. "All right, Director," he said, nodding at Tony. "You have five minutes. Go."

Fury inhaled a tremulous breath, sinking down onto the wooden armchair in the corner. "The mission that Barton and Romanoff were on over the summer, when your house was destroyed."

"Yeah, I remember it," said Steve.

"Well, that mission was a preliminary attempt to try and root out some of the possible moles inside S H I E L D," said Fury. "And the evidence that they were able to gather on that mission just turned out to be credible."

"What?" exclaimed Tony. "If that's true, then why in the hell were you asking Steve and I if we could trust them barely a week ago?"

"Because like I said, I had to rule out all other options, Tony," Fury retorted. "And to be fair, I asked Barton and Romanoff the exact same questions about the two of you. And got the exact same answers."

Steve's jaw was clenched so tightly it was starting to ache. "You were trying to pull an end-around on us?"
"Absolutely not," answered Fury. "I was just trying to cover my own back, make sure that I knew who I could implicitly trust. And all four of you passed the tests."

"Oh, well, I feel so much better now," barked Tony, prompting Steve to grab his hand.

"What did they find, Director?" he asked.

Fury's eye flitted over to Tony, flashing with guilt. "Those new engines you designed for us? Well, they're being put to use."

"The repulsor engines?" asked Tony. "You told me they were gonna be used for your next-generation helicarriers."

"Because that's what I ordered them for, Tony," Fury said. "But what I didn't know until now was what the helicarriers themselves were going to be used for. Or at least, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?" Steve asked.

Fury shifted on the chair, one hand clutching his side as he dug around in his pocket, pulling out a USB drive embossed with the SHIELD logo. "Project Insight," he said. "And this is everything that I was able to get on it before I was—"

"Attacked?" interrupted Steve as he took the drive, stuffing it into his pocket. "Who attacked you, Nick?"

"Steve, we have got to get going," Tony said from Steve's elbow. "Pete's waiting for us, and—"

"Shh!" Steve suddenly said, his ears picking up a strange rustling noise just before the silence was shattered by the ear-splitting sound of a rifle shot. Steve immediately lunged for Tony, knocking him onto the floor and raising his shield to cover their curled bodies as broken glass from the bedroom window rained down around them, followed directly by another smattering of bullets, pinging off the vibranium disc like deadly pieces of hail.

"Son of a bitch!" Fury roared once the cascade of bullets finally stopped, huddled behind his chair and clutching his bleeding left shoulder. "I'm getting way too old for this shit!"

Gritting his teeth, Steve waited three more heartbeats before moving the shield just enough to allow him to peer over the top of the windowsill, picking up the shadow of a man running along the rooftop towards the neighbouring building.

"Tony?" he gasped, looking down at his fiancé, who at first glance appeared to be unharmed.

"I'm all right, babe," Tony replied, his upper lip curling into a sneer. "Go get him. I'll take care of Fury."

Steve nodded once and scrambled to his feet, climbing through the shattered window and hoisting himself up onto the roof. The shooter had already almost reached the next building, which at first glance didn't make any sense to Steve. These buildings were long, and no one should've been able to cross that kind of distance that quickly.

No one, except himself.

"Stand down!" Steve yelled into the darkness, not really expecting the man to follow his order but frustrated nonetheless when his stride didn't falter at all. It was almost as if the man wasn't a man at all, more like an android or robot from one of Peter's movies.
"Damn it!" he gasped as he rounded a sharp corner, barely managing to keep the assailant in his sight as he leapt onto yet another rooftop. Steve's legs were already burning with the effort of the chase, his lungs screaming for relief as he followed suit, hitting the gravel roof so hard and so fast with his bare feet that he felt the tiny, razor-sharp rocks burrowing into his skin, felt every bone in his body rattling.

Three strides later and he noticed the shooter paused at the opposite end of the roof; the next building was apparently too far of a jump, even for him. Steve finally had him cornered.

"Stop!" Steve yelled again, taking another cautious step forward before launching his shield as hard as he could at the shooter, his arm already drawing back in preparation for its return.

And then, to Steve's utter shock the man simply turned, his piercing blue eyes nearly glowing in the darkness, and proceeded to catch the shield with his outstretched left arm, which was completely encased in silver-coloured metal, a red star embossed on the outside near the shoulder.

It was the Winter Soldier.

In an instant Steve froze, all the air in his lungs turning to ice, choking him as he attempted to wrap his mind around the fact that this… man had just caught his shield. Less than a second later the man shifted, briefly meeting Steve's eyes, and a shiver the likes that Steve had never felt before raced through him, almost like he'd been electrocuted with ice water.

There was something about those eyes, the shape of the man's nose, his forehead, the colour of his hair. Something… almost familiar.

But, that's impossible!

The thought had barely reached the forefront of Steve's mind before the shooter planted his back foot, whipping the shield back towards Steve with such intensity that Steve had to brace himself to keep it from slicing him in half, his feet sliding backwards on the thick gravel and sending spikes of burning pain up his calves to his knees.

And then, before Steve could blink again, he was gone.

Still gasping for breath, Steve gripped his shield, looking across the vast city as he tried to get his bearings, finally following the sound of blaring sirens back towards the apartment building where he arrived just in time to see Fury being helped onto a stretcher by Maria Hill.

"Tony!" he gasped, limping over to his fiancé who was sitting in the open back doorway of another ambulance, a medic dabbing at a bleeding cut over his left eyebrow. "Are you all right?"

"It's just a scratch, hon," Tony replied, wincing as the medic applied a bandage to the much-larger-than-just-a-scratch cut. "Nothing to worry about. Fury took a round through the shoulder, but looks like he'll survive too."

"Much to your dismay, I'm sure," Fury called from his stretcher. "Any luck, Cap?"

Steve inhaled a long, shaky breath, shaking his head at Hill as he sank down next to Tony, grimacing in pain. "It was him," he said. "It was the Winter Soldier."

"Holy shit, babe!" Tony exclaimed as he noticed Steve's bruised and bleeding feet. He jerked his head towards the medic, pointing to Steve's injuries. "What the hell were you running on, glass?"

"May as well have been," muttered Steve. "Didn't really have a chance to get my shoes on."
Hill pursed her lips. "Nick and I suspected it was him. He attacked Nick on the freeway earlier today, out in broad daylight."

"How the hell did he know where to find us?" Steve demanded, flinching as the medic dug a particularly stubborn rock from the ball of his right foot. His heart was still thudding madly, his patience hanging by only the thinnest of threads. "I thought this place was supposed to be secret!"

"It was," replied Hill. "But it's not like you guys can really keep a low profile, is it?"

"If it was a secret, then why was it bugged?" asked Tony. "I specifically swept the place for bugs when we first got here, and it was clean. So either someone knew we were coming and deactivated them before my scan, or those bugs were planted after we arrived."

"It honestly could've gone either way," Hill said. "Right now we have no way of knowing. The real concern should be what whoever was listening in was able to hear."

Another wave of dread washed over Steve, and he glanced over at Tony, seeing the very same fear mirrored in his eyes as he pulled out his phone.

"JARVIS, what's Peter's status!" Tony demanded.

"Master Peter's current location is his Tower bedroom, sir," answered JARVIS. "Agent Romanoff is with him."

"Good. Get in touch with Happy, I want another security team to take up point around the Tower, with four guys guarding the penthouse elevator. Got it?"

"Got it, sir."

"JARVIS, can we please see him?" Steve asked quickly, gasping as their son appeared on the screen, curled up and clinging to the wall by the ceiling, tear tracks lining his pale cheeks. "Tony, how can he still be up there?"

"Like I said, hon, call it an instinct," replied Tony, pinching the bridge of his nose as he turned to Hill. "We good to go here?"

"For now," said Hill. "I'd appreciate it if you could let us borrow Barton once you get back though. He's as good a CSI as anyone that I've seen, and since I'm not quite sure who else I can trust at the moment—"

"We'll put him on the Quinjet as soon as we get there," Steve said. He took Tony's trembling hand in his, giving it what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. "We should go."

"Yeah," answered Tony. "JARVIS, tell Pete that we're heading for the airport now."

"Very good, sir."

"I knew I should've brought a suit," Tony muttered once they were buckled into their seats on the Stark Industries jet. "Then you wouldn't've had to go after that asshole all by yourself, and we probably could've been home already. This is the absolute last time that I'm going anywhere without one, I swear if I have to—"

"And how would I be able to get home on one of your suits?" Steve demanded, a little too harshly when Tony raised an eyebrow.
"Easy, babe," Tony replied evenly. "I'd just carry you, kinda like how I carried Pete out of the cave. In fact, we should probably practise it during our training sometime. Might come in handy the next time aliens invade."

"Mmm," muttered Steve. Right then the thought of Tony having to carry him during a battle—or any other time, for that matter—didn't sound all that great. Too much like an out-of-control roller coaster for his taste, but he wasn't about to tell Tony that.

"You wanna tell me what's on your mind?" Tony asked after a short pause. "Besides Pete?"

Steve's jaw twitched, his fingers tightening around Tony's, trying to ignore the throbbing pins and needles sensation radiating from his healing feet. "I'm starting to think what Clint and Natasha said about the Winter Soldier being indestructible might not be so much hyperbole after all."

"Oh? Why?" Tony said gently, causing Steve's heart to give an almost painful lurch. It was scary sometimes how well Tony knew Steve, knew when he could push him with one of his ill-timed humorous remarks, and also knew exactly when to not.

"Because—" Steve started, gulping against the knot rising in his throat. Those eyes. "He was fast. And strong, easily as strong as me, maybe even stronger, and I don't know how that could be possible. I threw my shield at him. It should've flattened him, taken him out... but he caught it like it was nothing more than a dinner plate. And his eyes—, when he looked at me, it was like they were boring right through me, like bullets. Almost—"

He broke off as he squeezed his eyes closed, breathing in slowly.

"Almost?" prompted Tony, reaching up to rub the tight spot on Steve's shoulder.

"Like he knew me," Steve finished, the words whooshing out of him almost too fast, leaving him breathless.

Tony was silent for a moment, pondering. "Well... it's not like people don't know you," he said softly. "You're probably one of the most famous people in the country, if not the world by now, and —"

"No," Steve cut in. "This was different, Tony." He huffed in frustration, his head hitting the back of the plush leather seat. "I don't really know how to explain it. I threw my shield, the guy caught it, turned to launch it back at me but then hesitated, just for a fraction of a second, barely enough time to blink. But I still noticed it. There was something about me that threw him off."

"Mmm," mumbled Tony. "Even more reason for me to never be without a suit. I didn't have your back tonight."

"Yes, you did," said Steve.

"Not like I should have," insisted Tony. "There's no way you should've been out there facing down this guy alone, Steve. No goddamn way. And that's not gonna happen again."

The lump in Steve's throat grew even larger, and he brought his free hand to Tony's cheek, running his thumb softly along his cheekbone. Where the hell would he be right now if it weren't for this man next to him? How would he have survived being plunged into the twenty-first century alone without Peter and Tony's patient guidance? How would he have managed to get the Avengers up and running into the well-oiled machine that they now were without Tony's unwavering support, both behind the scenes and as an active team member?
There was no way. As much as Steve hated to admit it sometimes, Captain America was not invincible.

But with Tony by his side, watching his back, he didn't have to be.

"I know," he whispered, leaning in to brush his lips across Tony's, grunting in surprise when Tony's hand curled around the back of his neck to keep him in place. The kiss was leisurely and sweet, intended to convey comfort as much as intimacy, and Steve practically melted into it. Tony had confessed to him once that he had never particularly enjoyed just kissing—making out—before he met Steve, mainly because for him kissing had always been just a quick stepping stone to sex. But with Steve, Tony was different. Even now, after sharing a bed for several months, Steve and Tony would often spend long moments just kissing, their arms wound around each other as their mouths moved together, hands tangled in each other's hair, reveling in each other's taste and smell.

In a lot of ways, kissing could be even more intimate than sex.

"I love you," he breathed once they finally broke apart, their foreheads pressed tightly together. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, babe," Tony whispered. "And I'm here, all right? We're gonna figure all this shi—, I mean, crap out together. Somehow, we'll figure it out. We'll start with Pete and go from there, okay?"

"Okay," Steve said. "Together."

Despite what he thought were brave words, Tony was truly not prepared for what he saw once they finally arrived back at the Tower. As soon as Clint had taken off for D.C. on the Quinjet, he and Steve hurried into Peter's bedroom to find their beloved boy literally clinging to the wall sixteen feet up in the air, his eyes closed and his head tipped back, a huge pile of beanbag chairs bunched up on the floor underneath him in case he happened to fall. The pathetic sight was enough to momentarily choke the breath from Tony's lungs, and it was all he could do to not cry out in anguish and startle Peter into letting go.

"Is he asleep?" Steve quietly asked Natasha, who was standing guard next to Peter's Lego-building mat.

"I don't know," she whispered back. "He hasn't moved too much since JARVIS told us you were on your way, and to be honest, I'm not exactly sure how he'd be able to sleep in that position, but I wouldn't be surprised if—"

"Daddy?" Peter suddenly said, his eyes slitting open, his lower lip trembling as they landed on Tony. "You guys are finally back! What the hell happened to your face?"

"Yeah, bud, we're back," Tony answered, struggling to keep his voice calm. "And my face just got scratched up a bit, nothing to worry about. Now, why don't you come on down from there and we can talk about what's going on, yeah?"

Peter inhaled a tremulous breath, biting down hard on his lip. "I didn't mean to hurt Uncle Clint," he said, his voice thick with unshed tears. "I swear I didn't!"

"Peter, we're not mad at you, little guy," Steve said gently. "Not at all. What happened was just an accident, it wasn't your fault, okay? And Uncle Clint is just fine, you didn't hurt him."

"Maybe not," replied Peter. "But I could have, and that's just as bad."
"Buddy, it'd be much easier to talk about this if you came down from there," Tony said. He held open his arms, much like did when Peter used to climb up onto the banister all the time when he was a toddler. "C'mon, bud. You've gotta be getting tired."

"No, not really," said Peter, shaking his head. "I'm—, I'm actually more hungry than anything."

"I'm on it," Natasha said, popping to her feet with all of the grace of a well-trained ballet dancer. "Be back in a minute."

As soon as Natasha exited the room, Steve stepped forward, opening his arms as well. "Please, little guy. I promise we're not mad."

Peter hesitated, his eyes welling with tears. "Uh huh," he finally said. "Okay, I'll come down."

"That's my boy," Tony murmured, his head tilting in wonder as Peter turned himself so he was facing the wall and began to climb down, using only his fingertips and toes. Tony's eyes widened as he watched, his belly giving a hard swoop as he realised that he'd seen Peter do this very thing before.

It was the exact same way that Peter had crawled over to Steve's bloodied body during the house bombing. Steady, close to the surface, his back straight and his hands and feet evenly splayed out, and using only his fingertips and toes. Tony hadn't thought anything of it at the time, having been pretty distracted by the firing bullets and exploding missiles and trying to keep his boys alive, but now that he was seeing it again, it was as obvious as if it was being spelled out for him.

The wall-climbing was yet another of Peter's new enhancements, and if Tony's hunch was correct, the haystack hiding the needle they were searching for had just gotten a whole hell of a lot smaller.

Peter barely had time for his feet to hit the floor before Tony had his arms around him, gathering him tightly to his chest as Steve's strong arms wrapped around them both, guiding them gently onto the pile of beanbag chairs. Peter ducked his head under Tony's chin, his ear pressed up against the arc reactor, his skinny body shaking with suppressed sobs as Tony buried his nose into his son's hair, kissing the top of his head.

"We've got you, buddy," he whispered. "We've both got you. It's gonna be okay."

"I'm so sorry, Daddy," Peter rasped. "I'm sorry you guys had to fly back home in the middle of the night, I'm sorry for being such a bother, I'm sorry—"

"Shh, little guy," Steve said, stroking the back of Peter's neck. "You're never a bother, don't even think like that."

They all looked up as Natasha reentered the room, carrying a tray covered in six peanut butter sandwiches, a big bag of Doritos, and three glasses of orange juice.

"We really appreciate all of this, Natasha," Steve said as she set down the tray. "If you'd like to go home now, that's fine with us. You must be exhausted."

"I could sleep," she replied, winking in Peter's direction. "We still on for training tomorrow afternoon?"

"I think we'll take tomorrow and the next day off instead," said Steve. "Let us all catch up on our sleep and hopefully get Clint back."

"Sounds good," Natasha said. "Have a good night, boys."
"Night, Auntie Nat," Peter said his voice muffled against Tony's chest.

"Here, little guy, you should eat something," Steve said as he handed Peter one of the sandwiches, picking up another for himself. They all ate and drank in relative silence, cuddled up together until Peter happened to notice Steve's bandaged feet.

"Papa, what happened?" he asked in alarm. "You and Dad both got hurt, how did you both get hurt?"

Steve locked eyes with Tony over Peter's head, quirking an eyebrow, with Tony nodding in reply. Peter was bound to find out what happened eventually, and it would be better for him to hear it from his dads than someone else.

"Director Fury was attacked earlier today," Steve said quietly, his hand resting on Peter's back. "And when he came to warn us about it, he was attacked again. I tried to go after the person who attacked him—"

"You mean that he attacked all of you, don't you?" exclaimed Peter. "Both you and Dad got hurt! And is Director Fury okay?"

"Fury's gonna be fine, Pete, and Papa and I are both gonna be fine too," Tony interrupted. "Papa probably doesn't even need those bandages anymore, and mine's just a scratch anyway. We're both fine."

"But who was it?" Peter asked. "Who attacked you?"

Steve let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head helplessly at Tony.

"It was the Winter Soldier, Pete," Tony said. "But everything's okay. Papa… chased him away."

"Chased him away? That only means that he's gonna be back!" Peter yelped. "Is he gonna come here next?"

"No, Pete, he's not," Tony stated. "And that's all there is to it. No one would be stupid enough to try to come anywhere near this building who doesn't belong here."

Peter's shoulders sagged as he stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth, chewing it slowly. "I don't want you guys to leave again," he said, so softly that Tony had to lean closer to hear him. "I don't wanna be left here alone. I'm—, if I'm strong like Papa now then maybe I could help, and then you guys wouldn't have to—"

"Shh, Peter," Steve whispered. "No talking like that. You're never gonna be left alone, and you know there's no way your dad and I would let you go after any criminal, much less someone as dangerous as the Winter Soldier. You're just a child."

"No, I'm not," muttered Peter. "I'm a teenager now."

" Barely, kid," said Tony, ruffling Peter's hair. "And Papa's right, there's no way you're going after anything right now except some sleep."

"Hmph," Peter grumbled. "Fine."

"That's right," Tony said, kissing his forehead. "Go on and brush your teeth now."

Nodding, Peter drained the rest of his orange juice and shuffled towards his bathroom, so exhausted
that he could barely pick his feet up off the floor. Tony watched him go, tipping back against Steve as soon as Peter disappeared around the corner.

"You're exhausted too, sweetheart," Steve whispered in Tony's ear.

"Mmm, I'm not gonna lie and say that I'm not looking forward to sleeping in our own bed tonight," Tony replied. "Or at least what's left of tonight. That damn bed in D.C. was a travesty."

"Well, most people don't have a bed the size of most bedrooms, Tony," Steve said with a rather impish grin. "Anything would feel small compared to that."

"Doesn't help that my bedmate takes up half of it," Tony said, elbowing Steve in the side. "And hogs all the covers."

"I do not," protested Steve. "And you always say that you'd rather use me for heat than the blankets anyway, so…"

"Yeah, you got that right, babe," Tony murmured as he cuddled even closer, allowing himself to relax just a bit as Peter stepped back into the room.

"Don't worry about getting up for school in the morning, bud," Tony said as he pulled Peter's blankets up to his neck, tucking them around him. He brushed the curls from Peter's forehead, leaning over to kiss him. "Just sleep until you wake up, yeah?"

"Uh huh," Peter mumbled, already half asleep. "Love you guys."

"Love you too, buddy."

"Love you too," Steve said as he bent down to kiss Peter's cheek. "Sleep tight."

Steve curled his arms around Tony as soon as they crossed the threshold into their bedroom, his long fingers threading into Tony's hair, massaging his scalp.

"You're gonna knock me out standing right here if you keep that up," Tony mumbled against his chest. He never knew just how much he enjoyed getting his head massaged until Steve came along. "Damn, those hands of yours are magical."

"Think Peter will be able to sleep?" Steve asked, brushing his lips across Tony's temple.

"God, I hope so," answered Tony, letting out a long, heavy sigh, his bones turning to mush. "Poor kid."

"Yeah," Steve whispered. He pulled back so he could see Tony's face. "Are you gonna tell me how you knew he wouldn't fall down from the wall now?"

Tony's head thudded against Steve's collarbone, his hands gliding up and down Steve's back, feeling him shiver. "Like I said, babe, it was mainly just an instinct. I don't have anything more concrete than that yet."

"Yet?"

"Well, I might've placed a decryption bug on one of the main computer systems at the Department of Defence the last time I was there," Tony said. "So JARVIS is working on it."

"Like the one you placed on the helicarrier during the Chitauri invasion?" Steve asked.
"Yeah, pretty much. And it's a bit of a long shot, because I don't honestly know if there would be anything of use in any of those DoD databases, but I figured, what the hell, right? Couldn't hurt to try."

"No, I suppose not," replied Steve. "Just as long as you don't get caught."

"Nah," scoffed Tony. "No way in hell any of those idiots would find it. They can barely tie their shoes without a committee meeting. I had one guy ask me to show him how to do a password retrieval the last time I was there. Turns out he was using his mistress's birth date for his password, which is just a big no-no on a whole lot of levels."

"Yeah, that sounds like it," Steve said with a chuckle. He disentangled himself from Tony just enough to dig into his pocket, pulling out the USB drive that Fury gave him. "So, when should we look at this?"

Tony scrubbed a palm down his face, pursing his lips. "We can start tomorrow. I'm gonna want to set up some safeguards with JARVIS before we actually open anything on it, make sure there's nothing funky on it that'll mess with any of the Tower's systems."

"That's a good idea," Steve agreed. He paused for a moment, running his thumb along Tony's cheekbone. "And while you're doing that, I was wondering if I could take Peter down to the gym with me. He's obviously not used to his strength yet, so I thought I could maybe help him with it. Let him see what he's capable of, and how he can better control it."

A soft smile stretched across Tony's lips. It never failed to amaze him just how thoughtful Steve could be. "Did you have someone to do that for you?"

"No," Steve said, his eyebrows knitting together. "And I really wished that I had, so I'd like to do it for Peter. Maybe it'll save him from breaking too many drawer handles or drinking glasses, or—"

"Launching our teammates across the room when he has a nightmare?" asked Tony.

"Yeah." Steve paused for a moment, the worry wrinkle forming between his eyebrows. "And… about that… there's something else I'd like to ask you."

"About what? Pete's nightmares?"

"Yeah."

Tony stiffened, pulling away slightly. "What about 'em?"

Steve's worry wrinkle grew deeper, his hold on Tony tightening, as if he was afraid that he would try and escape. "That runner that I introduced you to, down in D.C.? Sam Wilson?"

"Yeah, I remember," Tony said warily. "What does he have to do with Pete's nightmares?"

"Well, we got to talking, and he told me that a big part of his job down at the VA is helping vets adjust to civilian life." Steve paused, sucking in a deep breath. "He's a… counselor, and I was thinking—"

"No," Tony stated, his jaw clenching as he twisted out of Steve's grip. *How many damn times do we have to discuss this?* "I've told you no, and the answer is still no. No goddamn shrink is ever gonna get their grimy hands on my boy, Steve. End of story."

"Sam isn't a shrink!" protested Steve. "He didn't even call himself a counselor, I'm the one who
called him that. He only told me that he runs support groups for vets that are struggling, and Tony, Peter is struggling! He needs help, more help than we can give him. All tonight did was prove that."

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean, he needs more help than we can give him?" Tony barked, digging his fingertips into his temples. It was way too damn late for this same stupid argument. "We're his parents, goddamnit! We're supposed to be able to help him!"

"Yes, Tony, we are. But that doesn't mean that we're automatically equipped to handle this," Steve said, in that infuriatingly soft and gentle voice of his, proving yet again that Steve Rogers wasn't quite human. Steve hardly ever raised his voice, even when he was angry, which was such a sharp contrast to what Tony was used to that it still managed to throw him for a loop every time that they argued. Growing up with a father who yelled—often with a bottle in his hand—pretty much every chance that he got had made Tony more than determined to be better once Peter came along.

And he was better. In all of Peter's thirteen-plus years, Tony had only ever truly yelled at him a handful of times, and most of those were because he'd done something childishly stupid. Like setting the lab on fire, or tinkering with JARVIS's programming so he could sneak into said lab, and then set it on fire.

But Tony was still a Stark, and therefore still had the infamous Stark temper, and unfortunately it managed to get the better of him more often than he liked. Especially when Steve kept insisting on bringing up the idea of Peter seeing a shrink after Tony had told him no at least a dozen times.

"Tony," Steve said, reaching a tentative hand towards him, which Tony was too tired to try and avoid. "You even said so yourself. Peter has been through more than any kid should ever have to experience in a hundred lifetimes, and the fact that he's held up as well as he has shows just how strong he really is. But that doesn't mean that he's not struggling, and even more so with his new enhancements. And I'll be the first to admit that I'm not equipped to help him. I can help him adjust to his strength and his sensory changes, but I can't take away his nightmares or his flashbacks because I'm still too busy fighting my own." He paused, drawing Tony closer to him, nuzzling his temple. "And so are you, sweetheart. And we can't help Peter battle against his demons when ours are still overpowering us."

Burning hot tears stung Tony's eyes, and he shook his head, realising he was fighting a losing battle. Steve was right. Tony was so tired from everything that had been piling up for so long that his very bones were supersaturated with fatigue, and all it would take for the entire system to completely destabilise would be the smallest additional speck of trouble.

"It's pretty low to come at me with this right now, you know," he muttered, his heart clenching at the look of torment that crossed Steve's face.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," said Steve.

"Yeah, I do," Tony replied with a heavy sigh. "You're too good to have ulterior motives."

"Tony, don't," Steve said in a low voice. "You know I don't like it when you say things like that. I'm no more good than you are."

"Mmm, I think we'll just have to agree to disagree on that one," mumbled Tony. His mind was swirling in a million different directions, even more than his usual, his head was aching, and he was just so tired, so damn tired. "Can we just go to bed, please? I can't—, I can't think about this right now, not with everything else, I just—, I just need—"

"Of course, sweetheart," Steve whispered. He pressed a light kiss to Tony's forehead. "I'm sorry, I
should've waited until tomorrow to bring it up."

"Yeah, that might've been a better idea. And only after I've had coffee. At least three cups."

That at least brought a tired smile to Steve's lips. "Deal. C'mon, let's get to bed."

A few minutes later they were curled up on their bed, with Tony resting his head on Steve's shoulder with his arm draped across him, shivering against Steve's radiating heat as the tension slowly seeped from his body.

"Steve?" Tony whispered a few moments later. He just couldn't help it, he had to ask.

"Yeah?"

"That guy, Sam, he didn't try and give you his home phone number, did he?"

"No, Tony, he didn't," Steve said patiently, and Tony could almost hear his suppressed eyeroll. "He knew that we're engaged, and he told me if I wanted to get in touch with him to contact him through the VA."

"Oh. Okay." Good. Now I won't have to blast him in the gut if I ever see him again.

Steve's arm tightened around him, pressing them flush together. "I love you, Tony. Goodnight."

"Mmm. Love you too."

"All right, little guy, we're just gonna start with some basic sparring first," Papa said as he finished tying on Peter's boxing gloves. He pulled a set of thick black pads onto his own hands, holding them up. "I want you to start out easy at first since we're just warming up. Sound good?"

"Uh huh," answered Peter, knocking his gloved hands together. The gloves belonged to Papa and were too big on him, so Papa had stuffed some padding inside them so they would fit better until he could get his own. "But are you sure it wouldn't be a better idea to start off with the punching bag?"

"The punching bag is more for endurance," replied Papa. "And we'll get to that eventually, but right now we're just trying to get you used to what you can do, and how you can tone it down when you need to." He paused, ruffling Peter's hair with his padded hand. "Ready?"

"Ah, sure," said Peter, hopefully with more confidence than he felt. To quote Han Solo, he had a bad feeling about this. "Um… so…"

"Feet apart about shoulder-distance, right foot forward and knees slightly bent," Papa said, guiding Peter into the proper position. "And when you punch, lean into it with just your upper body, keeping your feet in place. Aim for the opposite pad, okay?"

"Got it," Peter said. He drew in a deep breath, aiming his gloved fist at the pad in Papa's right hand and hitting it square in the middle, pulling back immediately. "Like that?"

"Exactly like that," Papa said proudly. "Was that as hard as you can hit?"

"No," Peter answered, rather timidly. "I don't—, I'm afraid—, I don't wanna hurt you."

"That's what the pads are for, Peter," said Papa, giving him an encouraging smile. "So you don't need to worry about me."
"Even so…" Peter said, his voice trailing off as he shivered. The horrifying crunch that Uncle Clint had made when he hit the far wall of Peter's bedroom still haunted him whenever he closed his eyes, and the last thing he wanted to do was possibly hurt his papa.

"We can work up to it, okay?" Papa said. "Let's keep going, you're doing great."

"Uh huh," Peter said as he lunged again, this time with his left hand, once again hitting the pad square in the middle.

"Great job, Peter," Papa said, shifting his stance slightly. "I can tell you're still holding back though."

"Yeah, a bit," answered Peter.

"Try and gradually increase the force of each punch, okay? Work up to your maximum strength, and then I'll show you how to tone it back down."

"Mmm," Peter mumbled as he aimed his right hand, grimacing against the sharp slap of his glove against the pad.

"That's good," said Papa. "A little harder now."

Gritting his teeth, Peter swung his left hand, this time grinning as a strong bolt of adrenaline shot through him. He could see why Papa enjoyed boxing, it was definitely good stress relief. Peter immediately swung again, and again, and again, his punches even and precise, not even noticing that he was forcing Papa to step backwards with each subsequent hit until he had almost pushed him back against the wall.

"Are you okay?" Peter asked, huffing and puffing as he stepped back, swiping his gloved hand across his sweaty forehead.

"I would have stopped you if I wasn't, little guy," Papa answered, winking. He pulled off one of his pads, handing Peter an opened bottle of Powerade, which he took awkwardly with his gloves. "Don't want you to get dehydrated." He watched as Peter downed the Powerade, taking the bottle when he was finished. "Let's keep going, and this time, no holding back, okay? I want you to give it everything you've got."

Peter's belly gave a hard swoop. He should've known Papa would figure out that he'd been pulling his punches. "But, I have been—"

"No, you haven't," Papa said gently. "I can tell, little guy. You're still unconsciously holding back, and I can't help you learn to get control over it until both you and I know where we need to start." He tapped his padded hands together, giving Peter an encouraging nod. "Get your stance ready and let's go again."

Biting his lip, Peter raised his hands, hesitating. He honestly didn't know what his limit was at this point, and he had to admit he was more than a little afraid to find it out.

"It's all right, Peter," Papa said. "You're not gonna hurt me. No holding back."

"Okay," Peter said warily. He drew in as deep a breath as he could, bending slightly at the knees and waist, preparing to punch. "Here—, here goes." He pulled back his hand, swinging with all of his might. His gloved fist connected with Papa's padded hand with an almost deafening crack that echoed across the gym, sending Papa spinning around so fast that he landed flat on his back on the mat.
It all happened so quickly that Peter didn't even realise exactly what had happened until he looked down and saw that Papa was struggling to breathe.

"Oh my God, Papa!" Peter shrieked, panicking as he raced to his father's side, fumbling with his gloved hands as he attempted to roll him over. Papa started to choke as soon as Peter got him onto his side, clutching his chest as he gulped in lungfuls of air. "Papa, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—!

"It's okay!" Papa wheezed, his face bright red as he continued to cough, his eyes betraying the panic he felt at being unable to breathe. "Just—, just got the wind knocked out of me is all."

Peter's head thudded against Papa's shoulder, his heart thudding wildly as he blinked back tears of shame. "I'm so sorry, Papa. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"And I said it's okay, little guy," Papa said, still struggling for breath. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, pulling off the pads over his hands so he could hug Peter close, stroking his damp hair. "This is exactly why we need to work on this, okay? To prevent things like that from happening."

"I tried to warn you," Peter mumbled against Papa's chest, listening to the soothing sound of his heartbeat, slightly elevated from the exertion. "I tried to tell you, Papa. I'm so sorry!"

"Yeah, well, I might've underestimated how strong you really are, so that one's on me, okay?" Papa said as he patted Peter's back. "This wasn't your fault, and it won't happen again."

"No, it won't," said Peter, suppressing a shudder. He squeezed his eyes closed, his mind conjuring the horrible mental image of hitting Papa in the face instead and possibly breaking his nose, or even worse. "'Cause I'm not gonna do anything like that ever again. What if I had missed the pad and hit you instead?"

"Well for one thing, you hit every single punch square on, so I doubt that you'd miss the pad," murmured Papa. "And if you had, better me than someone who really couldn't take it. "He pressed a kiss to the top of Peter's head. "And we're gonna keep working on this, all right? Everyday after school for awhile, until you feel more comfortable with it."

"Fine," Peter mumbled, attempting to swipe at his eyes with his gloved hands but only managing to smear the sweat across his face. "I'm getting hungry, can we go back upstairs now?"

"Absolutely," answered Papa. He untied Peter's gloves, putting them away in their storage locker as Peter studied his bare hands, clenching them into tight fists. They didn't look any different to him than they always had, if anything maybe a bit bigger, just like his eyes and ears still looked the same.

But they were so different now. So very different.

Now Peter could hear and see things that were well beyond the capacity of the average human, and apparently he could now even out-punch Captain America.

And yet he still looked like a short, skinny, baby-faced kid. Definitely not someone that would make a bad guy shrink away in terror at the mere sight of him.

Hmm, Peter thought as he unclenched his hands. I wonder…

"Ready, little guy?" Papa asked, startling Peter from his thoughts.

"Uh huh," answered Peter, relieved when Papa clapped a hand on his shoulder as they walked
towards the elevator. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure," Papa said. "Like I said, just got the wind knocked out of me for a few seconds." He gave Peter what he probably thought was a reassuring wink, but Peter knew better. He knew how tough his papa was, how he could take pretty much anything, but he also knew that any hit to Papa's lungs was enough to cause him to panic, if only for the briefest of moments.

It was something that Peter could definitely relate to.

They were just finishing their lunch of homemade quesadillas when Dad walked into the kitchen, a tablet in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

"Just got a message from Helen Cho," he said, causing Peter's stomach to violently flip. He wrapped his arms around his front, swallowing against the rising bile in his throat as Papa squeezed his shoulder.

"And?" Papa said.

"She says she's got some answers for us," Dad said simply as he set down his coffee, patting Peter's back. "She's waiting for our call."

"Well..." Papa said, pursing his lips. "Then we should probably call her."

"Yeah," said Dad. "You ready, Pete?"

"No," Peter answered, staring at his empty plate. "But it's not like I'm ever gonna be, so may as well get it over with."

"That's my boy," Dad said as Peter and Papa got up from the table, following Dad into the living room. "JARVIS, call Dr Helen Cho."

Peter's hand was rapping a staccato rhythm against his leg as they all waited for the call to connect. As the screen flickered and Dr Cho came into view, both of his dads placed their hands on Peter's shoulders, a silent reminder that they were all in this together.

"Good afternoon, Dr Cho," Papa said politely. "We appreciate you getting back to us so quickly."

"It's actually around three in the morning here, Captain," Helen replied with a tired smile. "And you're welcome. I have some rather... interesting results to share with you."

"We're ready," said Dad.

Helen nodded, shuffling some papers on her desk. "The gene sequencing took a bit longer than I expected, or I would have gotten back to you sooner. I felt it necessary to run the test three times just in case there was a mistake, which I've never had to do." She paused, giving Peter what he assumed to be a sympathetic look. "The origin of the activator gene was—"

"Arachnid," Dad cut in, glancing furtively down at Peter as both he and Papa gasped in shock. "It was arachnid, wasn't it."

"What?" Papa exclaimed. "Tony, how would you know that?"

"Yes, that's correct," Helen replied, her head jerking back in surprise. "But, how do you know? I still haven't been able to obtain any records from SHIELD regarding Agent Parker that have been of any use, so—"
"Yeah, we haven't been able to get anywhere on that either," Dad said, shooting Papa an apologetic look. "And something tells me that that's not a coincidence."

"I'm afraid that I don't understand, Mr Stark," said Helen. "How did you know this DNA source would be arachnid in nature?"

"Because I can climb up the walls now?" Peter blurted out. He looked down at his fingers, tapping his fingertips together. "My hands, they're like… sticky, or something. I climbed up the wall in my room just yesterday."

"And you combine that with the enhanced hearing, the panoramic, otherwise known as compound vision, the temp drops, the enhanced strength, and the violent reactions to peppermint, it just makes sense," Dad said.

Holy crap! Peter thought, mentally kicking himself for missing it himself. Of course! That's why I threw up the peppermint ice cream! That disgusting experience had put him off of ice cream completely ever since then, and it also explained why he felt so sick to his stomach every time that he even caught a whiff of anything peppermint. It was so bad that he could barely go down the candy aisle at the grocery store now.

"Well, then I guess you aren't as shocked as I was," said Helen. "Although I'm still not quite sure how this could be possible. I've never seen a successful study where they were able to combine human DNA with that of any animal, much less a spider."

"Yeah, which is probably the main reason for the high classification of those records," Dad muttered. "Because something tells me a lot of the answers we're looking for would be in there."

"Well, then I wish you good luck, Mr Stark, Captain," Helen said. "And you as well, Peter. And if there are any further questions that you gentlemen discover along the way, please let me know if I can help."

"Thank you, Dr Cho," said Papa, wrapping an arm around Peter's shoulders. He felt very lightheaded all of a sudden, and his entire body was trembling so badly he was surprised he was still able to stand.

Oh my God, my mom was some kind of spider-mutant or something, which means that I'm now a mutant. Just some freaky… spider-kid. What the hell does this mean? What am I gonna do? Oh God, what am I gonna do? Why spiders? Why'd it have to be a spider, they're so gross!

"Peter? Peter, look at me," Papa said as soon as the screen went blank. He cupped Peter's face in his large hands just as Peter's knees buckled, with Dad grabbing him from behind just in time to keep him from crumpling to the floor.

"It's okay, buddy, you're okay," Dad said into his ear, which Peter barely heard over the blood rushing past it. "We're both here with you, and I swear to you that we're gonna get through this."

"I'm just a freak of nature!" Peter cried as he brought his knees to his chest, cradling his head in his hands. "I'm nothing more than some freaky spider-mutant!"

"Stop that talk right now, Peter," Papa said in his Captain's voice, raising all the hair on the back of Peter's neck. "Because none of it's true. Absolutely none of it."

No, no, no, no! It's all true, and nothing anyone says is gonna change that!

"Did you know?" Peter shrieked, raising his head up to look at Dad. "Before now, did you know?"
"Not definitively, Pete," Dad said gently. He pressed the pads of his fingers into Peter's scalp, and
Peter moaned, practically melting against him. He'd never been able to resist getting his head rubbed.
"I had a guess, one that was reinforced when I saw you sticking to your bedroom wall like it was
covered in flypaper. And then when I saw you climbing down, well… it was the same way that you
crawled over to Papa during the house attack. You moved the same way. But I never knew for sure.
We haven't been able to get our hands on any of the records that we'd need to know for sure. All we
know right now is that Mary and her husband were SHIELD scientists."
"Well, then they must've been some kind of godawful mad scientists to turn me into something like
this!" Peter cried. "What the hell kind of people were they to go around experimenting with…
spiders? I mean, why? Spiders are just creepy!"
"Oh c'mon, Pete, you know that mad science is just an area of study, not an actual degree," Dad said.
"And I promise you, bud, no matter what, we're gonna find the answers we need. No matter how
long it takes, we'll find them, if nothing more than to give you some peace of mind. Okay?"
"But… how?" Peter asked, whimpering as Dad rubbed a particularly tight spot on his neck. "How're
you gonna find anything? It's like someone is deliberately trying to keep us from finding out the
truth!"
"We don't know how yet, Peter," answered Papa. "But we will, I promise. Whatever it takes, okay?"
"Papa's right, buddy," said Dad as he kissed Peter's temple. "Whatever it takes."
It was well after one in the morning by the time Steve and Tony were able to get Peter into a deep
enough sleep that they were able to tiptoe out of his room without him waking back up. As soon they
stepped into the hallway Steve grabbed Tony's hand, pulling him not-so-subtly towards their
bedroom, relieved when Tony didn't even try to protest. There would be plenty of time tomorrow for
him to work on whatever next suit of armour or other equipment he was working on. Right now
Steve was both mentally and physically exhausted, and all he wanted to do was cuddle up next to
Tony and go to sleep.
Unfortunately, they had barely had a chance to lay down and get somewhat comfortable before
JARVIS's mechanical British lilt broke the silence. "Pardon me, sir, Captain, but Director Fury is on
the line, and is requesting maximum security."
"I swear to God that man has absolutely no concept of normal business hours," Tony grumbled, his
hands splayed across his face. "JARVIS, engage the Inception Protocol."
"Very good, sir."
"What's that?" asked Steve as he grabbed for his discarded t-shirt, pulling it over his head and
handing Tony his tank top.
"Three additional levels of security that are built like a maze," replied Tony. "Once the conversation
is over it's stored in its own secured virtual vault, and anyone trying to break in is continuously
rerouted back to the upper levels if they don't know their way through the maze."
"Okay," Steve answered, almost sorry that he'd asked. "Go ahead and put him through, JARVIS."
"Gentlemen," Director Fury said as soon as his face appeared on the screen, his left arm still in a
sling from his gunshot wound.
"There better be a damn good reason why you're constantly bugging us when we're trying to sleep,


"Fury," Tony grumbled. "'Cause I'm getting really sick and tired of this—"

"I have a request, Captain," Fury interrupted. "From Agent Rumlow."

"Rumlow?" Steve asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. "But I thought that—"

"What you suspected is correct, Captain," replied Fury. "Which is one of the main reasons why we're having this conversation during normal sleeping hours. I have been asked by Agent Rumlow to have you loaned out temporarily to the STRIKE team. They have a few missions coming up that could use an extra pair of hands, and they have asked for you."

Steve's jaw twitched as he pondered. He had to admit that it was smart, asking for help from the very person you were trying to keep from discovering the truth. He had no doubt that Rumlow's goal with this request was to either keep Steve too busy to look any further into the Winter Soldier's whereabouts, or to eliminate him completely with some sort of "accident", like they tried to do with Fury.

"And?" he asked Fury. "What are your thoughts on this request, Director?"

Fury pursed his lips, shifting slightly in his chair. "My thoughts are that this presents a rather unique opportunity. Nothing like planting our own mole in with the rest of the moles. Rumlow doesn't yet suspect that I'm onto him, or at least I don't believe that he does, so…"

"Yeah, but at the same time he'd be keeping Steve away from myself and Peter!" Tony retorted. "Divide and conquer, hmm?"

"You'd still have the rest of your team, Tony," Fury said. "And any other trustworthy SHIELD agents that I can scrounge up would also be at your disposal if the need arose."

"That you can scrounge up," Tony mumbled under his breath, prompting Steve to reach for his hand. "Oh, that's a huge help."

"I've managed to uncover a bit more information since the last time we spoke," Fury continued. "Loki's sceptre, for example."

"Yeah, what about it?" asked Tony. "Bruce told me he's been working on deciphering some of the data on it."

"That's correct," said Fury. "But what I've been able to uncover is that the sceptre was recently moved from SHIELD's headquarters, and I have been unable to access its new location as of yet."

"How recently?" Steve asked.

"Around the same time as the attack in Malibu," Fury said. "And I highly doubt that that's a coincidence."

"No, not likely," said Steve. "And you think that by working with Rumlow that I'd be able to find where the sceptre's been taken?"

"That would not be your primary objective, but it would sure be nice to know," answered Fury. "Your primary objective would be to find out just how deep these moles have burrowed, and what all they've managed to disrupt in the process. And who's responsible for the Winter Soldier."

"And so, what, you're just gonna use Steve as bait? Dangle him like a goddamn carrot in front of Rumlow and the Winter Soldier's nose?" Tony snapped. "No. No way in hell, Fury."
"Tony," Steve said gently, squeezing his hand. "It's not the worst idea I've ever heard."

"What?" Tony squawked, his voice thick with fear. "Steve, no! You can't be serious!"

"I'll be just like another HYDRA raid," Steve said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. "And I always came back from those."

"That was back in the goddamn forties!" yelped Tony. "This is now! These STRIKE team goons are the best of the best in special forces, and you're not a spy anyway, so there's no telling what—"

"If it helps at all I can send Agent Romanoff with you, Captain," Fury said. "She is definitely a spy, one of the best that I've ever seen. I can make your agreement to participate contingent on including her as well."

Steve let out a heavy sigh, looking over at Tony. He didn't want to do this. Tony was right, the risk was considerable. But if doing so meant they were able to root out all of the moles within SHIELD, take out the Winter Soldier, and maybe even get their hands on the files they needed to help Peter, then that risk would be more than worth it.

"Why don't you check with Natasha first, Director," Steve finally said. "If she agrees, then I'll do it."

"I already have, Captain," said Fury. "She's ready to go on your orders."

"Course you have," scoffed Tony. "Always trying to stay one step ahead."

"It's my job to stay one step ahead, Tony," Fury said. "And preferably more than just one step. This may be our only chance to gather some real intelligence on what exactly is going on here."

"Even if it's nothing more than a trap?" Tony asked, his voice trembling ever so slightly. "Steve..."

"Look, why don't you two discuss this and let me know in the morning," said Fury. "Send me a code word or something, and I'll have your instructions delivered within the hour."

"Thank you, Director," Steve said. "Code word is Dodgers if it's a go, Mets if it's not."

The corners of Fury's lips quirked into the slightest of smirks. "Got it, Captain. Goodnight, gentlemen."

Tony turned to Steve as soon as the screen went blank, his brown eyes radiating worry as Steve curled his arms around him, burying his face into Tony's neck.

"Steve, I don't think you realise how dangerous this could be," Tony pleaded, his hands fisting into the back of Steve's t-shirt. "We have to assume that Rumlow's intentions are hostile, and I know you can more than hold your own, but these are men trained specifically for black ops, and they're damn good at what they do. And if they sic the Winter Soldier on you again, then—"

"Then I'll be ready for him, sweetheart," Steve interrupted, stamping down the image of those piercing blue eyes he saw that night in D.C. There is no possible way! He pressed a kiss to Tony's neck, breathing in the intoxicating scent of his skin, cologne mixed with the slightly metallic undertone from his arc reactor. "I'm pretty adaptable, in case you hadn't noticed. And if doing this means we can finally get some answers, both about what happened with Peter and what happened with you, and take down the moles inside SHIELD, then it'll be worth it."

"But there's no guarantee that you'll be able to find out any of that," said Tony. "And there's a whole shitload of risk. I mean, this is either completely brilliant or complete madness."
"Yeah, it's kinda funny how often those two things coincide, isn't it?" Steve slid his palms up Tony's back and leaned back, cupping his face in his hands. "You trust me, don't you?"

"I do," Tony replied, without hesitation. "You know I do."

"Then trust me on this," murmured Steve. "Please."

Tony's lower lip started to shake, and he caught it between his teeth.

"All right, Steve. I'll trust you."

Stop by and see me on Tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :).
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Here we go! ;)

CW: Flash Thompson makes a potentially homophobic remark in this chapter. It is not my personal belief that Flash is homophobic, but I have no doubt that he would say something like this to bully Peter, which is the setting for the remark. It is in the first section in Peter's POV if you would like to avoid it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Okay, J, try the new communications channel reroute again and display," Tony commanded, sipping from his coffee cup and frowning at the fact that there were only dregs remaining. He'd already gone through at least three pots trying to get this thing to work, and it was looking like he was going to need a fourth soon.

"Simulation successful, sir," JARVIS announced a few seconds later. "Would you like me to begin
"Yeah, then go ahead and construct, with two backups as usual," answered Tony, scrubbing his palm down his face as he huffed out a sigh of relief. He'd have to teach Steve how to install the backups if necessary, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. Like he'd said recently, Steve was very adaptable, and comfortable enough now with modern tech that Tony or Peter usually only had to show him how to work something once before he had it down pat.

"Very good, sir," JARVIS said as the lab filled with the whirring noises of Tony's robotics systems, preparing to build the new communications chip that Tony was planning to hide in the left sleeve cuff of Steve's newest suit. The Avengers had their own separate closed-loop comm system whenever they were out in the field, but since this was a STRIKE team mission and not an Avengers mission, Agent Rumlow would likely have his own comms, and there was no way in hell that Tony was going to allow Steve to go on a mission with a potentially hostile force without being able to listen in on everything that was happening.

Setting down his empty coffee cup, Tony slid on his glasses and picked up his needle and thread, smirking with pride as he threaded the needle on the first try. He was just about finished with Steve's new uniform, one he was calling the Stealth Suit since it was a much darker blue than Steve's other uniforms and would be better suited for the night missions he was facing. And, hopefully more difficult for the Winter Soldier to track.

Tony was just finishing the right shoulder seam when a flash of movement caught the corner of his eye, and he looked up to see Steve approaching the lab, dressed in the tight t-shirt and tan pants that he usually wore for his morning runs and carrying a steaming cup of coffee in one hand.

"How'd you know I was out?" Tony asked as Steve handed him the cup, wrapping his hands around it and inhaling the delectable scent, briefly closing his eyes.

"You've been in here all night, Tony," Steve replied, with only a hit of reproach. "And when I got into the kitchen I noticed that the coffee pot was empty, so I just assumed."

"Mmm, good assumption, babe," Tony said as he brought the cup to his lips, taking a tentative sip of the burning hot liquid. It was perfect, of course. Just like the man who had brought it.

"So, what do you think?" he asked Steve, indicating the new suit. "Once JARVIS is done with the new comm unit I can get that installed, and then you'll be good to go."

Steve gave a light sigh as his eyes swept along the dark navy blue uniform, embossed with silver-coloured stripes extending from the arms onto the chest and meeting in a single silver star, and nodded appreciatively.

"Looks good. Very… stealthy."

"Yeah, I'm guessing it'll look even better when it's on, I made sure that it'll accentuate all of your finest attributes," Tony said, winking rather slyly as he reached around to give Steve's ass a playful squeeze. Tony adored Steve in all shades of blue—actually, he adored Steve in pretty much anything, or nothing, as it were—but there was something about Steve in navy blue that got Tony even more hot and bothered than usual.

"And it matches your eyes," Tony added, shivering as a bolt of heat shot through him. "You know, when we're—" his voice broke off as Steve's cheeks flushed bright pink and he smiled that adorably boyish smile of his, the one that always pulled the dimple into his cheek, as if he didn't know exactly..."
what Tony was referring to. And Tony absolutely loved that he still had that effect on him after a year together.

"You know," Steve murmured, low and husky as he slid his warm hands around Tony's waist. "I'd like to actually get that opportunity before I have to leave tomorrow morning."

"You will, babe," Tony said, pressing a slow kiss to the underside of Steve's jaw and feeling his broad body shudder. Steve was scheduled to depart at 0-some-ungodly-hour tomorrow, way before sunrise. "I just—, I needed to get this stuff done. I couldn't let you and Natasha go on this crazy mission without the best tech that I could offer. I redesigned her Widow's bites and upgraded her suit, and I also added electromagnetic locks to your sleeve so you can hold onto your shield without using the handles. And this new comm chip will let me listen in on everything that goes on, so I can still have your back even though I'm not there with you."

"Sweetheart," Steve whispered, drawing him even closer, his breath fanning over the exposed skin of Tony's neck and forcing him to set down his coffee. "I don't need a new suit or some fancy comm chip to know that you have my back."

"I know, but this also has a transponder, so if your phone gets taken or destroyed I'll still be able to —"

"You'll be able to what, Tony?" asked Steve.

"I'll be able to fly out to wherever you are and save your ass. And the rest of you along with it," Tony said firmly. "I figured that'd be pretty obvious."

Steve was quiet for a moment, his long artist's fingers tracing light patterns across Tony's back as he continued nuzzling his neck. Tony knew Steve wasn't fond of the concept of needing saving by anyone, especially after the house bombing, but as far as he was concerned that was too damn bad.

"That would very likely blow the cover," Steve finally said.

Tony scoffed as he pulled back, his fingers gripping Steve's biceps. "Yeah, I know. But if it comes down to blowing your cover or Rumlow blowing off your head, I'll take blowing your cover in an instant."

Steve's full lips quirked into a slight smile, and he dipped his head, pressing his lips to Tony's in one of those kisses that always rendered Tony breathless.

"I brought something for you," Steve murmured once they broke apart.

"Besides the coffee? And you?"

"Yeah." He dug into the pocket of his running pants, pulling out the thin silver chain that held his Army-issued dog tags. "Back during the war, soldiers used to give these to their gals as a token of affection. A promise, if you will." Steve took Tony's hand, curling the chain into his palm and pressing the tags down, closing Tony's fingers around them. "I would've liked to have given them to you when I proposed to you, but—"

"They were kinda buried under about three tons of rubble?" Tony said, forcing the words past the lump in his throat as he stared at his closed fist. For how much Tony enjoyed teasing Steve about his 1940's genteel behaviour, he secretly adored it. He absolutely loved being courted by his fiancé, absolutely loved when Steve held doors open for him, reached out to help him when he was carrying too much stuff at once, encouraged him to eat and sleep when he was pushing himself too hard, and in general treated Tony like he was someone worthy of Steve Rogers' love.
It was something that Tony still wasn't quite used to, but that didn't mean that he didn't love it, even if it did elicit the occasional eyeroll.

"Yeah, something like that," Steve whispered. He brought Tony's closed hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles. "I was… hoping you'd wear them while I was gone."

Tony's lips twitched as he slipped the chain over his head, dropping the tags under the collar of his t-shirt where they clinked softly against the arc reactor.

"You got it, babe," he said as he wound his arms around Steve's neck, pulling him down for another deep, lingering kiss, one that pulled a light whimper from the back of Tony's throat. If only they didn't have to wake Peter up for school in less than an hour…

"You realise that I had to reschedule our first wedding suit fitting for all of this, don't you?" he asked once they broke for air. "And a couple of cake tastings, and—"

"You and Peter could still do all of those things," answered Steve. "You know I wouldn't mind."

"Yeah, except he's not the one that I'm marrying," Tony said. "And you know if they call it 'cake' then Pete's already a fan anyway, even if it's nothing more than icing-covered styrofoam. I swear that kid has absolutely no taste buds ninety-nine percent of the time."

"Not everyone has as sophisticated a palate as yours, sweetheart," Steve said with a rather impish grin. "Most of us mere mortals just like to eat our food rather than study it."

"Yeah, yeah, then he must get that from you," Tony shot back, smirking when Steve found one of his ticklish spots on his left side. "And who says you're a mere mortal, anyway? Do you ever even look in a mirror?"

"Sometimes," answered Steve, winking.

"Mmm, I guess not often enough then. 'Cause if you did then you'd know what I was talking about."

"Render is finished, sir," JARVIS said. "The chips will be completed in approximately three hours."

"Thanks, J. Once they're done make sure and assign them their own frequency, all right? I don't want anything else on this channel while Steve is gone."

"Very good, sir."

"And once they're done I'll show you how to install the backups if you need them," Tony said to Steve. "And I'm also gonna—"

"Tony," Steve interrupted. "I don't want you staying up all night every night listening in on what's probably going to turn out to be nothing. It's not—"

"Well, that's just too bad," retorted Tony. "'Cause that's what I'm gonna be doing. It's kinda the whole point of this."

Sighing, Steve dropped his forehead against Tony's, trailing his palms up and down Tony's back until they slipped underneath his t-shirt. "We have almost an hour before Peter gets up for school," he murmured. "Come back to bed with me? I missed you last night."

Heat flooded Tony's body at Steve's words, his fingers reflexively tightening on Steve's arms. For all Tony's talk about the effect he still had on Steve, he knew the effect Steve still had on him was just
as powerful, and perhaps even more so.

"Mmm, are you sure?" he asked, rather slyly. "You'll have to skip out on your run."

"I can go running after we bring him to school," whispered Steve, his lips already trailing hot kisses along Tony's jaw as his hands slipped down to squeeze Tony's ass. "Please? You made me sleep alone last night, and God, I want you so badly right now."

"Well, since you asked so nicely," Tony said, gasping as Steve hoisted him up, his lips already latched on to Tony's neck as he began walking them out of the lab. "But only if you promise to go full-on Brooklyn for me, okay? You know what that sexy accent of yours does to me."

Steve pulled back, his eyes already darkening to that navy blue colour that drove Tony mad with desire. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Tony rasped as Steve sat down on the edge of their bed with Tony straddling his lap, his lips blazing a burning hot trail across Tony's collarbone, his hands already tugging on Tony's t-shirt. "All those dropped Gs and extra Rs, shit, Steve. It's so damn hot!"

"Mmm," Steve growled against Tony's skin as his fingertips circled the arc reactor, perfectly framed by the dog tags. "Does my gorgeous fella need some lovin'?"

Tony groaned as Steve twisted them onto the bed, his fingers tangling into Steve's thick blond hair, his body aching for Steve's touch. "Damn right, baby. Now c'mere and love me."

"You gotta promise to be extra careful, okay Papa?" Peter said as he stood shivering in the cold of the early November morning, watching as Steve and Natasha finished loading the Quinjet. Clint was already on board, having volunteered to fly Steve and Natasha down to D.C. "Please?"

"You know I will, little guy," Steve replied. He crouched down in front of Peter, gathering him into one of his patented papa bear hugs, ruffling his hair as Peter's skinny arms wrapped around his neck. Peter's huge brown eyes were thick with unshed tears, and Tony bit his lip, swallowing back his own emotions so he could remain as stoic as possible for Peter's sake.

"You be careful too, Auntie Nat," Peter said as Steve released him into Natasha's arms. "Don't let Papa do anything too stupidly brave just 'cause he's a Gryffindor."

"Don't you worry, kiddo, I'll keep a close eye on him for you," Natasha said, winking at Tony. "And you too, shellhead."

"Yeah, well, you know I'll be keeping an eye on you guys," Tony said, barely able to tear his eyes away from his fiancé. Dressed in his brand-new uniform and cowl with his shield on his left arm, he made quite the dashing figure standing in the dim light of the landing pad.

"Try not to worry too much, sweetheart," Steve whispered into his ear, his right arm curling around Tony's waist. "We're gonna be fine."

"I know," Tony said with forced enthusiasm as he tilted his head up to accept Steve's kiss, ignoring their son's wrinkled nose and his own cracking heart. "'Cause I'll be watching your back."

Steve huffed against Tony's lips, shaking his head slightly. "You gonna be working on opening that USB drive?"

"Yep. As soon as I get the kid to school," said Tony. "Bruce offered to help me."
"'Kay," Steve replied. He dipped his head to kiss Tony again, his arm pressing Tony tightly against him. "Love you."

"Love you too, babe," Tony whispered. "See ya soon."

"All right, enough with all the smacking, let's get this show on the road!" Clint called from the Quinjet's door. "I got other stuff to do today besides be a transport service."

Tony rolled his eyes, kissing Steve one final time just to piss off Clint. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

Clint gave him a mischievous smile. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Whatever, Legolas," Tony grumbled as Steve and Natasha stepped onto the Quinjet. "Just be damn careful, will ya? That's precious cargo you're carrying."

"Hey, it's me," replied Clint, shooting Tony a wink as he closed the door. The engines roared to life a few seconds later, with Peter grabbing onto Tony's arm as the aircraft lifted off, flying off into the breaking dawn.

"It's like Papa's going off to war, Daddy," Peter mumbled once the Quinjet had vanished from sight. "Like Uncle James, only this seems even worse." He inhaled a shuddering breath, swiping at his nose as he looked up at Tony. "This mission, it could be so dangerous."

"I don't like it either, Pete," Tony said, hugging Peter close. "Not one bit." He kissed the top of Peter's head, breathing in the comforting scent of his green apple shampoo. "C'mon, buddy. Let's get you ready for school."

"Uh huh."

Dropping Peter off at school an hour later, with strict instructions to call Tony at the slightest indication that something wasn't right, Tony headed back up to the lab, pulling the SHIELD USB drive from its locked drawer and turning it over in his hands. He'd already had JARVIS run a bunch of tests on it, ensuring that it wasn't infected with any aggressive malware or anything that would mess with the Tower's systems.

He was just about ready to plug it into the lab's mainframe when JARVIS suddenly spoke up.

"Pardon me, sir," JARVIS said. "But the decryption bug that you placed at the Department of Defence has just returned some rather… curious information."

Tony's eyebrows shot up, the USB drive still in his trembling hand. "Curious how, JARVIS?"

"Curious in that the keywords 'Project Insight' were found, sir. I am unsure as to why a DoD official would have reason to reference a SHIELD project classified at nearly the highest level."

"Yeah, I'd agree that is rather curious," Tony replied, his heart already starting to thud. "Can you display the document where you found the keywords?"

"Not as of yet, sir, as the decryption is not yet complete. I should be able to offer more information in about three hours' time."

"Mmm. Can you at least tell me where you found it?"

"Yes, sir," said JARVIS. "It was located on a private server that belongs to Senator Stern. I was able to link to it from the main database during the decryption process."
Tony frowned at the mention of Senator Stern, the very same head of the Senate Armed Services Committee who had tried to force Tony to turn his Iron Man suits over to the government after Tony and Peter came back from Afghanistan. Aside from maybe General Ross, there was no one in the entire government or military who Tony loathed more than Stern. The man was just a first-class asshole who had never wasted an opportunity to try and make Tony's life miserable.

"So, Stern's got a private server that he's linking directly with SHIELD classified stuff," Tony mumbled. "That right there would be an arrestable offence, and I'd bet that old Fury wouldn't be too happy about it either."

"I quite agree with that assessment, sir. Also, there is another curious mention on this server as well."

"Yeah?"

"I also came across the name Rosa Varga, sir," JARVIS said.

"What?" yelped Tony, his heart leaping into his throat. "Pete's nanny? What the hell would her name be doing there? No one's seen or heard anything from her since Afghanistan!"

"I do not know, sir. Unfortunately, there is no other accompanying information as of yet, just the mention of her name."

"What the hell…" Tony muttered, squeezing his eyes closed as he recalled the frantic telephone call Rosa received only a couple of hours before Tony was set to depart for that fateful trip. How she had begged and pleaded with Tony to allow her to go, something that she'd never done before because Peter had always been her first priority. She had said so ever since Tony had hired her, way back when Tony first brought a baby Peter home from the hospital.

And Tony had never had any reason to not trust her. After all, she was the niece of Ana Jarvis, and while Tony had never personally met Ana, Edwin Jarvis had spoken with enough reverence for his deceased wife over the years that Tony never would've guessed in a thousand years that one of her relatives could have possibly wanted to betray him.

And try to hurt my boy. Oh God, what have I done?

"But—, but—," he began in a choked voice, cradling his head in his hands, struggling against the guilt threatening to overtake him. Holy shit, how could I have been so fucking blind? "If Rosa had meant to hurt Pete, there would've been plenty of opportunities for her to do something before that point, right?"

"I would agree, sir," JARVIS said tentatively. "However, without any additional information I would recommend waiting before incorrect conclusions are drawn."

"Yeah, okay…" Tony's voice trailed off as he glanced up at the clock. He didn't really have the strength or the time to think about this at the moment, Bruce was due to come up in less than an hour to start working on the drive. "All right, J, let's stick with this Project Insight for now. Can you pull it up the SHIELD databases?"

"Search returns no results, sir," JARVIS answered after a short pause.

"None?" Tony asked, confused. "That doesn't make any sense."

"I have rerun the search three separate times now, sir, with no results."

Tony huffed out a sharp breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Damn it. JARVIS, call Fury."
"Inception protocol, sir?" JARVIS asked.

"You got it," said Tony as Nick Fury's disgruntled face blinked into view.

"I hope this line is secure, Tony," he said. "I'm trying to keep a low profile here."

"You know it damn well is," Tony snapped. "Why the hell are there no records of this Project Insight in any of the SHIELD databases?"

Fury's eyebrows knitted together as he tapped the computer screen in front of him, his frown growing deeper by the second. "Looks like all record of it has been erased," he finally said. "And I wish I could say that I'm surprised, but I'm not. Good thing I got that intel to you when I did."

"Ah huh," muttered Tony. "And who could've done that?"

"There's only a handful of people who have higher clearance than me, Tony," Fury said in a low voice. "And out of those people, only one of them who would have the access available to erase the records."

"Yeah. And who might that be?" Tony asked.

"Alexander Pierce," Fury answered. "He's the World Security Council Secretary, and the former director of SHIELD."

"Before you?"

"That's right. He appointed me to take over as Director when he was appointed to the Council."

Tony tapped his chin, pressure building in his chest like he'd just been punched by Hulk. "You got any reason to believe that he's dirty?"

"I'm starting to think so," replied Fury after a short pause, not without a touch of melancholy. "I've known Pierce a long time, pulled him out of some situations that were pretty damn ugly. I can't imagine why he'd turn dirty, but I can't figure out who else it could possibly be. All the evidence seems to point to him."

"Goddamnit, Nick!" Tony barked. "And now Steve and Natasha are out there with one of this lunatic's lackeys who's gonna try to do who-knows-what with them, and we're just supposed to sit here and let it happen?"

"Both Rogers and Romanoff are well aware of the risks, Tony," Fury said. "And dare I say that I'm pretty sure they can both hold their own."

"And dare I say that that man is my fiancé, and that I don't fucking appreciate you sending him on some wild-goose chase when you could've figured out who the bad guys were from your goddamn desk!" Tony cried. "What the hell, Nick?"

"Figuring out who the bad guys are is a hell of a long way from actually taking them down, Tony!" retorted Fury. "Which is exactly what Rogers and Romanoff have a chance to accomplish!"

Tony inhaled a deep, shaky breath, clenching his hands into tight fists. His chest felt like it was being squeezed in a vise, that suffocating sensation of drowning that always caused him to panic.

*Not now, goddamnit!*

"I swear to God, if anything happens to him—"
"I'm not gonna let that happen, Tony," Fury said, more gentle and caring than Tony had ever heard from him before. "I know how important Steve is to you. And to Peter."

"He's—, he's the best thing to ever happen to me besides Pete," Tony whispered as his belly swooped in fear, hating himself for being so open and vulnerable in front of Nick Fury, of all people. *What the hell was I thinking, letting him go on this mission?* "Nick, I can't—, I can't lose him."

"And I'm going to try my best to see that you don't," replied Fury. "Now, you still got that USB drive?"

"Yeah, I have it here," Tony choked out.

"Be careful when you open it. I tried to read it for almost an entire day before I finally gave up. It has some of the strongest encryption on it that I've ever seen."

"Yeah. Bruce and I are both gonna tackle it," Tony said, scrubbing his palm down his face. "Hopefully we'll be able to get something off it. It might help a bit if you clued me in to exactly what this whole Project Insight is, though."

Fury's lips twitched as he tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him. "Three next generation helicarriers synched to a network of targeting satellites," he began. "Once they're in the air, they don't ever have to come down."

"And these helicarriers, they're outfitted with my turbines?" asked Tony.

"That's right," Fury said. "Allowing for continuous sub-orbital flight."

*Holy shit.* "You know there's no way I would've built those engines if I'd had any idea—"

"Yes, I do," said Fury. "Things were, shall we say, a bit different when I first placed the order, which is one reason why I had Romanoff and Barton gather that intel."

Tony's eyes widened. "So you knew they were gonna be used for this Project Insight?"

"I did. But like I said, the objectives for the project evidently were changed in the time it took to actually build the helicarriers."

"Okay, so… what the hell happened?"

"The targeting algorithm. The high-range precision guns mounted on those carriers can eliminate up to one thousand hostile per second, and so—"

"Holy shit, Nick!" Tony exclaimed. "One thousand per second? And they used to call me the Merchant of Death?"

"That's correct, which is why the accuracy of the targeting algorithm is extremely important to get correct. Wouldn't you agree?"

Tony nodded slowly, willing himself to stay calm. He couldn't afford to lose it now. "And let me guess, this is where things went wonky?"

Fury steepled his hands under his chin. "You might say that. The evidence acquired by Agents Barton and Romanoff right before the Malibu bombing was the first indication that the targeting algorithm had been… modified."

"Okay, modified by who? Pierce?"
"That's one of the answers I don't yet have, Tony," answered Fury. "And one that I'm hoping Rogers and Romanoff will be able to uncover. I would suspect now that Pierce was involved, but he's not tech-savvy enough to do this himself. And neither is Agent Rumlow, or any of the other STRIKE team members."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Tony. "And neither is Senator Stern."

"Stern? What's he got to do with anything?"

"JARVIS uncovered a mention of Project Insight on a private server belonging to Stern," Tony said. "He's still working on decrypting more information."

"Well, isn't that… interesting," Fury said. "So it would appear that these moles—or should I call them ghosts?—aren't limited exclusively to SHIELD."

"Starting to look that way."

Fury sat up abruptly in his chair, rapping his palm onto the desk. "And I'm starting to think that it's time for me to blow this joint. My presence here has been tenuous at best since that damn metal-armed man attacked me on the freeway, and now… I'm thinking that I might be more useful elsewhere. And likely have a longer lifespan."

Tony shook his head, biting back the retort echoing through his mind. So you're gonna go run and hide while Steve's out there risking his life? Doesn't that just figure!

"How will I get in touch with you?" he asked instead.

"Hill will know where I am, you can ask her if the need arises," Fury replied. "I'll see you around, Tony."

"Yeah, see ya."

As soon as the screen went blank Tony slumped into his chair, tears stinging his eyes as all the breath whooshed from his lungs in one fell swoop. He felt like he was watching Steve climb a hill built over a ticking time bomb, unable to do anything to prevent the love of his life from getting caught up in the explosion.

Things must really be bad if Nick Fury was wanting to up and run. And now with the possibility that Peter's nanny had been working for the bad guys all along, but still not knowing exactly who the bad guys were—

"JARVIS, what's Peter's current location?" Tony demanded.

"Master Peter is currently attending his physics class, sir," replied JARVIS. "His vital signs are within his normal parameters."

His normal parameters, now adjusted for the fact that Peter's body temp could no longer hold steady without multiple layers of clothing, a result of his DNA becoming integrated with that of a spider.

A goddamn spider. What in the hell?

You can't make this shit up.

And the fact that Senator Stern of all people potentially knew more about Peter's new enhancements and where they came from than Tony did was enough to make Tony's blood burn with anger.
"And how many security guys are stationed around the school?"

"There are a total of six, sir. Two at each of the entrances, and two more hidden at other strategic points."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks, J."

"You are most welcome, sir. And Dr Banner wishes to report that he is on his way up to the penthouse."

"Good," Tony replied. He let out a heavy sigh as he picked up the USB drive, wondering if it contained any information on the targeting algorithm that Fury had mentioned. Because if these helicarriers were as deadly as Fury was saying, whoever controlled the targeting algorithm was really the one with all the power.

"Good morning, Tony," Bruce said as he entered the lab, carrying a pile of disheveled books and rumpled papers that was topped with a precariously perched cup of coffee. The sight was almost enough to bring an amused smile to Tony's lips. All horribleness of the circumstances aside, he did enjoy working with Bruce. The man was a genius, if not a bit absent-minded, and Tony was fascinated by him, as he often was with other brilliant people.

"Hey, big guy," Tony said, hoping his voice belied the fear threatening to crush him. So much for being made of iron. "Ready to get started?"

"Think so," replied Bruce as he set down his pile on the counter, grabbing the coffee cup right before it had a chance to topple off the top. He glanced over at Tony over the top of his glasses. "You holding up okay?"

"Course," Tony said automatically, wincing as he pictured Steve's eyebrows of disappointment in his mind's eye. "I'll be fine," he added as he plugged the USB drive into the lab's mainframe, tapping his chin as JARVIS began running his decryption programs. "Let's just get this done."

Let's get this done so we can get them home.

"What'cha looking at?" Ned asked as he sat down next to Peter at their lunch table where Peter was intently studying his phone. "What's that blinking blue light mean?"

Peter's heart flipped in his chest as he quickly swiped his thumb across the screen, cursing himself for allowing Ned to get close enough to see it. He should've known not to check it out in the open like this.

"Peter?" Ned asked, now peeking intently at Peter's face. "What's wrong?"

"It's my papa," Peter admitted. "He… um… had to leave this morning, on a mission, and—"

"Oh wow, that's so cool!" exclaimed Ned. "Another Avengers mission?" He leaned closer, whispering, "Are there more aliens coming?"

"No, no more aliens, at least not that I know of, and it's not an Avengers mission or my Dad would've gone with him," said Peter. "Papa's… helping out one of the SHIELD teams with something. He and Auntie Nat left early this morning."

"Oh. Well, that doesn't sound all that dangerous. More like a business trip, and my dad goes on business trips all the time," said Ned. "And isn't SHIELD the good guys anyway?"
"Yeah, they're the good guys," Peter choked out past the sudden lump in his throat, trying desperately not to cry. *God, I wish it was only just a business trip!* Dad used to go on business trips all the time, and still occasionally did, but trying to filter out hostile moles inside SHIELD was a lot more complicated and dangerous just a simple business trip.

"So, then what's the blue blinking dot for?" Ned asked.

Peter sighed as he bit his lip, glancing around to make sure they couldn't be overheard. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Um… sure?" Ned said with wide eyes. "What is it?"

"My papa has a transponder built into his uniform," whispered Peter. "And I figured out how to tap into the frequency for it so I could keep an eye on him."

"Oohh, dude, I thought you weren't supposed to be tinkering around with your dad's UI anymore," Ned said warily. "Didn't you get into huge trouble for doing that that one time?"

"Yeah," Peter said, guilt hitting him like a sledgehammer. "But… JARVIS promised not to tell, and I just want to make sure that Papa's okay, that's all. My dad is monitoring him too, so it's not just me."

*But I know Dad wouldn't tell me anything if I asked, so…*

"Mmm, okay," said Ned. "As long as you don't get into trouble again."

"I won't," Peter said firmly. *Cause I learned how to hide my tracks a lot better this time.*

Pocketing his phone, Peter tried to keep up with Ned's rather enthusiastic small talk about the latest episodes of Arrow while they ate, his legs bouncing impatiently the whole time. There was no way he was going to be able to concentrate on much of anything until Papa was home safely.

*I wish they'd let me help them,* Peter thought as he took a sip of his milk. *I'm strong now, I can see and hear better than anyone, I can climb walls, I can sense danger… I even saved Papa's life.*

*I'd—, I could be a pretty good Avenger.*

Not that his dads would ever let him even think about it in a million years. To them, Peter was still the same skinny, scrawny kid that he'd always been.

*But… what if I wasn't? What if I was something… more?*

"Dude?" Ned suddenly asked, breaking through Peter's muddled thoughts. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Huh?" Peter stammered, shivering as a cold sweat broke out along his hairline. "Um… what?"

"I was asking if you thought your Uncle Clint could beat Oliver Queen in an archery contest," said Ned.

"Oh, absolutely," Peter said without hesitation. "If only for the fact that Uncle Clint's equipment is better."

"'Cause your dad makes it?" Ned asked.

"Yep," Peter replied proudly. "He makes all the tech for the Avengers, and it's always the best of the
"Yeah, I s'pose not, Oliver's not really all that smart," agreed Ned. "Felicity's the one with all the brains on that show, but she's not a mechanic like your dad."

"Nope," Peter said as he pulled out his phone, checking Papa's transponder location. He and Auntie Nat were out over the water now, heading towards Europe. Papa had mentioned something about a possible mission in the Indian Ocean when he was talking to Dad before they left, so they were probably on their way there.

"I bet you're bummed that your Auntie Nat had to go too," Ned said as they exited the lunchroom. "Wasn't she giving you ballet lessons?"

"Jesus, now the little Prince Peter is getting ballet lessons?" Flash Thompson said as he came up behind Peter and Ned, knocking into Peter with his shoulder as he passed. "Does that come with the whole gay superhero dads package too?"

"Shut the hell up, Flash!" Peter snapped, his hands clenching into fists and fighting the urge to punch Flash's lights out. He hated anyone talking smack about his dads even more than them talking smack about himself. "Don't you dare talk shit about my dads!"

"Don't you dare talk shit about my dads," Flash singsonged back at him, his face twisted into a sneer. "Bet Captain America wouldn't wanna hear you swearing like that, would he, little Prince? I bet he doesn't even know how to spell shit!"

"Good grief, Flash, you're an idiot every single day of the week," Ned shot back. "Couldn't you take a day off every once in awhile? And shit's not even that hard to spell anyway!"

"Mr Leeds!" the stern voice of Principal Morita suddenly said from behind Peter and Ned, causing them both to whip around as Flash tiptoed quickly away. "Do I have to remind you about this school's policy on foul language?"

Peter gulped as they turned to face Mr Morita, standing with his arms crossed in front of him. "Um… no, sir," said Ned. "No reminder is necessary, sir."

"Good," said Mr Morita. "Then I trust that you and Mr Stark know the location of your next class?"

"Yes, sir," Peter said, clearing his throat. "We do."

"Very well. Then I suggest you be on your way, Mr Leeds, while I have a word with Mr Stark here."

"Um, okay, sir," Ned said with wide eyes, shooting Peter an apologetic look as he headed down the hallway.

"Look, Peter," Mr Morita said in a low voice, once Ned was out of earshot. "I know you've been through a lot lately with some of your medical testing, and because of that, I've been asked by both of your fathers to keep an extra close eye on you."

"Um… okay," Peter replied, inwardly rolling his eyes. Doesn't that just figure!

"But that's still no excuse for mouthing off to another student. Everyone needs to follow the same rules here, all right?"

"Yes, sir. I will."
"Good." Mr Morita gave him a kind smile. "Now, get to class."

"Uh huh," Peter mumbled as he turned, barely managing to step inside his classroom before the bell rang, his cheeks burning with indignation and embarrassment. It wasn't bad enough that Dad and Papa and the rest of the Avengers already watched him like a hawk, now he had the freaking school principal hovering over him too.

Peter kept his eyes low as he slid into his seat, not even attempting to pay attention to what the teacher was saying as his mind swirled with ideas.

Maybe it's time for me to start showing everyone what I'm capable of, he thought. What's the point of having all these crazy enhancements if I never get to use them?

Opening the screen for his laptop, Peter slid his notebook over the keyboard, opening it to a clean page. He nibbled on the cap of his pen as he thought for a moment, then proceeded to start sketching. He wasn't nearly as good of an artist as Papa, but that was okay, he only really needed a basic blueprint to get started. Much like Dad, Peter was better at designing stuff as he built it rather than following a strict set of instructions.

He played with the design for the entire fifty-minute period, smiling in satisfaction at his results as he closed the notebook before someone could get a glimpse of the page he'd been working on.

The page that said, WEB SHOOTERS in big block letters.

Because if Peter was part spider now, then what was stopping him from becoming even more like one? And maybe even trying to help some people in the process?

"Steve, I swear I am this close to flying the hell out there," Tony said, clutching Steve's dog tags through the fabric of his shirt as he stared at the monitor in front of him. "I've got all of my new implants ready to go, so all I'd need to do is inject them and test out the prehensile suit, and then—"

"And that would be a very bad idea, Tony," Steve said firmly, his phone jiggling in his hand as he sank onto a stained and sagging couch in the disgusting-looking safehouse where they were holed up. It was well past three in the morning in New York, and Steve and Natasha had just returned to land after cleaning up some mess some idiot had made over something stupid out in the Indian Ocean, a mess that had allowed Natasha to break away from the fighting long enough to gather some more intel on the possible mole infiltration.

"Right now Rumlow is none the wiser about our real purpose here, but if he gets a hint of any of this, it'll be all over very fast."

Tony huffed out a sharp breath, cursing Rumlow and Pierce and Stern and whoever the hell else decided that they wanted to suddenly rule the world. Listening in on the fight that Steve and Natasha had just been a part of and not intervene had taken nearly every ounce of strength that Tony had, and he was exhausted from it.

"Fine," he said. "But I swear that dude you were fighting against sounded like he was about twelve feet tall."

"He was pretty big," Steve acknowledged with a nod. "But nothing I couldn't handle. The new magnets on my sleeve are pretty helpful."

"Well, at least there's that," Tony said, not wanting to start an argument over it. While Steve had come out on top during his recent skirmish, it had not exactly been the cakewalk he was making it
sound like. His blond hair was a mess, his face was covered in dust and grime, and even in the dim, yellowish light of the safehouse Tony could make out a smattering of bruises across his knuckles.

"You got anything useful for us, Tony?" Natasha asked as she sat down next to Steve.

"I wish," Tony grumbled. "Bruce and I have gone through that USB drive with the finest fine-toothed comb that JARVIS can offer over the last three days, and we haven't really turned up much of anything. All that's on there are the blueprints for the new helicarriers and a few other things."

"What other things?" asked Natasha as she pulled off one of her boots.

"Not too much," Tony said with a sigh. "Some close-ups of the gun designs, the size of the shells, things like that."

"Nothing regarding Loki's sceptre?" Natasha asked.

"Not that we were able to find, and we pretty much stripped the thing bare," answered Tony. "You think you got any new intel for us?"

"Hopefully," said Natasha, grunting as she pulled off her other boot. "You and Bruce ready for it?"

"Yeah, why not. It'll take half a day to get decrypted anyway."

"Got it," she said. She handed another USB drive to Steve, who plugged it into the port in his phone. "I'll leave you two alone for a few minutes."

"Thanks, Natasha." Steve waited until she had walked away before turning his face back to the screen. "How's Peter doing?"

"Oh, you know," Tony said, waving a dismissive hand. "He's missing you like crazy but trying not to show it. Been hiding in his room ever since you left designing some new something-or-other, probably something he's planning on for the next science contest."

"That's good that he's keeping busy," said Steve.

"Yeah," Tony muttered. "Too bad it's not helping his sleep any."

Steve's face fell, and Tony felt a sharp pang of guilt. "I didn't mean it that way, Steve," he said. "He's just… Pete's worried about you."

"And you?" Steve asked. "Are you getting any sleep?"

Tony's eyebrows knitted together. "What do you think?"

"Tony…" Steve said, his shoulders sagging. "It's no wonder Peter isn't—"

"Look, just get done with whatever the hell it is that you and Natasha need to get done with and get back here, all right? That's the only way either of us are gonna be fine."

"We're trying, Tony," answered Steve. "But this will all just be a big waste of time if we don't at least find something of use while we're out here."

"Yeah, I know," grumbled Tony, pinching the bridge of his nose. His coffee had gone cold over an hour ago, and the kitchen had seemed so far away at the time that he hadn't bothered to refresh it. "Once this new data comes in I'll get started on that, hopefully it'll lead somewhere."
"Sounds good," said Steve, his beautiful full lips stretching into a slight smile. "I'm going to try and catch some sleep now, sweetheart. You might think about doing the same."

"You're not worried about Rumlow or one of his goons trying to knife you or something while you're sleeping?" Tony asked. "Cause I wouldn't put something like that past that guy."

"Natasha and I have been alternating keeping watch," Steve answered. "And tonight it's her night for first watch."

"Yeah, okay," replied Tony. From what Tony had seen, Natasha could definitely hold her own against Rumlow, at least long enough for Steve to wake up. "Night."

"Goodnight. I love you."

"Love you too, babe."

As soon as the screen went blank Tony slumped down in his chair, kneading his temples with his fingers. He was exhausted, but he also knew there would be no way he'd be able to get any sleep. Not without Steve there in the bed with him.

"JARVIS, that new data coming in?"

"Yes, sir," replied JARVIS. "But the decryption process will be slow, there is a rather large amount of information."

"Yeah, okay," muttered Tony as he picked up his coffee cup and took a sip, grimacing as the cold, bitter liquid hit his tongue. "Tell ya what, J. Pull up the Insight helicarrier specs again while I go get a refill, yeah?"

"If you insist, sir."

Returning to the lab with fresh coffee in hand, Tony blinked at the large holographic model of the Insight carrier, glowing blue with its massive gun array outlined in bright orange. Stepping underneath the holographic projection, Tony examined the targeting systems with a critical eye.

"JARVIS, can you let Steve know that it looks like these carriers are satellite-triggered?" he said. "Just send as a silent text, don't wanna wake him up if he's sleeping."

"Very good, sir. Captain Rogers' current vital signs do indicate a pattern of light sleep."

"Even more reason to trust Natasha," Tony mumbled under his breath. There would be no way Steve would be able to sleep under Natasha's watch if he didn't implicitly trust her. "And... that means if I'm able to figure out where these satellites are located, it might give me a clue as to who's trying to run the show. JARVIS, can you pull a list of all recent satellite launches from the DoD databases? Maybe we can follow the paper trail, if there is one. Wouldn't put it past these guys to try and launch something into Earth orbit without approval."

"Just a moment, sir."

"I am not finding any records of any satellite launches within the last two years, sir," JARVIS replied a moment later.

Tony's shoulders sagged. "Worth a shot. I still don't get why the carriers be launching if the targeting satellites weren't ready though—, hold on. You still got that link to Stern's private server?"
"I do, sir."

"Search that server for the records," demanded Tony, taking a huge gulp of his coffee, sputtering as some of it attempted to go down the wrong pipe.

"There is one record of a launch that occurred approximately one month ago, sir," JARVIS said. "Eight satellites in total."

"Ah huh. And where were they launched from?"

"It appears the satellites were launched from the middle of the Indian Ocean," said JARVIS. "From an anchored ship."

Tony's belly swooped at the mention of the Indian Ocean. "Shit, J, isn't that where Steve and Natasha just were?"

"That is correct."

"Okay, so... what the hell?"

"I am unable to come up with an appropriate reason why there would be a need for Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff to return to that location."

"Unless they're launching additional satellites," murmured Tony. "With a new targeting algorithm." He gave his head a light shake. "Send that info to Steve as well, no rush."

"Very good, sir."

Taking another sip of his coffee, Tony squinted as he stepped closer to one of the orange-outlined holographic guns. There was something eerily familiar about the design of the barrel, something he'd only seen in—"

"Holy shit, JARVIS!" Tony exclaimed, stumbling backwards so quickly that he nearly spilled his coffee. "These are my fucking guns!" He pointed to the holographic turret with a shaking finger. "That's—, that's my design!"

There was a pause as JARVIS analysed the design, comparing it to the catalogue of former Stark Industries weapons.

"You are correct, sir," he finally said. "While the design has been slightly modified, it is far too similar to one of the former Stark Industries models to be a likely coincidence."

Tony clapped his hand to his forehead, so hard that it stung. "Goddamnit. I can't believe I didn't notice this before."

"Perhaps the fact that you've been awake for nearly seventy-two hours has something to do with that, sir?" JARVIS said, rather reproachfully.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, so that has to mean that the Ten Rings are involved in this, doesn't it? I mean, who else would know my proprietary design? I know you and Pepper would've told me if there'd been any security breaches."

"There have been zero breaches in security of any of the Stark Industries systems or servers since you took over as CEO, sir," said JARVIS.

"Which means this information had to come from someone who'd seen the guns up close," Tony
said. "Which means it had to have come from either the Ten Rings or the military, and I know it
didn't come from the military 'cause there's no way Rhodey would've allowed that to happen." He
pressed his fist to his chest, gripping the dog tags hanging beneath his shirt. "So it really is the Ten
Rings who's orchestrating all of this."

"I agree it does appear that way, sir," JARVIS said. "However, may I point out that there has been
no appearance or word from any of the Ten Rings factions ever since you destroyed several of their
leaders at Gulmira."

"That probably just means that they went into hiding. Crawled back into their caves to lick their
wounds for awhile," insisted Tony. He ran a hand through his hair, cringing at how greasy it felt. He
really could've used a shower, and he supposed it couldn't hurt to try and lie down for a bit,
especially if Steve was sleeping too. If nothing else at least Steve's pillow would still smell like him.
"Did you send this all to Steve?"

"Yes, sir."

"And how long will it take to decrypt the new stuff coming in?"

"Approximately six hours, sir."

"All right, then I guess I'll go and clean up a bit," Tony said as he gulped down the rest of his coffee,
setting the cup down on the cluttered countertop. "Let me know if anything pops up, yeah?"

"Of course, sir."

A loud crash startled Peter from his tenuous sleep, and he shot bolt upright on his bed, his heart
thudding against his ribcage.

"JARVIS? What's going on?"

"Mr Stark is testing his new armour, Master Peter," replied JARVIS. "And it is… going about as
well as you might expect."

"He's testing it inside the lab?" Peter asked, jumping as another crashing noise came from the
direction of the lab, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. "What the hell is he doing in
there?"

"As I said, Master Peter, Mr Stark is performing a test of his new prehensile armour—"

But Peter was on his feet before JARVIS could finish, stumbling towards the door and racing down
the hallway just in time to watch his father duck to avoid being slammed in the head by a flying piece
of armour, which proceeded to embed itself into the storage cabinet of one of his other suits, not too
far from where DUM-E was cowering in fear in the corner.

"Slow it down just a little bit, JARVIS," Dad said as another component flew towards him, attaching
to his thigh and wrapping around. "Yeah, I guess we can work on the speed a bit later."

"Dad!" Peter yelped as Dad was nearly knocked backwards and then forwards again by the next two
pieces. "Be careful!"

But it was as if Dad hadn't even heard Peter as he just stood back up, balancing himself with his
repulsors and stared down the final component. His face mask.
"C'mon, I'm not scared of you," he said, almost like he was taunting the armour to give him its best shot. The mask proceeded to lift itself up from the table, hovering in midair for a few seconds before turning completely upside-down as it flew towards him. Peter's jaw dropped as he watched his father leap from the floor, flipping in midair as he caught the mask, and landing in his signature Iron Man pose.

"Whoa," Peter breathed, impressed despite himself. He was just about ready to start applauding when the component stuck in the storage cabinet worked itself loose and flew towards his father, hitting him in the small of his back and sending him flying onto the floor, the armour pieces scattering around him.

"Dad!" Peter cried as he raced towards him, gathering him into his arms as Dad winced in pain. There was blood trickling down his face from a cut by his left eye—why was it always his left eye? "Are you okay? What're you doing in here?"

"What am I doing—, what're you doing awake?" Dad asked as his bleary eyes finally focused in on Peter. "It's gotta be—"

"It's like three in the morning, Dad," said Peter. "And there's no way I could sleep with all of the racket going on in here anyway!"

Dad huffed out a sharp breath, running his palm down his face. "I must've forgot to have JARVIS soundproof the lab. I'm sorry, buddy."

"Yeah, well, it's not easy to think at all when you've only had like three hours of sleep in the last week," Peter said. He grabbed the first-aid kit off the counter and proceeded to clean Dad's cut. "You know Papa's not gonna like it—"

"What Papa doesn't know won't hurt him," Dad said, groaning and clutching his side as he sat up. He'd probably bruised a rib or two when he fell. "And it's not like I can just sit around here and do nothing while he's out there risking his life!"

Yeah, I s'pose I can understand that, Peter thought. 'Cause I feel the same way. But at least you can do something about it.

"Still, you should probably try and take a nap or something," he said. "Otherwise I'll have to tell JARVIS to deactivate the coffeemaker."

"That's actually not a bad idea, Master Peter. Thank you," JARVIS said.

"Don't you even think about messing with my coffee!" snapped Dad as he pushed himself up to his feet. "Not unless you want to be responsible for repurposing DUM-E into another coffeemaker."

Hmph. "What even is all this?" asked Peter, giving DUM-E what he hoped was a reassuring shake of the head.

"It's my prehensile suit," said Dad. "I finally got all the bugs worked out with the implants, so I was testing out the armour."

Peter's eyebrows shot up in both horror and fascination as he noticed the injection marks lining his father's arms. "Implants? You mean like cybernetics?"

"Yeah, kinda like that," answered Dad. "Just trying to make the suit-up process a bit faster."

"But… is it safe?"
"Well, I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"Mmm." Peter had to admit that it was brilliant, as were most of Dad's ideas and inventions. If only he wasn't so darn impatient all the time. "And I suppose JARVIS tried to talk you out of it 'cause something wasn't quite ready?"

"I did indeed, Master Peter," said JARVIS. "Perhaps you would like to look through the safety briefing that your father chose to entirely ignore?"

"Sure, I can do that."

"Thank you."

"Yeah, yeah, just keep ganging up on me," grumbled Dad. "Go on, I don't mind."

"Wanting you to not get killed by your own armour and thinking you need some sleep is not exactly ganging up on you," Peter retorted. "And I know that you know that I'm right."

"Well, you always were the smart one," Dad said, ruffling Peter's messy hair. "C'mon, bud. You should get back to bed."

Peter let out a heavy sigh, shivering as the images from his latest nightmare echoed through his mind. It was the same one he'd been having ever since Papa had left on his mission, the one where he saw Dad and Papa fighting against not only one Winter Soldier, but six of them.

And they were losing. Badly.

"Will you—, will you come and sit with me?" Peter asked, cringing at how meek he sounded. "Please? Just for a little while?" He knew it was pitiful that he still needed his dad or papa's help to fall asleep sometimes, but right then he didn't really care.

"You have another bad dream?" Dad asked, his face falling when Peter gave him a sheepish nod. He curled his right arm around Peter's shoulders, his left hand still pressing into his side. "Sure, buddy."

"Thanks."

"Here you go, bud," Dad whispered as he settled on Peter's bed, holding open his arm. Peter immediately crawled over to him, settling his head against Dad's chest, his ear pressed up against the arc reactor, listening to its comforting hum as Dad's fingers stroked through his hair. "Better?"

"Loads. Thank you."

They were quiet for several minutes as Peter's tense body began to relax, his eyelids growing heavy. As he stole a quick peek up at his father Peter noticed that his eyes were closed too, his head tipped back against the headboard. Dad really was exhausted, and as usual, was trying to just work through it instead of dealing with it. And with Papa not around to "encourage" Dad to get any sleep, he wasn't getting any.

And, knowing Papa, he wasn't getting much sleep either. And while he could function a bit better without it than Dad could, the mission he was on was dangerous enough that even the slightest amount of extra fatigue could turn out to be deadly.

*Please, Papa,* Peter thought as he drifted off. *Please, come home soon.*

"So we got back to D.C. and Fury's not here," Steve said in a loud whisper, throwing a furtive
glance over his shoulder. "And Rumlow isn't too happy about it."

"Yeah, well, that's no shocker," Tony replied. "Fury told me that Hill would know where he is if we need him."

"Copy that," answered Steve. "Is Peter at school?"

"Yeah. He's looking forward to the weekend though. Clint offered to take him to see a movie on Saturday afternoon."

"Oh? That's really nice of him."

"Yeah, it's got an archer in it, so I'm not all that surprised," Tony said. "So with Fury gone then what's the next move? I would think Rumlow would release you guys if there's no more instructions coming from the top, even if he wasn't exactly following them."

"I don't know yet, Tony," Steve said with a heavy sigh. "We haven't exactly accomplished much, but I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

"Yeah, okay," Tony muttered. "Just... be careful? With Fury out of the picture there's really nothing holding Rumlow back from trying something stupid."

"I will. See you soon."

"Yeah," Tony whispered, his heart clenching as the screen went blank. "JARVIS, put Steve's comm chip on the speakers."

"Yes, sir."

A burst of static filled the air, followed by the sound of Steve's heavy footsteps echoing against a polished floor as Tony tapped his monitor. He was still trying to work through the new information sent by Natasha, but it had been extremely slow going. The information was protected by some sort of AI, something that neither Tony nor Bruce had ever seen before, and the fact that he couldn't seem to crack it was really starting to piss him off. Every time they seemed to get somewhere, the thing started to rewrite itself, erasing everything they'd managed to accomplish.

"Operations Control," he heard Steve say.

"Confirmed," replied a mechanical-sounding female voice, one that Tony recognised as the elevator operator in the Triskelion. He let out a smirk; JARVIS sounded so much cooler than that.

A few seconds passed in silence until Tony heard the elevator doors opening again, followed by the footsteps of at least three large people.

"STRIKE personnel on site," came the voice of Agent Rumlow. "Hey, Cap."

"Rumlow," replied Steve, in that aloof-but-still-polite voice he always used when he didn't trust someone.

"Forensics," said Rumlow, waiting until the elevator's confirmation to continue. "I've scheduled a debriefing in fifteen minutes down in Ops Control, Cap."

"That's where I'm heading," said Steve.

"You need to confer with Romanoff at all beforehand?" Rumlow asked, his slimy voice raising all the hair on the back of Tony's neck.
"Damnit, Steve, just take the stairs."

"Nah, that won't be necessary," answered Steve.

"Okay. Hey, how's that kid of yours doing? What's his name again?" asked Rumlow, causing Tony's eyes to widen and then immediately narrow. *Oh no you didn't just try and do that!*

"His name is Peter, and he's doing well. Thank you for asking."

"Steve, I really don't like this," Tony muttered under his breath. "Get off the goddamn elevator."

"That's good," Rumlow said. "It's gotta be hard on him though, you being gone like this."

"Oh, he's a pretty tough kid. I think he'll be okay," said Steve, and Tony could practically hear the frown he was wearing. Steve knew that something wasn't right, but he was probably at least thirty stories up with nowhere to go. Rumlow was playing dirty.

The elevator stopped again, and Tony counted the footsteps of at least three more people as they entered. No, this was definitely *not* good.

"JARVIS, display Steve's vitals," Tony ordered, gulping against the knot in his throat as Steve's heart rate and blood pressure appeared on the monitor, both slightly elevated. "Goddamnit why didn't I make this comm chip a two way?"

"To do so would've taken at least two more days of fabrication, sir," answered JARVIS. "Which I don't believe you would have been able to accomplish given your limited time frame for construction."

"Yeah, that question was rhetorical, J!" Tony snapped, leaning closer to the monitor. "C'mon, Steve! Get off the damn elevator!"

There was a pause of several seconds, during which Tony didn't even allow himself to blink. "Any chance of tapping into the cameras in that elevator shaft, JARVIS?"

"I could make an attempt, sir, but it's unlikely that it would be successful given the time constraints."

"Go ahead and attempt anyway, maybe we'll get lucky," said Tony, just as Steve's voice came through the speakers.

"Before we get started," he said. "Does anyone want to get out?"

*You goddamn stubborn soldier—*

"Oh, shit!" Tony exclaimed as Steve's heart rate spiked and he cried out, hit by something that sounded like a souped-up cattle prod. "Damnit, JARVIS, I need those cameras!"

"Not likely, sir!" JARVIS replied over the thudding sounds of impacting fists and kicking feet, interspersed with an emergency alarm klaxon and Steve's grunts of pain, each of them tearing off a tiny piece of Tony's heart.

"Whoa, big guy," Rumlow suddenly said, struggling for breath. The elevator had fallen silent, Steve must've managed to finish off the rest already. "I just want you to know, Cap, this isn't personal!"

Tony gasped as he heard the horrible buzzing sound of the cattle prod again, shuddering as Rumlow struck Steve and he cried out. Whatever that thing was, it sure packed a wallop. Less than three seconds later a loud *crash* came over the speakers, followed by a thudding noise, like the sound of a
"It kinda feels personal," Steve said, panting like he'd just finished one of his runs, followed directly by, "I'm all right, Tony."

"Like hell you are!" Tony rasped, as if Steve could hear him. "You're still in a massive building surrounded by hostiles!"

_Damn, now I'm even starting to sound like Steve._

"Captain Rogers' phone survived significant damage during the attack, sir," JARVIS said. "Would you like me to connect you?"

"Yes, damn it!" Tony yelped, rapping his hand on the counter as JARVIS placed the call. "Steve, you gotta get the hell out of there!"

"I'm working on it!" Steve shot back, grunting like he was lifting something heavy. "Not a lot of options at this point!"

"You have nowhere to go, Rogers!" a muffled voice suddenly said. "Open the door!"

"Honey, that entire building is gonna be out to get you now," Tony said. "You got any weapons on you?"

"The elevator's stuck between floors, Tony," Steve replied. "And I'm not just gonna start shooting at people unless I know that they're hostile. I can't believe that everyone in this building is working for the moles."

"Then how in the hell are you gonna get out?"

Tony's heart sank when Steve didn't answer right away. "Oh no, don't you dare—!"

He was cut off by the ear-splitting crash of shattering glass, followed a few seconds later by a bone-crushing impact that Tony felt almost as much as he heard.

"Always have to be so damn dramatic, don't you?" he grumbled. "Jesus, babe."

"Not really the time for that, Tony," Steve snapped, groaning in pain. "Tell Natasha to get ahold of Hill, I'll meet up with them once I can."

"Yeah, and as soon as I can get Rhodey out here to watch Pete I'm coming to find you. My new suit is ready, and—"

"Not yet," Steve said in his Captain's voice. _Damn that Captain's voice! _"I need you and Bruce to crack that data first. None of this will mean anything without it."

Tony's belly swooped. _And now isn't really the time to be going off alone! _"Steve, I don't know if I —"

"We need that data, Tony! Please, don't argue with me on this!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay," muttered Tony. "I'll get Bruce back up here ASAP."

"Thank you. I need to go now," Steve called over the roar of a revving motorcycle. "I'll see you soon."
The call cut off, replaced by the feed from the comm chip, which was nothing more than the noise of the motorcycle's engine.

"JARVIS, send to Natasha to get in touch with Maria Hill," Tony said. "And get ahold of Rhodey, I want him out here like right now."

"Very good, sir."

Tony slumped into a chair, scrubbing at his eyes with his palms. "And once that's done, get in touch with Bruce. We need to get back to work on this data."

"Already done, sir. Dr Banner reports he will be up in a few minutes."

"All right," Tony said with conviction. "Then let's get going."

"So, where's the fire this time?" Bruce said as he entered the lab, the sheepish smile dropping from his face the second he glanced at Tony. "Oh. Is there really a fire this time?"

"If not now there's gonna be one soon, big guy," Tony said. "Steve was just attacked at the Triskelion, he and Nat are on the run."

"Attacked?" exclaimed Bruce. "Are they all right? Attacked by who?"

"Rumlow and his STRIKE team thugs," Tony said bitterly. "And yeah, they're both fine, at least for the time being." Swan dive out the damn window and everything.

"But—, but, that doesn't make any sense!" stammered Bruce. "Their helicarriers aren't even ready yet, why would they attack Steve now and expose themselves?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," answered Tony. "I guess Rumlow saw them as a pretty big threat to their operation, which they are. I'm planning on meeting up with them as soon as we can get this data sorted."

"You think Steve will call in the rest of the team?" Bruce asked warily, glancing at Tony over the top of his glasses. Even though he could now control his transformations for the most part, Bruce still didn't prefer to use Hulk unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Actually, I was kinda hoping you'd stay here, help watch over Pete," Tony said. "You and Rhodey make pretty good bodyguards. I'll have Barton on standby if Steve thinks we'll need him, and you can be a last resort of sorts. Sound good?"

"Yeah, I can handle that," said Bruce. "Thanks."

"No problem." Tony pulled the new data stream up on his monitor and began typing in commands, trying to reconstruct it on his private server so he could analyse it at his leisure, cursing when the program began to rewrite itself. Even though he'd been halfway expecting it to happen, it still pissed him off.

"Goddamnit," he muttered, his fingers flying over the keyboard, barely able to keep up ahead of the deconstruction. "Get over here quick, Bruce. I can't stay ahead of this on my own."

Pulling up another keyboard, Bruce leaned in, squinting through his glasses at the code Tony was hastily writing in order to stay ahead of the program's built-in self-destruct. "What the hell is this, Tony? I mean, who designed this?"
"I have no goddamn clue!" Tony snapped. "But whoever it is—or was—is really fucking smart. The only other time I've seen code this complex is when I created JARVIS. Now, get in here and back me up."

The program was relentless, one of the most vicious Tony had ever seen, almost like it was thinking on its own. Just as soon as he thought they had finally made progress the program would veer off in a new direction, rendering their entire code string useless. By the time they were finally able to get ahead and begin the transfer process, Tony was sweating and shaking so hard that he could barely keep typing.

"Shit," Tony said with a groan, rubbing at his eyes as the data compiled on the Tower server. "I can't—I, I can't understand where this would've come from."

"Hmm," said Bruce. "Now watch it be from some sixteen-year-old kid who was just trying to pirate a video game or something."

Tony rolled his eyes as he let out a weak chuckle. "Yeah. Wouldn't that just be our luck."

"Sir," JARVIS suddenly said. "I have just begun my analysis of this new data, but I have found something that I believe is of interest to both you and Captain Rogers."

"Yeah?" Tony said, sliding his glasses back on. "What is it?"

"A page of a medical record, sir," replied JARVIS. "From a one Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, 107th Infantry Regiment."

Tony's head snapped back in surprise. "Barnes? The Howling Commando? Steve's old war buddy?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Wasn't he killed in action?" Bruce asked, frowning.

"He was, according to U.S. Army records," JARVIS said. "James Buchanan Barnes was lost during the capture of HYDRA scientist Arnim Zola in 1945. However, two years prior to that, his entire regiment was captured and held for a period of time by HYDRA."

"And then rescued by Steve, yeah, yeah, yeah," Tony said impatiently. "We know all this already. What's your point?"

"It would appear that Sergeant Barnes did not perish during his fall from the train in 1945, sir," said JARVIS. "He did in fact, survive."

"What? How in the hell could he—?"

Just then a photograph appeared on Tony's monitor, and he froze, shivering as all of his blood suddenly ran cold. It was a picture of Barnes, his left arm entirely encased in a rippled, silver-coloured metal and embossed with the red star of the former Soviet Union.

"Holy shit," Tony gasped. "He's the Winter Soldier!"

"What? Barnes is the Winter Soldier?" Bruce asked, gaping at the monitor. "How is that possible? He's gotta be what, ninety-some-odd years old by now?"

"Yeah, well, so is Steve," Tony said. "But I still don't understand how…" his voice trailed off, his upper lip curling into a sneer as he studied the photograph. The man pictured was wearing a mask
that obscured the lower half of his face, but his blue eyes were filled with such intense hatred and
disdain that Tony felt his heart skip a beat. It really was Barnes. James Buchanan Barnes was the
Winter Soldier.

Steve had been right; the Winter Soldier really did know him.

And he'd also tried to kill Steve. And Peter.

_How dare you!_ Tony thought, his jaw clenched so tightly that his teeth were grinding.

"I wonder where he's been held all this time?" Bruce said.

"I don't really give a damn," Tony said, low and dangerous. "This asshole tried to kill Peter, and
almost managed to kill Steve. As far as I'm concerned he's no better than the terrorists who
kidnapped us."

"Tony, just hang on a minute, okay?" Bruce said cautiously. "I don't think that Steve would want
you to—"

"This asshole almost killed Steve!" cried Tony. "If Pete hadn't saved him, he wouldn't—" his voice
broke off as he swallowed hard, breathing in deeply, his fist closing around Steve's dog tags. "Well,
he's not gonna get another chance. I won't allow it. Because the next time that he dares to show his
face, I'm gonna kill him."

---

_Stop by and see me on tumblr, I'm _geekymoviemom_ and _geeky-writes_ there! :)_

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment. :)

Also, if any of you guys have suggestions for a wedding song for Tony and Steve, I'd
love to hear them! :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of the wonderful comments! I'm so glad you guys are enjoying the story! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"And you're positive that you can trust this guy?" Tony said, his beautiful face etched in such fatigue and worry, evident even on the small phone screen, that a knot rose in Steve's throat. "I mean, you've only met him once, and—"

"I'm positive, Tony," Steve answered, in as reassuring a voice as he could muster at the moment. Truth be told the events of the day had shaken him more than he cared to admit, but allowing Tony to see that would only make things worse. He needed Tony to crack the rest of the Project Insight data, and as soon as possible. Otherwise, they had nothing.

"Sam is one of the good guys," he added. "Natasha just got here, and we're gonna rest up for a few
hours until you and Bruce tell us our next step."

Tony's lower lip twitched in that way that always meant he was either nervous or hiding something. Or both. "Yeah. Okay, Steve. Your instincts are usually spot on, so…"

"Sweetheart?" Steve said gently. "What's going on?"

Tony shot him one of Peter's *duh* looks. "Ha ha ha, you're joking, right? You mean besides having to listen to you take a header out a window from over two hundred feet up and then go up against a fully armed Quinjet? And that was a pretty nice bike that you wrecked, by the way. I mean, it wasn't the best of the best, not like that beauty that got destroyed in Malibu, but—"

"Tony!" interrupted Steve, trying desperately to hold onto his patience. "Yes, besides that."

"Nothing I wanna get into over the phone, babe," Tony replied after a short pause, waving a dismissive hand. "We can talk more once I get out there."

Steve frowned. It wasn't that he didn't want Tony's help—they were going up against what appeared to be at least a good portion of SHIELD and could use every hand they could get—but in addition to everything else he was more than a bit nervous about leaving Peter alone, even confined to the Tower, with the STRIKE team still out there on the loose.

And there was something about Tony's entire countenance that just seemed… off, more than simple nervousness or fatigue, or anger.

It was more like… *rage*. The same kind of rage that Tony had carried when he went off to destroy the Ten Rings leaders in Gulmira.

"Is Peter all right?" Steve asked, hoping to alleviate some of his own nervousness.

"Yeah, he's doing okay," answered Tony. "He's still at school, but I've got a continuous lock on his phone and there hasn't been any funny business going on that I've seen. Happy's gonna pick him up so Bruce and I can keep working on this stuff, and Rhodey just called and said he was on his way, so Pete should be okay. He'll just have to stay here in the penthouse while I'm gone."

"You know he won't like that," Steve said. Peter tended to get cabin fever pretty quickly, especially if he knew he wasn't allowed to go anywhere.

"Yeah, well, that's too damn bad," grumbled Tony. "And he'll just have to get over it. It's for his own good. He's a smart kid, he'll understand."

Steve huffed out a sharp breath, blotting his face with the towel hanging around his neck. "All right, sweetheart."

"I'll let you know as soon as we find anything," Tony said, his fingers tapping on the counter in front of him. "You know the whole of Rumlow's team is gonna be searching for you guys now, and there's no telling what kind of resources they have at their disposal, so you guys should try and stay as low as possible."

"That's what we're gonna do," Steve replied. "I love you."

Tony's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard, his lower lip twitching. "I love you too, babe. And for Christ's sake be careful, will ya?"

"We will."
As soon as the screen went blank Steve let out a heavy sigh. Sitting and waiting around for something to happen had never been one of his strongest suits, especially during a mission, but until Tony and Bruce turned up some something of actual value intelligence-wise, there really wasn't anything he and Natasha could do. He also felt more than a bit guilty endangering Sam like they were, even though Sam had said it was fine. Steve knew their very presence in his home was marking him as a target that he didn't deserve.

A knock on the open doorway pulled Steve from his heavy thoughts. "I made some lunch," Sam said. "Nothing much, just some sandwiches and fruit, if you guys eat that kinda thing."

As if in cue, Steve's stomach growled, loud enough for even Sam to hear it. When had been the last time that he'd eaten anything?

"I guess that's a yes," Steve said with a smile. "Thank you."

"Yeah, don't mention it," said Sam as he led Steve into the kitchen. "Last thing I need is Captain America having a hypoglycemic attack in my house. I'm not a medic."

"So according to what Tony and Bruce have been able to uncover so far, it looks like these helicarriers are triggered by satellites," Steve said, starting in on his second ham sandwich. "They're still working on deciphering the data Natasha obtained from the Lemurian Star, so hopefully we'll have some information on the targeting algorithm soon."

"Okay, so… how does that help you?" asked Sam. "You planning on taking out three massive helicarriers on your own?"

"No…" Steve said slowly. "Not exactly. Tony told me that he's gonna join us once he and Bruce finish with the data."

"Mmm," said Sam. "That's still only three of you." He reached into one of the kitchen cupboards, digging behind an array of cereal boxes until he pulled out a file, dropping it onto the table. "What's this?" Steve asked as he opened the file to a photograph of Sam and another airman, both wearing a strange sort of black pack-like apparatus strapped to their shoulders. "Call it a resume," Sam replied with a rather proud smile.

Natasha peeked over Steve's shoulder, her eyes going wide. "Is this Bakhmala?" she asked. "The Khalid Khandil mission, that was you?"

"Yep," answered Sam. "Riley and me, he was my wingman, that was us. Riley though, he didn't make it back. Got taken out by an RPG right in front of me." He let out a heavy sigh. "All I could do was watch him go down."

"I'm so sorry, Sam," Steve said softly, his mind's eye replaying Bucky's fall from the train and Tony's fall from the portal in all-too-vivid detail. "There's no worse feeling in the world than watching something like that and being unable to help."

"I heard they couldn't even bring the choppers because of the RPGs," Natasha said. "What'd you use, a stealth chute?"

"Nah." Sam turned the next page over in the file, pointing at something labeled EXO-7 Falcon. "We used these. And Cap, I'm pretty sure that your guy had a hand in making 'em."

Steve's eyebrows shot up as he scanned the page, a blueprint for what looked like a set of mechanical...
wings. "Tony made these?"

"Pretty sure either he or his company did," said Sam. "Think they were a prototype of sorts, Riley and I were the only ones who were trained on them."

"They sure look like something Tony would design," Natasha said with admiration.

"I agree," Steve said, closing the file. "But I thought you said you were a pilot."

Sam gave him a rather cheeky grin. "I never said pilot."

Steve bit his lip, giving his head a slight shake. "Sam, I can't ask you to do this. You got out for a good reason."

"Dude, Captain America needs my help? I can't think of a better reason to get back in."

"Having another flyer would come in pretty handy," Steve said to Natasha. "And since involving Colonel Rhodes would probably cause a big fuss with the Air Force—"

"You know Tony would insist that Rhodes stay at the Tower with Peter anyway," said Natasha.

"Which is fine," Steve said quickly. "Bruce has asked to sit this one out unless absolutely necessary and we have no way of contacting Thor, so that leaves Clint on standby." He fished his phone out of his back pocket. "JARVIS, do you know if there are anymore of these EXO-7 Falcon packs left at Stark Industries?"

"According to Stark Industries records, all EXO-7 Falcon prototypes were destroyed in combat, Captain," replied JARVIS. "There are no working models currently available."

"Yeah, well, that's not exactly true," said Sam. "'Cause I know for a fact that mine is at Fort Meade. It's behind three guarded gates and a twelve-inch steel wall, but it's there. I've personally seen it."

Steve glanced over at Natasha, who gave an indifferent shrug.

"That shouldn't be a problem," he said. "Thank you, Sam. We'll go as soon as Tony gives us the word."

Tony's hand was rapping impatiently on the counter as he waited for JARVIS to finish compiling the newly decrypted data, the photograph of Sergeant Barnes—the Winter Soldier—still staring at him from the monitor, his piercing blue eyes boring into Tony's very soul. Bruce had run out of his preferred creamer and so had gone out to get a refill on his coffee, leaving Tony alone with his thoughts, which weren't exactly the most pleasant of company at the moment.

"I'm gonna get you, you son of a bitch," Tony said through clenched teeth. "Just you wait. No one tries to kill my son and lives to tell about it." He frowned at the slight pang of guilt that shot through him, trying to ignore it. He knew that Barnes and Steve had been good friends during the war, and even before that, but there was no denying that Barnes had somehow gone off the deep end if he was now working as an assassin-for-hire, and had been since at least the 1950s.

And he had tried to kill Peter, and almost killed Steve. There's no way even Steve would be able to overlook that. Steve loved Peter just as much as Tony did, there was no way he would allow anyone who had hurt him to go unpunished.

"JARVIS, can you pull up anything on that guy, Sam Wilson?" Tony asked. He had done a
preliminary search on Sam shortly after he and Steve had returned from D.C.—just verifying the story that Sam had told Steve—and hadn't found anything that would cause concern, but it never hurt to double-check. Especially since Steve and Natasha were now using him as a safehouse.

The monitor blinked, replacing the picture of Barnes with a picture of Sam Wilson in his Air Force dress blues. "Samuel Thomas Wilson," JARVIS began. "Age thirty-six, grew up in Harlem. Served as a member of the 58th pararescue squadron during several missions in Afghanistan, and one of two test pilots for the EXO-7 Falcon wings."

Tony frowned. Obie had told Tony that both of the Falcon pack prototypes had been destroyed, and at the time he hadn't had any reason to question it. "The test pilots were successful?"

"Their missions were successful until one of the test pilots was killed," JARVIS said. "Following his death, the project was scrapped."

"But the second pack survived?" asked Tony.

"Yes, sir."

"Then why the hell would Obie have told me they were both destroyed?"

"I am… unsure as to what Mr Stane's motivations would have been for such a deceit, sir."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's too late to ask him," Tony muttered. "You still got the old blueprints for the pack?"

"I do, sir."

Tony got up from his chair, raising his arms up over his head to stretch. "Go ahead and throw them up, might help me pass the time a bit."

"Very good, sir."

As per his usual, Tony lost track of time as he tinkered, playing around with materials that would increase the rigidity to flexibility ratio while increasing the Kevlar thickness a couple of millimeters to render them a bit more bulletproof. He was so caught up in his work that he hadn't noticed that Bruce had returned from the coffee shop until he tapped Tony on the shoulder.

"Looks like we got some new information," he said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah, okay, big guy," said Tony. "JARVIS, go ahead and save all this in a new file, titled 'Falcon'."

"Already done, sir."

"So, what's up," he asked as he stepped back over to the counter, the monitor displaying a map of the Eastern Seaboard, with a large blinking dot directly over— "New Jersey? What's in New Jersey?"

"That's apparently where we gotta go," Bruce said gingerly. "Whatever Natasha was trying to get off of that ship, we only got the bare minimum of information." He jerked his head towards the screen. "The rest of it is there."

"Shit," muttered Tony. He had been afraid of that, especially since JARVIS hadn't been able to find anything else in the data regarding Sergeant Barnes besides the limited information he'd already shared. "Well, then I guess that's where I'm headed as soon as Rhodey gets here. JARVIS, what's
Rhodey's status?

"Colonel Rhodes reports he should be arriving at the Tower in approximately thirty minutes," JARVIS said. "And Mr Hogan and Master Peter have just arrived in the Tower garage."

"Yeah, okay." He turned to Bruce, raising a questioning eyebrow. "You still good staying here with Pete?"

"Yep," answered Bruce. "Maybe he can give me a hand with the last of the data burst I got from the sceptre before it disappeared."

"Yeah, sure, I bet he'd like that," Tony said. "Then as soon as Rhodey gets here and I get in touch with Steve, I'm gonna head out."

"All right. But be careful, Tony," said Bruce. "These guys may not be aliens, but they seem pretty hell-bent on causing a lot of trouble."

"Yeah," Tony whispered. Bruce was no doubt remembering the many run-ins he'd had with corrupt military and government leaders. "Yeah, we'll be careful."

"Sir, Master Peter wishes to know if it is safe for him to enter the laboratory," said JARVIS.

"Yeah, J, tell him it's fine," Tony said, his lips curling into an instinctive smile as soon as Peter came into view, still bundled in at least four layers of clothing with his pale cheeks and nose flushed from the cold. Tony held open his arms as Peter approached, his heart clenching when Peter walked right into them, tucking his head under Tony's chin.

"Good day today?" he murmured into Peter's hair, trying to push the eerie photograph of the Winter Soldier out of his mind.

"Eh, it was okay," Peter replied. "But what's going on here? Happy told me that Uncle James is on his way, which usually means that—"

"Yeah. I'm gonna be heading out to meet Papa as soon as Uncle James gets here," Tony said. "He and Natasha… hit a snag during their mission, and they need some backup."

"Hmph," Peter mumbled against Tony's chest. "That's just code for 'nearly got themselves killed'. Isn't it?"

"Papa's a lot harder to kill than most people think, Pete," Tony said firmly. "And he's just fine. He and Natasha are both fine. They're just gonna need my help for the rest of the mission."

Peter drew his head back, giving Tony his adorably boyish scowl. "And I suppose that means I'll have to stay here?"

"Well, you're sure as hell not coming with me," Tony retorted. "I don't care how well you can see or how much you can bench press now, you're still just a kid."

"Teenager," grumbled Peter, so quietly that Tony barely heard him.

"Barely. And regardless, you're not going. And you won't need to worry about going to school while I'm gone either. I've already spoken to Principal Morita. You can get your assignments from Ned if you want, and Bruce thought you might give him a hand with some of his stuff too. Okay?"

"Mmm. Fine."
"Good." Tony pressed a kiss to the top of Peter's head, ruffling his hair. "Wanna give Papa a call before I go?"

Peter shot Tony one of his *duh* looks. "Yeah!"

"Go for it." Tony kept his hand on Peter's shoulder as JARVIS placed the call, smiling as Peter's entire face lit up when Steve appeared on the screen.

"Hey, little guy!" Steve said, his own smile mirroring Peter's. "How was school today?"

Peter shrugged. He'd been doing a lot of that lately, which Tony assumed was part of the whole teenager gig. "Eh, it was okay. Are you doing okay? Dad told me you and Auntie Nat ran into some trouble."

"I said they hit a snag, Pete," protested Tony, throwing Steve a sheepish look. "Quit trying to get me in trouble."

"Nothing that we couldn't handle. Auntie Nat and I are both just fine," Steve said in that reassuring, fatherly voice that never failed to melt Tony's insides. He really was good at just about everything.

"Mmm. As long as you can stay that way," Peter said. "But it can't be going all that great if you're needing Dad's help."

"We were already getting Dad's help, Peter," said Steve. "This'll just be a different kind of help."

Peter wrinkled his nose, glancing furtively at Tony. "If you say so."

"I do say so," Steve said firmly. "Now, can you tell me something exciting that happened at school today?"

Peter blinked at the obvious subject change, but complied anyway, giving Steve a far-too-detailed description of what he was currently building in Robotics Lab for the next five minutes until Steve said, "All right, little guy, let me talk to Dad alone now, okay? I'll see you soon."

Peter's lower lip twitched as he nodded. "Uh huh. You promise to be careful?"

"I promise."

"Okay. Say hi to Auntie Nat for me."

"I will. I love you, little guy."

"Love you too, Papa."

Tony's throat tightened as Peter turned to him, his narrow shoulders slumped. "Go on and get a snack now, buddy."

"Uh huh."

Steve's face turned serious as soon as Peter exited the lab. "So, what have you found?"

"Not a hell of a lot, babe," Tony replied, huffing out a sharp breath. "The data that Natasha pulled from that ship wasn't complete, most of it was just some random details about random stuff, but we did find the location of where we need to go to find more."

"Okay, so where's that?" asked Steve.
"Camp Lehigh in New Jersey," answered Tony. "Your old stomping grounds."

"Camp Lehigh?" Steve said, his eyebrows knitting together. "Why there?"

Tony shrugged. "Makes sense when you think about it. It was the location of the SSR, which eventually became SHIELD. By the time I was old enough to know what was going on SHIELD had moved into their new HQ in D.C., but I remember Howard mentioning Camp Lehigh every now and then over the years. He always called it the birthplace of Captain America. We'll probably find some shrine that he left for you once we get there."

"Tony—"

"Nevermind that, babe," Tony interrupted. "Anyway, according to the data that's where we gotta go to find out anything of importance."

"All right," Steve said after a short pause. "Then we'll head out as soon as we can get ready." He sucked in a deep breath, swallowing hard. "Sam offered to help us."

"Oh he did, did he?" Tony said, stamping down his irrational jealousy before it could take hold. "Well, isn't that nice of him. I take it he's still got those wings of his?"

"Wings? How'd you know—?" Steve's brow furrowed even more, the worry wrinkle forming between his eyes. "Tony, were you checking up on him?"

"Damn right I was!" retorted Tony. "You had just gotten attacked by practically half of SHIELD and were hanging out with a guy that you'd met exactly once. How could you think that I wouldn't check up on him?"

Steve tilted his head, pursing his lips. "He said that you manufactured the wings that he used. Or that Stark Industries did, at least."

"Yeah, they were one of my designs. Never made it past the prototype stage though. Obie told me they were both destroyed in combat, and like an idiot I just believed him."

"You're not an idiot, Tony," Steve said gently. "And yes, Sam still has his wings. Or at least he knows where they're being held."

"Let me guess; Fort Meade?"

Steve gave a nod. "Under pretty heavy guard from what he told us."

"Nah, I'll get JARVIS to work on it, shouldn't be too hard to break into their security systems. Once you're on your way let me know and I'll meet you guys outside Camp Lehigh."

"And you're sure it's okay to leave Peter?" Steve asked. "It's not that I don't trust James and Bruce, I just—"

"I'm not all that thrilled about leaving him either, Steve," Tony cut in. "But if my hunch is correct about what we're gonna find out there in Jersey, you're gonna need me. It took Bruce and I hours to just get into what we could get into, and it wasn't even all that much. And now I almost wish that we hadn't."

"All right. You gonna leave now? 'Cause it'll probably take us a bit to get ahold of Sam's wings, and then we'll have to drive up there, and—"
"May as well," Tony replied. "I can always case out the place while I'm waiting."

"Copy that," Steve said with a determined nod. "Then we'll head out in a few minutes. I love you. Please, be careful."

"Love you too, babe, and you do the same."

Tony squeezed his eyes closed as soon as the screen went blank, his fingers curling around his left forearm, which was aching. _This really fucking sucks!_ he thought bitterly. _This whole thing just completely sucks!_

"JARVIS?" Tony barked, probably harsher than necessary.

"Yes, sir?"

"Get going on a preliminary render of that new Falcon pack design, yeah? If the guy wants to play like an Avenger we may as well get him outfitted like one."

"Of course, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"Yeah." Tony scrubbed his palm down his face, checking his mental checklist as the _thwap thwap thwap_ of a helicopter's rotors reached his ears. "Have the Mark 15-22 armours on continuous standby just in case, and make sure the penthouse is completely locked down as soon as I leave. No letting Pete sweet-talk you into anything, got it?"

"Got it, sir. And Colonel Rhodes has just arrived."

"'Bout time," Tony said as Rhodey stepped through the outer glass doors into the lab. "What, you take the scenic route or something?"

"Flying across the country isn't exactly quick, Tony," Rhodes said, rolling his eyes. "And dropping everything every time that you need an emergency babysitter isn't exactly easy to explain to my superiors either."

"You damn well better be joking," snapped Tony, glowering at his best friend just as Peter reappeared, still chewing whatever he'd just been snacking on.

"Hey, Uncle James!" Peter exclaimed, rushing over for a hug, which Rhodey gave willingly, shooting Tony an apologetic look over Peter's head. "How's it going?"

"Not too bad, kiddo," answered Rhodes as he patted Peter's back. "Looks like we're gonna get to hang out for awhile."

"Yeah, I heard," Peter said, his enthusiasm already waning.

"Hopefully won't be for too long, you know how busy Uncle James is," said Tony, earning another Uncle James roll on. "C'mere, buddy, I need to get going."

Peter's skinny body shivered as Tony drew him into a hug. "Be careful, Daddy," he whispered. "Please?"

"I will, bud," Tony murmured, kissing the top of Peter's head. "Don't run Bruce and Uncle James too ragged, yeah?"

"I won't."
"That's my boy." Tony pulled back, cupping Peter's round cheek and giving him what he hoped was a confident wink. Then he stepped back and held out his arms, pride surging through him as his prehensile suit wrapped around his body. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah," agreed Peter. "Just so long as it keeps you intact."

"It will," Tony said as his faceplate locked into place. He walked over to the door that led to the landing pad, turning to give Peter and Rhodey a final wave. "Love you, buddy."

Peter nodded as he raised his hand, leaning against Rhodes. "Love you too, Dad. See ya soon."

Not wanting to draw too much attention to his final destination, Tony ended up zig-zagging quite a bit as he flew towards New Jersey, finally landing approximately three miles away to cover the last of the distance on foot, which he regretted about five minutes later.

_Maybe I should join Steve on one of his runs one of these days_, he grudgingly thought as he made his way through the thick, nearly frozen brush that surrounded the old Army camp. While he was in pretty good shape for his age—Steve had even told him so—and had regular sparring sessions with both Steve and Natasha as part of the Avenger training, he knew his endurance could be better if he made more of an effort.

Arriving at the locked gate of the chain-link fence, Tony huffed out a breath as his eyes swept across the moss-covered signs, a strong wave of nostalgia washing over him. He'd only seen this building a few times before that he could remember, but it may as well have been only yesterday. He even half-expected to see Howard running around, wearing one of his god-awful pea-green suit coats and clutching the inevitable bunch of red roses he often brought home for Tony's mother when he suspected that she was upset over his long work hours. Tony's heart clenched as he recalled how his mother used to light up at the sight of the fragrant flowers, always rushing to put them into a vase so they didn't wilt. She'd often set the vase up on her piano so she could see the flowers while she played, reminding herself that she still had a husband even if she hardly ever saw him.

As a child, Tony had absolutely loved listening to his mother play the piano. Maria Stark had taught Tony how to play as well, saying that it made him a bit more well-rounded, and while Tony had been decent enough at it he didn't have nearly as much musical talent as Maria, and so never enjoyed playing as much as he loved listening to her play.

That still didn't stop him from teaching Peter how to play, though. And while Tony knew he wasn't the best judge of piano-playing talent, Peter grew to be far better at it than he'd ever been. Some of Tony's fondest memories of Peter's early childhood had him perched up on a couple of fat telephone books on the piano bench, his tiny fingers racing across the keys as Tony sat next to him, smiling so widely that his cheeks were sore.

Tony sighed as he shifted on the freezing, uneven ground, wishing for the umpteenth time that his mother had been able to meet Peter. She and Howard had been dead for seven years by the time Peter came along, but Tony always knew that she would have been the most wonderful and doting grandmother that Peter could've asked for. Aunt Peggy had tried her best to fill in that grandmotherly gap, at least before her mind went too far south to continue, and while Peter had adored his 'Auntie Peg', it was never quite the same.

Dusk was falling rapidly around Tony, his mind whirling with new armour designs and calculations trying to keep himself occupied when he heard the sudden crunching noise of a car approaching on the dirt road. He immediately shot to his feet, his repulsors at the ready as the car came into view.
"It's just us, Tony," came the soothing voice of his fiancé. "Meet us at the gate."

"Copy that," Tony said, the breath whooshing out of him in a puff of white as his faceplate popped open. "What the hell took you so long, it's freezing out here!"

"Relax, shellhead," Natasha said as she climbed out of the backseat of the nondescript sedan, presumably belonging to Sam Wilson. "Not all of us can fly."

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled Tony. "Speaking of that, did you—?"

"We were able to extract the wings from Fort Meade with no casualties," said Steve as he unfolded himself from the car, shield in hand. He wrapped his free arm around Tony's armoured waist, planting a quick but firm kiss on his lips. "JARVIS was very helpful, thank you."

"Nice to see you too, babe," Tony replied. "Especially in one piece."

"Ah, are we sure that this is the place?" Sam asked as he finished strapping on his wing pack, eyeing the rusted lock on the gate suspiciously. "I know I'm not exactly a computer expert, but it doesn't seem like something so complex could come from a place like this. This is like straight out of the seventies!"

"Well, you're not wrong," Tony said as he lasered the lock from the gate, kicking it open with a loud clang. "But if JARVIS says that this is the place, then this is the place. Besides, this was the epitome of tech back in the seventies."

Sam raised his eyebrows, holding out his arm to allow Natasha to follow Tony through the gate. "Still, I'm counting at least ten different buildings, and those are only the ones I can see. Got any idea where to start?"

"Yeah, I'm not picking up anything," added Natasha. "No heat signatures, no radio waves, nothing."

Tony turned to Steve, quirking an eyebrow. "You know this place better than anyone, hon. Got any ideas?"

Steve frowned as he looked around, his gaze finally settling on a bunker-type building about a twenty yards away. "Army regulations prohibit storing munitions within five hundred yards of the barracks," he said. "This building's in the wrong place."

Breaking the lock with his shield, Steve pulled open the door, its rusty hinges groaning in protest. Tony aimed his repulsors to light their way as they descended a set of creaky metal stairs that ended at a concrete floor, the room ahead of them extending at least fifty yards.

"Light," Natasha said as she flipped a nearby light switch, activating the hanging overhead fluorescent lights, their high-pitched buzzing sound immediately reminding Tony of Peter.

"He's gonna be okay, Tony," Steve murmured from Tony's side, as if he'd read his mind.

"Yeah," Tony rasped, swallowing hard as they made their way down the dank hallway, past the abandoned metal desks and swivel chairs and old pictures of Howard and Aunt Peggy lining the walls to where the hallway appeared to dead-end at a set of very dusty bookshelves.

"JARVIS, give me an IR scan of the room," he said as his faceplate closed again. A beam of light shot out from his eyes, scanning the bookshelves.

"I'm reading an air pocket behind the bookcases, sir," JARVIS said.
"Yeah." He nodded at Steve, readying his repulsors as Steve yanked hard on one set of shelves. "Please be a secret door, please be a secret door!" he muttered under his breath, letting out an almost childish, "Yay!" when the shelves revealed the elevator door hiding behind them.

"Does this seem a bit too haunted-house-like for anyone else, or is it just me?" Sam asked as they all piled into the elevator. "I keep expecting ghosts to pop out or something every time we round a corner."

"Wouldn't surprise me too much if there were ghosts here," muttered Tony. "You trying to say that you're a bit jittery there, Wilson?"

Sam gave him a rather sly grin. "Hell no. It'd take a lot more than a simple ghost to scare me. I used to fly these wings of yours, remember?"

"Shh," Steve said as the elevator finally came to a stop, the doors opening into another long hallway. He glanced back at Sam and Natasha. "Stay behind us."

They crept along the hallway, overhead lights blinking on as they went, until they reached what looked like the kind of command center one might find in an old war movie. The ancient picture-tube monitors and raised keyboards were covered in a thick layer of dust, and were surrounded by what appeared to be hundreds of banks of actual data tapes, something that struck Tony as so irrationally funny given the circumstances that he burst out laughing.

"Tony?" Steve asked gingerly, breaking into Tony's almost hysterical giggles. "Any of this look familiar?"

Tony shook his head, biting his lip. "Nah. Howard never used anything like this at home, and I never got much further than the front door the couple of times I came here as a kid."

"This can't be the data point, this technology is ancient," Natasha said, frustrated. "Well, except for that."

"That, which happened to be a port for the very type of USB drive first given to Steve by Nick Fury."

"Tony?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, I got it. Everything we've been working on is on here." Tony opened a small slot on his arm gauntlet, retrieving the USB drive. He looked it over, raising an eyebrow at Steve as he inserted it into the port. "Here goes nothing."

With a whirring noise, the databanks began to light up and spin, the words INITIATE SYSTEM appearing across the center-most monitor.

"Y, E, S," Natasha said as she typed in the letters. "You know, this reminds me of that old movie---"

"Don't!" Tony said in a loud whisper, wincing when Steve jumped, raising his shield. "Whatever you do, don't say it. That's seriously one of Pete's favourite movies and for the love of God, I can't stand it. It's so goddamn cheesy!"

"Oh, come on, Iron Man!" protested Sam. "War Games is a classic!"

"Yeah, but 'classic' doesn't automatically equal 'good', birdman," Tony said, rolling his eyes.

"I happen to like that movie," Steve said, shooting Tony his eyebrows of disappointment. "And I'll remind you of this conversation the next time you call one of your cars a classic."
"Hey, boys," Natasha said, snapping her fingers and pointing to the screen, where a creepy, crude image of what had to be a man had appeared on the green-tinted screen. "Can we please refocus here?"

A camera mounted above the monitor turned, resting on each of them for a couple of seconds, almost as if it were scanning them. "Rogers, Steven," the monitor said, the voice heavily accented and so eerily familiar that a chill raced down Tony's spine. "Born 1918. Stark, Anthony, born 1970. Romanoff, Natalia Alianovna, born 1984. Wilson, Samuel, born—"

"Yeah, yeah, we get the point," Sam cut in. "Who the hell are you?"

"It has to be some kind of recording," said Natasha.

"I am not a recording, Fraulein," insisted the voice. "I may not be the man I was when the Captain took me prisoner in 1945, but I am—"

"Holy shit!" Tony exclaimed. "It's Arnim Zola!"

"Yes, that is correct, Anthony," said Zola. "And you're all standing in my brain."

"Zola? How in the hell would he have been allowed access to SHIELD tech?" demanded Steve. "He was a HYDRA scientist who worked with the Red Skull!"

"That's true, but he also worked with my father," said Tony. A cold sweat broke out along his hairline as he glanced over at Steve. Goddamnit, Howard! You never could resist cosying up to another scientist, no matter where they were from! "Operation Paperclip. After the war, former German scientists who were deemed to have strategic value were offered asylum if they came to work for SHIELD."

"And let me guess," Sam said, thick with sarcasm. "We're about to find out that that wasn't such a good idea?"

"SHIELD thought I could help their cause," said Zola. "What they didn't realise is that I was also helping my own."

"HYDRA died with the Red Skull!" Steve said, the slight tremor in his voice piercing Tony's heart like a spear. Steve was shaken, and trying desperately not to show it.

HYDRA was supposed to have died with him. But then, Steve didn't die, did he? He was just asleep…

Oh, shit!

"Cut off one head, two more shall take its place," Zola said, his pixelated visage replaced by the HYDRA symbol.

"Steve," Tony said softly. "Maybe we shouldn't—"

"Oh yeah?" Steve interrupted, as if he hadn't even heard Tony. "Prove it."

"Accessing archive," Zola said. A second later the monitor off to the side began cycling through a series of images; Johann Schmidt, bombers dropping bombs on London, Steve leading his Howling Commandos on one of their raids, with Zola narrating an increasingly chilling account of how humanity couldn't be trusted with their own freedom while at the same time clinging to that very freedom with such a strong grip that HYDRA started getting antsy… blah, blah, blah.
"SHIELD was founded after the war, and I was recruited," Zola continued, and Tony's belly swooped as a picture of Howard as a younger man appeared on the screen with Aunt Peggy in the background, and finally pictures of Zola himself, interspersed with newspaper headlines of natural disasters and the deaths of famous people. "And the new HYDRA grew, a beautiful parasite inside SHIELD. For seventy years we have been secretly feeding crises, reaping war."

"Oh my God," Tony gasped as a document embossed with the logo of the SHIELD top-secret science division appeared on the screen, the names Richard and Mary Parker highlighted. "Steve—!"

"Are you trying to tell us that Mary Parker was a HYDRA scientist?" Steve yelled, more angry than Tony had ever seen him. "Is that what you're saying, Zola?"

"And when history did not cooperate?" Zola continued, ignoring Steve's question as a grainy photograph of two twisted dead bodies replaced the document, blood pooling beneath them. "History, was changed."

"Holy shit!" Tony rasped, the knot in his throat so large he could barely swallow. "Steve, she wasn't a HYDRA scientist, HYDRA killed her! They killed her, which means—"

"That's not gonna happen to Peter, Tony," Steve said firmly, reaching for Tony's armoured hand and squeezing. "We won't allow it."

"No, no, no, you don't understand!" shrieked Tony, the words yanked through his tight throat like a stubborn weed from a garden. "The Winter Soldier, he's—"

"None of this is possible anyway!" Natasha exclaimed. "SHIELD would've stopped you!"

Tony's blood froze as Zola scoffed, and a photograph of the starred metal arm of the Winter Soldier appeared on the screen, followed immediately by the newspaper article announcing the deaths of Howard and Maria Stark.

"Accidents, will happen," Zola said, his pixelated image almost sneering.

It took Tony three heartbeats for those words to fully sink in.

"You goddamn sick son of a bitch!" he screamed, firing his repulsor directly into the center of the monitor, sending it flying off the counter and into the row of databanks behind it. "You fucking killed my mom!"

"Tony, stand down!" commanded Steve, placing his palm against Tony's chest. "That's not gonna help anything."

"HYDRA created a world so chaotic, that humanity is finally ready to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security," continued Zola from one of the smaller screens, now displaying the blueprints of the Project Insight helicarriers. "Once the purification process is complete, HYDRA's new world order will arise. We won, Captain."

Tony's chest was so tight it felt like he'd been punched by Hulk, his mind swirling so fast that his armour and Steve's hand were the only things keeping him upright. The Winter Soldier killed Peter's mother, he killed my parents, he tried to kill Peter, he tried to kill Steve—

Oh God, please, not now!

"Goddamnit Steve, I wanna blast all this to hell!" he choked out, taking one stumbling step backwards. "Let me blast it all to hell! That asshole killed my mom!"
"Not yet, sweetheart," Steve murmured, so tender and loving that burning hot tears stung Tony's eyes. "I know that you're angry, but not yet."

"So what's on this drive?" Natasha asked, shooting Steve and Tony a concerned glance. "Is the algorithm on it?"

"The answer to your question is fascinating," Zola said, with such a infuriating tone that Tony almost snarled. "Unfortunately, you shall all be too dead to hear it."

"What?" Tony stammered, startling as blast doors began to lower all around them just as JARVIS spoke up.

"Sir, I am detecting a missile approaching your location," he said. "I would suggest taking immediate cover."

Steve promptly launched his shield at the blast doors, huffing in frustration as it only bounced harmlessly off and back towards him. "How much time, JARVIS?" he demanded.

"Approximately fifteen seconds, Captain."

"Probably a bunker-buster, they can dig down right through here," said Tony, his heart thudding against the arc reactor as he grabbed the USB drive from the port, returning it to his gauntlet. "Who fired it, J?"

"SHIELD, sir."

"They'll seal us in here like a tomb!" cried Sam, eyeing the concrete ceiling. "This is not good!"

A second later Steve surged forward, ripping a metal grate from the floor a few yards away and pulling Natasha down into the small rectangular space, positioning his shield over them. "Tony!" he gasped. "Cover Sam!"

"Right." Locking his faceplate, Tony grabbed Sam around his waist, diving underneath the counter where Zola's slimy voice was still spewing rhetoric. He curled his armoured body around Sam, managing to get his hands over Sam's head just as the missile slammed into the bunker, the resulting fireball shooting down the steps and through the underground room, sending desks and chairs and databanks flying in all directions. Tony grunted as chunks of concrete and equipment slammed into his back, trying not to scream as memories of the last time something like this happened were yanked up to the forefront of his mind.

I am so goddamn sick of being blown up!

"Tony!" Steve shrieked once the dust had somewhat settled. "Tony! Sam! Are you guys okay?"

"Still intact!" Sam managed to warble in between his rasping coughs. "Or at least I think I am."

"Same here," added Tony. He groaned as he got to his feet, pulling Sam up with him. "But we should probably get the hell outta here ASAP. Whoever launched that thing is gonna come looking for bodies pretty quick."

"Agreed," answered Steve. He was carrying a very shaken Natasha in his arms, his pale face and blond hair streaked with soot and dust. "But where should we go?"

"And how?" asked Sam. "'Cause I'm pretty sure my car just bit the dust. Literally."
"We're gonna have to fly," Tony said grimly. He aimed his HUD at Sam's Falcon pack, inspecting it for damage and finding nothing. "Falcon here can take Natasha, and I can take Steve."

Steve grimaced, giving him a reluctant nod. "All right. Then what's our heading? From what Zola was saying that algorithm of his is on this drive, so—"

"We can't go to the Tower," Tony said quickly, the panic he'd managed to stamp down threatening to roar back to life. "We can't lead these assholes anywhere near Pete, Steve, we can't—"

"I know, Tony," Steve said gently. "Then, where?"

Tony inhaled a deep, shaky breath, clenching his armoured hands into fists. "The Stark Industries building in D.C. I've got a lab set up there that's decent enough, and JARVIS, so I can get going on this drive while we figure out our next move."

"You think you can decrypt the algorithm?" Steve asked, carefully setting a shivering Natasha on her feet and shrugging out of his uniform top, wrapping it around her shoulders.

"I guess we'll find out," Tony answered, tilting his head as he picked up the sounds of approaching vehicles. "But we need to be outta here. Now."

Sam nodded towards Natasha as he activated his wings. "Ready?"

"Guess so," she said. "This'll be fun."

"JARVIS, set course for the SI building, keep us out of sight of whoever's coming to find us, and keep a lock on the Falcon here," Tony said as Steve stepped onto Tony's boots, curling his arms around Tony's shoulders. "Just like we practised, babe, yeah?"

"Got it," replied Steve, already shivering in the thin white tank top he usually wore under his uniform. Tony knew that Steve deplored being cold, but unfortunately there wasn't much they could do about it at the moment.

"Ready, sir," answered JARVIS.

"After you," Tony said to Sam, who gave him a quick salute as he took off. Steve tightened his arms, his shield covering Tony's right flank. Tony's emotions were so all over the place at the moment that he could barely think, but even despite the circumstances there was still something damn sweet about it, and he made a mental note to take Steve out flying for fun sometime, after all of this horribleness came to an end.

"Hold on, babe, here we go."

"Daddy!" Peter cried, watching helplessly as his father laid sprawled across the a hard rocky floor, his bruised and bloodied face twisted in fear as two men—or at least two people who appeared to be men but who at the moment more closely resembled actual fire monsters, with glowing eyes and everything—held him down as a third jabbed his burning hot index finger directly into the center of Dad's arc reactor, eliciting such an agonising scream that Peter screamed right along with him, icy-cold bolts shooting down his back as he struggled against the hard metal cuffs that secured his chafed wrists to the electrified chair, the chair he'd been bound to ever since he'd been brought to this horrible place. It didn't make any sense, really, that there existed such cuffs that could even hold his wrists like they were, but Peter had been trying to get free for over three days now, his skin rubbed raw and bleeding from the effort, and still they held fast.
Or he at least thought that it had been three days. If he was honest, he really had no idea how long it had been. Time had lost all meaning since he’d been brought here.

"Please, stop hurting him!" wailed Peter, his throat as raw and jagged as his wrists, his ears ringing from the deafening noise. "You're gonna kill him!"

"It's okay, Peter!" Papa called through the haze of Dad's screams, followed by the deafening clang of metal against metal. That's right, Papa's hands were bound too, and he couldn't seem to get away from them either. "Peter, it's okay, little guy, just don't watch! It's gonna be okay, just close your eyes!"

"I can't!" Peter croaked, his eyes burning with tears that rolled down his cheeks in hot, salty rivulets, dripping into his mouth. "I can't, I—" Try as he might, Peter couldn't tear away his eyes from his beloved father, even as Papa kept pleading with him to do so. He was too afraid if he did, Dad would be dead by the time he opened them.

"All right, that's enough." a deep voice called from behind Peter, causing him to flinch. "Let's see if he's interested in talking now. Get the sceptre!"

The voice was eerily familiar, so much so that Peter's arms pebbled with goosebumps. Whoever it belonged to had remained hidden in the shadows ever since Peter had been brought to this place, so there was no way for him to be sure, especially since he wasn't able to turn his head enough to get a glimpse.

Besides, it was impossible anyway.

Wasn't it?

Peter jolted awake, panting for breath and shivering, his entire body coated with a thick layer of sweat. He pushed himself up on shaking arms, reaching for the bottle of water that he kept next to his bed on Papa's recommendation, choking as he attempted to swallow the whole thing down in only three gulps.

"Are you all right, Master Peter?" JARVIS said, causing Peter to jump and cry out. "Would you like me to contact Colonel Rhodes?"

"No!" Peter squeaked, swiping his pyjama sleeve across his mouth. "No, thank you, JARVIS. I—, I'm fine, just…"

"Your heart and respiratory rates are elevated, Master Peter, which would indicate that you have suffered another nightmare. I do believe that Mr Stark would wish me to—"

"I said no, JARVIS," Peter said, as firmly as he could muster. "Please, don't wake up Uncle James and don't call my dads. They have enough going on right now without worrying about my stupid bad dreams." They're just bad dreams, they're not real. Not real… He inhaled a deep, shaky breath, releasing it slowly as he pulled on a hoodie, tugging the hood up over his head. "I think I'll just… go to the lab for awhile. See if that'll tire me back out. He may as well take the opportunity to start building his web shooters while he had the chance since he couldn't exactly do it when his dads were home.

"As you wish, Master Peter," JARVIS said, almost like he was sighing. "Please let me know if I can be of further assistance."

"Yeah, thanks."
Opening his bedroom door, Peter began tiptoeing down the hall, not wanting to awaken Uncle James as he passed the guest room. Peter had learned from experience that no matter how deeply asleep Uncle James appeared to be, he could be fully awake in less than a second if he sensed any sort of a threat. Papa was the same way, and Peter figured it had to be a military thing.

But Peter had only gone a few steps when he picked up Uncle James' voice through his bedroom door, apparently talking to someone on the phone. The clock in his room had read 3:24am when he'd woken up, and Peter knew that California was three hours behind, but that still was pretty late for a military briefing.

"Yes, yes, I understand that the President is getting antsy," Uncle James said as Peter pressed his ear to the door, listening intently. "But without any new leads I'm afraid there's not much that we can do at the moment. There haven't been any bomb casings that we've been able to find at any of the sites thus far. Aside from that they seem just like your ordinary run-of-the-mill suicide bombings, which, given the locations of their detonations, doesn't seem all that surprising."

"Bomb casings? Peter thought, frowning. I hope this doesn't mean that more government people are gonna be coming after Dad!

"Yes, sir," said Uncle James. "I understand, sir. Yes, sir, as soon as I'm able to break away I'll take a look at what's available. Thank you, sir. Goodnight."

Sounds like a new mission for War Machine, Peter thought as he entered the lab, blinking as the lights came on in what Dad had dubbed the Peter Mode, dimmed down to avoid bothering Peter's more sensitive eyes.

"May I ask what you intend to work on, Master Peter?" JARVIS asked quietly as Peter began assembling the materials he would need.

"Um… just something I came up with for Robotics Lab," Peter replied. "Thought I'd get a head start on it here since I can't go to school right now."

"That's a fine idea," said JARVIS. "I know your father would be proud."

"Yeah, well, he can be proud when he gets home, okay, JARVIS?" Peter paused for a moment, thinking. Dad still didn't like him using his soldering irons when he wasn't around, and Peter knew that JARVIS would protest if he attempted to do so now, which meant that he would have to use his newly-perfected superglue to assemble the shooters.

"Cool," Peter said under his breath. "Using my own tech to build my new tech."

Retrieving the superglue from its storage cabinet, Peter got to work, stamping down the flare of guilt building inside his belly. Peter was absolutely certain that both Dad and Papa would be vehemently opposed to him trying to act like any kind of superhero. They both had even said as much.

But when you can do the things that I can, but then don't, doesn't that make you just as bad as the bad guys?

It was why Dad and Papa did what they did. They and the rest of the Avengers were the Avengers because they possessed unique skills and talents that set them above the average person, which allowed them to fight the battles that other people couldn't.

And Peter could be the same. He now had his own set of unique skills and talents, and so could fight his own battles to help other people.
And maybe, just maybe, if he could prove to his dads that he could handle himself, they would back off a little on their overprotectiveness and allow him to help.

It wouldn't be easy. Peter was a terrible liar, and always felt horrible guilt every single time he attempted to lie to anyone, especially his dads.

But if he was able to pull it off, it would be more than worth it.

*If I really am some kind of spider-mutant, then I may as well try and do some good with it.*

Pursing his lips, Peter attached two of his pieces together, his mind already contemplating on what what he was planning to do with the web shooters once they were built. He'd need something to actually shoot from the shooters, something that would act like a spider's web. Spider webs were both sticky and strong, so—

"That's it!" he exclaimed, barely stopping himself from saying the rest of it out loud. No sense in spilling all of his secrets to JARVIS before he even knew them himself.

*I can modify my glue recipe to make webbing! That'll be so awesome!*

Setting down the shooter, Peter hurried over to his chemistry counter, pulling out the notebook he kept of his recipes and opening it to a clean page, writing the words *WEB FLUID* across the top.

*I don't have to be the kind of superhero who saves people from alien invasions,* he thought as he began scribbling down various chemical formulas. *Maybe I can just be more like a friendly... neighbourhood kind of superhero. The kind that stops people from getting mugged and stuff. A bit more low-key, but just as important.*

*I can be... Spider-Man,* Peter thought, pausing his scribbling as a slow smile spread across his lips.

He would need a suit too, in addition to his web shooters and fluid, but that wouldn't be too much of an issue. Dad kept bolts of fabric stored in the lab that he used to make the Avengers' uniforms, so Peter could just use some of whatever colour he ended up choosing and go from there. And while he wasn't nearly as good a seamstress as his father, he still knew how to work a needle and thread. Dad had always insisted on it.

Pushing the other logistics out of his head, like when he would actually get to do any of this superheroing, Peter's grin grew even wider.

*This is gonna be so incredibly awesome!*

---

Tony shivered as he stepped out of the shower, allowing Steve to drape one of the huge fluffy towels around his hips. They had made it back to D.C. without incident, and after getting permission from Pepper for Natasha to borrow some of her clothes—she and Happy kept an apartment in the SI building as well—Steve had gotten Natasha and Sam settled in two of the other bedrooms and then guided Tony directly into the master bedroom so they could get cleaned up, his expression mirroring the tormented agony roiling through Tony like a tidal wave.

"Hey," Steve whispered as he drew Tony close, burrowing his long fingers into his wet hair, pulling a faint moan from Tony's throat. "Talk to me."

Tony scoffed, his forehead thudding against Steve's collarbone. "What's there to say? You saw the same stuff that I did." He sucked in a deep breath, his fingertips digging into Steve's biceps. "Those sons of bitches killed my mom, Steve. They killed her!"
"I know, sweetheart," Steve said gently. "And I know that you're hurting, I do. But I also know there's something you're not telling me." He cupped Tony's cheek with one hand, tilting his head up to look at him. "What is it?"

Tony's lower lip trembled as he looked up into the concerned blue eyes of his fiancé, wondering how in the hell he was going to be able to tell him the truth. _Hey babe, just thought you'd like to know that your old war buddy didn't die like you thought and has actually been working for HYDRA this whole damn time. Oh, and he not only killed my parents and Peter's mother, he's also tried to kill us multiple times in the last few months._

"Do you remember," Tony started, clearing his throat. "When you told me it seemed almost like the Winter Soldier knew you?"

Steve's entire body froze against Tony's, his blue eyes tenuous, almost like he suspected what was coming.

"Yeah?"

"Well, that's 'cause he did. Or still does, I guess," Tony said, his mouth curling into a sneer. "I found it while Bruce and I were trying to decipher the data from the Lemurian Star, they had his picture."

"Found it—, found what, Tony?" demanded Steve. "Whose picture?"

"It was Barnes!" Tony spat out, twisting out of Steve's grip, his temper finally getting the better of him. "He's the goddamn Winter Soldier, Steve! Your old war buddy killed my parents and then tried to kill us!"

Tony had meant his words to hurt. He had just discovered that his mother had been murdered as collateral damage because a bunch of deranged people were out to get his father, the very same people who then tried to not only kill Tony and Steve, but Peter as well, and he was fucking angry about it.

But what he wasn't prepared for was to see Steve stumble backwards like Tony had just punched him in the face, his eyes welling with tears.

"Are you—, are you sure?" he stammered, gripping the bathroom counter.

"Yeah," whispered Tony. "I'm sure. Bruce and I both saw it."

"That he's been working as a HYDRA assassin for the last fifty-plus years?" Tony asked, his words coming out a bit harsher than he intended. "No, I'm not sure how anyone could've guessed that one. And why the hell didn't you tell me that you suspected it was him in the first place?"

"Tony," Steve choked out. "I can't—, it's not him. The Bucky I knew would never—, HYDRA must've done something to his mind, been controlling him somehow all this time. He would never do these things if he had a choice."

Tony's hands clenched into fists at his sides, the blood starting to burn in his veins. The conversation
was not at all going the way he had thought it would. "Barnes tried to kill Peter!" he said through clenched teeth. "And I don't care if he had a choice or not, he came after my son, so that makes him my enemy!" He sucked in a shuddering breath, swallowing hard. "And it should make him your enemy too."

Steve's eyes went wide, and he shook his head so hard that his damp hair flopped down over his forehead. "No, Tony, you have to believe me! I know he wouldn't've done those things if he knew what he was doing, I just know it! The Bucky I know would've never tried to hurt Peter!"

"That doesn't fucking matter, Steve!" Tony shouted. "It doesn't matter what you think Barnes would do, the fact is that he did it! And if you truly cared about Peter then you'd be just as angry about it as I am!"

"That's not fair!" Steve snapped, almost too quickly. "You know how much I care about Peter!"

"No, what's not fair is for my thirteen-year-old son to get almost blown up twice in two years, and for your old fucking war buddy to be responsible for one of them!" Tony stepped back, looking Steve up and down. "And who knows? Maybe he had a hand in Afghanistan too."

"And I'm telling you that I can't believe that," retorted Steve, shaking his head like the goddamn stubborn soldier that he was. "I just can't. I know Bucky. I know him better than anyone, and I know he would never do something like that."

Something about the tone of Steve's voice, the panic in his eyes and the emphaticness of his words caused all of Tony's insides to contract in fear and suspicion, and he looked down, suddenly very self-conscious of the fact that he was still dressed in nothing but a towel. Apparently Barnes wasn't just some old war buddy, he thought as he hurried from the bathroom, grabbing some clean clothes from the dresser and trying to ignore the way Steve's dog tags were sticking to his still-damp chest. Once he was dressed he sat down on the side of the bed, kneading his temples.

So that's why he didn't tell me what he suspected.

I should've goddamn known. I should've seen it coming, why the hell didn't I see it coming?

He refused to look up as Steve entered the bedroom and sat down next to him, his expression so tortured and sad that Tony wanted nothing more than to hold him, to run his fingers through his hair and tell him that everything was going to be okay. But he couldn't. Not until Steve was able to explain himself to Tony's satisfaction. If that was even possible.

"I know what you're thinking," he began, so softly that Tony had to strain to hear him. "But it's not true. Or at least, not all of it."

"Oh yeah?" Tony said evenly. "Which part?"

Steve's shoulders sagged, and he let out a heavy sigh. "I did love him," he said, rushing his next words when Tony flinched. "Or at least I thought that I did. Bucky was my best friend since we were kids. He was there for me through everything. Every illness, every beating, even in art school, he was there for me. He even tried to get me to move in with him after my ma died because he didn't want me to be alone."

Tony rolled his eyes, tilting his body further away. "How nice of him."

"But I didn't do it," Steve continued. "Because I knew at the time I'd only be torturing myself—"

"Stop!" Tony cried, hurt piercing his heart like a knife. "Just… stop. I'm not—, I can't hear this right
"No, I need to finish, Tony," Steve said firmly. He grabbed onto Tony's wrist, sliding his palm down to Tony's hand. "Please, can you at least look at me?"

Reluctantly, Tony rolled his head in Steve's direction, biting his lip to keep it from shaking.

"Thank you," Steve whispered. He brought Tony's hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles. "When Bucky died, I thought that a part of me died right along with him. I loved him, yes, but I'd resigned myself to the fact that he could never love me back, not the way that I wanted. He didn't—, he wasn't —"

"Into guys?" asked Tony.

"Yeah. He was only interested in the gals, and I was just his short and skinny best friend that he always had to bail out of trouble and could never find a date. But I didn't really realise any of that until I met you and Peter."

Tony gave him a confused look. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Steve tugged on Tony's hand, pulling him closer so he could curl his arm around his waist. "This is gonna sound cheesy as hell, but right now I don't much care. What I thought I felt for Bucky, Tony, it doesn't compare to what I feel for you. It took me awhile to understand it, and even then I tried to fight it, felt like I had to justify it in some way or I was tarnishing Bucky's memory. But I mean it, it's not the same." He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to Tony's. "It was more hero-worship than romantic love. Bucky was my hero long before I became one, and it took me a long time to let that go, but I did. You and Peter taught me that I could let it go, that I could let him go."

He paused to take a breath, allowing his words to sink in a bit. "But all that being said, I truly believe there is no possible way that he's aware of what he's doing. Bucky was one of the best sharpshooters the Army had ever seen, and there's no doubt in my mind that HYDRA would take that talent and warp it somehow to fit their needs. He would never choose to be what they've turned him into."

Tony was quiet for a long time, Steve's words echoing around his head, trying to harden his heart against them and failing miserably. This had always been the reason why Tony Stark didn't do relationships, because eventually, they always ended up leaving him. Always.

Always.

Except for Steve.

Because Steve had managed, in his sweet, aw-shucks, let-me-court-you-so-your-son-can-see-how-it-should-be, i-want-to-hear-you-say-that-you-love-me-before-we-have-sex way to tear down the iron shield Tony had moulded around his heart so quickly and completely, burrowing himself in so deeply that there was now no way for Tony to ever be rid of him. He could try, and probably ruin both he and Peter's lives in the process, but it would never work. It was as if their very souls had been welded together, and any attempt to separate them now would only cause irreparable damage to them both.

"He tried—," he finally said, dragging the words past the lump in his throat the size of a ping pong ball. "Barnes tried to kill my son, Steve. He tried—, and I watched him nearly kill you—, right in front of me—, you would've died if Pete hadn't—, and I don't know what I would've done—"

"But he didn't, sweetheart," Steve whispered, his lips brushing across Tony's forehead. "I'm still here, and Peter is safely at home being guarded by three superheroes and a whole squadron of
"But he's just gonna come after you again!" Tony choked out. "If he's one of those HYDRA goons now, then he's not gonna stop until they've liberated us from our freedom or whatever such bullshit Zola was spewing. And Steve, I can't let him hurt you or Pete again! I had to watch as my son clung for his life by his fingertips at the edge of a chasm! I had to hold you as you coughed up half the blood in your body and begged me to not let you go! And after all of that, how in the hell can you ask me to just look the other way the next time he tries to kill you? I can't do it! I won't do it." He stood up from the bed, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "And you still should've told me about all of this."

Steve shook his head as he got to his feet, cupping Tony's face with both hands. "I know that, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Tony. I guess... I guess I thought if I didn't believe it could be true, then it wasn't. I should've known better. Can you forgive me?"

Tony huffed as he looked into Steve's glassy blue eyes that were radiating shame and begging for forgiveness and nodded once, allowing Steve to wrap his arms around him. "You've got me hooked, Steve, as much as I sometimes hate to admit it. I couldn't get rid of you now if I tried."

"Well, then I guess I'll take that as a yes," Steve murmured into Tony's hair. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"Mmm, don't thank me yet. I meant what I said; if he comes after you again, I'm not gonna be able to hold back."

"Then we'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen," said Steve. "If that time comes, I'll have to confront him myself."

"No!" Tony yelped. "Barnes is just nothing but a deranged madman now, how can you not see that?"

"I don't believe that, Tony," Steve said, gently but firmly. "Bucky could've killed me that night on the roof, but he didn't. And I have to believe it's because he was fighting against the poison in his mind."

Tony scoffed, rolling his eyes. "You make it sound so cut and dry."

"That's because it just might be," said Steve. "Just like Clint was mind-controlled by Loki, Bucky is being mind-controlled by HYDRA. It's not really all that different. And I have to think that if it was Colonel Rhodes in this situation instead of Bucky that you'd be able to understand it a bit better."

"Yeah, well I've never thought I was in love with Rhodey," muttered Tony. "He's just kinda always had to put up with me, ever since college when I was just a skinny, nerdy, fifteen-year-old kid, and —"

He was cut off by Steve's fingers brushing across his lips, followed by his own lips. The kiss was chaste but full of unspoken promises, reminding Tony so much of their very first kiss that heat bloomed across his chest. "Shh, sweetheart," Steve whispered once he pulled back. "I love you. I love you, and I love Peter, and once all of this is over we're gonna go back home, and we're gonna mourn your parents the way they deserve to be mourned, and then we're gonna pick up our wedding plans, okay?" He gave Tony a rather shy smile. "You still have to teach me how to dance."

Tears welled in Tony's eyes, remembering when Steve confessed to him that he didn't know how to dance, the night before he and Natasha had left on the mission.
"You're a fast learner," Tony said. "You'll pick it up in no time."

"Maybe," said Steve. "But I'm looking forward to it regardless, okay? We just gotta get past this."

"All that giddy optimism," Tony muttered, swiping his hand across his nose. *Mom would've liked to see me get married.* "You make it sound like it's just a speed bump or something."

Steve smiled even wider, and Tony's heart surged. He'd always been hard-pressed to resist that smile. "No, it's a bit more complicated than a speed bump," he admitted. "But we can handle it, Tony. You and me, and Sam and Natasha, we can all get done what needs to be done. We can stop this." He took Tony's hand, interlacing their fingers. "Together, right?"

Tony breathed in, nodding. "Together."

They were just leaning in for another kiss when Sam cleared his throat from the doorway, poking his head inside. "Um... someone named Maria Hill just spoke with Natasha, and she said as long as we're able to find out when they plan to launch the helicarriers, we shouldn't have to worry as much about the targeting algorithm."

Steve looked at Tony, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Yeah, that makes sense," Tony said. "If HYDRA's in control of the algorithm then we can assume they're gonna be targeting whoever they view as a threat, so—"

"So then we should get working on finding out when they plan to launch," Steve agreed. "Can we do that here?"

"Should," Tony said with a nod. "JARVIS?"

"At your service, sir," replied JARVIS.

"Then let's do it," Steve said, taking a step towards the door. Tony snorted, grabbing Steve's arm as Sam raised his hands, backing away from the door with wide eyes.

"You might wanna get dressed first, babe," Tony said, smirking as he gave Steve's ass a quick pinch through the towel, delighting in the blush that spread across his beautiful face. *That's my ass, damnit! But I'll go ahead and get started."

"Yeah, good idea," said Steve. "I'll be there in a minute."

_Giddy optimism indeed,* Tony thought as he headed towards the lab, where a holographic model of the Insight carrier was already waiting for him.

He didn't know where he'd be without it.

"Anytime now would be kinda nice, shellhead," Natasha said as she came up behind Tony, whose fingers were flying so rapidly across the keyboard that his fingertips had gone numb.

"Yeah, and that's really not helping, Widow!" Tony snapped around the arm of his glasses stuck between his teeth. He let out a growl at the screen as the code he'd just completed was completely wiped out by the AI protecting the drive. "Goddamnit, JARVIS, why can't I get ahead of this?"

"It is indeed quite sophisticated, sir," answered JARVIS. "But I do believe... give me a moment... yes. Try it again now, if you please."
Tony inputted the code, letting out a loud *whoop* when he saw the blinking blue light on his monitor, indicating that the AI had been overridden. "That did it, JARVIS! What the hell'd you do?"

"I believe the term you would use is an 'end-around', sir?" JARVIS replied. "Basically, I was able to convince the AI that I was in fact the private server belonging to Senator Stern, so it was no longer needed to protect the data."

"That's damn smart of you, J," Tony said, finally allowing the glasses to clatter onto the counter. "Someone must've taught you pretty well."

"Yes," JARVIS said warily. "I suppose that is true."

Tony's fingers continued their rapid typing, bypassing the blueprints and all of the other nonsense that didn't matter at the moment until he found the launch schedule. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed as he reread the data. "We've only got about six hours! JARVIS, send this info to Bruce, I want him to start working on disabling the targeting satellites, but make sure it's kept out of Pete's sight, yeah? I don't want him aware of what's going on."

"Very good, sir," answered JARVIS, just as Steve appeared behind Tony with a fresh cup of coffee.

"I heard you swearing in here," he said as he set down the cup. "Which either means something good happened or something bad happened."

"Well, it's kinda both," Tony replied. "Project Insight is launching in six hours, give or take a few minutes, you know the traffic in D.C. sucks, so—"

"What does the traffic have to do with anything, Tony?" Steve asked, semi-patiently.

"Because Pierce is waiting for the rest of the World Security Council to arrive. Apparently he's making the whole thing a big show, like the fucking peacock that he is."

Steve pursed his lips. "Well, that doesn't give us a lot of time, but—"

"We've got a plan," Natasha said, suddenly appearing next to Steve with Sam in tow. "Hill says she's got a set of new targeting blades that will reprogram the targeting algorithm."

"Okay, so how do we do that?" Steve asked.

"It'll have to be done manually," she said. "There's one located on each carrier, and they all have to be in place before they start firing or it won't work."

"Okay," Tony said after a short pause. "So, Steve, Sam, and I will each take a carrier while—"

"While I go to the Triskelion and confront Pierce," Natasha said, an edge to her voice that Tony had only heard a couple of times before. "When I joined SHIELD I thought I was going straight, but apparently all I did was trade the KGB for HYDRA. And I'm gonna kick Pierce's ass for it."

Tony and Steve exchanged looks, with Steve quirking an eyebrow. "That sounds like a good plan, Natasha," he said. "But do you think you're okay to go in alone?"

"I won't be alone," answered Natasha. "Fury's gonna come in to back me up once things get going."

"Oh, I bet he's gonna enjoy that," muttered Tony, earning a smirk from Steve.

"All right," Steve said in his Captain's voice. "Then I'd say this is a go. When are we supposed to meet up with Hill?"
"Hill and Fury should arrive at the Triskelion in about three hours," Natasha said. "So we should be ready as soon as they're ready."

Steve gave a firm nod. "Sam, you're still okay with all this?"

"Absolutely," replied Sam. "Let's kick those HYDRA asses."

"I'd say he's ready," said Natasha.

"I agree," said Steve. He looked around at each of them, pursing his lips in determination as he reached for Tony's hand. "Okay, we all have our assignments. Let's get this done."

Come and say hi to me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :)

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment!

I'm still taking recs for Tony and Steve's wedding song as well, thank you to everyone who has recommended songs so far! :)
"Hey, kiddo, our pizza's done," Uncle Clint called from the hallway, causing Peter to jump as he attempted to shut off the feed from Papa's comm chip. He'd been finally able to tap into the broadcast frequency the previous night, constructing his own subroutine in JARVIS's programming when the UI had flat-out refused to allow him to listen in, reminding him that neither Dad nor Papa wanted him to know what was going on.

And while Peter supposed he could see why, that was just too darn bad. If his dads were going to be going up against HYDRA of all things, an organisation that was supposed to have died with Hitler, then Peter wanted to know exactly what was going on.

Peter's heart ached as he wondered how Papa was taking it. All he'd managed to overhear so far had been Papa and Dad discussing their upcoming battle plan, but Peter knew that Papa had to be just reeling from the knowledge that the enemy he'd spent years of his life fighting, losing someone he loved in the process and eventually sacrificing himself in order to defeat, had resurfaced.

And that they'd been hiding inside SHIELD the whole time, the very same agency that had found Papa in the ice.
No wonder that Agent Rumlow dude had been so creepy. He was a freaking Nazi.

"Peter?" Uncle Clint said, poking his head around Peter's doorway. "C'mon and eat. You've been in here all morning, you've gotta be hungry."

"Yeah, okay," mumbled Peter. He was hungry, there was no denying it, but he'd been so worried about his dads that lately everything he'd been eating had just sat at the bottom of his stomach like a lead brick.

On top of everything else, Peter missed his papa's cooking. While Uncle James could make a decent enough breakfast—and really, how hard was it to scramble eggs and pop bread into the toaster?—he wasn't nearly as good of a cook as Papa, and since he'd been stuck on a conference call with his Air Force superiors since way before sunrise and Uncle Bruce was holed up in his own apartment working on something for Dad, the burden of making sure that Peter had something to eat had fallen to Uncle Clint.

Which meant they'd be eating frozen pizza and Cheetos. Again.

Sliding his phone into his back pocket, Peter followed Uncle Clint to the kitchen, his traitorous stomach growling at the smell of hot pizza, even though it was covered with mushrooms. For some reason Uncle Clint loved mushrooms, which Peter thought were absolutely gross, something that his snarky uncle delighted in teasing him about.

They ate in relative silence. Uncle Clint wasn't really all that much of a talker anyway, preferring to read newspapers or books at the table, which at the moment suited Peter just fine. With his mind still perfecting the design of his new web shooters, he wasn't in the mood for idle chit-chat anyway. He'd already tested out three different preliminary designs and was planning on finalising it tonight once Uncle James went to bed.

And once the shooters were done—with backups of course, backups were always a good thing—then he could get started on making the webbing.

And then once the webbing was done, he could get started on his suit.

Peter sighed as he picked yet another mushroom off of his pizza, wrinkling his nose as he dropped it onto the pile of Cheetos sitting on Uncle Clint's plate, stifling a shudder as he proceeded to pick up the now-contaminated Cheeto and pop it into his mouth.

That's just disgusting.

Unfortunately, with how closely Peter was being monitored everywhere he went, it didn't seem plausible that he'd get to actually do any superheroing anytime soon. It was one thing to have all the ingredients, it was another thing completely to get to use them. He supposed it was possible that once all of this was over Dad and Papa would back off a little on their hyper-overprotectiveness and allow Peter to do stuff again, like going over to Ned's house to watch movies after school, or working for a few hours in the Robotics Lab.

Hmm, maybe that could work, Peter thought as he absent-mindedly chewed on a Cheeto. Barring another alien invasion or the reveal of another super-secret Nazi organisation back from the dead, Dad and Papa were still planning on going on a honeymoon after their wedding. Uncle James was going to be babysitting again, but lately he'd been so distracted by stuff going on within the Air Force that Peter felt certain he wouldn't be hovering over him as much as his fathers would be, so maybe then he could start scouting around for a good place to work.
"That all you're gonna eat?" Uncle Clint said a few minutes later, jerking his head towards Peter's plate. "You've only had two slices."

"You know I'm not a huge fan of fungus on my food," Peter grumbled. "I don't know how you can eat those things."

Uncle Clint shot him a maniacal grin as he popped yet another mushroom into his mouth, chewing as slowly as possible. "Blame it on our SHIELD survival training," he said. "You get dumped out in the middle of absolutely nowhere for two weeks and have to survive on what you find, you'd start eating mushrooms too. And hope that in your near-starvation fog, you didn't pick one of the ones that would kill ya."

Peter let out a hard shudder. He should've known it was something like that since Uncle James had told him about going through something similar back when he was in pilot training. Survival school was just part of that whole process, and likely had been for Papa as well.

Good thing Dad had been only a consultant for SHIELD, otherwise he would've probably had to do it too.

"Yeah, I guess," Peter said, pushing his plate away. "I'm full though."

"Suit yourself," said Uncle Clint. "You feel like watching a movie? I think Rhodes is still on that call of his."

"Sure," Peter said with a shrug, trying to smile. At least Uncle Clint had decent enough taste in movies, and based on what he'd overheard earlier, nothing was going on with Dad and Papa for at least a couple more hours.

They ended up watching Terminator 2, with Uncle James finally emerging from his room about halfway through, plopping down onto the couch between them with the rest of the leftover pizza.

"I got a message from Tony," he said once the movie was over. "He said they're hoping to wrap things up in the next couple of days. Which is good, 'cause there's a whole crapload of stuff going on at Edwards that I need to be getting back to." He glanced down at Peter, giving him an affectionate wink. "No offence, kiddo."

"Nah, that's okay," Peter said. "I'm looking forward to stuff getting back to normal too."

"Yeah, I bet you are," said Uncle James. "Both your dads say 'hi', by the way. And I'm also supposed to make sure that you're brushing your teeth before bed."

Peter rolled his eyes, smiling when Uncle James ruffled his hair. "I'm gonna go into the lab now, if that's okay. I'm… working on something for school."

"Fine with me," said Uncle Clint as he stretched out on the couch, nearly pushing Uncle James onto the floor. "Think I'll take a nap."

"Figures," Uncle James muttered under his breath as he got to his feet. "You could go back downstairs to your own couch and nap there, you know."

"Nah," said Uncle Clint, his eyes already closed. "No point, I'm already here. Besides, this couch is more comfy."

"Whatever, man," said Uncle James. "Just so long as you don't start snoring."
"Yeah, yeah, leave me alone," grumbled Uncle Clint. "Tryin' to sleep."

Raising his eyebrows, Peter shot a final glance towards Uncle James and headed into the lab, pulling out his phone as soon as he sat down at his chemistry counter.

"JARVIS, please soundproof the lab," he said. "And then connect to Papa's comm chip."

"Captain Rogers, Mr Stark, and Agent Romanoff are now on the standard Avengers' comms, Master Peter, as well as Agent Barton who was just summoned. Would you like me to connect you to those instead?"

"Oh, yes please!" Peter said eagerly. The Avengers' comms were a lot stronger than the chip in Papa's uniform, and it also made sense if they wanted Bruce to be able to hear what was going on since he was currently providing tech support.

And if they were calling in Uncle Clint, they must be getting pretty close to showtime.

"May I inquire as to what you'll be working on?" JARVIS asked.

"Just a new recipe that I'm trying out," answered Peter as he poured one hundred millilitres of a clear liquid into a beaker and set it on top of one of the Bunsen burners. "Since I can't go to school may as well try it here, right?"

"Yes," JARVIS said warily. "Just so long as it's not explosive. I don't believe your father would appreciate returning to a damaged laboratory."

"Yeah, 'cause he never causes any damage to the laboratory," Peter grumbled, mimicking JARVIS's British pronunciation. "Besides, DUM-E's right here if I need him. Right, DUM-E?"

Peter smiled as DUM-E gave him a reassuring beep.

"Very good, Master Peter," JARVIS said, and Peter could just imagine him rolling his eyes, if he in fact had them. "Please let me know if I can be of further assistance."

"Uh huh."

"All right, listen up," said Maria Hill, handing Tony, Steve, and Sam each a computer chip about half the size of a credit card. "These are the new targeting blades. You three will have to fight your way into the main computer core on each of the three carriers and manually replace the existing targeting blades with these."

"Seems easy enough," Tony said, not without a hint of impatience as he stowed the chip in his left arm gauntlet. Now that they had a decent plan in place he was eager to get started, thinking that the sooner they got this done, the better the chances they had of not running into Bucky Barnes.

Because even after he and Steve's conversation, and Steve's reassurances, Tony knew he wouldn't be able to hold back if Barnes so much as even looked at Steve in a way that he didn't appreciate. There was no way. Mind-controlled or not, Tony was not about to let Barnes try to hurt him again.

"Not really that easy, Stark," retorted Hill. "The blades in all three carriers need to be replaced before Insight goes live, or a lot of people will die. Now, Natasha's already in place at the Triskelion and Fury's on his way there, so—"

"Okay, so then let's get started," Tony said. "The launch time is approaching, and the last thing we
need is for Pierce to jumpstart it because he suspects something's up."

"Tony's right," said Steve, stowing his chip into his utility belt. He glanced over at Sam, raising an eyebrow. "There's a lot of risk here, Sam. Potentially a lot more than when we were up at the bunker."

"I know, Cap," Sam said firmly, placing his goggles over his eyes. "And I'm ready."

"All right," Steve said. He placed his hand on Tony's shoulder, nodding in Sam's direction. "Tony, you're gonna be on Alpha, Sam on Bravo, and I'll take Charlie. Now, even though we're starting on separate carriers, teamwork is going to be very important here. Tony, I'm gonna need you on air support once you're able to lock your carrier. Barton is on his way, but even flying supersonic it's gonna take him some time to get here, and the people on those carriers that are loyal to HYDRA are going to have access to the full arsenal of SHIELD weaponry, so we can expect to encounter some pretty heavy resistance."

"Copy that, Cap," Tony said quietly.

Steve gave him a nod, his blue eyes radiating the fear that he didn't dare voice and that only Tony could see. Steve was nervous, not only about the mission itself, but about potentially running into Barnes. Even more reason for Tony to have Steve's back.

"Hill," Steve said. "Can you patch me through to the Triskelion? I have something that I'd like to say."

Hill's eyebrows shot up, and she pressed a series of buttons on her console, nodding at Steve when she was done. "You're in, Cap."

Steve drew in a deep breath, giving Tony a wink as he began. "Attention, all SHIELD agents, this is Steve Rogers. You've probably heard a lot about me in the last few days, and some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think the time has come for you to know the truth."

He paused for a second, glancing over at Tony for encouragement. Tony smiled fondly; there was something about one of Captain America's rousing pre-mission speeches that that never failed to get his blood pumping.

Which, Tony realised, was entirely the point.

"SHIELD is not what we thought it was," Steve continued. "It's been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader, and there's likely a lot more of them out there as well. They could even be standing right next to you. Right now they have almost everything that they want, which is absolute control. They tried to kill Nick Fury, they tried to kill me, and it won't stop there. So if you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone who stands in their way. Unless we stop them."

Next to Tony, Sam was grinning widely as he leaned over to whisper, "Is he always this hoo-rah before a mission?"

"Yep," answered Tony. "Damn good, isn't he?"

"Hell, yeah!" exclaimed Sam. "I could listen to him all day!"

"I know I'm asking a lot," Steve said, concluding his speech. "But the price of freedom is high, it
always has been. And it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not."

Steve nodded at Hill when he was done. "Maybe that'll sway a few, you never know."

"It was good, Cap," Hill said, obviously just as choked up as Sam.

"The best, Cap," Sam said emphatically. "And now we should probably be heading out."

"Sam's right," said Hill. "We've got twelve minutes til launch."

"All right," Steve said as he fastened his cowl. "Bruce, are you ready?"

"Ready, Cap," Bruce replied from his lab back at the Tower. "But just be aware, this coding is so complex that I'm not sure I'll be able to get this done on my own. I mean, I'm sure Peter could help if I asked, but—"

"No way in hell, big guy," snapped Tony. "Under no circumstance is Pete to get involved in any of this, do I make myself clear?"

"It's all right, Bruce," Steve said, giving Tony's armoured hand a reassuring squeeze. "The deactivation of the satellites was never a sure thing, just do what you can."

"Yeah. Got it. And Clint reports that he's about ten minutes out."

Steve inhaled a deep breath, nodding as he attached his shield to his back. Ten minutes didn't sound like that long of a time, but Tony knew it could be an eternity during a battle. "All right. Let's get this done. Good luck."

"Copy that, babe," Tony said, his faceplate locking into place, his heart already thudding as Steve headed out the door towards the Charlie carrier, which just happened to be the carrier closest to the Triskelion. "JARVIS, I want a continuous lock on Steve's transponder. Any sudden unexpected movements or change in his vital signs and you let me know, got it?"

"Got it, sir. Lock obtained."

"Thanks."

Taking off towards the Alpha carrier, Tony quickly realised that Steve hadn't been exaggerating about the resistance when three of SHIELD's attack Quinjets suddenly appeared directly in front of him, the center jet firing machine-gun rounds while the outer two took up flanking positions, attempting to force Tony off course. Tony gritted his teeth, grunting as he performed evasive manoeuvres while arming one of his shoulder missiles.

"C'mon, you assholes!" he muttered as he launched the missile towards the jet on the right flank, letting out a triumphant, "Woohoo!" as it hit the aircraft's far-side wing, forcing it to swerve into its two companions which proceeded to crash down onto the deck of the Alpha carrier, taking out another jet in the process.

"You good, Tony?" Steve called over the comm.

"Better now," Tony answered as he landed, immediately repulsing away a foot soldier coming at him with a rifle. "Just landed and heading towards the core."

"Copy that."
"Cap!" Sam called over the comm. "How're we supposed to know the good guys from the bad?"

"If they're shooting at you, they're bad," replied Steve.

"I haven't seen too many good ones yet," Tony said. "I'd watch your asses!"

"I'm trying to scrounge up some additional air support," said Hill. "But I wouldn't count on it. The comm channels are loaded and we still don't know exactly who we can trust. I'd assume that anyone on those carriers is HYDRA until proven otherwise."

"Barton, what's your status?" Steve asked with a grunt.

"Four minutes, Cap," answered Barton. "If I go any faster she's gonna fly apart."

Tony scowled at Barton's reply, making a mental note to start working on an upgrade to the Quinjet's inertial dampeners as soon as he was able to carve out the time.

"I'm just about done here," Tony said as he arrived at the helicarrier's computer core, repulsing away two more HYDRA soldiers who dropped down onto the metal bridge in front of him. "JARVIS, keep a close eye out there while I take of this, yeah?"

"Yes, sir."

Retrieving the targeting chip from his gauntlet, Tony cursed as he was suddenly hit between the shoulder blades by an RPG blast, slamming him up against the core. "Damnit, J, you're supposed to be watching my back!"

"That projectile was launched from three levels up, sir," answered JARVIS. "I was unable to—"

"Just target him and fire!" Tony snapped, dropping to his knees to reach the chip that had managed to slide underneath the core.

"Right away, sir."

Tony grunted as his armoured fingers were barely able to close around the chip just as another of his shoulder missiles armed and took off, hitting the HYDRA soldier who had launched the grenade square in the chest.

"Enemy has been neutralised, sir," said JARVIS.

"Thanks, J. I owe you one."

"Yes," replied JARVIS, rather sarcastically. "But who would you say is keeping score? Certainly not me."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," grumbled Tony as he pulled himself up to his feet. He quickly tapped in the commands to unlock the core, ripping out the existing blade—and crushing it in his fist for good measure—before replacing it with his own.

"Alpha is locked, babe," he said as he closed the core, heading back across the bridge. "Where do you need me?"

"Cover Sam on Bravo, Tony!" Steve replied, the loud thwang of his shield impacting against something metal echoing across their comms.

"Hey now, I'm holding my own just fine here, Cap," protested Sam. "You're the only one at this
"party who can't fly!"

"Steve—" Tony started, frowning when Steve interrupted him.

"That's an order, Iron Man," he said firmly. "Cover Sam. Barton says he's still ninety seconds out so right now you're all we've got."

Tony pursed his lips, huffing out a sharp breath. "Fine."

"Thank you."

_Goddamn stubborn soldier_, Tony thought as he took off from the deck, aiming for the Bravo carrier. _You're damn lucky you're cute._

"Under no circumstance is Pete to get involved," Peter grumbled under his breath, glaring at the offensive speaker those words had come across only a few minutes prior. "No, let's not tell one of the smartest people in this entire Tower about the life-threatening problem that you're facing because you still think I'm a tiny and helpless little kid that needs to be protected from everything!"

"Pardon me, Master Peter?" JARVIS asked. "I didn't quite catch that."

"Nothing." Peter tilted his head, thinking. "JARVIS, can you please pull up the Project Insight data my dad was working on before he left?"

"I do not believe that Mr Stark would wish for me to—"

"Override code 'Hufflepuff', JARVIS!" barked Peter, smiling in satisfaction as the data started scrolling across his monitor. "Thank you. Now, let's see if I can…"

He began typing in commands, noting that Bruce was down in his own lab attempting to disable the Insight targeting satellites orbiting the Earth. An attempt that did not appear to be going all that well.

"Bruce is gonna notice if I try to help him with the satellites," Peter said, his fingers already flying across the keyboard. "So my best bet would be to try to break into the algorithm and see if I can disable it."

"That would seem to be a valid plan, Master Peter," said JARVIS.

"Yeah," murmured Peter, wincing as a booming blast came from the comm speaker, followed directly on its heels by the sound of Papa gasping in pain. "JARVIS, can you please display my dads' vitals for me?"

"As you wish," JARVIS said as Dad and Papa's heart rates and blood pressures appeared on Peter's secondary monitor, all of which were elevated.

Peter shivered as another crashing sound came from the speaker, drowning out the voice of Dad as he directed someone named Sam on how to avoid the enemy fire.

"I got you covered, Falcon!" yelled Dad through the nearly ear-splitting explosions and weapons' fire. "Get your ass up to that computer core so we can get the hell outta here!"

"Copy that!" called Sam

"I'm forty seconds out," Uncle Clint suddenly said. "Just hold onto your butts til I get there!"
"Bravo lock!" Sam said a few seconds later. "That's two!"

"Good work, Sam," said Papa. "Tony, you and Sam head on up to the Triskelion. I want you both backing up Natasha and Fury."

"Copy that," replied Sam.

"Steve—!" Dad said, cut off immediately by Papa.

"No arguments, Tony, just do it! There's a lot of enemy fire coming from the forty-first floor of the building!"

"Cap, I'm here," said Uncle Clint, followed directly by a massive explosion that nearly made Peter jump out of his skin. "Where do you want me?"

"Stay on the enemy jets," commanded Papa. "Don't let any of 'em take off. Let's keep the HYDRA personnel contained on the helicarriers."

"Copy that."

"Damnit!" Uncle Bruce suddenly said from several floors down. "I almost had it, Cap!"

"Four minutes!" said the sharp voice of Maria Hill. "Steve, four minutes til launch!"

"Damnit!" Peter exclaimed, dragging his eyes back to his monitor. "JARVIS, is there any way for me to break into this algorithm in only four minutes?"

"It is one of the most complex sets of coding that I have ever seen, Master Peter," replied JARVIS. "And Mr Stark attempted to do just that several times when he was not as pressed for time as you currently are."

"Yeah, okay," said Peter, cringing as yet another explosion roared from the speaker, followed quickly by a very loud four-letter word from his father. "But I'm gonna keep trying."

*It's the least I can do.*

Things were relatively quiet for the next sixty seconds or so as Peter concentrated on his task, letting out a loud, "Woohoo!" as the decryption finally broke and a list of names began to appear on the screen.

"Oh my God!" breathed Peter as the list kept going, and going, and going, like a really messed up version of the Energizer bunny. "JARVIS, who are all these people?"

"It appears that they are all targets of HYDRA, Master Peter," JARVIS stated. "Including Captain Rogers, Mr Stark, Dr Banner, Agent Romanoff—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it!" Peter snapped. "How can I change it?"

"I believe it's too late for that, Master Peter," JARVIS said sadly. "There is no more time—"

"Steve!" Dad suddenly cried, the intense fear in his voice causing Peter to freeze. "He's here! He just took out Sam!"

"Who's 'he'?" demanded Peter, his heart thudding madly. "JARVIS, who is Dad talking about?"

"I'm all right, Cap," Sam said quickly. "But the pack is toast. I'm sorry."
"Get Sam to safety, Tony!" Papa ordered. "I'm okay for the moment."

"Like hell you are!" Dad yelled. "Steve, he's coming straight for you!"

"Yeah, and the jet just took a pretty bad hit, guys!" Uncle Clint said. "Some asshole fired an RPG from the Bravo deck and took out the left engine. I'm gonna have to set her down."

"That's all right, Clint," said Papa. "Get on up to the Triskelion and link up with Natasha and Fury."

"Copy that."

"JARVIS, who're they talking about?" Peter cried. "Who's coming for Papa?"

"Two minutes to launch, Cap!" called Maria Hill.

"I'm fine, Tony!" yelled Papa, his voice laced with barely-controlled fear. "Get Sam to safety!"

"But you don't sound fine, Papa!" Peter cried, burning hot tears pricking his eyes. "Who's coming for you?"

"I'm clear, Cap!" Sam yelled a second later. "Iron Man's on his way."

"Damn right I am," said Dad, low and ice-cold. "And this time he's not getting away."

"Tony!" Papa cried. "Remember what we—"

"There's no way in hell I'm gonna let him hurt you again!" shouted Dad. "No fucking way!"

"Oh no!" gasped Peter, realisation hitting him like one of Dad's repulsor blasts. "They're going up against the Winter Soldier!"

Steve hadn't had to try to think all that much about how it would feel if he were to come face-to-face with Bucky again. That night on the D.C. rooftop, when Bucky's tortured blue eyes had stared into his own and he'd noticed that nearly infinitesimal flicker of recognition had been seared into Steve's mind so deeply that thinking about him since then hadn't been an issue. Bucky had been pretty much occupying a part of Steve's mind from that moment on.

What he had told Tony the previous night had been the absolute truth. Steve had loved Bucky once, desired him, wanted him in ways that would've gotten him at least dishonourably discharged and at worst arrested and court-martialed. There was no such thing as an openly gay man in the U.S. Army back in the 1940's, and since Steve knew that Bucky was very much a ladies' man anyway, it just never made sense to say anything out loud. Being Bucky's best friend was going to have to be enough.

In fact, one of the reasons why Steve had been so at peace with his decision to crash the Valkyrie into the Arctic ice had been that he'd thought, as romantic a notion as it perhaps had been, that maybe once he was dead he would get to see Bucky again.

Except, he didn't. Because Bucky apparently hadn't died when he fell from the HYDRA train.

Then again, Steve didn't die when he crashed the Valkyrie either.

Guess they had both managed to cheat fate.

Except that Bucky's alternative fate had turned out to be a heck of a lot worse than Steve's.
Steve remembered all too well how lost he'd felt during those initial two weeks out of the ice. How jarring everything in the twenty-first century had been. How fast, how bright, how loud.

And everything ran on electricity. Even drawing, Steve's oldest passion, something that he had enjoyed since he was a little boy, even before he learned how to spell his own name, was being done electronically.

At first Steve refused to believe it. He shunned all of the modern technologies that he possibly could, refused to turn on the television unless it was to watch one of his old propaganda movies, asked Agent Coulson to bring him paper and pencils rather than a computer and stylus. He did everything he possibly could to cling to the time that he knew, to what was familiar.

Just like he had tried to cling to Bucky after he'd lost him.

And then Agent Coulson and Director Fury showed up with Tony and Peter's files, telling him that they had been kidnapped by terrorists and he was being sent to help find them.

And the rest, as they say, was history. That fateful day when Steve Rogers first came face to face with Tony and Peter Stark out there in the middle of the Afghanistan desert, was the day that the rest of his life began.

Steve never forgot Bucky, but moving in with the Starks and falling in love with Tony, and having that love reciprocated in ways he never could have imagined were possible, had helped him see that his infatuation with Bucky had been just that. An infatuation.

Hero-worship, like he'd said.

But that still didn't help much when Steve landed on the metal bridge of the Charlie carrier and came face-to-face with the man he once said he'd be with "til the end of the line". The man who had tried to not only kill him, but Tony and Peter as well, the two people Steve loved most in the entire world.

He stood there, staring, his brown hair hanging in his face, his blue eyes piercing and emotionless, his metal arm glinting in the smattering of sunlight that filtered through the upper decks of the helicarrier. He carried a machine gun in each hand, and Steve could see two smaller guns strapped to his back, in some kind of specialised holster.

HYDRA had taken Bucky—Steve's oldest friend—and moulded and warped him into an assassin. Cold. Emotionless. Deadly.

Evil.

Except, he wasn't. He was still Bucky.

He just couldn't remember.

"Bucky," Steve said, the words tearing through his throat like the jagged thorns on a rose bush. "People could die. I can't let that happen."

There was no response. No twitch of his lips, no blink of his eyelids. Not even a trace of breeze through his hair. He was immobile, unmoving.

Only his eyes betrayed the hint of doubt swirling through his tortured mind.

"I know you can hear me," Steve continued. "I know you know me. Please, don't make me do this."
Again, there was nothing, and Steve's heart sank down to his knees. Bucky was standing directly between him and the computer core.

Steve was going to have to fight him.

With a sharp inhale Steve launched his shield, attempting to hit Bucky's metal arm and hoping it would throw him off-balance enough that Steve would be able to get past him. But Bucky seemed to have anticipated the move, bringing his arm up and swatting the shield back. Steve immediately caught it, advancing towards him as Bucky raised his guns, their bullets pinging off the vibranium disc as he twisted around, stepping up in front of the computer core, shielding it with his body. Steve lunged towards him, knocking the guns from his hands and wrapping his fingers around his metal arm in an attempt to get past him, but Bucky was strong, easily as strong as Steve, and stubbornly held his ground.

"C'mon, Bucky!" Steve pleaded, grunting as he ducked to avoid Bucky's swinging fist. "Please, this isn't you! You don't wanna do this!"

"Might wanna hurry it up, Cap!" Maria Hill yelled over the comm. "Sixty seconds til launch!"

"I'm working on it!" cried Steve, barely managing to avoid being sliced in half by a knife nearly the length of his forearm. Bucky stumbled slightly as he missed, giving Steve the split-second he needed to grab him by the shoulders and knee him in the gut. The hit had its intended effect when Bucky doubled over, allowing Steve to get to the computer core and open it.

But he had just barely managed to rip out the existing targeting blade when Bucky's boot connected with his hand, sending the replacement blade skittering across the bridge and over the side, landing one level down. Steve's belly swooped in panic as he swung his shield against Bucky's metal arm, ducking underneath his swinging right fist as he slid across the width of the bridge, jumping down to retrieve the blade. He was just bending over to pick it up when a shot rang out, his ears picking up the sound of it a split-second before the bullet pierced his skin, lodging into his abdomen.

Steve cried out at the searing pain, his right arm clutching his side as he doubled over, gasping for breath and trying desperately not to panic. All of the air around him was suddenly burning, scorching his lungs with every shallow breath he managed to inhale.

*I can't—, I can't breathe! Oh God, I can't breathe!*

Another shot rang out, piercing through the fiery air and hitting the opposite side of Steve's abdomen. The shot was so forceful that it sent him spinning, the resulting vertigo only increasing his panic. Steve landed hard on the bridge, choking on the blood-scented air lodged in his throat. He squeezed his eyes closed against the nauseating pain, trying to keep control of himself long enough to regain his bearings.

*C'mon, Steve, get up. You got this.*

*Breathe.*

*I can do this all day.*

He was just peeling his eyes open again when he picked up the approaching sound of Tony's repulsors.

"Get away from him, you goddamn son of a bitch!" Tony yelled as he flew in from behind Steve, skidding onto the bridge as he landed and repulsing Bucky straight off, sending him flying at least three levels down before Steve could utter one word of protest. As soon as Bucky was gone Tony
hurried over to Steve, gathering him as close as his armoured body allowed.

"Tony!" Steve gasped. "Don't—, please don't hurt him! He doesn't know—"

"None of that nonsense now, honey," Tony snapped. "We only got fifteen seconds til launch and I'm trying to keep you from dying on me here!"

"Blade's down there!" Steve grunted, jerking his head towards the blade dangling precariously close to the edge of an incline underneath the bridge. Tony immediately lunged forward, curling his fingers around it and taking a single step towards the core when he stopped, wrapping Steve's arm around his shoulders and hauling him to his feet, pushing the blade into Steve's palm just as a deafening whirring noise sounded from all around them.

The Insight guns were taking aim, readying to fire.

"Do it, Captain," Tony said, nodding once.

Gritting his teeth, Steve shoved the blade into its slot, collapsing sideways against Tony as soon as it was in place.

"Charlie—, Charlie lock!" he rasped. "Hill, do you copy? Charlie is locked!"

"Copy that, Cap," Hill replied. "Programming new targets."

"Good job, guys," Bruce's voice piped up over the comms. "I'm sorry I wasn't more help on this end."

"Steve, targets are set and the carriers are repositioning," said Hill. "You guys gotta get out of there now!"

"Fire!" cried Steve with an agonising grunt. "Hill, fire now!"

"Are you guys clear?" Hill asked. "I'm not gonna fire on you if—"

"We're clearing out now," replied Tony. As gently as he was able, he took Steve into his arms, cradling his head with his palm. "JARVIS, you know what to do."

"Affirmative, sir," said JARVIS as Tony's boot repulsors powered up, lifting them both off the bridge just as the first of the massive shells impacted the helicarrier a few decks below. Hill had reprogrammed the three helicarriers to shoot at each other instead of the potentially millions of human targets.

Steve let out a pained gasp as soon as they were safely on the ground, not too far from the bank of the Potomac River. Explosions boomed in the distance as the Insight helicarriers continued their assault, with chunks of burning debris splashing down into the frigid river and onto the land around it. Steve's eyes went wide as he realised that the Bravo carrier was heading straight for the Triskelion, and he dug his palm into the grass, pushing himself up to a sitting position.

"For Christ's sake, babe, stay still!" Tony protested, his faceplate flipping open. "That asshole shot you twice!"

But Steve only shook his head. "Tony!" he said, still struggling for breath. "Our team, they're up there in the building, they need to get out! And the SHIELD agents, not everyone in there is—!"

"It's okay, Cap!" Clint piped up, calling over the thwap thwap thwap of a helicopter's rotors. "I
ordered an evac as soon as I got inside, and I've got Fury and Nat with me. Oh, and… dude, what's your name again?"

"Sam Wilson," replied Sam.

"Yeah, Sam. Got him too," said Clint.

"See, babe, they're all okay," Tony said, his face etched in fear and fatigue. He unbuckled Steve's cowl, setting it aside so he could run his fingers through his hair. "JARVIS says an ambulance is on the way, so just stay with me, all right?"

But Tony had barely finished his sentence before a tall, menacing figure burst from the surrounding tree line and marched directly towards them, his metal hand wrapping around Tony's armoured neck before Steve even realised what was happening. Bucky growled as he lifted Tony completely off the ground and flung him into the woods, shuddering as his metal-covered body crunched against the trunk of a tree.

"No!" Steve cried, pushing himself up on his elbows, his forearm pressed against his bleeding abdomen. "Bucky, don't! This isn't you!"

But Bucky ignored Steve's desperate plea, pulling his metal fist back and swinging towards Steve's face, the audible crack of his splintering cheekbone echoing against the surrounding trees. Bucky immediately swung again, with Steve barely managing to get his arms crossed in front of him to block the blow, his damaged abdominal muscles screaming in protest as he scrambled to his feet. He wrapped his fingers around Bucky's left wrist, trying to disable his metal arm.

"You know me!" Steve said through clenched teeth. "You've known me your whole life! You're my friend!"

"And you're my mission!" Bucky snarled back, the lifelessness of his voice sending a shiver down Steve's spine. He sounded like only a shell of himself, absolutely nothing like the Bucky that Steve had known for almost his entire life.

"No, I'm not!" argued Steve. "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes, and you're—"

"Get the fuck away from him!" screamed Tony as he flew straight into Bucky, knocking him to the ground and pinning him, his knees pressed onto Bucky's shoulders as his shaking hands curled around Bucky's neck and squeezed. "You will not hurt my family again, you got that, you son of a bitch? You will never touch them again!"

"Tony, don't!" gasped Steve, stumbling towards them, barely avoiding being kicked by Bucky's flailing legs. "HYDRA had control of his mind, Tony, please! We can help him!"

Tony's head whipped towards Steve, and even through his armour Steve could see the confusion and anger radiating from him, the shock at being asked to help the person who had caused them all so much pain. He could understand it; Bucky had tried to kill them, tried to kill their son, killed both of Tony's parents. Those weren't things that someone could overlook just like that.

And yet, that's exactly what Steve was asking him to do.

It might've been easier for Steve to ask Tony to fly to the moon. At least that was something he'd actually attempted before.

But Steve also knew that no one was stronger than Tony. Hulk, Thor, and Steve, and now even Peter, they were all physically stronger, yes. But Steve had never met someone with as strong a will
as Tony. No one could go through what he had been through and survive like he had without being the strongest person that Steve had ever seen.

Bucky's entire face was now bright red, his legs kicking and his hands scrabbling, trying to loosen Tony's ironclad grip on his throat.

"Tony, please," Steve pleaded, his fingers wrapping around Tony's wrist. "Please, sweetheart, don't do this. We can help him."

Tony's faceplate popped open, his brown eyes filled with such intense agony that tears welled in Steve's own eyes. "How—, how can you ask me to do that, Steve? How?"

"For me," Steve said gently, giving Tony's wrist a slight shake. "Please, do it for me. He's my friend, and I want to help him. Please."

Tony breathed in, shaking his head as he glanced back down at Bucky, whose eyes had already rolled into the back of his head. He only had a few seconds left.

"He killed my mom, and he hurt my boy," Tony said, every painful word chiselling off a tiny piece of Steve's heart. "Our boy."

"I know, sweetheart," Steve murmured. "I know he did. But you know this wouldn't change anything, and you know Peter wouldn't want this. Please, just let him go."

Tony flinched at the mention of Peter's name, sucking in a sharp breath as he finally released his hold on Bucky's neck. Bucky's eyes immediately flew open and he gasped, just before Tony's right fist came across his cheek, knocking him out. Steve grabbed onto Tony's shoulders, hauling him off of Bucky and gathering him close, weaving his fingers through Tony's hair and pressing them into his scalp.

"Thank you," he whispered into Tony's ear, his busted cheekbone throbbing with every beat of his heart. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"He's not getting anywhere near Pete," Tony stated, his lower lip quivering. "Absolutely nowhere near him, do you understand me?"

"I do," answered Steve, groaning as he shifted slightly. "And I agree."

"Jesus, babe, you're still bleeding all over yourself," Tony grumbled, sitting up to inspect Steve's wounds. "JARVIS, how much longer?"

"The estimated arrival time for emergency services is two minutes, sir," JARVIS replied. "And Agent Barton reports—"

"That Agent Barton is here," Clint said as he emerged from the treeline, followed by Sam and Natasha. He paused, taking in the scene around him. "Do I wanna know what happened here, or can I just make something up?"

Steve winced as he attempted to push himself up to a sitting position, halting when Tony's arms wrapped around him, holding him in place.

"You've been shot, honey, and the side of your face is the size of a grapefruit!" he said, incredulous. "For God's sake, will you just sit still?"

"Yeah, okay," Steve said as he relaxed back against Tony, briefly closing his eyes. He could feel the
tiny fibres of his skin knitting themselves back together over the bullet holes even as they sat there, but he also knew that unlike the last time he was shot, his life wasn't in imminent danger. Bucky was one of the best shots Steve had ever seen, and there was no doubt in Steve's mind that he had deliberately aimed for non-fatal wounds during their fight.

If Bucky had truly wanted Steve dead, then Steve would be dead.

"Is everyone okay?" asked Steve.

Clint raised an eyebrow, shrugging as he turned to Natasha. "For the most part. Fury lost his eyepatch during everything so he's grumpy about that, and Nat took a pretty good zap to her sternum during the confrontation with Pierce, but—"

"I'm fine, Cap," Natasha cut in. "No permanent damage done."

"Yeah, she's tough as nails anyway," added Clint. "And Sam's still pissed that his pack got busted all to hell, but he's otherwise fine too."

"I am, thank you," added Sam.

"Good," Steve answered. "And I need you to let Bruce know that we're gonna need to borrow his… panic room for awhile." He shot a quick glance over at Bucky, who was still out cold. "We have someone who's gonna need it until we can work out something else."

Clint looked over at Bucky, his eyes going wide. "Uhh… are you sure it's okay to bring him to the Tower? I mean, he's—"

"I'm sure, Clint," Steve said in his Captain's voice. "Please, inform Bruce."

"O-kay," Clint said in disbelief. "You want us to get going, then? There's no telling how long he's gonna stay out, and I think there's a medkit in the chopper with some sedatives, but—"

"Yeah, that's a good idea," replied Steve. "Just make sure that Bruce knows exactly what's going on."

"All right. I'll drop them off and come back down for you guys when you're ready," Clint said. He jerked his head in Sam's direction. "Give me a hand with this guy, yeah?"

"Yeah, all right," said Sam as the sound of blaring sirens pierced the air. "You guys sure you're okay?"

"We'll be fine, Sam," said Steve. "Thank you."

"Barton, Pete doesn't hear a word about that guy being moved into the Tower either, you got that?" demanded Tony. "Not a single peep, you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," said Clint. "Keep telling the kid that everything's fine even after it's all gone to shit. Got it."

"I swear one of these days I'm gonna hide his hearing aides," Tony grumbled, pulling a short laugh from Steve that quickly transformed into a groan. Lethal or not, gunshot wounds and broken cheeks still hurt like hell.

"We can call Peter from the hospital once they get the bullets out, can't we?" Steve asked, fear and shame welling up inside his belly. "I don't want him to see me like this, Tony, I don't—"
"Yeah, babe," Tony said gently. Of course he understood, he always did. "That's fine. There's no reason he should even know what's going on, so it's fine."

Steve breathed out a short sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"It's okay," Tony murmured as the medics finally appeared through the trees. "I've got you. I've got your back."

Steve's eyebrows knitted together in what Tony always called his 'worry wrinkle' as his hand reached up to cup his fiancé's cheek, his thumb running along Tony's cheekbone. He definitely didn't deserve him, but he was damn lucky to have him.

"I know you do. You always have."

Peter's mouth had been hanging open so long that a small trail of drool had started to escape, making him jump as it hit his chin. He grimaced as he quickly swiped it away, shaking his head as page after page of data scrolled across one of his monitors, the result of Natasha dumping the entirety of HYDRA's hidden files onto the internet for everyone to see.

And oh, it was even trending. What a shock.

"JARVIS?" he asked. "Um… are either of my dads' names listed anywhere in this stuff?"

There was a pause as JARVIS searched through the data. "So far I'm finding several mentions of both Mr Stark and Captain Rogers, Master Peter," he replied. "But I'm afraid it would take several hours for me to complete a more thorough search."

"Yeah, maybe later," Peter mumbled. He was still a bit shaky after listening to the showdown between Dad, Papa, and the Winter Soldier, and didn't think he could handle reading about the no-doubt horrific plans HYDRA had had for both of his fathers at the moment.

"Very good, Master Peter," said JARVIS. "And might I suggest taking a short break for some sustenance? You've been in here for several hours with nothing to eat."

Peter scoffed, his chin dropping to his chest. "Yeah, I will in a few minutes."

"I will hold you to that, young man," JARVIS said.

With a morbid chuckle, Peter resumed his perusal of the file he'd pulled up on his primary monitor shortly after the data dump, the one regarding a SHIELD agent by the name of Mary Parker.

*Agents Richard and Mary Parker, both assigned to SHIELD secret science division. Requested by Doctor List to aid with experimental DNA splicing experiments, both unaware of HYDRA's involvement.*

Peter shook his head. That just sounded like a whole bunch of lunacy. He scrolled past several more pages, shivering at the photographs of white-coated researchers working at countertops littered with PCR machines, X-rays, chemistry set-ups, and other equipment that he recognised, along with animal cages filled with rats, rabbits, birds, and monkeys.

*Accident in lab resulted in exposure to experimental gene therapy,* the file continued, with Peter's eyes widening as a photograph of what could only be described as something out of a horror movie appeared on the screen.
Richard Parker originally thought dead, currently on the run with HYDRA agents attempting to track. Mary Parker currently located in Malibu, working under direction of Nicholas Fury. Will maintain watch, but no further action necessary at this time. Concentrate manpower on locating Richard.

"That must've been when she changed her name," Peter said. "'Cause when she met Dad she said her name was Regina." He continued to read, his heart lurching when the file mentioned that Mary had become pregnant, against all odds.

"Wait a minute," Peter said, leaning closer to the screen. "Against all odds? What the hell does that mean?"

Mary Parker's pregnancy unexpected due to presumed sterility, will follow closely. Child of definite potential interest to HYDRA.

"Holy shit!" Peter exclaimed, jumping back from the monitor. "HYDRA was monitoring me?"

In her attempt to continue to elude HYDRA authorities, Ms Parker induced herself to give birth early, placing her infant in the care of the boy's presumed father, one Anthony Edward Stark, who is already under observation by HYDRA. As of now, the boy appears to possess no extraordinary abilities. Will continue to monitor. Full DNA scan on record.

Gulping, Peter examined the DNA scan on the next page, noting that it appeared to be exactly the same as the scan from the geneticist Peter saw back when his spider symptoms first began. He continued to scroll, coming across his father's DNA scan a couple of pages later.

Upon further review, it appears that Anthony Stark's genes underwent modification at an early age. Will continue to investigate.

"Yeah, that makes sense," Peter said. "From when Grandpa gave him whatever he gave him. But what was it—, oh my God!"

Scrolling to the next page, Peter jumped back in shock as an embedded video began to play, timestamped with a date of December 16th, 1991. The quality was poor, very grainy with a glaring yellowish tinge, but there was no mistaking who it was.

It was the Winter Soldier. And he was driving a motorcycle—not too unlike the kind that Papa liked to drive—chasing Peter's grandparents, Howard and Maria Stark, as they drove along a narrow, poorly-lit, and isolated road in the dark.

Peter flinched as the Winter Soldier shot out one of the car's back tires, forcing it to crash head-on into a tree. Dad had told Peter when he was a little boy that his parents had died in a car crash when he was twenty-one, and Peter had never questioned that explanation because Dad had never questioned it. That had been all there was to it.

Which meant that it was highly unlikely that Dad knew this video even existed.

"So the Winter Soldier was working for HYDRA?" said Peter. That actually made more sense than him being controlled by the Ten Rings. Even though the Ten Rings were supposedly the largest and most powerful terrorist group in the Middle East, Peter doubted that they had even existed back in 1991. Or if they had, that they would've had the influence and financial backing to be able to interfere with Howard Stark and his work.

His heart thudding, Peter watched in growing horror as the Winter Soldier parked his motorcycle and stepped over to the trunk of the car, presumably to check for something before he approached the
driver's side, where Howard had just stumbled to the ground, blood trickling from his nose.

"Please, help my wife," he pleaded. "My wife, she's—"

Peter gasped as the metal-armed assassin grabbed Howard by his hair, hauling him up against the side of the car. He immediately pulled back his metal fist, halting when Howard's eyes widened in recognition.

"Sergeant Barnes," Howard said, begging for mercy with his eyes, mercy he didn't receive as the Winter Soldier—Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, Papa's best friend Bucky—proceeded to kill both him and Maria. He then grabbed a large metal case from the trunk of the car and took off down the road, into the night.

Choking on a sob, Peter scrolled down, pausing when he found another document with Dad's name highlighted.

_Serum infusion successful, trainees performing adequately but still refusing to follow most commands. Will remain in cryostasis until full obedience can be established. Continue observation of Anthony Stark to see if he develops any further characteristics consistent with serum infusion._

"So that must've been what Howard gave Dad," Peter said. "It must've been a prototype of a new super-soldier serum, and once he finally got it done, HYDRA killed him and took it!"

Which meant, Peter realised as his belly swooped in fear, that there were five additional Winter Soldiers out there somewhere. Six in total.

Just like in one of his nightmares.

He wondered briefly if their eyes ever glowed orange.

A loud knock on the glass door of the lab startled Peter, and his head shot up to find Uncle James entering his keycode to get inside. "Your dads are on the phone," he said as Peter rapidly cleared his monitors. "They wanna talk to you."

"Are they okay?" Peter choked out, clenching his hands into fists to keep them from shaking. That image of Barnes punching Howard in the face until he was dead—, that wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

Yet another nightmare to add to his litany.

"Yeah, kiddo, they're both fine" Uncle James said gently. "Cap's in the hospital, he got shot again but he's gonna be okay. Tony said they should be able to come home sometime tomorrow, but they wanna talk to you now."

"Uh huh," Peter said, nodding rapidly as he swiped at his eyes, brushing away tears that he hadn't even realised were there. "Yeah, I wanna talk to them too."

As they exited the lab, Uncle James clapped his hand on Peter's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "They're both okay, Peter," he repeated. "It's gonna be okay."

"I know," answered Peter. "I know it is."

_But it's really not_, he thought as they rounded the corner towards the living room, a violent shiver racing down his spine. _Because something tells me that this is only the beginning._
But the beginning of what, Peter had no idea.

Tony ran his palm down his face as he and Steve stared at his phone screen from the hospital bed, waiting for Peter to appear. His free hand was clutching Steve's, still shaking slightly from having to soothe him through yet another horrible procedure to dig bullets out of his body, realign three broken ribs, and fix his busted-up face. If there had ever been a better reason for Stark Industries to get started on developing some drugs that would actually work with Steve's lightning-fast metabolism, Tony couldn't think of one. Even with his Iron Man gauntlets to cushion Steve's vice-like grip, it was pure torture for Steve to have to go through something like that without anything for proper pain control.

And, just like he always had with Peter, Tony had felt every single torturous ounce of Steve's agony as though he were experiencing it personally. Steve's enhanced healing had even worked against him in this case, allowing his fractured cheekbone to begin healing with the bone ends still displaced, which then required the doctors to completely re-break it before it could be reset.

As such, the entire right side of Steve's face now looked like he'd been hit multiple times with a sledgehammer—which, considering what had caused the injury in the first place wasn't that far from the truth—and there were dents in Tony's gauntlets the exact size and shape of Steve's long fingers. His breathing was still shallow and rapid, bringing Tony's already frazzled nerves so close to snapping that he found himself craving a double-shot of the ridiculously expensive Scotch that he used to favour, something he hadn't craved that badly since he'd brought Peter home from the hospital as an infant.

*I fucking hate hospitals.*

"Sweetheart," Steve said through clenched teeth, raspy and weak but trying to hide it, like the stubborn soldier that he was. "It's gonna be okay."

"Says the man who just got his face rearranged. Twice," retorted Tony, guilt washing over him like a wave when Steve gave him his eyebrows of disappointment and then winced in pain. "I'm sorry, hon. I'm just a bit—"

"Fried?" asked Steve.

"Yeah." His back was aching pretty badly too, where the HYDRA RPG had slammed into him and where Barnes had thrown him against the goddamn tree there at the end, but he wasn't about to tell Steve that.

"Me too," Steve said. "But tomorrow will be better. We'll get to go home, and see Peter."

*Yeah. Home to a Tower that's now housing a madman, Tony thought bitterly. 'Cause why the hell not?*

Clint had called once the rest of the team had arrived at the Tower, saying they'd managed to get Barnes up to the panic room without incident. The panic room, an extra apartment that Tony and Bruce had designed to be a sort of decompression room for Hulk, had ceilings that were ten meters high, padded walls reinforced by three feet of the same gold-titanium alloy that Tony used for his armour, and six-inch thick ballistics-standard windows that could withstand an impact of up to three tons, so it would hopefully be enough to keep Barnes contained until they could figure out what the hell to do with him.

Clint had also informed Tony—with barely concealed pride—that he had even thought to land their
chopper four blocks away from the Tower and have Barnes driven in the rest of the way so they could avoid being seen by Peter.

And while Tony had appreciated Clint's foresight, and had told him as much, he hadn't at all appreciated the tone of voice that Clint used when he relayed that particular information, and had been right in the middle of a rather harsh rant when Steve grabbed the phone out of his hand and disconnected the call, sending Clint a thank-you text a couple of minutes later.

Tightening his fingers around Steve's hand, Tony's heart gave a painful lurch when he squeezed back. Here he was lying there in a hospital bed covered in bullet holes and bandages and bruises—not to mention the fact that the organisation he'd spent years of his life trying to destroy had just come back from the dead—and he was the one trying to comfort Tony.

"Daddy?" Peter said as his boyish face filled the phone screen, looking a bit paler than usual but still as sweet as ever. He gasped in horror as his eyes landed on Steve. "Oh my God, Papa, what happened to you?"

"It looks worse than it feels, little guy," Steve said, which Tony knew was a lie, but one he could appreciate since he would've said the same thing. "Just got beaten up a bit, nothing I haven't had before."

"Mmm," Peter said warily. "Uncle James said you got shot again too."

"Caught in some crossfire, bud," Tony said with a furtive squeeze of Steve's hand. "Maybe now Papa will listen to me and let me make him his own suit of armour."

"I'm starting to think that's not such a bad idea," said Peter. "When are you guys coming home?"

"Hopefully tomorrow afternoon, buddy," answered Tony. "The docs just wanna make sure that Papa's cheekbone sets the way it's supposed to first."

"Uh huh," said Peter, sniffing. "That's good."

"Everything else okay, little guy?" Steve asked. "You getting any sleep?"

Peter swiped at his nose as he shrugged, raising a knot in Tony's throat. Despite the brave front he was trying to put on, Peter looked both exhausted and spooked, a combination that never failed to set Tony on edge.

"Be better once you guys are home," Peter said. "It's always better when you guys are home."

"Yeah, we're looking forward to it too, bud," said Tony. "I'm thinking once we get there we should all pile onto the couch and have a movie night. Sound good?"

"That definitely sounds good to me," said Steve.

"Yeah," breathed Peter, his lips twitching as he tried to smile. "That sounds really awesome. Like, really awesome."

"Then I'll try to make sure Papa gets lots of rest tonight, okay, buddy?" Tony said. "Nothing like trying to mother hen the mother hen."

"Yeah," Peter said with a slight grin. "I know that can't be a fun job."

"We love you, little guy," Steve said. "We'll see you tomorrow, okay?"
Peter's huge brown eyes filled with tears as he nodded. "Uh huh, love you too. See ya tomorrow."

Tony slumped back against the pillow as soon as Peter clicked off, his heart aching at how lost and miserable Peter had been. He liked to pretend he was so tough sometimes, but Tony always knew better. He was still just a kid who wanted his dads to cuddle with him and tell him that everything was gonna be okay.

"It's gonna be all right, Tony," Steve said, as if he'd been reading Tony's thoughts. He was so damn good at that it was scary.

"How in the hell do you do that?" he asked as he glanced over at his fiancé, thinking he looked like he'd just gone twelve rounds with either Hercules or Conan the Barbarian. Or both.

"Do what?"

"Always seem to know what I'm thinking," Tony said. He laid his head down on Steve's shoulder, careful to avoid putting any pressure on his tender ribs. "Am I that easy to read?"

Slowly, Steve turned his head, brushing a soft kiss across Tony's forehead. "For me you are," he murmured. "I think most people, or at least people who don't really know you see the mask that you want them to see, but—"

"You can see right through me?" Tony asked. "Like I'm made out of glass?"

"It's your eyes, sweetheart," whispered Steve. "They speak volumes, even when you don't. I could tell that even before I met you."

Tony lifted his head, shifting so he could look Steve in the eyes. "You could?"

Steve smiled, as much as he was able to with his swollen cheek. "Mmmhmm. Your eyes were the very first thing I noticed about you, when I first saw your SHIELD file before I left for Afghanistan."

"Really," Tony said, his lower lip trembling. "And what did they say to you then?"

"They were gorgeous, but troubled," Steve said plainly, his hand reaching to cup Tony's cheek. "Like you had the weight of the world on your shoulders. And I thought, how can someone so beautiful, so charismatic and poised and everything that Director Fury was telling me that you were, be hiding such incredible sadness beneath that mask?" His thumb brushed across Tony's cheekbone, the touch so gentle that Tony's eyes filled with tears. It never failed to amaze him how Steve, a man with super soldier serum coursing through his veins, a man who could carry both he and Peter in one arm, could be so incredibly gentle.

Tony tilted his head, leaning into Steve's palm as his eyes fluttered closed. "And, what about now?"

"Well, you're definitely not made out of glass," replied Steve. "Cause you're one of the strongest people I've ever seen. But you can't hide anything from me, if that's what you mean. And I'm glad. I wouldn't want you to."

"Nah," Tony said as he kissed Steve's palm. "It'd be too exhausting anyway. Which, by the way, you should try and get some sleep now. I promised Pete that you'd rest and I intend to follow through on that."

It was a testament to how mentally and physically exhausted Steve was that he didn't utter one word of protest as Tony slid off the bed and lowered it a bit so Steve could lie back. "You should try to sleep some too," he said. "I know you're just as exhausted."
"You know I won't, honey," Tony whispered. He smoothed Steve's hair off his forehead, leaning over to kiss him. "Love you."

"Mmm," Steve mumbled, already half asleep. "Love you too."

Positioning his chair so he could still reach Steve's hand, Tony took out his phone again as soon as Steve's breathing had evened out, pulling up the HYDRA files he'd had JARVIS searching through since earlier that afternoon.

"JARVIS?" he said quietly, so as to not wake up Steve. "Anything interesting show up in those files?"

"While I'm not sure 'interesting' is the word I would choose, there are in fact numerous mentions of yourself, Captain Rogers, your father—"

"Yeah, yeah, I can look at that stuff later," Tony interrupted. "There's been no mention of Pete though, right?"

"Actually, sir, I did find one rather curious mention of Master Peter," answered JARVIS.

Tony huffed out a sharp breath. 'Curious' was always JARVIS-code for wonky, and Tony hated things that were wonky.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is a document containing a copy of Master Peter's DNA scan," JARVIS. "With the initial date during the time of your captivity in Afghanistan."

"What?" Tony exclaimed, slapping his hand over his mouth when Steve startled in his sleep. He ran his thumb along Steve's hand, trying to soothe him as his own heart started to thud. "Can you show me the document?"

His phone screen flickered as the document came into view. Tony leaned back, enlarging the picture so he could read it better without his glasses, racing past what he deemed unnecessary until he located Peter's name about a third of the way down.

*Blood sample taken from Peter Stark while under experimental mind control drug Cortexiphan. Upon further questioning, the boy appeared to remember nothing about his experience with the drug, nor the reason why the sample was acquired.*

"Holy shit!" Tony rasped. "Those Ten Rings fuckers actually did drug my boy?"

"It appears so, sir," answered JARVIS.

Tony shivered, his eyes squeezing closed as a cold sweat broke out over his entire body. No wonder Peter could never remember anything about where their captors took him or what they did to him.

*I was supposed to protect him! How could I have allowed this to happen?*

Inhaling a shaky breath, Tony let it out slowly, trying desperately to pull himself together. "Okay, but why in the hell would something like that be in HYDRA's secret files? As far as we know, the Ten Rings and HYDRA aren't connected in any way, unless—"

*Oh, shit!*

"Are they connected, JARVIS?" Tony asked, dreading the answer.
"Give me a moment, sir," said JARVIS. "I am attempting to search for more information regarding this particular document."

Tony tapped his foot as he waited, his thumb still rubbing circles on Steve's hand, his lips pressed tight in anger.

_I swear if I ever see any of those assholes again, I'm gonna—_

"I have found something, sir," JARVIS said as another page blinked into view. "According to this, it appears that the initial sample from Master Peter—"

"His DNA scan?" asked Tony.

"No, sir. The camp where you both were being held prisoner was not equipped to run DNA scans, so Master Peter's blood sample was given to someone on the outside who then proceeded to run the scan, with the results eventually being reported to HYDRA."

"All right," Tony said, his jaw so tight it was starting to ache. "So who'd they give his blood sample to?"

There was an ominous pause, almost as if JARVIS was holding his breath.

"The blood sample was given to Obadiah Stane, sir."

Tony froze, his fingers clenched so tightly around Steve's hand that his knuckles were white.

Obadiah had been working for the Ten Rings.

He'd been the one behind Tony and Peter's kidnapping.

"It was Obie all along, was it, J? He arranged it all. He got Rosa out of the way, then he arranged for the bombs, and the kidnapping, all of it."

"It appears so, sir."

The fact that JARVIS's revelation didn't hit Tony as hard as it should have wasn't lost on him. Even as he felt his stomach drop like a rock to his knees and all of the blood freeze in his veins, Tony had long given up on the notion that Obie had been anything other than the complete asshole he'd turned out to be in the end. The one who had thrown a fit when Tony announced that he was halting the weapons production at Stark Industries, the one who had then threatened to take Tony's company away from him before Tony informed him that he'd been fired and had Steve kick him out of their home.

And while Peter had later told Tony and Steve that he'd always been suspicious that Obie hadn't liked him, Tony had never thought in a million years that Obie's apparent dislike of Tony's beloved son would extend to orchestrating an explosion and capture of both Tony and Peter by terrorists hell-bent on extortion.

"Okay, but that still doesn't explain how this ended up in HYDRA's files," Tony managed to choke out. "Unless—"

He was cut off as yet another page appeared, the accusatory text highlighted in yellow.

_DNA scan on Stark boy obtained from one Obadiah Stane. Stane states he is willing to work alongside embedded HYDRA agents to help further cause. Will continue to monitor both Anthony_
"JARVIS," Tony asked as evenly as he could muster. *How in the hell could I have been so goddamn blind?* "I need—, I need you to tell me if I'm reading this right, because—, it's been a really long day, and I'm just really fucking tired, and—"

He cut off as he set the phone down on his lap, pressing his palm to his chest and gripping Steve's dog tags through his shirt. It was times like these when it seemed like the arc reactor wasn't powerful enough, that Tony could practically feel the jagged piece of shrapnel trying to crawl its way into his heart so it could kill him.

"From what I can see, this document is trying to say that the SHIELD agents sent by Fury to watch over Obadiah actually turned out to be HYDRA? And so instead of staking him, they actually recruited him?"

"It would appear so, sir," JARVIS answered, so quietly that Tony could barely hear him. "I am sorry."

"Oh, God!" Tony croaked as his heart cracked in two. He'd been trying to keep Peter safe, and all he'd managed to do was put him in even greater danger than ever.

"JARVIS, what the hell have I done?"

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Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony wasn't sure how long he had sat there, staring at the bathroom door in Steve's closet-sized hospital room, the hand still clutching Steve's trembling so violently that Tony was shocked he hadn't woken up from it.

Natasha was damn lucky that Tony hadn't known about her plan to dump HYDRA's files onto the internet beforehand, or he would've strongly suggested that she find another way to get her revenge on Alexander Pierce. He supposed he could understand why she did it, revenge was sweet, after all, but still. If he'd known…

But really, how could he have known that he'd find something like that? All of Peter's tox screens were negative after they were rescued, there was no such drug called Cortexiphan listed anywhere in the Stark Industries records—or anywhere else, for that matter—that Tony could find, and Peter's fever had broken by the time the terrorists had brought him back to Tony anyway, so he had always just concluded that they'd given him an antibiotic or something similar and that was it.

You still should've known, his traitorous mind whispered. You're supposed to be smart, you should've figured it out.
"JARVIS," Tony said once he was able to find his voice again. "JARVIS, I need you to pull all of this down and lock it away on my private server. I don't—I don't want anyone else getting their grubby paws on this stuff, do you understand me? Any mention of Peter, I don't care how insignificant you think it might be, you pull it down and lock it away, you got that?"

"Yes, sir," answered JARVIS. "And may I remind you that all of the HYDRA data files released by Agent Romanoff were heavily encrypted. That in addition to their rather large overall volume should ensure that the chances of someone else finding and being able to read this specific document remain slim."

"Slim isn't the same as zero, J," Tony snapped. "I want it gone, all of it! And when you're done with that, I want you to pull down anything that mentions Steve or myself as well, or anyone else on the team, including Sam Wilson. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Another thought suddenly occurred to Tony, and he winced, as if it had physically pained him to think it.

Actually, it had physically pained him to think it.

"JARVIS?" he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Pull any records that you find of James Buchanan Barnes too, while you're at it. No sense in having whoever tries to step into SHIELD's shoes finding them first. File them under a new heading: Sergeant Barnes."

"Very good, sir."

Which will probably end up being some idiot government officials drunk on the possibility of getting revenge on SHIELD because Nick Fury called them out on their idiocy once or a dozen times, Tony thought. And the last thing he needed now was for those idiots to try and break into the Tower so they could get to Barnes and try to use him as a scapegoat. It would be best for everyone outside of the immediate Avengers' loop to just forget that Barnes didn't die when he fell from that train, at least until they could figure out how to purge all the HYDRA programming from his mind.

If that was even possible. Clint had mentioned that Bruce had already placed a call to Helen Cho and ordered a new MRI machine that could work around Barnes' metal arm, so the ball was at least rolling. Whether or not the ball would continue to roll smoothly or hit a rock and veer off to the side somewhere remained to be seen.

"JARVIS, what's Pete up to?" he asked. "Is he sleeping?"

"Not at the moment. Master Peter is currently in his bedroom, working on constructing a Lego set with Agent Romanoff."

"Yeah, okay," said Tony. He wondered briefly if Natasha's apparent adoration for Legos was listed in her SHIELD file. "Is Sam Wilson settling in okay?"

"It would appear so, sir, as he has already ordered an alarm for a morning run tomorrow morning," said JARVIS. "And I have already arranged to have his household goods in Washington D.C. transferred to the Tower."
"Yeah, that's good, J. Thanks."

"You are most welcome, sir."

Slumping back in his chair, Tony reread the page describing how the Ten Rings had turned Peter's blood sample over to Obadiah Stane, his exhausted mind swirling as he attempted to make some sense of it all. As far as Obie had known, Peter was just a normal kid, albeit one who was on the small and sickly side and with a genius-level intellect, but otherwise normal. So why would he have been so interested in Peter's DNA?

Unless…

"Oh, shit!" Tony cried, so loudly that Steve woke with a start, bolting upright on his hospital bed so fast that he hissed in pain, pressing his arm into his wounded abdomen.

"What's 's matter? Are you okay?" Steve stuttered, his chest heaving as his frantic eyes landed on Tony, which only served to increase Tony's distress. He dropped his phone onto the bed, bringing his hand up to brush Steve's hair off his forehead.

"God, honey, I'm so sorry," Tony murmured, his heart thudding so fast he felt dizzy. Steve was hurt, damnit. He needed to rest so he could heal, not get jolted awake because he thought some enemy from his nightmares was now attacking Tony in his hospital room. "It's nothing, I'm fine. Go back to sleep."

Steve's eyebrows knitted together into a frown, the effect of which was somewhat lessened by the fact that the entire right side of his face was still horribly bruised and swollen. "I wish you wouldn't do that," he said as he caught Tony's wrist, dropping a quick kiss to his palm. "You're as white as a sheet, there's no possible way that you're okay. What happened?"

Tony sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. So much for Steve getting any rest.

"JARVIS found something in the HYDRA files," he said. "About Peter."

"About Peter? What about him?" Steve asked, his blue eyes taking on that edge of fear that Tony absolutely hated. The fear that he always managed to keep so well hidden from the rest of the team that only Tony and Peter had ever seen it.

"They… ah…" Tony started, shaking his head as he curled his fingers around his left arm, squeezing it hard. How could I have allowed this to happen?

"Tony?"

"It's just like I always suspected, even though we could never find any proof, which was probably because the damn drug they gave him is some experimental thing so it's not on any of the usual tox screens, or at least it's not at any of the military hospitals, so—"

"Tony, stop rambling and tell me what happened!"

"The Ten Rings fucking drugged him, Steve!" Tony cried. "They took Pete out of my sight and gave him some goddamn experimental mind-control drug so he wouldn't remember what they did to him!"

"Oh—, oh my God!" Steve stammered, his tongue poking out to run across his chapped lips. "Are you—are you sure?"

Tony picked up his phone, shoving it into Steve's hand so he could read the offensive document
detailing the entire sickening thing. "It's all right there, and it's all my fault. I let them take him."

Steve shot him the eyebrows of disappointment. "You know I don't believe that for one second," he said. "You and Peter fought so hard to escape from that cave, Tony, you told me that yourself!"

"I guess it wasn't hard enough," Tony choked out. He pressed his clenched fist to his mouth, trying desperately to hold back the tears as he recalled that horrifying time that he'd tried so hard to keep buried. "He was so sick, Steve, it was a miracle he was even still alive. He was burning up, his forehead was so hot I could barely even touch it, and his lungs sounded like he was trying to breathe through a honeycomb. And then those assholes came into the room, the lead guy all high and mighty and brandishing the guns that they'd stolen from me, and he demanded that I build them a missile. And when I told him that I wouldn't do a damn thing until he got Pete some medicine, they yanked my sick boy off his cot by his arms and dragged him away! And I could hear him screaming for me to help him, it was echoing throughout the entire cave, but I couldn't help him because I was too damn weak! And they took him, and they gave him some drug that messed with his mind, and then they—" He broke off, shaking with sobs that grew even harder when Steve gripped his shoulder.

"Tony, you are not weak," Steve said in his Captain's voice. "You were badly injured, your life was hanging by a thread. Any lesser man would've been dead by that point, but you weren't."

Tony scoffed, scrubbing at his eyes with his palm. "They took my boy away and drugged him, and then they poked him with a goddamn needle and took a sample of his blood, and then—, and then—"

"Sweetheart," Steve pleaded, tears welling in his own eyes. "Please, tell me what happened!"

"Steve, it was Obie," Tony whispered, shame hitting him like a tidal wave, nearly pulling him under. "It was Obie all along. He orchestrated the whole damn thing. He got rid of Pete's nanny, he ordered the bombing, got Pete's blood sample, all of it. He was working with the Ten Rings. He was conspiring with them for who knows how long and I never suspected a goddamn thing."

"Oh, God!" Steve exclaimed, his hand trembling where it rested on Tony's shoulder. He was quiet for several agonising seconds, his chest heaving with barely-restrained sobs.

"There's no way that you could've known any of this, Tony," he finally said. "You can't go blaming yourself."

Tony scoffed, shaking his head. Leave it to Steve to say something like that. "I fucking should've suspected something!" he cried. "Peter's my son, and he had to tell me after I'd kicked Obie out of the company that Obie had never liked him? How in the hell could I have been so goddamn blind?"

"You were too close to the situation, sweetheart," Steve said gently. "You told me that you had known Obadiah pretty much your entire life, that he was like a father-figure to you after Howard died. It's not surprising to me at all that you wouldn't suspect him of wanting to hurt you or Peter."

"That's still no excuse," Tony said dismissively. He didn't deserve for Steve to try to make him feel better about himself. "I should've been able to—"

"Tony, stop," Steve interrupted, his blue eyes glassy with tears and pain. "Please, just stop. None of that is true, and beating yourself up about it now does absolutely nothing to fix anything." He tugged on Tony's shoulder, pulling him closer so he could kiss his temple.

"What we should be concerned about is what happened after Peter was drugged," he continued. "Does the document say anything about what happened after Stane got his hands on the sample?"
Tony shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed as he gripped the front of Steve's hospital gown. "At least, not right away. Not until the goddamn HYDRA agents that Fury sent to monitor him managed to recruit him instead."

Steve's fingers, which had been tracing soothing circles on Tony's shoulder, froze, his fingertips digging into Tony's skin. "Are you sure?" he asked, low and tight.

"Yeah. And, not surprisingly, he was more than eager to be recruited."

A heavy silence fell across the tiny room as Steve's forehead thudded against the back of Tony's head, breathing deeply through his nose. "This isn't your fault, Tony. None of it. Evil people enjoy the company of other evil people, and I'm not surprised that Stane jumped at the chance to join something like HYDRA, especially if he was already working with the Ten Rings. Didn't you tell me that their twisted philosophy was pretty much identical to HYDRA's anyway?"

"If you're referring to the whole global domination through chaos thing, then yeah," answered Tony. "That's what Yinsen told me after they took Pete, and everything I found afterwards just confirmed it." He let out another shuddering breath, burying his face into Steve's neck. "I thought I took out the Ten Rings, Steve, if not all of them then at least their backbone. But now, what if I didn't? What if they've just been out there somewhere regaining their strength, just like HYDRA was, just waiting for the right time to strike? And now with SHIELD gone, who the hell is gonna be able to stop them?"

"Shh, sweetheart," Steve murmured, weaving his long fingers into Tony's hair and pressing into his scalp, like he always did when Tony was upset. It was almost like his own personal reset button known only to Steve, and Tony let out a soft moan as he practically melted against Steve's side. Those fingers of his truly were magical. "Didn't Clint say the authorities had already managed to arrest most of the high-ranking HYDRA members?"

"He said something like that," replied Tony. "Fury killed Pierce during the confrontation at the Triskelion, and Senator Stern and some Agent Sitwell dude were arrested, along with Rumlow and the rest of his goddamn STRIKE team. Rumlow is in the hospital in intensive care, and if he survives he's going away for life, and Stern and the other government operatives are already facing treason charges, but there's no way of knowing if we have everyone or not until all the data is combed through, and it's a whole shitload of data, Steve. It's gonna take awhile, especially if the Department of Defence is put on the task, those idiots can never do anything fast, especially in a crisis. It's gonna be long enough for people to up and run if they haven't been caught yet."

"Then we'll just have to catch them," Steve said firmly. "That can be the Avengers' next mission. We'll comb through the files, locate any HYDRA members who've gone missing, and take them out. All of them."

And once again, Steve made it sound so easy. As if there weren't potentially tens of thousands more of them out there, embedded in every possible global organisation or agency that existed.

As if the Avengers were even going to be allowed to continue to operate the same way they always had, under Steve's authority and tutelage. SHIELD had technically been the overseeing agency for the Avengers, but everyone knew that was just so the government couldn't force them under someone else's jurisdiction.

But now with SHIELD scattered to the four winds—there were already news headlines labelling it a terrorist organisation—who knew what was going to happen? A power vacuum had been created, which meant there was going to be a lot of clamouring and infighting to try and fill that vacuum.
"That might keep us busy until we retire," Tony said, more serious than sarcastic.

The corners of Steve's swollen lips twitched into a slight smile, and he brought his thumb to Tony's cheek, brushing his tears away. "Yeah, it might," he murmured. "But as long as Peter and the rest of the world stays safe, I don't mind if we're kept busy, and I doubt the rest of the team would argue too much. Besides, if we're able to identify and target the larger HYDRA groups first and take them out, it's likely that more of them will start to follow suit. That's how it happened back during the war."

Tony gave a short nod. "Makes sense."

"And if we get really lucky, we might even find out where the Ten Rings have been hiding all this time in those files too," added Steve. "Obadiah might not have been the only link between the two organisations, so… killing two birds with one stone, hmm?"

And there's that giddy optimism again. How in the hell does he do that?

"Sure," Tony said, this time not bothering to hide his sarcasm. "That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Tony," Steve whispered, his lips brushing across Tony's temple. "It's gonna be okay. I promise."

He promises, Tony thought as more tears welled in his eyes, spilling down his cheeks. "How? How in the hell can you promise that? I mean, that whole thing about Obie being dead was probably just one huge lie too, so now he might still be out there somewhere, and he knows Pete, and if he knows what's happened with Pete's DNA, then—"

He was cut off by Steve's fingers on his lips, something Steve was having to do more and more often lately. "Shh, sweetheart," he murmured. "I know you're scared, but giving in to fear won't help anything. It's so much better to keep on hoping than to give in to fear."

Tony's lower lip trembled as he gazed up at his fiancé, into his beautiful, swollen blue eyes, surrounded by purple and yellow bruises like he'd just lost a fight with one of his paintbrushes. His words made sense, but Tony still couldn't see how they were possible.

What if my fears are so strong that they wipe out all my hope before I even realise I've had it?

"Why?" he asked softly.

Steve leaned forward, pressing his forehead to Tony's. "Because hope is always stronger than fear. And as long as we have hope, there's no way that we can lose."

Tony was silent for several heartbeats, Steve's words echoing around in his head. Steve was seriously one of the most stubborn people Tony had ever met, which often caused him nothing but what Peter would call 'angst'. But in this case, going up against what was left of HYDRA and the Ten Rings, Steve's stubbornness might actually allow this cockamamie plan of his to succeed.

"God, how in the hell do you do that?" he finally asked, half in frustration and half in awe.

"Do what?"

"Always find the perfect thing to say? It's like you have a presidential scriptwriter feeding you lines inside your head or something."

Steve gave a slight shrug, leaning in to press his lips to Tony's. His lips were swollen and chapped, but the kiss was still fiery enough to curl Tony's toes, pulling a soft whimper from his throat.
"No, sweetheart," he whispered as he pulled back, cupping Tony's cheek. "I just know what I'm fighting for."

His gaze was intense, despite the pain Tony knew he had to be in. "Just so long as every fight doesn't have to end with you taking bullets," Tony murmured. "I'm not sure how much more my heart can take of this, and Pete—, babe, he's such a tough kid, but even he's got his limits."

Steve's fingers twitched on Tony's cheek as he cringed. "I know, and I'm sorry. I'll try to be more careful next time."

Yeah, more careful around your so-called best friend who tried to kill you. Again.

"Good," Tony said instead. "Now, get some sleep. I promised Pete that you'd rest, and you know he'll kick my ass if I don't follow through." He moved to get off the bed, halting when Steve's hand landed on his shoulder.

"Please, stay with me?" he whispered. "It's been so long since I've been able to sleep next to you."

"Steve—" Tony started, cut off again by Steve's fingers against his lips.

"You won't hurt me," he said, giving Tony his best imitation of Peter's puppy-dog eyes. "And I'll sleep much better with you here. Please?"

"Mmm," mumbled Tony as he laid his head gingerly down on Steve's chest, careful to avoid his injured ribs as he pressed himself as closely as possible. It had been way too long since they'd been able to sleep in the same bed, even if it was a tiny and uncomfortable hospital bed.

"I see you've been taking lessons from Pete again."

He felt Steve smile against the top of his head, his arm heavy across Tony's waist, anchoring him.

"He's a good teacher."

"Yeah," Tony whispered, his eyelids already heavy. "He's the best."

And we gotta make sure that we keep him that way.

Tony's arm was tightly wrapped around Steve's waist as they stepped from the roof access of the hospital towards the waiting Stark Industries chopper, the bright November sun glinting off of the chopper's rotors. X-rays earlier that morning had confirmed that Steve's fractured ribs and cheekbone had already formed strong enough callouses to allow him to be discharged, and Tony was pleased that his bruises had significantly faded overnight as well. No sense in scaring Peter any more than they already had.

He had spent a good chunk of the morning on the phone with Pepper, coordinating the deployment of the Stark Relief Foundation to the areas in D.C. damaged by the crashed helicarriers, and with the Department of Damage Control to get started on the cleanup, hoping to avoid too much of the HYDRA and SHIELD tech falling into the wrong hands. The discussions with the requisite DoD officials had proceeded a lot smoother than usual, which Tony attributed to the fact that Senator Stern was no longer the chairman of the Armed Forces Committee and therefore could no longer attempt to thwart Tony's every move just because he was an asshole on a power trip.

Either that or the remaining committee members were all just afraid that Tony would have them arrested as well, which honestly he didn't mind all that much. He would take whatever allowed him
to accomplish what he needed to accomplish.

"Head down, babe," Tony said, sliding his palm up to Steve's neck and ducking as they climbed into the cabin. Clint was up in the pilot's seat with Maria Hill next to him, a tablet resting on her lap.

"So, what's the story?" Tony asked once they'd taken off. "Fury still hiding out?"

Hill gave a nod as she twisted in her seat. "For the time being. There was quite a bit of weapons' fire exchanged inside the Triskelion during the Insight launch, and Nick was right in the middle of most of it. In all of the chaos that followed the crashes, we managed to... manipulate enough security footage to ensure Nick's ability to stay underground for as long as he sees fit."

Tony rolled his eyes, prompting Steve to place a comforting hand on his knee. "And I suppose you guys think that's for the best?"

"He does, for now," answered Hill. "There's a lot of uncertainty and anger out there at the moment, and Nick feels like too much of it would be aimed at him for him to be of much real use. Especially now that you're harbouring HYDRA's secret weapon inside your Tower."

"Well isn't that just goddamn wonderful!" Tony snapped. "So now it's all just gonna be aimed at us instead, or didn't that even occur to him?"

"It did," Hill said firmly. "And he told me that he has full confidence in the Avengers' ability to continue to operate at the exceptional level that you always have. Steve will remain the team Captain, with me as an unofficial liaison between the team and Fury while officially working out of Stark Industries."

"Oh, really." Tony muttered. "Now my company's being used as a cover? You know that all high-ranking job offers come through the office of Pepper Potts, so if she didn't approve it, then I don't think—"

Hill pursed her lips. "It's all been taken care of, Tony," she said. "I've already received my security codes."

Tony huffed as he looked over at Steve, whose jawline was sharp enough to cut glass. He wasn't happy about this either.

"Did Director Fury give you any other instructions before he disappeared?" he asked.

"Only to tell you to be careful," answered Hill. "And to not trust anyone besides the team, at least for now."

Steve's hand tightened on Tony's knee, his brow furrowed. "Well, then I guess it's just us."

"Yeah," Tony whispered. "Guess so."

Which means that keeping all the government idiots off our backs is gonna fall on my shoulders.

Great.

The last thing the team needed to be worrying about was a bunch of power-hungry politicians who wanted to use the Avengers as their own personal superhero squad, and Tony knew without a doubt that Steve would agree. After what had just happened with SHIELD, there was no way Steve would allow the Avengers to be under anyone's control but their own.
"What about the rest of the loyal SHIELD agents?" Steve asked. "Not everyone in the Triskelion was working for HYDRA."

Hill huffed out a sharp breath. "Agent Romanoff activated a program that should have erased the identifications of the remaining SHIELD agents before she left the Triskelion, but without access to the SHIELD computer systems we have no way of knowing if it was completely successful. Some of them are already looking into other agencies but most are hiding out, afraid of retaliation." She shot Tony a rather pointed glance. "It'd be nice if we could retain them, but it would look pretty suspicious if they all suddenly showed up in Manhattan."

Tony scowled at the underlying meaning behind Hill's words, even as he knew he had the means to offer a solution. Hill seemed to have picked up Fury's ability to manipulate quite well.

"I might have a place," he said, sighing as he looked over at Steve. "Stark Industries has an old warehouse complex upstate, kinda out in the middle of nowhere. I've kept it up, so the buildings are structurally sound and secure and everything, but right now it's nothing fancy. Nothing like what you SHIELD agents are used to."

"How long would it take for you to get it ready?" asked Hill, as if she'd been anticipating Tony's offer. Which, Tony realised, she probably had, since Fury knew about the complex.

Taking out his phone, Tony pulled up the calendar for his personal contractor, rearranging the remodel of the offices in D.C. and reassigning a few personnel from the new SI complex going up over in India.

"About ten days to get it into move-in shape, and another month to get it completely integrated," he said. He glanced over at Steve, showing him the blueprint he'd thrown together on a whim a few months ago. "I thought we could use a secondary facility ourselves too, maybe get out of the city every now and then?"

"You mean for the Avengers?" he asked. "Or just us?"

"Well, both, I guess," answered Tony. "We could build a joint training facility, and we wouldn't be as pressed for space as we are in the Tower so you could design it however you wanted. And then some other common areas, even a common living area if you'd want something like that, but then we'd all have our own private sections too, you know, where we could hide out if we wanted to get away." His lips quirked into a slight smile at the look of growing awe on Steve's face. "There's a couple of nice lakes nearby, a lot of land and trails for hiking and biking, and we could even put in a baseball field if you want."

Steve nodded rapidly, his face lit with excitement. "And maybe we could even spend the summers there, since we don't go out to California anymore? And we could build bonfires, and sleep in a tent out in the backyard, and I'd love to teach Peter how to fish, do you think he'd like that?"

Tony smiled widely as he pictured Steve and Peter sitting in a tiny fishing boat in the middle of a sun-kissed lake, casting their lines into the water as Steve listened to Peter rattle on about whatever newfangled thing he was building.

"I think he'd love it, babe," Tony whispered. He leaned in for a kiss which Steve eagerly gave, completely forgetting that they were still in the middle of a conversation with Hill. Steve's hair had grown out a bit since he'd been gone, and Tony buried his fingers in it, revealing in the feel of the soft blond strands against his skin as Steve cupped his face, his thumbs brushing along Tony's cheekbones. Steve usually got a haircut about once a week with how fast his hair tended to grow, but this slightly more shaggy look was definitely something that Tony could get used to.
And God, he had \textit{missed} kissing Steve like this. Like they were just two normal people in love with each other who didn't have a care in the world.

"Do they do this a lot?" Tony heard Hill ask Clint.

"All the damn time," Clint replied, grumbling. "And you should be grateful that's all you've seen. It's gotten to the point now where I have to ask JARVIS if the gym's clear before I go in."

"Yeah, that's a mental picture I really didn't need, Agent Barton," Hill retorted. She snapped her fingers right next to Tony's ear, startling them apart. "Stark, you still with me?"

"C'mon, give me a break," Tony rasped, glaring bullets at Hill as he sucked in air. "He almost died, for Christ's sake. Again."

"You said something about this new facility being ready in ten days?" she asked, completely ignoring Tony's statement.

"Yeah, yeah, the contractor will start on it tomorrow," said Tony. "If you start vetting people now they should be able to move in once the preliminary offices are ready."

"Sounds good," Hill said with a nod, marking notes on her tablet. "I can work with that."

Steve took Tony's hand, intertwining their fingers. "Is there anything new on Bucky?" he asked gingerly.

Hill glanced furtively at Clint before responding. "No, nothing yet. He's still unconscious, Bruce thought it best to keep him sedated while he examines him, so he's on a continuous infusion of something that would probably knock out an elephant. There were a few physical injuries that Bruce went ahead and took care of, so now we're just waiting. We'll know more once we can see what's going on inside his head."

"An MRI won't show anything aside from structural abnormalities," Tony said, careful to keep his tone as neutral as possible. "You know that, right? It probably won't tell us how he was enhanced or how he was brainwashed."

"Yeah, Bruce said the same thing," said Clint. "But that's where he wanted to start, so… we can't just keep him under forever, you know? Bruce already overnighted a few blood samples to Helen Cho, so we're hoping she'll be able to give us some idea of how Barnes was enhanced, and then… we'll just go from there."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Steve said, his jaw twitching like it always did when he was upset or anxious. "Thank you, I really appreciate it."

"Yeah, well, I'm just the messenger here," Hill said. "I'm sure Bruce can give you a better update once we get back."

"Which will have to wait until after Pete goes to bed tonight, babe," Tony said quickly. "He still doesn't know Barnes is even there, so—"

"Then we need to tell him," interrupted Steve. He shifted in his seat to face Tony, squeezing his hand. "I don't—I don't want to keep something like this from him, Tony, I don't. This… this is pretty big, and Peter's so intuitive, he's gonna figure it out eventually anyway. We need to just tell him."

Tony cringed, swallowing his immediate instinctive retort of 'absolutely hell no' and forcing himself to try and see it from Steve's point of view, as hard as it was. That… man, Barnes, had been Steve's
best friend, had saved his life on numerous occasions from what Steve had told him, both before and during the war. The fact that he was captured by enemy forces and enhanced against his will wasn't Barnes' fault, it was HYDRA's.

Intellectually, Tony knew all that.

Unfortunately, that didn't help much where Peter was concerned. Try as he might, Tony couldn't seem to separate Barnes the man from the assassin known as the Winter Soldier, who had not only killed his parents but had also blown up their home and tried to kill them.

"Steve…" he said, pleading with his eyes even though he knew it was a lost cause. *Damn stubborn soldier.*

"It'll be better for him to find out from us than to discover it on his own, sweetheart," Steve whispered. "Please, you know that I'm right."

Tony's shoulders sagged in both exhaustion and resignation. "Maybe, but that's a pretty damn big secret we'd be asking him to keep," he said. "He wouldn't be able to breathe a word about it to anyone, and I mean *anyone*. There's gonna be so many people out there looking for blood after what happened, and with Barnes' ties to HYDRA, they're gonna be coming for him. And there's no way in hell I'm gonna let Pete get caught in the crossfire, Steve. No goddamn way."

"We can make sure that won't happen, Tony," Steve said firmly. "You know we can. And Peter's been able to keep his new enhancements a secret just fine, so I think he'd be okay with this too."

Tony breathed in, shaking his head even as he knew that Steve was right. "It's not fair for us to ask him to keep secrets like this."

"I know, but I don't see us as having any other choice. Not about this."

"If anyone cares about my opinion, I agree with Cap," Clint piped up from the front. "Kid deserves to know who's living in his house, don't you think?"

"Mmm," Tony grumbled, scowling at the back of Clint's head. He didn't really want to admit it, but Legolas did have a point. "All right, we can tell him. But I want to make it abundantly clear that he is not to seek out Barnes or try to find out any information on him that we don't want him to know. He's already seen enough monsters in his lifetime."

"Tony," Steve admonished, hurt filling his eyes. "Bucky isn't a monster."

"If you say so, Tony thought, even as he squeezed Steve's hand.

"Sorry, babe," he murmured. "I'm trying, but it's gonna take me awhile."

"As long as you're trying, I'll be grateful," said Steve. "And I think it'll be better for Peter if he sees you trying. I think it'll help him to not be as scared."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Tony said as he waved a dismissive hand. He stifled a yawn, tipping his head onto Steve's shoulder as Steve's arm wrapped around him. His entire body was sore, both from the battle and from sleeping on that damn uncomfortable hospital bed, and his left arm was doing that annoying prickling thing it always did when he was worried. "Looking forward to getting home."

"Me too, sweetheart," Steve answered, pressing a kiss to Tony's forehead. "Me too."
Not surprisingly, Peter was waiting just inside the doors of Tony's lab when they arrived at the Tower. Steve's heart leapt as Peter came running out to meet them as soon as he and Tony had cleared the chopper's rotors, his face a mixture of relief and elation.

"Papa!" he exclaimed, stopping short as he came up to Steve, as if he was afraid he would hurt him if he attempted a hug.

"No, no, little guy, you're not gonna hurt me," Steve said as he opened his arms, gathering his son close. "I've missed you!"

"I missed you too," Peter said, his voice muffled against Steve's chest. Tony's arms encircled them both as Clint tossed their bags out the door and took off with Hill back towards the hangar. Their Quinjet was still being repaired from the damage it took during the battle, and while they had a spare parked in the Tower hangar it still carried the SHIELD logo, and Steve hadn't wanted it used until they could have it repainted with the Avengers' logo instead.

"You doing okay, buddy? You still look kinda pale," Tony said once they stepped inside the lab, his eyes sweeping along Peter as if he was searching for injuries. Peter appeared physically fine, but Steve could tell he was exhausted. There were deep purple circles under his big brown eyes, and he looked thinner, like he hadn't been eating properly.

"Nah, just tired. Hard to sleep with you guys gone," Peter said, his eyes flitting quickly towards Steve and away just as fast, which Steve had come to recognise as an attempt to hide something. He made a mental note to check with him later.

"Hey, guys, glad you're back," Rhodes said as soon as they entered the living room. "And now I've gotta hustle right out of here. I've got the Pentagon breathing down my neck about all kinds of stuff, so I'm heading right back to where you just came from."

"The Pentagon?" Steve asked, his brow furrowing. "Is it about SHIELD?"

"No," Rhodes answered. "Funnily enough, this has nothing to do with the little party you guys had over the Potomac. Otherwise I'd be pointing them all in your direction."

"Yeah, not like we don't have enough people pointing fingers at us right now," grumbled Tony. "What the hell are they harassing you about now?"

Rhodes pursed his lips, shaking his head. "Sorry, Tony, but I can't even tell you. Not yet, at least." He clapped both Tony and Steve on the shoulders and pulled Peter in for a quick hug. "Glad you're back in one piece, and see ya later."

"Bye, Uncle James," Peter said, turning back to Steve and Tony as soon as the elevator doors had closed behind him. "Are we still gonna have a movie day today?"

"Absolutely, little guy," Steve said quickly, relieved when Tony nodded his approval. "But Dad and I need to talk to you about something first, okay?"

Peter's cheeks blanched white as he bit his lip. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, buddy, not at all," said Tony, his brow furrowing. "Why would you think that?"

"No reason," Peter said with a shrug. "Um, so what is it?"

Steve glanced at Tony, who jerked his head towards the couch. "Let's go sit down, yeah?"
They all piled onto the couch, with Peter in between them cuddled up against Tony's side. Steve inhaled a deep breath as he took Peter's hand.

"Can you tell me what Auntie Nat told you about what happened in D.C.?" he asked. May as well start with what Peter already knew and go from there.

Peter swallowed hard as he dropped his gaze to his lap. "She told me that you guys discovered that SHIELD had been infiltrated by HYDRA," he said softly. "And that you took them out."

"That's right, little guy, we did," said Steve. "And while it wasn't as big of a battle as it was here in New York, it still made quite a mess, so... Dad and I are gonna be working on coordinating the cleanup and aftermath of it for probably the next several months."

"Okay," Peter said. "Nothing too weird about that."

"This is weirder though, Pete," Tony said. "Because it was HYDRA instead of aliens, which means that there's gonna be a lot of people pointing a lot of accusatory fingers, and some of those fingers are gonna be pointed directly at us."

Peter's eyebrows shot up so high they disappeared under his hair. "At the Avengers? Why at you? You guys beat HYDRA!"

"Because the Avengers fell under SHIELD's purview, and SHIELD was completely infiltrated by HYDRA," Steve said, cringing. He still had no idea how it was possible for HYDRA to have gone unnoticed for so long, but that was a discussion for another time. "And because of that, a lot of people are going to make assumptions that are incorrect until we can uncover all of the information that we need to uncover."

"Hmph," Peter grumbled. "Well, you know what they say about assuming."

"Yeah, and the proverbial 'they' would be correct in this case," Tony said firmly. "But we just wanted you to be aware in case some idiots at school decide to say something stupid."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Peter said with a shrug. "And I can handle it just fine, you don't have to worry about me."

Steve let out a sigh, locking eyes with Tony over Peter's head. "That may be, bud, but you know that we're still going to be concerned," Tony said. "You're our son, it's our job to be concerned about you."

"Yeah, I know that, Dad," said Peter. "But really, I can handle the kids at school just fine."

"We're not saying that you can't, little guy," Steve said. "We just want you to understand what's going on."

Peter nodded, sinking even further into Tony's side. "Uh huh. Can we get something to eat and watch a movie now?"

Tony's head tipped back against the back of the couch as Steve's belly swooped. "Not quite yet, Peter," he said softly. "There's still something else we need to tell you."

Peter's brown eyes widened, his small hand trembling in Steve's. "What is it?"

"The Winter Soldier, Peter," Steve said softly. "We brought him here, to the Tower. He's—well, he's—" Steve's voice broke off as tears stung his eyes. "It turns out that he's not just some nameless,
faceless assassin. He's—he's my friend, Bucky, that HYDRA captured back during the war and…
well, we don't exactly know what they did to him, but we decided that we're gonna try and help him, so… he's downstairs, in Hulk's panic room, and we're gonna be working on trying to get the HYDRA programming out of his head."

Peter's eyes widened impossibly more as his jaw dropped open. "The Winter Soldier—, is your friend?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it, Pete?" said Tony, thankfully with only a hint of sarcasm. "Papa thinks when Barnes was captured in '43 that HYDRA enhanced him somehow, so he was able to survive his fall from the train. And then when they got a hold of him again, well… they basically turned him into a hell-bent, evil version of Steve."

"Against his will," Steve added. "All of that was done to him against his will, Peter, you have to understand that."

"But—, but—" Peter stammered, his huge brown eyes radiating fear. "But… he almost killed you!"

"I know, little guy," Steve said. "But I don't believe that he knew what he was doing. He was operating under HYDRA's influence, and now that he's free of them we're gonna try and help him get back to himself."

"If that's even possible," said Tony, sighing heavily. He threaded his fingers into Peter's curly hair, kissing the top of his head. "The bottom line of it is, we don't know what the hell we're doing, but we're gonna try anyway. But you can't breathe a word about this to anyone, okay, bud? Not even Ned can know that Barnes is here. Like Papa said, there's a lot of uncertainty out there right now with SHIELD going down, and uncertainty tends to breed panic, and panic tends to cause people to do really stupid things, and the last thing we need is the wrong person to find out that the Avengers are harbouring an infamous HYDRA assassin."

Peter's chest heaved as he nodded, leaning back against Tony as his frightened eyes bored into Steve's, bringing a knot to Steve's throat. The news of Bucky had shocked Peter, but it wasn't only Bucky's presence in the Tower that was scaring him.

Peter had a memory like a steel trap, and there was no doubt in Steve's mind that in that moment, Peter's memory was replaying a conversation they'd had a long time ago, before Steve had even asked Tony for their first date.

He was afraid that his family was going to be broken apart, and even the thought of it was enough to crack Steve's heart right down the middle.

"Hey, little guy," Steve whispered, squeezing Peter's hand. "It's gonna be okay, I promise."

"Uh huh," Peter answered, not at all convincingly. "Can we please eat now? I'm really hungry."

"Sure thing, bud," Tony said before Steve could answer. "What're you hungry for?"

They ended up ordering from their favourite Mexican place after Peter vetoed getting pizza, saying he'd had enough of it while they were gone. As soon as they were done eating they piled back onto the couch to watch Back to the Future, with Peter cuddling up under a blanket between Steve and Tony like he usually did, but Steve could tell he was more distant than usual, leaning closer to Tony with both of his hands wrapped around Tony's arm.

Peter was carrying the same kind of deep-seeded insecurity inside him that Tony carried, and while Steve disliked the fact that he needed to reassure them both of his love and commitment on such a
regular basis, he was more than willing to do so for as long as it was necessary. They both had been betrayed by so many people who had once been close to them, Steve supposed he would be the same way if he’d been through what they had.

He got his chance about halfway through the movie when JARVIS paused it to announce that Tony's contractor was on the line with some questions regarding the new upstate facility.

"Sorry, bud," Tony said as he ruffled Peter's hair. "This should only take a few minutes."

"Uh huh," Peter said, watching as Tony hurried into his lab to take the call. Peter remained on the couch, his skinny shoulders curled in and stiff, his hands gripping the fleece blanket so tightly that Steve was surprised that he hadn't torn it.

"Peter," he said, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Please look at me."

Peter sniffed as he turned his head, biting his lip to keep it from shaking.

"What?"

Steve leaned forward, looking straight into Peter's eyes. "Do you remember when I told you that I wasn't going anywhere?"

The corners of Peter's lips twitched as he nodded, his brown eyes glassy. "Yeah. It was on Boxing Day."

"That's right," Steve said as his body flooded with heat at the memory of that morning, the morning after he and Tony had spent the night together for the first time. "And I meant that, Peter. Every word."

A single tear escaped Peter's eye, rolling down his round cheek. His jawline had sharpened up a bit over the past year or so as he'd grown, but he still looked very much like a little boy to Steve's eyes, and even more so when he was upset.

"I know you did at the time, but—, but—"

"No, little guy, there's no need for any 'buts'," Steve whispered, planting a kiss on Peter's forehead. "I'm in love with your dad, and I love you, and I'm not going anywhere. No matter what."

Peter inhaled a deep, shaky breath. "Are you sure? 'Cause I remember that you said you were—"

"I'm absolutely sure," Steve said. He brushed Peter's tear away with his thumb, cupping his chin in his palm. "In fact, there's something I'd like to ask you, if that's okay."

"Okay," Peter said in a small voice. "What is it?"

Steve's heart started to thud; he was almost as nervous as he had been when he proposed to Tony, and this hadn't been exactly the way he'd planned to do it, but... oh well.

"Well, Tony was on the phone quite a bit this morning before we left the hospital," Steve began. "And so I took the opportunity to get in touch with Ms Potts, and she put me through to a couple of the Stark Industries lawyers, and—" He broke off, swallowing hard. "I'd like to formally adopt you, Peter. Do you think—is that something that you'd be willing to allow me to do?"

"Huh?" Peter sputtered as more tears rolled down his cheeks, dripping onto the blanket. "Are you serious?"
"Absolutely," Steve choked out, his throat so tight he could barely get the word out. "And I haven't even asked Tony about it yet because I wanted to talk with you first, but the lawyer I spoke with said it would only take a couple of weeks to get the paperwork together, so it could be finalised before Christmas, and—"

He was cut off as Peter threw his arms around his neck, almost knocking them both backwards off the couch. Steve grimaced as his still-healing ribs and abdominal muscles protested against the strain, but he hugged his boy to him as strongly as he dared, relief washing over him in waves. He had been wanting to pursue adopting Peter for several months, pretty much ever since he and Tony started dating, but with all the uncertainty about the whereabouts of Peter's mother he had never thought it appropriate before now. He still felt a little like he was taking advantage of Agent Parker's tragic death, but he also felt like this was best for Peter. If—God forbid—something were to ever happen to Tony, Peter would still have one legal parent to take care of him.

"I want that, Papa," Peter sobbed into his shoulder. "I want that so bad! Thank you!"

"Oh sweet boy, you don't have to thank me," Steve whispered, his own eyes leaking happy tears. "And I mean it. I'm not going anywhere, so you don't have to worry about that ever again. All right?"

"Uh huh," Peter said, sniffling as he pulled back to look into Steve's eyes. "It's just… um… does Dad know? About Bucky? 'Cause if he doesn't, then—"

"He knows," Steve said. He blotted Peter's tears away with a corner of the blanket, bopping him gently on the nose. "And I told him the same thing, okay? Neither of you have to worry about that."

A wide smile broke across Peter's face, and he swiped his hand across his nose. "Good. That… that's really good. And I—I'm—I'm sorry, Papa. I just—"

"No need to be sorry," Steve said. "I understand. And I know there's a lot of stuff happening all of a sudden and there's gonna be a lot of changes coming up, but… you will never have to question how much I love you, or how much I love your father. Okay?"

"Okay," breathed Peter.

"Good," Steve said. He pressed a kiss to the top of Peter's head and held out his arm. "Want some Papa bear cuddles?"

Peter immediately scooted towards him, laying his head against Steve's chest as Steve wrapped his arms around him. "Yeah," he mumbled. "This is much better."

They were quiet for a moment, until Peter lifted his head. "Papa?"

"Hmm?"

"Um… I know you're probably gonna be mad at me, but—"

"Were you listening in on our comms again, Peter?" Steve asked. He quirked an eyebrow as Peter blinked, his mouth opening and then snapping right closed again. "I know you've done that before, little guy, so what did you hear this time?"

Peter gulped. "Uhh… just the helicarrier battle," he whispered. "I… kinda got distracted after Auntie Nat dumped the HYDRA files."

Despite himself, Steve breathed out a quick sigh of relief. If Peter had to overhear anything, that's
what he would have chosen. Better that than the end confrontation between Tony and Bucky.

"Well, we can talk more about that later," he said, rather sternly. "Why don't you go ahead and tell me what you found?"

Nodding, Peter swallowed hard before continuing. "Well, like I said, I found something in the HYDRA files, and I wasn't really even looking for it, but I still—, and it's about Dad, and my grandparents, and we need to tell him about it, but—, I don't how how we're gonna be able to."

"It's all right, Peter," Steve said gently. "Dad already knows what happened to his parents."

"He does?"

"Mmmhmm."

"And he still let the Winter—I mean, Bucky, come here? 'Cause, Papa, I didn't just find a picture or an article, I saw it. I watched what happened, and—, and it was—"

"Shh, little guy, it's okay," soothed Steve, his heart clenching in pain. Tony was right, Peter was one of the toughest kids Steve had ever seen, but even he had a breaking point, and Steve needed to make sure that Peter never reached it.

"We can talk to Dad about it tomorrow, okay? If he wants to see it for himself, that can be his choice." He shifted so he could look Peter in the eye. "But I need to ask you to not go looking for anything else in those HYDRA files, okay? You're too young, and there's no need for you to do so. We're already working on them."

Peter pursed his lips, frowning. "Mmm. Fine."

"Thank you. Now, c'mere, I've missed my Peter cuddles."

"Uh huh," said Peter as he laid his head back down just as Tony stepped into the living room, a bright smile lighting up his tired face as he noticed them snuggled up together.

"Now that's a sweet picture," Tony said as he plopped back down on the couch next to Peter, pulling on Steve's arm so that his hand rested on Tony's shoulder. "Everything okay in here?"

"Yep, we're good," Peter replied. "What's going on with the contractor?"

"Oh, something new and terribly exciting," Tony said with a wink. "But Papa and I will tell you about it tomorrow, okay, bud? I think we've all had enough excitement for today."

"Yeah, okay," Peter said, rubbing his nose against Steve's side. "No more excitement sounds good to me."

Steve breathed out slowly as JARVIS resumed their movie, allowing himself a smile of contentment for the first time in far too long. Their entire world as Avengers might be changing, and they were starting what was sure to be a very uphill battle in trying to help Bucky regain his mind, but in that moment, all that Steve cared about most was right there, in his arms. The man with whom he was going to share the rest of his life, and the boy who called him, 'Papa'.

Steve clung to Tony's hand as they took the elevator down to the panic room, beyond grateful for his unwavering support despite the rotten circumstances. Tony's face was still unnaturally pale, with dark blue circles under his eyes caused by his disrupted sleep the previous night, but he had insisted
on accompanying Steve and Peter down to see Bucky anyway.

It had been a rough night for all three of them, actually. After nearly two hours of cuddling and whispered reassurances, Peter finally fell into a deep enough sleep to allow Steve and Tony to tiptoe out of his room. They had headed to their bedroom right afterwards, where Steve had been horrified to discover that Tony's entire upper back was littered with deep purple bruises, a result of getting slammed with an RPG during the helicarrier battle. As usual Tony had just tried to brush them off, which only served to frustrate Steve, but he had bitten back his retorts and just helped Tony get ready for bed instead, taking care to be extra gentle with him so as to not cause him any further pain.

And then, shortly after Tony had fallen asleep in Steve's arms, the nightmares began. Nearly every ninety minutes they came, with Tony jerking awake, screaming for Peter to run and berating himself over and over again for not being strong enough. It was utterly heart wrenching for Steve to witness, and only made him more determined to get both Tony and Peter to start talking with Sam as soon as possible. They both needed to start working through those deep-seated fears that kept them awake at night.

"You stay right next to me, bud, yeah?" Tony said as they exited the elevator, stepping into the anteroom where Bruce was working at a computer station, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. Steve gasped as his eyes landed on Bucky, lying unconscious on the huge, Hulk-sized bed. His arms and legs were wrapped with two sets of restraints, and he appeared pale and lifeless, surrounded by beeping monitors and medication pumps, with his face completely flat, devoid of emotion.

He looked... small. Diminished. Nothing like the larger-than-life Bucky that Steve had known for most of his life.

Oh, Bucky. What on earth did they do to you?

"How—, how is he doing?" Steve asked Bruce, squeezing Tony's hand as hard as he dared.

"He seems stable at the moment," replied Bruce. "We've kept him unconscious since he got here, and there hasn't been any change in his vitals or anything." He paused, removing his glasses and glancing furtively at Peter. "You sure you want him hearing this?"

"It's fine, big guy," answered Tony, his hand resting on Peter's shoulder. "Keep going."

Bruce raised his eyebrows, sighing. "Okay. There were some minor injuries when he came in that've already healed, it seems like he heals pretty fast, about as fast as you, Cap. There were also several older injuries, a few broken bones that I could tell hadn't been set properly, a couple of gunshot wounds, things like that. He's... he's been through some pretty rough times, from the looks of it."

Guilt pierced Steve like a knife as he wondered how many of those injuries were his fault, prompting Tony to turn to him with an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"Don't, babe," he said quietly. "Don't even go there."

"What about—" Steve stammered, sucking in a sharp breath. "What about his head? Does he have any sort of brain damage, or...?"

In response, Bruce stepped over the far wall, flipping on the lighted panels to reveal several X-ray pictures of Bucky's brain. "These are the MRI results," Bruce said. He pointed to three small darkened areas on one of the pictures, circling them with a pen. "From what we can see there are three small sections of his brain that are missing, each about the size of a quarter, and two of which
go right into the hippocampus which is largely responsible for a person's memory. Any damage to the hippocampus results in problems with creating and retaining new memories and recalling long-term memories."

"So, you're saying that Zola removed these sections of his brain so he wouldn't remember who he was?" Steve asked, gritting his teeth. "To make it easier for them to manipulate him?"

"That's a likely possibility, Steve," Bruce said gently. "And to make it so he wouldn't remember what he'd done as well. We also found some evidence of electrical stimulation, which would've likely been used to further precipitate memory loss and possibly what the Soviet Union used to program him once they got their hands on him."

"Oh, God!" Steve choked out, his knees nearly buckling as Peter wrapped his arm around his waist, holding him steady. "When I found him in that HYDRA facility in '43 he was strapped down on a gurney, mumbling his name and rank over and over. It took him a few seconds to recognise me, and I always thought it was because he hadn't seen me since I'd been transformed, but now—"

"Steve," Tony said as he took Steve's face in his hands, encouraging him to meet his eyes. "This isn't your fault, babe, none of it. Don't you even go there."

"But—"

"Dad's right, Papa," stated Peter. "There's no way you could've known."

Steve bit his lip, his throat burning with the tears he was trying to hold back. "Um… so have you been able to find anything in the HYDRA files about how they—how they programmed him?"

Bruce gave an apologetic shrug. "There's not really all that much out there, I guess the Nazis who did this weren't so careful with their note-taking, but like I said, with those sections of his brain removed, he wouldn't remember who he was, which would make him suggestive, and from what Helen was able to find from his blood sample he was enhanced by an experimental serum that was pretty similar to yours, so he's got similar strength and healing ability. And if the Soviets were using the neuro-electrical stimulation as a way to program his targets and remove any possible moral compass, then he could be used over and over as an assassin and he wouldn't necessarily remember any of it."

"Not necessarily?" Tony asked, his face etched in grief and anger. He was thinking of his parents.

"Well, the brain is fluid to a point," said Bruce. "And it's possible that over time and with the proper stimuli that he might remember some things. We would just have to be very careful to not… set him off, as it were."

"Okay," Steve whispered, his body nearly frozen in place, his hand gripping Peter's shoulder. "Thank you, Bruce, for everything that you're doing for him. I—I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"You're welcome, Steve," replied Bruce. "I'm sorry I can't tell you anything else at this point."

"When do you think you'll try waking him up?" Tony asked warily. "I mean, we can speculate till the cows come home, but we really won't know anything until we try and wake him up, yeah?"

"We're not quite there yet, Tony," answered Bruce. "There's still some more tests I'd like to run and I'll need to speak with Helen a few more times as well, but you're right, we'll have to get there soon, probably in the next couple of weeks or so. I'll keep you guys informed."

"All right," said Tony as he took Steve's arm, urging him back towards the elevator. "Thanks, big
"Sure thing."

They were quiet as the headed back up to the penthouse, each of them deep in their own thoughts and Steve's guilt threatening to overtake him. He should've tried to rescue Bucky sooner, he should've kept him from falling from the train, he should've told Tony about his suspicions sooner, he should've—, he should've—

But none of that going to help anything, he thought, even as he tried to fight that too. It's what he was always telling Tony, after all, that what had happened to Peter in Afghanistan wasn't his fault. This wasn't all that different, and it was time for Steve to take his own advice.

"Steve," Tony said quietly, tugging on Steve's hand as they stepped into their living room. "You okay?"

"No," Steve admitted. He curled his arm around Tony's shoulder and pulled him close, burying his face into Tony's neck. "But… I will be, eventually. As long as I have you and Peter, I'll be okay."

Tony turned his head, pressing a sweet kiss to Steve's cheek. "Always babe," he whispered. "We've both got your back."

They tried to move forward, because that's really all you can do after a crisis anyway. Just pick up the pieces and try to move forward with what was left, something that Tony had done so many times over the course of his lifetime that he felt it should've been second nature already.

At least in this case they all still had each other, relatively unscathed.

And it helped that he now had the new facility construction and the wedding planning to distract him. Distractions were always a good thing. Distractions helped Tony to focus on the distraction, instead of on whatever it was that he was trying to bury down in the deep recesses of his brain.

Like the video Peter and Steve had showed him of Bucky Barnes murdering his parents.

Tony had managed to hold himself together through most of it, even as he knew what was coming, more upset about the fact that Peter had found it in the first place and then watched it alone than the actual existence of it. It wasn't until he saw his mother's panicked face as Barnes wrapped his hand around her throat that something broke inside him and he lost it, forcing Steve to have to hold him back from marching down to that goddamn panic room and blasting Barnes through all three feet of reinforced wall. The very next day Steve insisted that they visit the cemetery where Tony's parents were buried and pay their respects, a place Tony hadn't set foot in since that very day. Peter even suggested that they bring a bouquet of roses for Tony's mother, remembering that Tony had told him about how much Maria Stark had always loved roses.

And once they were there, Tony, who had sworn to himself that he wouldn't cry—he'd never shed a single tear at his parents' funeral, standing stoically between Obadiah and Rhodey—lasted only about thirty seconds before breaking down, needing both Steve and Peter to practically hold him up as they headed back to the car.

Peter returned to school the day after they visited the cemetery, after once again promising to not reveal anything about Barnes. Tony was extra fidgety the entire time he was gone, checking up on him so often that JARVIS eventually just started giving him reports every fifteen minutes, even while he was in the middle of his conversations with the DoD.
Steve managed to keep himself busy combing through the HYDRA files, searching for clues as to where renegade agents might have gone to hide out—potentially even taking Loki's sceptre with them—and planning out raids with Natasha and Clint in between wedding suit fittings and visits to bakers and caterers. Steve had insisted that they continue with their wedding plans, saying that their wedding was not only a beacon of hope for themselves and Peter, but for the entire team as well.

Something to signify that their lives could continue to move forward.

They celebrated Christmas, and Steve's official adoption of Peter, with the entire team, complete with tons of presents and a huge Christmas dinner that Steve and Peter spent most of Christmas Eve preparing. About three days later Bruce began weaning Barnes from his sedation, allowing him more periods of consciousness and testing his reactions to both familiar and unfamiliar people. The tests were somewhat successful, in that they showed that Barnes had a far lesser tendency to become confused and violent when presented with people whom he deemed to be non-threatening.

Unfortunately, both Steve and Tony ended up on the 'threatening' list, along with Natasha, Clint, and Sam. Only Bruce could get within three feet of Barnes without him having something akin to a nervous breakdown, and even then, he wouldn't really respond to Bruce, only mumbling a few phrases over and over in Russian while keeping his eyes averted.

"Pardon me, sir, but Dr Banner is on the line," JARVIS announced the following afternoon, cutting into the blare of Tony's favourite AC/DC song. Steve and Peter were out getting haircuts and doing some shopping and Tony was in the lab, working on Steve's newest uniform while his robotics system assembled his latest suit of armour, the Mark 35. They were heading out on the first of their HYDRA raids in three days' time, and Tony wanted to make sure that they were as prepared as possible.

Tony huffed as he set down his sewing needle. "Yeah, J, put him through."

"Hey, Tony," Bruce said as soon as he appeared on the screen. "I catch you at a bad time?"

"Nah, big guy, it's okay," Tony replied. "What's up?"

Bruce gave him a sheepish look as he fiddled with his glasses. "I… um… need to ask you something, something that you're not gonna like, but I need you to hear me out first before you start protesting, okay?"

Tony instantly felt his chest seize, and he curled his fingers around his left arm, breathing in deeply.

"What is it?"

"I think I have a good guess as to how we could reach Sergeant Barnes," said Bruce. "And I don't mean just talk at him, I mean really get him to respond and answer some questions. Right now we're just kinda spinning our wheels, and without any more information on what he went through I'm afraid that's all we'll be able to keep doing, which isn't really fair to anyone. Especially him."

"Yeah," Tony said shortly. "What's your point?"

"I'd like to send someone in to talk with him, Tony," Bruce said. "Someone who Barnes has never really seen, and so has never associated as being a threat. Someone who doesn't appear to be all that physically threatening, but also who could definitely hold his own if Barnes were to become upset, if what Steve told me is any indication."

"Oh yeah? And who's that?" Tony asked automatically, his head jerking back in shock as his brain finally registered what Bruce was implying. "Wait just a goddamn minute, you're not telling me that
you want to send—?

"That's right, Tony," Bruce cut in. "I want to send in Peter."

"No way in hell, big guy," Tony shot back. "And I can't believe you even thought you could ask such a thing."

"Peter said he would do it," said Bruce. "I already asked him."

"What?" barked Tony. "You went ahead and asked him before—?"

"I called to talk to Steve first and he was hesitant, just like you are, but Peter overheard our conversation and volunteered. He told me he wants to help."

"That's 'cause he's Peter!" Tony snapped. "You could ask him to do just about anything and he'd say 'yes' because he's the most selfless person on the planet! Not to mention the fact that he thinks you're like the coolest person ever so of course he'd volunteer if you asked, and so all you're doing now is taking advantage of that!"

Bruce's lips twitched as he waited for Tony to finish his rant. Then he crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned closer to the monitor.

"Tony, I tried to talk him out of it," Bruce said, almost like he was speaking to a wounded animal. "If you choose not to believe me that's your prerogative, but he volunteered to help and Steve thinks that he would be fine. Steve told me that Peter has knocked him to the floor a few times during their sparring sessions, so he doesn't feel that Peter would be in any physical danger with Bucky. And besides, the rest of us would only be a few feet away."

"Yeah, behind a goddamn two-way mirror!" Tony retorted. He pushed himself back from the counter, pinching the bridge of his nose and forcing himself to take deep breaths. "Bruce, you haven't seen what this guy is capable of, but I have. He killed my parents, he almost killed Steve twice, and—"

"I know that," interrupted Bruce. "I've seen the footage, I know what Barnes has done. But there's nothing in any of the files we've uncovered so far that indicate that he's ever deliberately gone after a kid, and besides, you brought him here—"

"That was Steve's call—"

"It was both of your calls," said Bruce. "You brought him here and you asked me to try and help him. And after all the testing and research and everything else that we've done, this is how I think we could help him. We need to get Barnes to talk, to tell us what he remembers, and I can't think of anyone who looks more trustworthy than Peter. He's the perfect choice. And once Peter is able to get through to him, then we can reintroduce him to Sam and get him started on the path to real recovery."

Tony's chest was so tight he could barely breathe, but he forced himself to anyway, his palm pressed over the arc reactor. Once again, what Bruce was saying made intellectual sense, but… this was Peter they were talking about, and while he may have gotten a bit stronger lately, he still was just a kid.

And not just any kid. He was Tony's kid, who he loved more than his own life.

"Bruce, I—I'm—just—I can't let anything else happen to him," Tony whispered. "I couldn't take it. It would kill me."
Bruce's brow furrowed in sympathy. "I understand that, Tony, and I also think that you're stronger than you think, but that's probably something better left to Sam's expertise. But like I said, we would all only be a few feet away, just on the other side of the mirror, and between you, Steve, Nat, Clint, and Hulk, I think we could handle Barnes if he got out of control enough that Peter couldn't subdue him."

"Yeah," Tony choked out. "I suppose there's no chance at getting Thor down here, is there? Just to round things out a bit?"

"If you've got a way to get ahold of him, I'm all ears," Bruce said, absolutely serious. "Otherwise—"

"Yeah, yeah, I was only half joking anyway," Tony said as he slumped down onto a chair, his shoulders sagging in defeat. He knew Steve wasn't exactly objective when it came to Barnes, but he also knew without a doubt that there was no way Steve would agree to let Peter try this if he didn't think that Peter could handle himself. And if he was truly honest, Steve was a better judge of Peter's newfound strength than Tony since they did often spar together.

"How long would he need to be in there?" Tony asked.

"Well, as long as it takes, I guess," answered Bruce. "But we should know pretty much in the first minute or so if things are going well or not. Barnes has been pretty adamant with letting us know when he's not happy."

Tony scoffed, his upper lip curling into a sneer even as he felt a twinge of guilt. He should've known that Peter would try to nose his way into things sooner or later, because he always did. His selfless nature didn't allow him to not try to help.

*He is so much better than me. I don't deserve him.*

"When were you thinking?" he asked, his eyes stinging with tears.

"Tomorrow morning, if that works," Bruce replied. "No sense in waiting any longer than we have to, especially with the raid coming up. And if this works, then I was thinking that Sam and Peter could keep working with Barnes while the rest of us are gone."

"Yeah, yeah, we'll have to see about that," mumbled Tony. He was nervous about the raid coming up as well, mainly for the fact that Rhodey wasn't available to babysit so Peter was going to be left in Sam's care for the first time, with Pepper and Happy and an entire squadron of security people on standby. And it wasn't that Tony didn't trust Sam, he just didn't know him all that well yet, and with Obadiah potentially still out there somewhere…

Tony shook his head, attempting to clear it. Steve was always telling him that it didn't help to dwell on things that couldn't be changed, and while it usually made Tony roll his eyes when he said it, he couldn't deny that it was pretty solid advice because it came from Steve. Steve was an endless fountain of solid advice. It was one of the many reasons why he was the team Captain.

"All right, Bruce, I'll let him do it," Tony said, so softly he was surprised that Bruce heard him. "But I swear, if anything happens to him—"

"Nothing's gonna happen to him, Tony," said Bruce. "We'll make sure of it."

"Yeah, okay, big guy," muttered Tony, waving his hand at the screen. "Now let me get back to what I'm working on, yeah?"

"Sure thing. And thank you. I really think this is going to give us the breakthrough we've been
As soon as the screen went blank Tony pitched forward, gripping the counter with both hands as he squeezed his eyes closed.

*Are we ever going to have any peace?* he thought desperately. *Or is this just the new normal, going from one crisis to another?*

Somehow, he feared it was the latter.

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*Stop by and see me on tumblr, I'm [geekymoviemom](http://geekymoviemom.tumblr.com) and [geeky-writes](http://geeky-writes.tumblr.com) there!*

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Chapter End Notes

Whew! Lots of stuff happening in this chapter, I can’t wait to see what you guys think!

:)
Thank you so much for all of the kind comments, I'm so glad you're enjoying the story! I also wanted to thank all of you who recommended wedding songs, I really appreciated all of your awesome suggestions! I decided to go with All of Me by John Legend as I thought the lyrics really fit Steve and Tony well, but it was not an easy choice. :)

This chapter also pushes up against that t-rating a bit towards the end, I thought after everything that’s been going on that Tony and Steve deserved a nice wedding night. It's still not what I would consider mature or explicit, just a bit more... detailed than before. ;)

Steve yawned as he shifted slightly on Peter's bed, careful to avoid jostling his sleeping boy. He and Tony had decided to sleep in Peter's room with him in the hopes that it would help keep his nightmares to a minimum. They wanted to ensure that Peter's senses were as sharp as they could possibly be when he faced Bucky in the morning.
Tony's fingers combed idly through Steve's hair, the fear his brown eyes tangible in the soft blue light emanating from the arc reactor, even as Steve knew he was trying to hide it.

"Hey," he whispered as he stillled Tony's hand, turning to kiss his palm. "Talk to me."

Tony scoffed, quirking an eyebrow as he ran his thumb over the stubble along Steve's jawline. "You didn't shave this morning?"

"No, I guess not," Steve answered. "Must've forgotten."

"No, you never forget stuff like that," Tony insisted. He propped himself up on his elbow, looking at Steve with alarm. "What's the deal, babe?"

Steve huffed, trying to hide his frustration. He'd been trying to reassure Tony, not have it turn the other way around.

"Just a bit nervous about the mission, I guess," he finally said.

"Oh. That it?"

"And about tomorrow."

"Ah. Well, I'd be concerned if you weren't nervous about tomorrow," Tony said. His jaw twitched as he glanced down at Peter, cuddled up between them. "You still sure it's the right move?"

"I hope so," Steve admitted, rather painfully. He didn't like being uncertain, and liked admitting it even less so. "But I honestly don't know what else to do. I do think Peter is our best hope to get through to Bucky, I just… wish that he wasn't. It's a lot to put on him… after everything."

"Mmm," muttered Tony. "You still thinking that Barnes will know something about where the rest of HYDRA might've scattered?"

"More like hoping, but yeah," said Steve. "We can plan out all the raids that we want, but there'll be a lot less risk to the team if Bucky's able to give us some usable intel, and there's no way he can do that unless we can get through to him. Which is where Peter comes in."

Tony's eyebrows knitted together, his lips quirking into that I-love-you-but-you're-crazy look that he often gave Steve. A look that, according to Peter, Steve often gave right back at him.

"Well, I s'pose if anyone can get through to that muddled brain of his, it'll be Pete," Tony said, his fingers resuming their carding through Steve's hair. "He could probably charm the socks off an alligator without saying a word. Even Fury's fallen prey to those puppy-dog eyes of his a few times over the years."

Steve shuddered as Tony hit a particularly sensitive spot on his scalp. He absolutely loved when Tony ran his fingers through his hair, and had even been wearing it a bit longer lately to make it easier, at Tony's request.

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a second," he replied, smiling softly as he brushed a stray curl off of Peter's forehead, his throat tightening when Peter sighed in his sleep and burrowed even closer to him. "There's no way I'm gonna let anything happen to him, Tony, you know that."

"Yeah, I do." Tony sighed as he flopped back down onto the pillow, reaching for Steve's hand. "Wish you could've been here with me during his colicky days. Whew. You wanna talk about sleep-deprivation… now that was something else. And he wouldn't sleep a wink unless his tiny little body
was touching mine from head to toe and his ear was pressed right over my heart. On the really bad nights we wouldn't even make it to bed. I would just tie him to me and lean against the wall for awhile."

Steve's eyebrows shot up, in both amazement and horror. "You slept standing up? With Peter tied to you?"

"Well, I was at least in a corner, but yeah. You get to the point where you'll try anything," said Tony, his eyes wide in remembrance. "And I mean, anything. Rosa taught me how to wrap him, and I'd just bounce around the house like a pogo stick until he finally fell asleep. But then once he was asleep it was like he could sense just the slightest change in barometric pressure or something, 'cause as soon as I'd even attempt to sit down he would jerk awake like I'd poked him with something and start screaming all over again. So after awhile I just started leaning against the wall, and… yeah. Not exactly the deepest sleep you could get, but still better than nothing."

Steve shook his head, his mind already creating a mental picture so he could attempt to sketch it out later. "I actually do wish I could've been here then," he said, his fingers tightening around Tony's. "I would've loved to have been able to raise him with you from the beginning."

"Nah," Tony said with a slight shake of his head. He gave Steve one of those self-deprecating looks that he loathed. "I was pretty much an asshole to anyone who wasn't Pete back then, so I doubt you would've liked me all that much. You should ask Rhodey, I'm sure he'd have some pretty good stories to share."

"You were a single dad to what sounds like a very needy baby," Steve pointed out. "I'm sure you were doing the best that you could. And I find it very hard to believe that I wouldn't have liked you."

"That's just 'cause you love me now," Tony said with a rather sly grin. "But back then, I was… well, I was pretty much what everyone said I was. Snobby, aloof, snarky, cold… that whole Merchant of Death persona. Kinda like Howard, I guess, except not at all with Pete."

"Mmm," Steve mumbled, frowning. He had suspicions that a lot of what Tony liked to call his pre-Afghanistan personality had been carefully moulded by Obadiah and didn't at all reflect his true inner self. But Steve couldn't even think about Obadiah anymore without his blood boiling in rage, so he didn't bring it up.

Instead, he wiggled himself forward so he could reach Tony's forehead, planting a kiss there. "I love you," he whispered. "Try and sleep now, okay? Don't they always say to sleep while the child sleeps?"

"Yeah, but that advice usually applies when the aforementioned child is a baby, not when they're a teenager."

"Even so," Steve said with a light chuckle. "You're tired. You should go to sleep."

"Mmm," Tony muttered, wrinkling his nose. "But are you absolutely sure about that cake that we ordered? I mean, I know you love strawberries, but I'm not quite sure about that glaze and I still don't think that three tiers are gonna be enough, and—"

Steve silenced him with another kiss, cupping his chin in his palm. "I'm sure. Now please, go to sleep."

Tony let out a heavy sigh, but he nodded anyway. "You should sleep too, Papa bear. You obviously need it if you're forgetting something basic like shaving."
"We'll see," answered Steve as he kissed the tip of his nose. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

It only took about ten minutes for Tony to fall into a semi-deep sleep, a testament to how tired he really was, and the fact that Steve had managed to switch him to decaf at dinnertime. He had been burning the candle at both ends lately, trying to get all of the Avengers' equipment ready for their upcoming mission and making sure that Peter's security team was in place for while they were gone, a team that rivaled any presidential Secret Service detail. Tony had assigned no less than twenty of Happy's best people to various stations in and around both the Tower and Peter's school, and while Steve might have thought it was all perhaps just a tiny bit excessive before the whole showdown with HYDRA, he no longer felt that way. Steve had even informed Happy to order his people to arrest Obadiah Stane on sight if he dared to show his face anywhere between the Tower and the school, if in fact he was still alive like they suspected. So far they hadn't been able to find any evidence in the HYDRA documents as to whether or not he was still alive, so Steve wasn't going to take any chances until they were absolutely sure.

Stane had already managed to hurt Peter once, there was no way Steve was going to allow it to happen again. That plus the fact that Peter couldn't remember anything about what happened to him while he was under the influence of that experimental drug ate away at Steve's insides like nothing ever had before. He had seen some horrifying examples of prisoner torture during the war, and the fact that a bunch of terrorists had taken his beloved child and drugged him so they could do who-knows-what to him, it was enough to make Steve want to punch through a wall.

Which he had, actually, just a couple of days prior. At least this time he'd only managed to bruise his knuckles, but it had been bad enough to induce one of Tony's overprotective fits.

"Never again," he whispered as he kissed Peter's forehead. He pulled back to look at him, marveling at how closely he resembled Tony in that moment. They both had the same curly brown hair, the same brown eyes with the ridiculously long eyelashes, the same full lips that pouted slightly as they slept. Their hands were also very similar; they both had long, thin fingers that were so adept at creating and building things and gestured wildly as they talked. They even had a lot of the same mannerisms and facial expressions, and of course the windows into their souls that were their eyes.

At least, they were for Steve.

They were his boys, and he loved them both more than he had ever thought he could love anyone. So much so that the thought of anyone trying to hurt either one of them was almost too much for Steve to even contemplate.

"No one's ever gonna hurt you again, little guy," Steve murmured into Peter's hair. "Not while I'm here, I promise you."

*Never again. Not while I'm still breathing.*

Steve's palm was sweaty against Tony's, his heart beating a staccato rhythm against his ribcage as he, Tony, and Peter stepped off the elevator and headed towards the anteroom, where Bruce, Natasha, and Helen Cho were all waiting.

"Morning, guys," Bruce said over his shoulder as he tapped notes into his computer station, his glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose.

"Good morning, Bruce," Steve replied, his voice trailing off as he caught sight of Bucky through the window. Bucky was sitting up on the massive bed with a black chess king clutched in his right hand, rocking slightly back and forth and mumbling under his breath in what Steve assumed to be Russian.
He looked thin, sad, and completely overwhelmed, nothing like the faceless assassin he had been forced to be for the last seventy years.

"Can you understand any of what he's saying?" he asked Natasha.

"Some of it," she replied. "A lot of it's just gibberish, but we've been able to identify a few random words that he keeps repeating. None of them make any sense, but we've been keeping track of them just in case."

"What words?" Steve asked.

Natasha gave a shrug. "Freight train, rusted, and homecoming, to name a few. We haven't been able to find any correlation between them, but we're still looking."

Steve's heart gave a painful lurch as he remembered the battle on Zola's HYDRA train that had led to Bucky's apparent death. "He fell from a train, maybe it has something to do with that. It wasn't exactly what I would call a freight train, but it might mean something."

"It might," said Natasha. "Like I said, we're still looking. The encryption on the files regarding the Winter Soldier has been a bit harder to crack than some of the rest, which again, isn't all that surprising."

Steve nodded as he tightened his hand on Peter's shoulder, feeling it tremble ever-so-slightly as Peter stifled a yawn, covering his mouth with his hand while Steve swallowed back his own yawn. Peter had been able to sleep a bit better the previous night, but Steve hadn't been able to quiet his own mind down enough to sleep all that much, too busy mapping strategies for their upcoming raids and trying to shut down images of Bucky attacking Peter that kept threatening to take hold. He had to believe that Peter could get through to Bucky. Otherwise, he wasn't sure what else they would be able to do for him.

And through all of it he was trying desperately to keep on the brave face that he knew Tony and Peter and the rest of the team expected of him. He was Captain America, the team leader. He was supposed to know what to do and how to do it, even if he had no clue at all, 'cause then he was just supposed to fake it.

And Steve hated being fake. It reminded him too much of his dancing-monkey, war bond propaganda days.

"So he's actually had a pretty good morning this morning, Captain," Helen said, clearing her throat. "He ate a decent breakfast, the most he's ever eaten at one time, and while it's still not nearly enough calories to maintain him with his enhanced metabolism, it's at least a step in the right direction."

"That's good," Steve answered, latching onto the small glimmer of hope. "One of his favourite fruits are plums, or at least they used to be, so maybe once he's eating better we can get some of those for him."

"That's actually a good idea," Helen said as she made a note in her tablet. "I'll have some brought up."

"Okay, so, what's the plan here?" Tony asked, rather impatiently. "Is Pete just supposed to saunter in there and say 'hey' and hope that he doesn't get attacked?"

Bruce removed his glasses, raising his eyebrows. "I'll get on the intercom and let him know that Peter is coming in. We've noticed that Sergeant Barnes appreciates when his visitors are announced as opposed to just barging in, which is understandable. And then—"
"We see what happens," said Tony, his brow furrowed in concern and fatigue. His sleep had been fitful as well, plagued by nightmares which required Steve to comfort him multiple times. He eventually ended up sandwiched in the middle of the bed, holding Peter and Tony on either side with both of their heads resting on his chest.

"Yeah, pretty much," answered Bruce. "Like I said, this is all pretty new to everyone, so—" He broke off as he handed Peter an earpiece, not unlike what the team used out in the field for their comms. "This way we can give you instructions as we go, or if he says anything that you don't understand then Natasha can translate for you. Okay?"

"Uh huh," answered Peter.

"Yeah, yeah, big guy," Tony muttered. "Then let's get going, shall we?"

"I agree. Are you ready, little guy?" Steve asked, a knot rising in his throat when Peter looked up at him, giving him a determined nod.

"Yeah, Papa, I'm ready," Peter said bravely. "After I introduce myself, I thought I'd ask him if he wanted to play chess with me. Is that okay?"

"Buddy, I don't think that's something that you—" Tony started.

"I think that's a great idea, Peter," Steve cut in. "I'm sure Bucky will appreciate it."

"Steve—!"

"Tony, we're trying to gain Bucky's trust here, and in order to do that I think it'll be better if Peter acts like he's visiting a sick friend in the hospital rather than yet another person who's just trying to interrogate him," Steve said gently. He squeezed Tony's hand, trying to offer what reassurance he could. "I promise, he's gonna be okay." 

"And here comes the promises again," grumbled Tony as his shoulders sagged. "Fine, but it's just gonna be a quick game, okay, buddy? None of those three-hour marathons that you and Uncle James usually get into."

"I know, Dad."

Tony huffed as he took Peter's face in his hands, kissing his forehead. "If you sense anything, any danger, anything at all that seems weird to you, then you get the hell right out of there, do you understand me? We're all gonna be watching you from right here."

"I know, Dad, you've told me that multiple times," Peter said, rather impatiently. "I'm gonna be fine."

"Good. Then let's get this over with, yeah?"

"All right," said Bruce. He winked at Peter as he pressed the button for the intercom. "Sergeant Barnes?"

Bucky's head snapped up at the sound of his name, his frightened eyes flitting around the room as his grip on the chess piece increased. It was so reminiscent of how confused and frightened Steve felt when he was first defrosted that tears sprang to his eyes. Poor Bucky probably had no idea what was really happening, or that he had spent the last seventy years being used as an assassin for the very organisation that he and Steve had fought so hard to eliminate.

"Sergeant Barnes?" Bruce repeated. "There's someone here who'd like to come in and speak with
you, is that okay? His name is Peter."

Several seconds passed as they waited for Bucky to respond, finally giving an almost imperceptible nod.

"All right, kiddo, you're up," said Bruce. "And like Tony said, if that special premonition sense-thingy of yours starts acting up, you just get the heck outta there, okay?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay, Sergeant, here he comes," Bruce said over the intercom. "There's no need to be afraid, he's not gonna hurt you."

Tony flinched as the door buzzed open, moving closer to Steve as Peter cautiously stepped inside. Bucky immediately looked over at him, his face a blank canvas as Peter approached his bedside.

"Hello, Sergeant Barnes," Peter said, only slightly wobbly. "How—, how're you doing?"

Bucky didn't reply at first, remaining impassive as he looked Peter up and down. Steve thought he might have sensed a flicker of recognition in Bucky's eyes, but just as it had been up on that D.C. rooftop it was there and then gone again so fast that he couldn't be sure.

*Maybe he thinks Peter looks like Howard?*

"Кто ты?" Bucky finally said, low and gravelly.

Peter's eyes widened as he glanced toward the window. "Um…"

"He's asking 'who are you', kiddo," answered Natasha. She glanced furtively at Steve, who nodded. "Go ahead and tell him your name."

"Okay," Peter whispered. He straightened his shoulders as he turned to face Bucky again. "I'm Peter. Peter Stark-Rogers."

Bucky's eyes went wide at Peter's response, his hand twirling the chess piece stilling as he once again looked Peter up and down, almost like he was scanning him.

"Застывший?" Bucky asked. "Роджерс?"

"He just repeated your last name, kiddo," Natasha said. "Go head and say it again."

"Do you think he recognises it? Both of those names would be familiar to him," Steve asked as he patted Tony's hand, which was clinging so tightly to his arm that his knuckles were white.

"It's possible," Natasha answered with a slight shrug. "Go ahead and say it again, Peter."

"I'm Peter Stark-Rogers," Peter said, this time with more emphasis on each name. "My dad is Tony Stark, and my papa is Steve Rogers."

Steve gulped as Bucky looked toward the window, his blue eyes blinking rapidly. "Застывший Роджерс?"

"Uh huh," Peter said with a friendly smile. "Do you know those names? My papa told me that you're his friend."

Bucky stared at Peter for several seconds, as if trying to figure out if he was telling the truth until he
glanced toward the window again.
"Ств?"

"That's 'Steve', he said 'Steve'," Natasha said quickly as Steve's heart started to thud. "Tell him 'yes', Peter."

"Yeah, that's right," Peter said, bobbing his head. "My papa's name is Steve Rogers."

It happened so fast that no one except Peter had time to react. Bucky's eyes flicked back to the window, narrowing just as he pulled back his metal left fist and aimed it directly for Peter's head. Steve gasped as Peter immediately caught the fist in his hand as if it were nothing more than one of Steve's baseballs, holding it steady as his eyes bored into Bucky's.

"Get him the hell out of there!" shrieked Tony. "Buddy, you get the hell outta there right now!"

"Not yet, Dad, I can do this!" Peter answered, not taking his eyes off of Bucky. "I'm not gonna hurt you, Sergeant Barnes. You don't have to be scared of me. My name is Peter Stark-Rogers, and I'm not gonna hurt you. I promise that none of us are gonna hurt you. We just want to help you."

"Get him out of there before he can provoke that lunatic again!" Tony demanded as he yanked hard on Steve's arm. "Right now, get him—!"

"Wait, Tony, please," Steve pleaded as Bucky yanked his arm back from Peter's grasp, flexing his metal hand. He tilted his head, his expression one of confusion mixed with shock. "Just… wait, sweetheart, please. I think—I think he's gonna be okay."

"Застывший Роджерс?" Bucky said again. "Ств?"

"That's right," answered Peter. "Steve Rogers is my papa."

"Ств."

"Uh huh. Steve Rogers. He's my papa."

At that Bucky looked directly at the window, the corners of his lips twitching.

"Стывичик."

"Uhh, he said, 'little Steve'," Natasha said, smirking slightly as she looked up at Steve. "Is that what he used to call you?"

Steve's cheeks flushed pink as Tony shot him look of mirth combined with barely-concealed jealousy. "He used to call me Stevie when we were kids," he said. "And maybe some when we were adults too, before the serum." He'd never cared too much for that particular nickname, especially since it was always what Bucky called him whenever he'd had to bail Steve out of a fight, but he wasn't about to say that now.

"Yeah, that's him," Peter said to Bucky. "He's my papa, and your friend."

Bucky flinched at the word 'friend', his right hand curling around the chess piece with a white-knuckled grip. "У меня нет друзей."

Natasha gave a sigh. "He said, 'I don't have any friends'."

Peter slowly shook his head. "I don't believe that, Sergeant," he said. "My papa doesn't tell lies, so if
he said that you're his friend then I believe him, and that makes you my friend too." He paused as he stepped over to the bookshelf against the far wall, selecting the wooden chess set sitting on the top. "Would you wanna play a game with me?"

Bucky's brow furrowed, his head tilting in confusion as he stared Peter down, with Peter staring back just as intently. Steve could've sworn he saw a flicker of a smile cross Bucky's lips before it vanished.

"Yes," Bucky said in English. "A game."

"Oh, good job, little guy, you're doing great!" Steve exclaimed, unable to contain his elation. This was going far better than he'd even dared to hope.

"Just like I said," muttered Tony, with far less enthusiasm. "Charming the socks off an alligator."

"He is good, I'll give him that," said Natasha. "I don't think you could get much sweeter than that boy of yours, Tony."

"Yeah, well, he gets that from Steve," Tony grumbled. "Look, the guy already took a swing at him! How long are we gonna let him stay in there?"

"Bucky knows that he's not a threat now, Tony," Steve said. "I don't think he's gonna do something like that again."

"You don't think?" Tony retorted. "Damnit, Steve, this is Peter we're talking about! You don't think isn't good enough!"

"Quiet, you guys!" Natasha hissed. "Barnes can probably hear you!"

"Tony, this is the most calm Barnes has been with anyone since he got here," Bruce said. "I don't think it would do him any good if we pulled Peter out right now."

Tony bit his lip, his brown eyes glaring bullets at Bruce. Finally, he nodded.

"Fine. But you better be prepared to go full-on Hulk if Barnes so much as looks at Peter in a way that I don't appreciate, you got that?"

"Yeah, Tony, I got it," Bruce said evenly. "I promise that none of us want anything bad to happen to Peter."

Steve curled his arm around Tony's shoulders and moved them both closer to the window, watching as Peter finished setting up the chess board. "It's gonna be okay, sweetheart," he whispered. "Please, you just have to trust me."

Tony's eyes flicked up to meet his, only for a second. "Yeah. I hope so."

"Okay, so, since I'm the white pieces I need to go first," Peter said as gently as possible, smiling when Sergeant Barnes nodded once. He moved his initial pawn carefully, not wanting to set Sergeant Barnes off again even as he could still feel the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins at being able to fend off the sergeant's attack. It was an exhilarating feeling, and one he hadn't experienced quite to that extent before. Sparring with Papa was fun, as Papa now knew just how hard he could push Peter and didn't usually hold back too much, but blocking Sergeant Barnes' punch had been something completely different.
Peter had just demonstrated to both himself and everyone watching that he could go up against a so-called bad guy and win. He had felt the ice bolt race down his spine right before Sergeant Barnes swung his fist, his lightning-fast reflexes had been spot on, and his display of strength had shocked pretty much everyone, including himself, if he was being completely honest. And, from the look of shock on Sergeant Barnes' face no one had ever caught one of his punches like that before, and that only reinforced Peter's desire to get out and start helping people.

And with both of his dads leaving on their HYDRA raid in a couple of days, it was the perfect time to finish his suit and get started.

He had already laid down some of the groundwork, asking permission to stay after school to work in the Robotics Lab with Ned twice a week, so Sam and Happy knew not to pick him up until just before dinnertime on those days. Shaking the literal legion of security people stationed around the school presented another roadblock, but Peter had always been pretty sneaky—and his new ability to climb up the walls and crawl on the ceilings definitely helped with that—and so felt certain that he could slip out of the school unnoticed. He had already decided to concentrate his patrols in Queens instead of Manhattan, the main reasons being that Queens was relatively close to home and was a bit rougher, giving him more opportunities to fight petty crime.

*Friendly, neighbourhood Spider-Man,* Peter thought as he took one of Sergeant Barnes' bishops, hearing Dad's breath hitch in his ear as he gave Sergeant Barnes a tentative grin.

"Maybe don't try and beat him, Pete?" Dad said, in that sort of rapid-fire tone he always used when he was being extra twitchy. "I don't really feel like watching him take another swing at you."

"Mmm," Peter replied, wincing as Sergeant Barnes retaliated by taking one of his knights. He definitely knew how to play chess. "Don't think you need to worry about that. I only have eight pieces left."

"Шах," said Sergeant Barnes as he moved his rook two spaces over from Peter's king, trapping it between the rook and his remaining bishop. He looked up at Peter, the corners of his lips twitching into the slightest of smiles.

"He said, 'check', Peter," said Natasha. "And from here, it looks like it might be—"

"Nope, not yet," Peter said triumphantly as he moved his queen diagonally to take the bishop, protecting his king from further attack. He sat back on his heels, waiting.

Sergeant Barnes' gaze dropped to the board, studying it for several seconds before poking his king with his metal index finger, toppling it over.

"Шах и мат," he said, which Peter assumed meant 'checkmate'.

"Yep, that's checkmate. Good game, Sergeant," Peter said. He smiled as he offered Sergeant Barnes his hand, watching as he stared at it for several seconds before finally taking it. "I'd like to play with you again sometime, if you'd like that?"

Sergeant Barnes' eyes flicked over to the window, then back to Peter.

"Стиб," he said quietly.

"Yeah, that's right," Peter answered, just as softly. "That's my papa, and your friend. I'm better at chess than he is, but he can come in and watch us play sometime if you want." He paused, watching as Sergeant Barnes blinked several times, almost like he was trying to clear an unpleasant image from his head.
"Да," replied Sergeant Barnes.

"Great!" Peter exclaimed. "I'll let him know, it'll make him really happy."

Sergeant Barnes nodded again as Peter got up from the bed, returning the chessboard to its place on the bookshelf. He had just taken a couple of steps towards the door when Sergeant Barnes spoke up again.

"Птеп," he said.

"That's your name, kiddo," came Natasha's voice in Peter's ear.

"Yeah?" answered Peter, turning to look at him.

"My name is Bucky," he said in English.

A huge grin split Peter's face, imagining the similar grin lighting up his papa's face at hearing Sergeant Barnes remember his childhood nickname. "Bucky," he said. "It's nice to meet you. And I think your metal arm is super cool."

Bucky frowned as he looked down at his metal hand, his shaggy hair falling across his forehead and into his eyes.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

"You're welcome," Peter answered.

The door buzzed open then, and Peter barely had time to step through before Dad's arms were around him, crushing him so hard against him that Peter felt the arc reactor pressing into his own chest.

"Good God, Pete, you really went all in while you were in there, didn't you?" he rasped into Peter's ear. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"That was amazing, little guy," Papa said as his arms circled around both Peter and Dad. "Better than I could've ever hoped. You even helped him remember his name."

"I agree, kiddo," Bruce said, rapidly typing notes into his workstation. He shot Dad a wary glance. "I'm thinking that he and Sam should try and come down here at least every other day while we're gone, Tony. I don't want Barnes' progress to backslide now. Sam can observe them the first few times, and then once Peter thinks Barnes is ready he can reintroduce him to Sam and we can go from there."

"I'm okay with that if you guys are," Peter said. It definitely meant that he was going to be kept busy while his dads were gone, but Peter far preferred being busy to being bored.

"Tony?" said Papa, his eager face belying his casual tone. "Is that all right with you? I'm sure Happy wouldn't mind standing guard if we ask."

Dad's eyebrows knitted together, giving Papa one of his playfully-frustrated looks. "What're you asking me for? From what I can see I'm pretty outnumbered here, so—"

"Tony," Papa said reproachfully, earning him another frown. "You know that's not true. We won't do this if you don't agree."

"Fine," Dad finally said. "But only if both Sam and Happy are down here with you." He huffed out
"I'm hoping that as Barnes gets more comfortable with us that he'll start speaking English more often," said Bruce. "That was the first time we've heard him say anything in English since he's been here."

"And all thanks to Pete," Dad said. He planted a kiss on Peter's temple, pulling back to look at him. "Now you have to be getting hungry, so we should probably feed you before you pass out, yeah?"

"Great idea," said Papa. "And then I think we've earned another movie night tonight, don't you think, little guy?"

"Yeah!" Peter said eagerly. "And I think it's even my choice since Papa picked the last time."

"Gotta get your homework done first, buddy," Dad said. "And when you're done with that I could use your help in the lab for a bit too." He shot Peter a wink out of Papa's view, and Peter grinned in reply. Dad was making Papa's wedding ring himself and had asked for Peter's help with the inscription for the inside, just like Papa had asked for Peter's help with Dad's ring that he'd had made at a jeweler's. Dad had also purchased a beautiful custom compass watch from Cartier to give to Papa as a wedding gift, and had asked Peter to help him come up with an inscription for that as well.

"That sounds awesome," Peter said. He was so excited for their wedding day to finally arrive that he could barely contain it.

We've already hit rock-bottom, so things can only get better from here, Peter thought as they said goodbye to the rest of the team and made their way back up to the penthouse. The stuff that he and his dads had endured over the last two years had been horrible at times, but here they all were, planning a wedding along with their next Avengers' mission and helping Papa's oldest friend regain his lost memories. They were proving to HYDRA—and any other bad guys who dared to cross them—that good will always triumph over evil.

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Peter gasped as he came to, immediately choking on the thick dust still settling around him and permeating throughout the stale air. It was almost completely dark, and he was so tired that his vision was going completely wonky, almost like he was trapped in some sort of haunted, psychedelic honeycomb.

What the hell had happened?

"Oh my God!" Peter squeaked as he realised that his entire body was completely pinned underneath what felt like at least three tons of rock. He shifted slightly, attempting to free at least one of his arms and trying desperately to avoid hyperventilating. The last thing he needed was to pass out again.

What the hell had happened?

Why couldn't he remember?

Peter squeezed his eyes closed, trying to concentrate on his breathing as the memories started coming back in tiny snippets, like the flash of a camera. One second he had been strapped down on that uncomfortable metal gurney, surrounded by people with glowing eyes while the guy who looked like he'd stepped off the deck of a Mediterranean yacht hovered over him, and the next second he was...

Burning hot tears welled up behind Peter's closed eyelids as more memories suddenly came rushing back like a tidal wave, flooding his exhausted mind with terror and grief.
There had been a fight inside the cave. Papa had managed to work himself free, and then he had come looking for Peter, and then—, and then—

"Oh God, no!" Peter cried. "Papa's dead!"

Shadow Man had activated that device he always kept in his jacket pocket and—

Papa had screamed. He had screamed like Peter had never heard him scream before, but only for a second or two before he fell completely silent, hitting the floor of the cave with such a sickening crunching sound that Peter would have thrown up if he'd had anything worthwhile in his stomach.

And the silence that followed the scream was even worse.

Because whatever Shadow Man's device had done, it had completely ripped Papa's breath from his lungs, leaving him to suffocate. It was the most horrific kind of torture that Peter could imagine for his beloved father.

"Papa!" Peter gasped as he turned his head, trying to get a glimpse of his fallen papa who was lying a few metres away, his body grotesquely twisted and his face covered in a spider-web of broken blood vessels, with another trail of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. His broken shield was propped up next to him, the jagged edges taunting Peter, showing him that not even Captain America was strong enough to resist the strength of the fire monsters and the Winter Soldiers.

The same Winter Soldiers who took their orders from that creepy Shadow Man, the man whose voice was so eerily familiar that the mere sound of it was enough to raise all of the hair on the back of Peter's neck.

Who was it?

Think, Peter, think!

"Daddy!" he cried as the rubble covering his back and legs shifted even more, crushing him under its weight. He wouldn't be able to breathe for too much longer. "Daddy, help me! I'm down here, I'm stuck, I can't move!"

But the only reply was the sound of shifting bits of rock, and his own voice echoing against what was left of their cave prison.

In all honesty, Peter didn't even know if Dad was still alive, because he hadn't even seen him in…

How long had it been since he'd seen Dad?

Oh God, how long had it been?

"Daddy!" Peter screamed, desperate to ward off the panic threatening to overwhelm him. It was almost pitch black, he was trapped underneath shifting rock, and he had no idea if either of his dads were still alive.

Tears tracked down through the dust covering his cheeks as he inhaled as deeply as he could.

"Daddy! Daddy, are you there? Please, help me!"

I don't wanna die! Please, don't let me die!

Don't let me die.
"Peter, wake up!" said a sharp voice as a pair of cold hands gripped Peter's shoulders, gently shaking him. "It's just a bad dream, kiddo, you just gotta wake up!"

Peter gasped as his eyes flew open, blinking rapidly as they attempted to focus in on the concerned face of someone who was not one of his dads.

"Ah!" Peter cried, jerking so far backwards on his bed that he banged his head on the headboard.

"Hey there, it's okay, it's just me," Sam Wilson said gently. He reached for the water bottle on Peter's bedside table, twisting off the cap. "Here. Your throat has to be raw with how loud you were screaming."

"Uhh…" Peter stuttered, trying to swallow but only managing to choke. He tipped back the bottle, whimpering at the contrast of the cool water against his burning hot throat.

"Better?" Sam asked once Peter had downed nearly half the bottle.

"Uh huh," answered Peter. He slumped back against his sweat-dampened pillows, swiping his hand across his forehead. "I'm—I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Nah, you don't have to be sorry, kiddo," said Sam. "I know it's tough on you with your dads gone."

Peter scoffed as he turned away, embarrassed. He wasn't a baby anymore, for heaven's sake. He should be able to sleep through the night without crying for his daddies.

"Not like they haven't been gone before," he muttered. "It's kinda in their job description. I should be used to it by now."

"Well, yeah, I know," Sam said as he placed a gentle hand on Peter's shoulder. "But things are a bit different now, aren't they?"

"I guess."

"Yeah. You wanna talk about it?"

"No," answered Peter. He wrapped his arms around his front, suppressing a shiver. Not real. It wasn't real. It was only a nightmare.

"Well, all right. But just try and remember that it's okay to be afraid of change, kiddo," Sam said. "And it doesn't mean that you're weak. It just means that you're human."

"Mmm," grumbled Peter. More like a human/spider mutant, but whatever. "If you say so."

Sam quirked an eyebrow as he took the water bottle from Peter's hand. "Okay, well, why don't you hit the shower while I get your sheets changed, yeah? I think you'll sleep better if your bed isn't stinky."

Peter gave a quick nod as he stumbled towards his dresser for some fresh pyjamas, berating himself for being so grumpy with Sam. He knew Sam was a really nice guy who was just trying to help, and who had already managed to slot himself in with the rest of their family so well it was as if he'd always been there.

Plus, he had already started talking with both Dad and Papa, trying to help them work through their post-battle traumas, as Papa called them, and had managed to hold a five minute conversation with
Bucky Barnes, three minutes of which were in English.

Sam was a great addition to their Avengers’ team, Peter just wished that he could just be Uncle Sam instead of Shrink Sam. He didn't want to have to talk about the dreams that haunted his sleep every night. He would've far preferred to just forget about them.

_Not real. They're not real. Papa isn't dead and Dad isn't missing, they're just out of town. I just talked to them before bed and they were both fine._

_It wasn't real._

Emerging from the bathroom, Peter found his bed made up with the same precision and hospital corners as Papa would have done, and the sight of it was enough to make him want to cry. As stupid as it might've been, he _missed_ his dads when they were gone. Even though their absence was allowing him to go on his new Spider-Man patrols, he still missed them.

In fact, his Spider-Man patrols were probably the only thing keeping Peter relatively sane lately.

"There ya go, kiddo," Sam said as Peter crawled onto the bed, burrowing down under the clean blankets and wishing for the umpteenth time that his beloved polar bear hadn't perished in the Malibu house bombing. "You sure you don't wanna talk about anything?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," answered Peter. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. You got your alarm set for school?"

"Uh huh. JARVIS does it for me."

Sam gave him a rather sly grin. "Yeah, I bet he does. And I will admit, JARVIS does come in pretty handy."

"Why, thank you, Mr Wilson," said JARVIS. "I am pleased that you find my services useful."

"Thank you, Uncle Sam," Peter said, smiling as Sam's grin grew even wider. "For everything."

"Like I said, don't mention it," Sam replied as he ruffled Peter's hair. "Now, go back to sleep, yeah? I'm tired."

"Uh huh."

As soon as the door closed behind Sam, Peter sat back up, scrubbing at his eyes with his palm. Despite what he thought were brave words, the nightmare had shaken him more than he wanted to let on, and he was not in any hurry at all to go back to sleep.

_Not real. It's not real._

_Papa's not dead, and Dad isn't missing. They're just on their mission._

_It wasn't real. It was just a bad dream._

"Would you like me to turn on the rain sounds, Master Peter?" JARVIS asked after a couple of minutes.

Peter sighed as he flopped back down, wrapping his arms around one of his spare pillows.

"Yes, please."
A second later the soothing sound of falling rain filled the room. "Is there anything else I can do to help, Master Peter?" asked JARVIS.

"No, I don't think so," Peter said sadly. "But thanks anyway."

"You are quite welcome."

Not real, Peter thought as he drifted off to sleep. It wasn't real.

It was just a dream.

"I can't believe your dads are still making you skip out on Robotics Lab," Ned whined as Peter finished tying his shoes. They had just gotten done with gym class, which was always a lesson in painful restraint for Peter. The urge to show off some of his new skills was hard to beat down, especially when Flash Thompson took such delight in teasing him about taking ballet lessons with Auntie Nat. If he only knew how handy those lessons were coming in now. There was no way Peter would be able to handle swinging on his webs and switching between them as well as he did without the posture and core work that he'd learned from ballet.

"Yeah, well, you know how paranoid they are," Peter said with a shrug. "And it's even worse when they're out of town. Maybe after the wedding they'll calm down a bit."

"Maybe," Ned grumbled. "That's not even a definite 'yes'. We're gonna get so far behind, Peter!"

"It's not like it's an actual assignment," Peter said, ducking under the flailing arm of another student as they made their way down the hallway towards chemistry. "It's for extra credit. Which I don't even need in the first place."

"So? It's still fun! And it's not like your dad ever lets me come over to work on stuff anymore. I haven't been to the Tower in months!"

"I know, Ned, and I'm sorry about that, okay?" Peter snapped, regretting his harsh words when Ned's face fell. "It's—, there's just a lot of stuff going on right now with everything that's happened, and Dad just doesn't wanna have to worry about extra people in the building. You still get to come to the wedding though, so at least there's that, right?"

Instantly Ned's face bloomed into a huge grin. "Oh yeah! The wedding is all my mom's been talking about lately! She even made Dad take her to Neiman Marcus to shop for a new dress, and she booked a spa day at SoHo for the day before! She's acting like it's her own wedding!"

"Yeah, well, it is kinda the wedding of the year," Peter said, only half-joking. He'd lost track of how many gossip columnists had devoted their precious column inches to writing about his dads' upcoming nuptials in the last few weeks. Speculation about the guest list, the menu, the baker, and who was designing their suits was running rampant, and while Peter was definitely looking forward to it, he was also looking forward to when it would be over just so they could get back to normal.

Or at least our messed-up, Avengers' family version of normal.

Arriving in the chemistry lab, Peter plunked his books down onto the counter and grabbed his goggles, sliding them on as Ned fired up their Bunsen burner. As soon as the teacher began his lecture Peter snuck his hand down into the bottom drawer of the cabinet, pulling out the extra cartridges of web fluid he had stashed in there the day before and slipping them into his pocket. So far he'd been able to keep up with manufacturing his web fluid at home, but he'd been too paranoid to actually store it there.
As soon as the class was over Peter said goodbye to Ned and raced for his locker, pulling out his backpack where he’d stashed his suit and web shooters. Once the coast was relatively clear he headed down the hallway and slipped inside one of the study hall classrooms. Peter had discovered a couple of months ago that this particular classroom had a broken latch on one of its windows which allowed it to be opened from both the inside and the outside, and it was also hidden behind a rather dense clump of bushes, making it extremely difficult for the security people to see from their sentry posts. All Peter had to do was shimmy out the window and crawl along the outside wall until he reached the alleyway that led to the subway station, where he was able to make his escape.

And, he had even thought to clone the transponder for his phone and hide it under one of the tables in the Robotics Lab, so if any of the security people were to check on his whereabouts—or JARVIS or his dads, for that matter—it would still look like he was in the Robotics Lab instead of flying around between the tall buildings of Queens.

Peter kept his head down on the train, careful to avoid meeting anyone's eyes. He was wearing what he liked to call the requisite Avenger disguise—a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses, the glasses being one of the special pairs that Dad had made to help him focus when he was tired—but he was still paranoid about getting recognised. His dads were some of the most famous people in New York, even the country, and Peter had experienced more than his fair share of people stopping him on the street.

Arriving in Queens, Peter exited the train station and made a beeline for the alleyway where he usually hid his stuff during his patrols. After practically inhaling the footlong sandwich that he'd packed and downing a bottle of Powerade, Peter checked to make sure that the coast was clear and changed into his suit. In addition to the glasses, Dad had made him some special undergarments to help maintain his body temperature during the fall and winter months, and they worked so well that Peter had made his suit out of the same fabric. He was grateful for the extra warmth, especially since things tended to get a bit chilly once he started flying around.

So far none of his patrols had really amounted to all that much. Not wanting to make too much of a spectacle—as if a skinny teenage boy flying around on homemade spider webs and wearing a tight red and blue suit and mask wasn't enough of a spectacle—Peter had mainly stuck with simple things. Helping old ladies cross the street, preventing a few bicycle thefts and shoplifting attempts, and one person who looked like he was trying to steal a car, so things hadn't been too intense as of yet.

And as it turned out, the guy hadn't actually been trying to steal the car, he had only been trying to retrieve the keys he had locked inside. But really, how was Peter supposed to have known that?

Pulling on his mask, Peter inhaled a deep breath and aimed his web shooter at the top of the building to his left, a huge grin splitting his face at the cool thwip sound it made as it shot out. As soon as the web had attached itself to the very top ledge of the building, Peter curled both of his hands around it and took off.

Once again it was a fairly quiet afternoon. Peter was able to thwart yet another shoplifting attempt and help a lady get her cat down from a tree branch, and was just starting to think about swinging back to collect his stuff when the harsh blare of sirens split the air, coming from a couple of blocks away.

"Oh, maybe this'll be something good!" Peter said as he took off swinging in the direction of the sirens, landing on top of a small apartment building as he scanned the streets below.

"There it is!" he said as a speeding pickup truck ran a red light with two police cars in pursuit. Peter immediately took off, managing to get ahead of the car just as it was approaching another intersection. Horns blared, and Peter gritted his teeth at the grating noise as he dropped down onto
the street, shooting his webs at two lampposts perched on opposite corners. Using the webs as leverage, Peter jumped up and planted his feet directly into the front grille of the truck, halting it in its tracks with a spectacular squeal of tires and stopping it just in time to prevent it from t-boning a bus full of commuters.

"There," he said as he webbed the man's hands to the steering wheel, preventing him from escaping. "Don't you know that it's wrong to run away from the police, mister?"

"And who the hell are you, some wanna-be Avenger?" the man shot back as he struggled against the grip of the webbing.

"Maybe!" Peter said gleefully as he hurried away, managing to get clear just as the police caught up and surrounded the guy's car. He flew back to the alleyway at breakneck speed, changing back into his clothes so fast that he almost put his jeans on backwards and his shoes on the wrong feet. He was still zipping up his jacket as he took off for the subway station, barely managing to get on the train before the doors snapped shut. His heart was in his throat as the train ambled its way back towards Midtown, with just enough time for him to shimmy through the school window before Uncle Sam texted to say that he and Happy were waiting in the parking lot.

"Hey, kiddo. Have a good day?" Uncle Sam asked as Peter slid into the backseat of the car.

"Yeah," Peter said, trying to hide the fact that he was panting like he'd just ran a marathon. "Not too bad, actually." He sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "How's Sergeant Barnes doing?"

Sam bobbed his head. "Pretty good. I brought him some of my Nana's favourite gumbo today for lunch and he actually ate quite a bit of it, and even thanked me when he was done. He's starting to get up more often too, walk around the room a bit, so I'm gonna ask Steve if he thinks we should get him some exercise equipment or something so his body doesn't turn to mush while we're trying to figure out how to clear his head."

"Oh, I bet Papa will be happy to hear that," said Peter.

"Yeah, I hope so. Steve texted this morning saying that the team should be able to come home in the next couple of days. He said they had cleared out as much as they could where they were, so it won't be too much longer."

Peter's heart leapt at the news, and he tipped his head back, sighing as the adrenaline seeped from his body. It was easy to forget how much he missed his dads when he was busy, but as soon as he wasn't it just all came rushing back.

"That's good," he said quietly. "I miss them."

"Probably not as much as they miss you, kiddo," said Uncle Sam. He clapped Peter on the shoulder. "Bucky asked me if you were planning on visiting him tonight. I think he's ready for another chess rematch."

"Yeah, I can go see him after dinner if that's okay," Peter said. "I don't have that much homework."

They ended up eating the leftover gumbo for dinner, which was absolutely delicious—Uncle Sam was definitely a worthy challenger for Papa for being the best cook in the family—and after Peter finished his homework they headed down to visit Bucky, whose face lit up when he saw Peter. Bucky's improvement was slow but steady, and everyone told Peter that a big part of his improvement was because of him. Bruce and Dad still hadn't been able to figure out the decryption key for most of the Winter Soldier files so they hadn't been able to get as much information on how
Bucky had been brainwashed as they had originally hoped, but the fact that he was improving as well as he was overshadowed any irritation with the lack of information. That plus the fact that the HYDRA raids had been pretty successful—Thor had even shown up out of the blue for their second set of raids, and had decided to stick around afterwards for Dad and Papa's wedding—and Peter's confidence in his new abilities was increasing with every single patrol was almost enough to overpower the lingering uneasiness that Peter carried from his nightmares.

Maybe things really can be normal, Peter thought as Dad tucked his blankets up over his shoulder following the four-hour wedding rehearsal dinner. Uncle Thor had insisted on reciting some Asgardian marriage prayer that had taken over forty-five minutes before the dessert course could be served, requiring Dad to have to poke Uncle James awake once it was finally over. Papa had then said goodnight to Peter and headed downstairs to Uncle Sam's apartment for the night, saying that he didn't want Dad to see him again until the wedding.

"Hey, Petey," Dad said as he brushed Peter's hair off his forehead, leaning over to kiss him. Dad was obviously feeling nostalgic on the eve of his wedding; he hadn't called Peter that nickname since he was about five or six.

"Hey, Dad."

"Are you happy, bud?"

"Oh yeah," Peter replied without hesitation. "Are you?"

A bright smile lit up Dad's face. "Yeah, I am. More than I ever thought possible. I think we picked a good one, bud. We're both pretty damn lucky."

"Yeah, we did," agreed Peter. He curled his arms around his father's neck, pulling him down for a hug. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too," Dad said, kissing Peter's cheek. "Now, go to sleep. We can't have a best man with bags under his eyes now, can we?"

"No, probably not. Wouldn't wanna give those silly gossip people anymore ammunition."

"Ah, who cares what they think," Dad murmured. He traced Peter's cheek with his fingers, leaning down to kiss him again. "Sleep now, buddy. Tomorrow's a big day."

"Yeah. Goodnight," Peter whispered, watching as Dad left the room. He rolled onto his side, clutching his spare pillow to his chest. It had been a long and bumpy road to get to this point, but seeing Dad happier than Peter had ever imagined possible was more than worth it.

It was even worth the nightmares.

"I believe ye're all set, Captain Rogers," said the elderly Scottish tailor as he tugged once more on the sleeves of Steve's suit jacket. He brushed his palms across the shoulders and stepped back, admiring his handiwork. "Yes, I believe ye'll do."

"Thank you very much," Steve said, swallowing down the nervousness that had plagued him ever since he'd said goodnight to Tony the night before. Steve had insisted that he and Tony sleep apart the night before, but the absence of Tony next to him in the bed meant that his sleep had been fitful at best, and now he found himself pacing around his dressing room waiting for things to get started.
And for all of his outward patient appearance, Steve absolutely deplored waiting.

"I'll be leaving ye to go and check on Mr Stark now, Captain," the tailor said. "And the young master."

"Yes, thank you," replied Steve, smiling politely as the tailor gave a bow and exited the room. He walked over to the full-length mirror set up on the wall, huffing out a deep breath as he studied his reflection.

He did have to admit that the suits he and Tony chose were absolutely beautiful. The fabric was the softest and most luxurious grey Italian wool that Steve had ever felt in his life, and the workmanship was impeccable. From the suit itself to the custom-made silk shirts to the ties and even the shoes, it was all perfect, and while Steve had initially balked at what he considered the outrageous cost, he couldn't wait to see how handsome Tony looked.

A tentative knock on the door startled him from his thoughts.

"Come in."

A mass of brown curls poked around the door, followed by the sweet round face of his son, looking absolutely dashing in his own matching grey suit and purple tie and carrying Steve's boutonnière in one hand.

"Wow, Papa, you look really nice!" Peter exclaimed. "Dad's not gonna know what hit him when he sees you!"

Steve gave Peter a nervous smile as he curled his arm around his shoulders, pulling him in for a quick hug. "Thanks, little guy. You look pretty good yourself."

"Thanks. Uncle James helped me get dressed since Dad was taking so long. Uncle Sam's been dressed for over twenty minutes already too, he said it was a military thing."

"And Uncle Sam is right," said Steve as he pinned on the boutonnière. "We're used to getting dressed on our own, and pretty efficiently at that, while—"

"Dad's definitely not," Peter finished. "Or at least he's not for something as big as this." He leaned in closer, whispering, "But wait til you see him. He looks really nice too."

Steve's lips immediately curved into a wide smile. "I bet he does. And I can't wait." He also couldn't wait for their wedding night—and the honeymoon, for that matter—but Peter didn't need to hear that. He and Tony hadn't been intimate since before they'd left on their last HYDRA raid, and Steve was definitely feeling it. There weren't very many opportunities for alone time while on missions, and they had only gotten home the day before the rehearsal dinner anyway, so Steve had asked to wait. Sort of as an homage to his deceased ma and his Catholic upbringing, as small as it might have been.

Even so, Steve believed that she would've been happy for him, even though he was marrying a man of Jewish heritage instead of one of the Irish Catholic girls that Steve had grown up with in Brooklyn. His ma had been a smart, perceptive lady who didn't miss much, and it was hard for Steve to believe that she hadn't had her suspicions about his sexuality long before even Steve knew for sure.

"Here, little guy, let me fix this a bit," he said as he straightened the knot of Peter's tie and brushed some invisible lint off his lapels. He cupped Peter's cheek in his hand when he was done, looking into his sweet brown eyes that were so very much like his father's. "I love you, Peter. You and Tony have made me happier than I ever thought possible, and I just—" he broke off as his eyes filled with
tears, leaning down to kiss Peter's forehead. "I just—"

"It's okay, Papa," Peter whispered, giving Steve that adorable, boyish smile that never failed to melt his heart. "I love you too."

Another loud, single knock came from outside the door, with Sam stepping inside at Peter's invitation.

"Everyone's in their seats and your guy is finally ready," Sam said, grinning as he looked Steve up and down. "Well, well, well. You definitely clean up pretty good there, Cap. Not too shabby."

"Thanks," Steve said quietly. He shot Peter a wink, clapping his palm on the boy's shoulder. "You ready, little guy?"

"Yep!" Peter said. "Let's go!"

They made their way down the hallway to the Tower's ballroom, recently renamed the Maria Stark Memorial Ballroom in honour of Tony's mother. Peter veered off as they approached, heading for the opposite side to rejoin Tony and his attendants while Sam, Clint, Natasha, and Thor remained with Steve on his side.

The processional music began, and two by two the attendants entered from the opposite sides, taking their places near the front where Happy was waiting to officiate the ceremony. Steve let out a huge grin as he watched Peter step inside with Pepper on his arm, looking every bit the handsome young Stark that Steve imagined Tony was at his age.

And then, it was Steve's turn.

Steve's eyes were drawn to Tony as soon as he stepped inside, with his feet following almost on their own accord. As they approached each other, Steve's breath hitched when Tony winked at him just before the biggest, happiest smile Steve had ever seen lit up his beautiful face, giving Steve no choice but to mirror it with one of his own. As soon as they were close enough they linked hands, not taking their eyes off each other.

Tony was simply breathtaking, impeccably dressed with his hair perfectly in place. But even more importantly, he looked peaceful, and that was enough to quash any of Steve's lingering nerves.

"Tony," Steve whispered, barely able to get the word out. "You look—you're just—God, you're just so incredible!"

"Mmm. Right back at'cha, babe," Tony whispered back, rather slyly.

"All right," Happy said, clearing his throat. "If I can get these two to stop gawking at each other, I think we're ready to start."

There was a smattering of laughter from the guests, after which Happy recited a few things from something that Steve was too distracted to pay much attention to as he was still gaping in awe at his husband-to-be, so much so that he had to be prodded by Natasha when the time came to start reciting his vows.

Steve's grip on Tony's hands tightened as he looked deep into his beloved's eyes, clearing his throat.

"Tony," he started. "There's no way that I could possibly convey what you mean to me in just a few short sentences, but I'm going to try anyway." He paused to breathe in, glancing briefly at Peter for support.
"When I woke up in this era, I had nothing. I had no one. And I thought I could just jump right back in, keep serving like I always had, but it wouldn’t’ve worked. I would’ve only been existing, not really living. My life would’ve been just a shell, moving from one mission to the next with no real meaning behind it."

He had to pause again when Tony squeezed his hands, biting his bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

"But then I met you and Peter, and even though it was under the most difficult of circumstances you still gave me a purpose, somewhere to belong. And then you gave me a home, and you gave me your heart, and you gave me a son, and I—" He broke off, swallowing against the huge lump in his throat as he held out his hand towards Peter, who placed Tony's ring in his palm. "I love you, and I love the family that we've created together, and with this ring, Anthony Edward Stark, I promise to love you and only you, for the rest of my life."

Tony looked down at his hand as Steve slid the ring onto his finger, curling his fingers into his palm once it was in place. Then he took Steve's hands in his again and breathed in, clearing his throat.

"Steve," he began, his melodic voice clear and strong. "I know I've told you this before, but I think since this is a rather momentous occasion that it bears repeating. When you saved my son's life out there in the middle of that godforsaken desert, you not only saved his life, you also saved mine. You saved me from continuing down the path that had turned me into my own worst enemy, and you did that simply by loving me without question or prejudice."

He paused to take a breath, his beautiful brown eyes glistening. "I am such a better person since we got together, but even more than that, you make me want to be better. You make me want to be the person that you think I am. You make me believe in myself, because you love me. I used to introduce myself by saying, 'you know who I am', but you, Steve, you truly know who I am, and I'm so damn lucky that you love me anyway." He sniffed as he turned towards Peter, holding out his hand for Steve's ring. "Steven Grant Rogers, with this ring I promise to love you and only you, for the rest of my life."

Steve gulped as Tony slid the ring onto his finger, curling his hand into a fist as soon as it was in place. The metal felt cool against his skin, and foreign, but Steve knew it wouldn't be long before he was used to it.

Then, as if on cue, they both turned to Happy.

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead and kiss!" Happy exclaimed. "I'm not gonna make you wait any longer."

Steve was reaching for Tony's face before Happy had even finished his sentence, smiling almost too much to even kiss Tony as the guests erupted into cheers.

"All right!" Sam exclaimed once they had kissed three more times. "Now let's get this party started!"

"Hell, yes!" added Clint. "I'm hungry, damnit!"

For all of the months of meticulous planning, the rest of the evening passed in a sort of dazed blur. Through the multitude of wedding photos, mingling with the guests, and then finally getting to have something to eat and cutting the exquisite cake, Steve didn't leave Tony's side for a single second, clinging tightly to his hand the whole time. And Tony was in his element, cracking jokes with the wealthy executives and charming the socialites as he always did, bragging about Peter and Steve and everyone else on the team while always downplaying his own contributions.
And when Clint tapped Steve on the shoulder, pointing off to the far corner where Sam was standing with an obviously nervous Bucky, Steve's heart swelled almost to the point of bursting when Tony voluntarily offered him his hand, thanking him for coming.

But the best part of it by far was when the lights dimmed and Steve led his new husband out onto the dance floor. They had practised dancing numerous times since Christmas, and while the song they ended up choosing for their first dance didn't exactly require much more than holding Tony close and swaying, Steve still cherished it. And as he wrapped his arm around Tony's waist and pulled him close, Steve breathed him in, closing his eyes as he inhaled the delectable scent that was Tony, whispering the song lyrics into his ear.

My head's under water but I'm breathing fine  
You're crazy and I'm out of my mind  

'Cause all of me  
Loves all of you  
Love your curves and all your edges  
All your perfect imperfections  

Give your all to me  
I'll give my all to you  
You're my end and my beginning  
Even when I lose I'm winning  

'Cause I give you all, all of me  
And you give me all, all of you  

"Thank you, sweetheart," Steve murmured as the song came to a close.  

"For what?" asked Tony. "Marrying you? 'Cause that was easy. Now, that," and he jerked his head in the direction of the pasta bar, where Thor was filling probably his fifth plate while regaling Bruce with yet another story of some grand Asgardian battle that he'd won, or something like that. "That's what really scares me. I swear every time he claps me on the shoulder I lose three years of my life."  

Steve grinned so widely that his face hurt. "Well, don't you worry. I promise to always protect you from the overenthusiastic, hammer-wielding Asgardian gods."

"For as long as we both shall live?" Tony said, quirking an eyebrow.

"Absolutely." Steve dipped his head to nuzzle Tony's temple, his belly swooping when Tony let out a soft moan.

"Babe, you keep that up and we'll have to make a pretty rapid exit," Tony murmured. He pressed a soft kiss to the underside of Steve's jaw, smirking when Steve's knees nearly buckled. "See? I can do it too."

"I'd be fine with making an exit soon," Steve said as he pulled Tony even closer, cursing the multiple layers of clothing between them. It had been far too long since he'd felt Tony's bare skin against his. "God, I can't wait to get my hands on you."

"That feeling is entirely mutual, hon. So why don't we start making the rounds, yeah? It's already gonna take longer than I have the patience for, and that patience is rapidly evaporating the longer you keep holding me." He pulled back, looking up at Steve and batting his eyelashes. "And have I told you yet how incredibly ravishing you look tonight, Captain Rogers?"
A shiver raced through Steve, and he cuddled Tony impossibly closer. "You are not making this easy."

Tony laughed at that, one of those delightful laughs that lit up his entire face and never failed to make Steve laugh right along with him. "Sorry honey, but you knew that about me a long time ago and you married me anyway, so I'm afraid now you're just gonna have to deal with it."

"And I will deal with it by getting us out of here as soon as it is appropriately possible," Steve said as he took Tony's hand, leading him towards the largest conglomeration of guests. "So let's get started."

Nearly two hours later, after absorbing all the congratulations and best wishes that they possibly could and then kissing Peter goodnight, they took the elevator to the special wedding night suite that Tony had designed in one of the spare studio apartments. As soon as they stepped inside and the door locked behind them Steve's mouth was on Tony's, kissing him with abandon.

"I have missed you!" Steve breathed against Tony's lips, desperate and needy as his hands went to work, sliding off Tony's suit jacket before starting in on his tie and shirt buttons, his shaking fingers fumbling as he attempted to work the tiny circles through the buttonholes. "It's been too long, sweetheart, I can't——"

"Damn right it has, baby. Want you naked," Tony murmured against his throat, loosening Steve's tie as Steve finally managed to get Tony's dress shirt undone and off. He then pulled Tony's undershirt from his waistband and slid his palms up his back, reveling in his husband's shudder as he raked his blunt nails across his smooth skin.

"Steve," Tony rasped, breathy and sensual, and Steve moaned as he slid his hands under Tony's ass, hauling him up and carrying him over to the turned-down bed, laying him on the lightly perfumed sheets. Steve crawled up to hover over him, looking into his husband's gorgeous brown eyes that were radiating so much love and desire that Steve could've almost drowned in it.

"I love you," he whispered, tracing his fingertips along Tony's jawline to his neck and chest. Tony shuddered as Steve reached the arc reactor framed by his dog tags, circling it before gently covering it with his palm. "I love you so much."

Tony's full lips curled into that soft smile that he reserved only for Steve. "I love you too, babe," he said. "And you're still wearing way too many clothes."

With that he tapped Steve on the shoulder, indicating for him to lie down. He then kicked off his shoes and socks and straddled Steve's hips, leaning down to kiss him while making quick work of his shirt buttons, cursing when Steve's shirt got stuck on the cuffs as he attempted to take it off.

"Not used to the cufflinks," Steve grumbled, tearing his lips away from Tony's just long enough to remove the diamond-encrusted jewels holding his shirt cuffs in place. As soon as his shirt and undershirt were off and tossed to the side Tony glided his palms up Steve's arms, across his collarbones, and down his pecs to his abs, which contracted at Tony's feather-light touch as he continued further down. For someone who was always working with his hands, Tony knew exactly how to use them.

"Tony!" Steve managed to say as Tony undid his belt and pants button, slipping one hand below the waistband. "Tony, please!"

"It's okay, babe, I've got you," Tony whispered as his glorious fingers finally curled around him, pulling a guttural groan from Steve's throat. "We've got all night, and I intend to use it." He kissed a path across Steve's jaw to his ear, whispering so seductively that Steve shuddered, his hands fisting...
in the sheets. "Do you want my hands or my mouth first?"

Steve groaned again, his entire body so alight he felt he might burst into flame. "Your mouth. I need your gorgeous mouth on me, please!"

He felt Tony grin against his skin, whispering, "Good choice," before continuing down, peeling off the rest of Steve's clothes as he writhed in anticipation. And then Tony's beautiful mouth was on him and he was transformed into pure sensation.

And Tony was right, they had the entire night all to themselves. There was nothing waiting for them in the morning. No early-morning runs, no mission debriefings, no meetings with the Stark Industries Board of Directors or the DoD. And James, Bruce, and Thor were taking Peter out for breakfast before his ballet lesson with Natasha, so they didn't need to worry about him either.

On this night, their wedding night, there was nothing to distract Steve and Tony from each other, and they took full advantage of it.

And finally, as the first slivers of spring sunlight began to filter through the surrounding skyscrapers, Steve wrapped his arm around Tony's shoulders and tucked him up against him, pressing a sweet kiss to his forehead as they settled down to sleep. He had lost count of how many times they'd made each other fall apart over the course of the night, and he was so sated and relaxed that he felt like he could sleep for a solid week.

"I love you, sweetheart," he murmured into Tony's—his husband's—hair.

"Mmm," Tony mumbled against Steve's chest as he slid his leg across Steve's lap and cuddled even closer, the coolness of Tony's wedding ring a welcome contrast to his overheated skin.

"I love you too, babe."

Come say hi to me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of your wonderful comments, especially on the wedding! I’m so glad you guys are enjoying the story!

Lots of details and clues are sprinkled throughout this chapter that will play into the third act, so... ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sun was shining brightly through the sheer window coverings as Steve slowly drifted back into consciousness. Tony was still asleep, stretched out across Steve with his head resting comfortably on Steve’s chest, over his heart. They were both naked, and Steve rejoiced in the feel of Tony's smooth, bare body pressed up against his, the sunlight highlighting his gorgeous olive skin as they lay sprawled out on the silky crimson sheets. Steve actually preferred sleeping in the nude to wearing pyjamas but felt it inappropriate most of the time because of Peter, so he very much enjoyed every opportunity that he had to forgo them.

Warmth bloomed across Steve's body as memories of their marathon lovemaking over the previous
night flooded his mind. Sex with Tony was always incredible, but this was the first time in a long
time that they had been able to explore each other the way that Steve most enjoyed, slow and
sensual. He and Tony had teased and marked and brought each other to climax at least twice before
Steve finally laid him out on the bed and took him, holding him as closely as their skin and bones
allowed as they moved together, both whispering words of absolute devotion and love until they fell
apart in each other's arms.

He breathed in slowly as he raised his left hand, twirling the brand-new wedding ring around his
third finger, which was just as breathtaking as the man who had made it. The band was titanium,
etched with a thin sliver of blue around one side and red around the other that were only visible if
you looked closely. Tony had placed it on Steve's finger with the red closest to his heart, which he
had explained during one of their afterglow cuddling sessions during the night. A huge grin lit up
Steve's face as he tilted his hand and the ring caught one of the beams of light, throwing a spot of sun
up onto the ceiling of their suite.

Shifting slightly, Steve tilted his head, pressing a kiss to Tony's forehead as Tony let out a sleepy,
contented sigh. Aside from their lovemaking, they didn't get many opportunities to just lie in bed and
hold each other like this either, so Steve absolutely cherished it when they did. He cherished the
mornings—or afternoons, as the case was—when Tony woke up in his arms, his beautiful face
relaxed and free of worry lines and his body supple against him. With the normal stress of their lives
as Avengers and as parents it wasn't nearly often enough that they were able to enjoy peaceful
moments like this.

A few minutes later Tony lifted his head, resting his chin on Steve's chest as he gave him a smirk that
was downright wicked, ghosting his hand down Steve's side and causing him to giggle.

"You're tickling me," he murmured as he squirmed, gasping as Tony's nimble fingers slid across his
pelvis and wrapped around him, stroking him slowly.

"Tony," Steve breathed, feeling Tony's triumphant smile against his heaving chest. "Tony, you're
insatiable!"

"Hard not to be when my husband is so damn hot," Tony said as he slid on top of him and
immediately ground his hips down, pulling a loud moan from Steve's throat as his hands flew up to
grip Tony's firm ass. "And who's calling who insatiable, hmm? I seem to recall that you ended up
ahead of me last night. Must be nice having the refractory period of a teenager."

"Were you really keeping score?" Steve managed as Tony's lips roamed across his neck and
collarbones, pleasure building up so quickly inside him that coherent thought was no longer possible.
Every nerve was on fire, sending electric shivers throughout his entire body as his fingertips dug into
Tony's ass, kneading the smooth, taught flesh.

"Does it matter?" Tony said cheekily before covering Steve's mouth with his own, splitting the seam
of Steve's lips with his tongue and devouring him. He tasted like the champagne and chocolate-
covered strawberries they had enjoyed in between their lovemaking sessions, and the bombardment
of overwhelming sensation was enough to make Steve climax right then and there, his entire body
convulsing with the intensity of it.

"That's it, gorgeous," Tony whispered as Steve came down from his high, shaking and panting and
clutching Tony to him as tightly as he dared. Tony brushed his sweat-dampened hair from his
forehead, leaning down to kiss his nose. "You're so damn pretty when you let go like that."

"Only for you, sweetheart," Steve said in a rush, slurring the words as he practically melted into the
mattress. "It's always been only for you."
"Damn right, baby." Tony dipped his head to kiss him again, their tongues leisurely stroking against each other as feeling slowly returned to Steve's limbs. As soon as he felt capable of movement again Steve hooked his leg around Tony's waist and flipped them over, pushing himself up on his arms and gazing down at the beautiful flushed face of his husband.

"My turn," he said just before capturing Tony's lips, savouring the smell and taste of him before kissing a slow path down his neck to his chest. Steve knew that even after all this time Tony was still a bit self-conscious about the arc reactor jutting out from his breastbone, and the way the skin around it was slightly puckered and irregular, so he always took extra care to lavish plenty of attention there.

To Steve the arc reactor—the intricate blue light in the middle of his chest, protecting his heart and keeping him alive—was just a part of Tony, and was therefore absolutely beautiful.

And he didn't know what he would do if the light ever went out.

He continued down Tony's exquisite body, his hands and mouth finding all of the glorious dips and curves as Tony's whimpers and desperate whispers of his name grew louder and more pleading, only fueling Steve's desire to please him. Tony always talked about how beautiful Steve was in bed, but to Steve there was nothing more beautiful than Tony's fingers buried in his hair and garbled words of praise and adoration spilling from his full lips as he came apart at Steve's touch.

"Steve," rasped Tony, still shaking as he released a trembling breath, his fingers rubbing lazy circles on Steve's scalp. "How in the hell are you so good at that?"

"Mmm," Steve hummed as he crawled back up Tony's lithe body and brushed the sweaty hair off his forehead, leaning down for another kiss. "I had a good teacher, sweetheart."

"Yeah, well, whoever said that married sex is dull and routine was absolutely wrong," Tony said, still so incredibly wrecked that Steve felt himself getting aroused again. "In fact, I think I'm gonna have to have some powerful words with those proverbial 'theys' just so I can set the record straight."

"Well I suppose you could try, but I think I'd just rather stay here and make out some more," Steve said, brushing his swollen lips across Tony's again. "That okay with you?"

Tony smirked as he curled his hand around Steve's neck, tugging him closer. They laid there together, just kissing, for several more minutes until Tony started to squirm.

"I hate to be that guy," he said gently. "But we should probably get cleaned up before we end up stuck together."

Steve gave him a wry grin as he held up his left hand. "I thought we already were stuck together."

Tony rolled his eyes. "You're such a sap."

"Yep," answered Steve with a wink. "And you married me, so by default that makes you a sap too."

"No," Tony murmured as he took Steve's hand, kissing his finger over the ring. "Marrying you was simply the smartest thing I've ever done." He smiled softly as he intertwined their fingers. "And I'm a genius, so that's saying a lot."

Tears of joy and appreciation stung Steve's eyes, and he cupped Tony's face in his hand, kissing his forehead.

"Thank you," he whispered.
Tony shook his head. "No, babe," he said, completely serious. "Loving you is one thing you'll never have to thank me for."

"I know," Steve answered as he sat back on his heels and gathered Tony onto his lap, moulding his body to him. "But I'm gonna do it anyway."

"See? You are a sap," Tony murmured into Steve's neck. He pulled back to look at Steve, smiling conspiratorially. "C'mon, babe. I have something to show you after we shower."

Not surprisingly their shower ended up taking close to an hour, with neither of them wanting to take their hands off the other long enough to actually get clean. By the time they managed to emerge and get dressed a lunch delivery arrived, which happened to be from the same Irish pub that Steve brought Tony to on their first date.

And Tony had even remembered exactly what they'd ordered. Who was the sap now?

"I have a little gift for you," Tony said as Steve took a sip of his beer. "I know that we said we weren't going to get each other a wedding gift, but… well, I kinda did anyway."

"Kinda?" Steve said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah." With a sheepish smile Tony reached into the bedside table and pulled out a maroon leather box, handing it to Steve. Inside was the most beautiful watch Steve had ever seen in his life, and he let out a soft gasp as he picked it up, turning it over in his hands. The round titanium face was etched in the same blue and red slivers of colour as Steve's wedding ring, and was a working compass as well as a timepiece.

"An homage to your lack of GPS appreciation," Tony said, his nervously fidgeting hands belying his glib words.

"It's beautiful!" Steve breathed as he ran his index finger along the soft navy blue leather of the band. "Tony, I can't—, thank you!" He moved to put it on but Tony stilled his hand, turning it over as he cleared his throat.

"There's an inscription on the back, Pete helped me with it," he said. Steve's heart lurched at the tentativeness in Tony's eyes, and he reached for his hand as he read the finely scripted words.

_The man out of time was just in time for me. Love, Tony._

"Oh, wow," Steve said, almost a whimper as the tears he'd been trying to hold back finally broke loose. He quickly brushed them away, bringing Tony's hand to his lips and kissing his knuckles. "This is so beautiful, sweetheart, I can't—I can't—thank you, to both you and Peter. I can even express how much I love it."

Tony smiled as he brushed the tears from Steve's cheeks with his thumbs. "See, babe? You are a sap."

"Yeah, but you love me anyway," Steve murmured. He leaned in for a quick but firm kiss. "And your gift is back in our bedroom upstairs."

"Oh, so I'm not the only one who can't follow the rules we set down then?" Tony said with a wink. "Care to give me a hint?"

"Nope," Steve said with a grin. "It'll be pretty obvious once you see it."
"Mmm," Tony grumbled playfully. Steve knew that Tony's patience level was about as high as Peter's, but Steve also hoped that it would be worth it.

They chatted about everything and nothing as they finished their leisurely meal, until Steve glanced down at his new watch and realised that it was already after 5pm. They were departing for their honeymoon the following morning, and Steve did want to spend a bit of time with Peter before they left.

He got to his feet, holding out his hand to his husband—his husband. It was going to take a bit of time before that title completely sunk in. Steve had always referred to Tony in his mind as simply his beloved or his fella—boyfriend had always sounded too juvenile and simple for how much Tony meant to him—but husband had a completely new feel to it. More fitting to how committed Steve was to him.

They were married now. Steve was now a married man, and Tony was now his not only in his heart but in the eyes of the law and all of the three hundred-plus guests that had attended their wedding.

It was literally a dream come true.

"We should probably get back now," he said, winding his arms around Tony's—his husband's—waist. 'I'm sure Peter's looking forward to seeing us before we leave tomorrow.'

"Yeah, I'm sure he is." Tony's head tipped forward as he slipped his hand under Steve's t-shirt, gliding his palms up his back. Steve shivered at the sensation, his arms tightening around Tony as he pressed a kiss to his temple.

"He's gonna be fine, Tony," Steve whispered. "This isn't another HYDRA raid, the rest of the team is gonna be right here with him the whole time."

"I know," Tony said into Steve's chest. "I just… we've been gone so much lately, I'm surprised the kid even remembers who we are half the time."

Steve's heart clenched at the self-deprecation in Tony's tone. They had been planning this honeymoon for almost as long as their wedding, but so much had changed in the meantime that it almost seemed like years had passed instead of only a few months.

"We can call him whenever we want to, sweetheart, you know that," Steve said gently. "And if we start to miss him too much we can just come home early."

"No, no, we're not gonna do that," Tony protested. He lifted his head, giving Steve that soft smile he reserved only for him. "I promised you a honeymoon so we're gonna have a honeymoon. It's just—I just—" he broke off, his beautiful brown eyes speaking what his mind couldn't articulate.

_I just worry_, his eyes said. _I can't help it._

"That's 'cause you're such a wonderful father," murmured Steve. "And everyone knows it, especially Peter. Don't ever think otherwise."

Tony's eyebrows knitted together into a frown. "As long as Pete thinks I'm okay I don't give a damn about everyone else."

"He does, sweetheart. Trust me." Then Steve cupped Tony's face in his hands, pressing their foreheads together. "C'mon. I wanna show you your wedding gift."

"Welcome back, sir, Captain Rogers," JARVIS said as soon as the elevator doors opened into the
"I trust that you enjoyed your evening?"

"Very much so, JARVIS," Steve answered, clearing his throat as Tony gave him a smirk.

"You're blushing again, babe," Tony whispered, his smile widening as Peter rushed into the room.

"Hey, you guys are finally back!" he said excitedly. "You gotta come and see what Auntie Nat and I have been building today, it's so awesome!"

Before Steve and Tony could even answer Peter grabbed hold of both their hands and dragged them into his room, where they found Natasha sitting cross-legged on the floor, working on a turret attached to the biggest Lego castle Steve had ever seen, at least a metre and a half tall and two metres wide. She looked up as they entered, giving them a rather cheeky smile as she attached another brick.

"Pretty cool, huh?" she said, glancing fondly at Peter. "Kiddo here challenged us to build a castle that he could actually sleep in, and I'm thinking that we're just about there."

Steve drew Peter into a tight hug, gaping in amazement at the massive structure. "Exactly how many Legos do you own, little guy?"

"Um… well…" Peter stammered. "A few. Auntie Nat and I took apart all of my other sets to build this one, so—"

"He designed it himself," said Natasha. "And so far we haven't run into a single mistake."

"What can I say?" Tony said proudly as he ruffled Peter's hair. "He's a smart one."

"So, you boys enjoy your wedding night?" Natasha asked as she attached another brick, shooting them a wink.

"Just a 'yes' or 'no' will do," Peter said quickly. "I don't need to hear any of the details."

"Ah, yes," Steve said, his blush deepening when Tony pinched his ass. "It was—ahem—very nice."

"Spoken like a true gentleman," Tony said fondly. "Let me know when you two are done with your model of Helm's Deep there, Pete, I could use your help with some stuff in the lab before we leave tomorrow."

"Uh huh," Peter answered, already immersed in his building. "Shouldn't be too long."

"And once you're done with Dad I was hoping you could come down and visit Bucky with me, little guy," Steve said. He quirked an eyebrow at Tony, who gave him a quick nod. "I'd just like to see him before we leave."

"Okay, Papa," Peter said, as nonchalantly as if Steve had asked him to clean up his room or something. "That's no problem."

Steve kissed the top of Peter's head, whispering, "Thank you," into his hair. Steve's conversations with Bucky always tended to go better when Peter was there with him, as if Peter's presence was calming to Bucky. The few times he had attempted to meet with Bucky alone he was always more closed off and guarded, so he tried to include Peter as much as possible. So far they still hadn't been able to glean too much information about his enhancement or brainwashing, but as Bruce liked to say, slow progress was better than no progress.

Leading Tony down the hallway to their bedroom, Steve covered his eyes as they approached,
letting out a relieved smile when he saw that the painting had been hung above their bed just as he had asked.

"Ready, sweetheart?" he whispered in Tony's ear.

"Yes, babe," Tony said, rather impatiently. He blinked as Steve removed his fingers, tilting his head as he studied the huge painting that spanned nearly the entire width of their bed. Steve had been working on it ever since the previous summer—it was an absolute miracle that it had survived the house bombing—and had pushed himself hard to get it finished before their wedding. But he had managed, and if the look on Tony's face was any indication all of his work had been worth it.

"Babe," Tony whispered as he clutched Steve's hand, staring up at the painting. It was a portrait of their family, Steve, Tony, and Peter, all cuddled up together on the beach in front of the Malibu house. It was dusk, and there were fireworks exploding in the distance over the ocean. Peter was leaning back against his dads' legs, watching the bursting bolts of colour in pure childish awe as Steve and Tony sat arm in arm, their smiling faces turned towards each other.

"What—? When—?"

"James took the photograph on my birthday last year," Steve said softly. "Before… everything started happening. And he showed it to me before he left that night, after you and Peter were already asleep on the beach chair, and I asked him to send it to me so I could paint it. It was such a beautiful photo, Tony, our first real family portrait, and I wanted—, I wanted it displayed here, where we could always see it."

"Hell yes," Tony said, low and guttural, like he always was when he was trying to contain his emotions. "It's—, it's perfect, babe." He turned to Steve, curling his arms around his neck. "Perfect, just like you."

"I'm not perfect, Tony," replied Steve as he wrapped his arms around his husband's waist. "I just love you and that little boy so damn much."

"Yeah, well, that makes you pretty damn perfect," Tony said. He tugged gently on Steve's neck, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. "Thank you, Steve. It's… breathtaking."

Steve nodded as he hugged Tony closer, breathing in the intoxicating scent of him. "We should probably start packing if we're still planning on leaving tomorrow."

"Yeah, probably," Tony said. "I still want to get started on my latest suit, and I need to finish a couple more things on Barton's new bow, and—"

Steve cut him off with his fingers on his lips, leaning down to kiss his nose. "Tony, we're going on our honeymoon. The equipment can wait, can't it?"

Tony pursed his lips, frowning. "Well… yeah, I suppose, but you never know what could happen, and you're always telling us that we should be prepared, and—"

"I think Clint's current bow will suit him just fine until we get back," Steve interrupted. "And were you planning on bringing your armour with us on our honeymoon?"

Tony shot Steve one of Peter's duh looks. "Well, yeah. Aren't you bringing your shield?"

"Well… yeah," Steve said with a sheepish nod. "I am. Old habit, I guess."

"Ah huh," said Tony. "So, there you go."
"All right, but you have at least ten other suits that are already built. Can't you just bring one of those?"

Tony sighed, his fingers rubbing circles on the back of Steve's neck. "Yeah, I suppose I could. But I'm still gonna finish Clint's bow. If he's gonna be here with Pete then I want him to be as well-equipped as possible. This new one folds up into the size of a ruler, so he can bring it inside the school if he needs to."

Steve didn't bother to ask why Clint might need to bring his bow inside Peter's school, choosing simply to nod instead.

"I'm gonna start packing then," he said.

Tony gave him a sweet peck on the nose. "Sounds good, babe."

About two hours later, once Peter and Natasha were done with their massive Lego castle and he'd finished up with Tony in the lab, Peter and Steve headed down to see Bucky. Sam greeted them as they entered the anteroom, having just finished eating dinner with Bucky.

"How's he doing?" Steve asked Sam, thanking the heavens yet again that he had met Sam when he did. He had honestly no idea where they all would be if it weren't for Sam. In addition to working as the de facto counselor for the Avengers—even Clint and Natasha had spend some time talking with Sam about various things—he was also a damn good person to have in a fight. In fact, he was planning to join them on their next HYDRA raid as long as James was available to stay with Peter. With how well Sam was able to work with Steve and Tony during the helicarrier battle, Steve was very much looking forward to seeing him in action again.

"Today's been one of the good days," Sam said. "Bruce said he exercised quite a bit this morning, and we just had a pretty nice dinner together." He paused, looking up at Steve with questioning eyes. "I'm wondering if we should start thinking about moving him. I think he'd enjoy having a place that didn't so closely resemble something out of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Steve's eyebrows shot up. There was no way that Tony would allow him to be moved while they were gone, but maybe once they got home…

"Let me talk to Tony about it," he said carefully. "I'm sure we could arrange for something that's a bit more home-like than this room, but—"

"Yeah, I figured nothing would happen until you got back from your trip," Sam said, rather slyly. "And that's fine. I don't think he's even ready to move just yet. But if he keeps on progressing like he has been he will be soon, so it'd probably be good to have a plan in place."

"Thank you, Sam," Steve said, his throat thick with emotion as he clapped Sam on the shoulder. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything you're doing for him."

"Hey, don't mention it, Cap," replied Sam. "I'm happy to help."

As Sam headed back upstairs Steve pressed the button on the intercom, motioning for Peter to speak.

"Hey, Bucky," Peter said, and Steve could've sworn that he saw Bucky's eyes light up. "Is it okay if my papa and I come in and see you?"

"Да" he answered.

Steve gulped as he buzzed the door open, holding it for Peter to step inside first. Bucky gave a nod at
the sight of him, his eyes tentatively flicking towards Steve.

"Птир," Bucky said as they approached his bed. He was drawing a picture in a sketchbook with a crayon as Bruce was still concerned with him having access to sharpened pencils when he was alone. "Сегодня дела идут хорошо?"

"Да," answered Peter with a pleased nod. "He just asked me if I was doing well, Papa."

At the mention of Steve, Bucky looked up at him, his brow furrowing like he was trying to place him.

"Стив?" he said.

"Yeah, Buck, it's me," Steve replied. "Do you mind if Peter and I sit down?"

At Bucky's affirmative nod, Steve sat down on the side of the huge bed, with Peter right next to him.

"How're you doing today, Bucky?"

Bucky stared at him, his expression neutral as he studied Steve's face. They went through this pretty much every time Steve came to visit so he should've been used to it by now, but it was still painful to have his oldest friend have to struggle to place who he was.

"Стивичик?" he asked.

"Yeah, Buck, that's right," Steve said softly. "I'm Stevie."

"Maybe tell us a story, Papa?" Peter suggested. "Uncle Sam told me that happy stories can sometimes help bring back memories."

Steve drew in a deep breath, his hand cupped around Peter's skinny shoulder. What Peter said made sense of course, but unfortunately most of the stories Steve had that involved Bucky were either from the war or before Steve received the serum. Stories from the war probably wouldn't help at all, and while Steve was often telling Peter that a person's physical size didn't matter if they had a big heart and that it was okay to stand up to bullies, he still felt uncomfortable with Peter hearing about him back when he was so weak that he could barely go three days without getting beat up or nearly suffocating.

He was Peter's dad, and dads were supposed to be strong.

"Yeah, okay, little guy," he murmured, giving Peter a quick smile.

"Oh, this'll be good," Peter said eagerly.

"I was almost five years old the first time that Bucky and I met," Steve began. "It was springtime, and springtime in Brooklyn meant that everyone was out and about trying to shake their cabin fever from the long winter, and also that the air was full of dust and pollen and smoke and just about everything else that made me sick. My ma had gone to work, and since she'd been working so much and there wasn't a lot of food in the house, she told me I could walk down to the corner store and buy myself an ice cream cone if I promised to go straight there and straight back. I was just getting over a pretty bad cold, and she didn't want me exposed to too much else that might've made me sick again."

"Your ma let you walk down the street alone?" Peter exclaimed. "In New York? When you were five?"
"Well, yeah," Steve answered with a slight shake of his head. He couldn't possibly imagine Tony allowing Peter to do such a thing. In fact, neither he nor Tony allowed Peter to do such a thing even now, and he was thirteen and had enhanced strength and agility.

"Things were quite a bit different back in the twenties, little guy," he said, with just a touch of regret. "Not as… fast." _No alien invasions, no evil company executives out to get me and my family… just no father, an overworked and underpaid mother, and not enough money for food or medicine._

"Yeah, I suppose that makes sense," Peter said. "But still, you and Dad would never—"

"And things are going to stay that way for the foreseeable future, Peter," Steve said, a bit more sternly than he probably needed to. "All right?"

Peter blinked nervously as he nodded. "Uh huh."

"So, of course I promised my ma that I would do as she said, because it was ice cream, right?" Steve continued, chuckling when Peter gave an emphatic nod. "So there I was, walking down the street with my head down and my hand in my pocket, clutching the shiny nickel that ma had given me for my ice cream, when these three other boys appeared on the sidewalk in front of me. They were all at least a head taller and a lot broader, and they stepped right up to me and demanded that I give them my money. And when I told them no and to leave me alone, the biggest boy punched me right in the face, and I hit the ground so hard that I got dizzy."

"But you got up again, right, Papa?" asked Peter.

"I did," Steve said with a nod. "And my nose was bleeding and it hurt so bad that I could barely see, but I did get back up. But before I could even draw back my fist Bucky suddenly appeared out of nowhere, shoved me aside and punched the boy so hard that he knocked him back into his two friends and they all ended up hitting the sidewalk." He looked over at Bucky, whose lower lip was twitching, his eyes trained on the sketchbook in front of him. "And then you tossed me an old handkerchief and told me to wipe my nose, and then asked if I wanted to play stickball in the street. And I knew I wasn't supposed to, especially since I was still coughing quite a bit and my chest was already starting to tighten up. But I—" Steve broke off, swallowing hard as he remembered how unbelievably lonely he had been back then. How he had always wished for a friend to play with, one who wouldn't mind playing indoors most of the time since he couldn't be outside for very long.

"I did anyway," Steve continued. "I went and played, and about fifteen minutes later—"

"You started turning blue," Bucky suddenly said, low and gravelly. He slowly looked up, meeting Steve's eyes. "You were doubled over, with your skinny-ass arms wrapped around your stomach and your eyes so wide they were almost popping outta your head. And you said, 'My ma's gonna kill me', and I said—"

"That I looked like I'd die before she got the chance," Steve finished, trailing off as his lips curled into a shaky smile. "Bucky, do you remember?"

Bucky's eyes shifted as a pause settled between them, laced with regret.

"Sometimes," he whispered. He shook his head, his shaggy hair falling across his forehead and into his eyes. "Bits and pieces, here and there. Most of the time I can't tell what's real and what's made up anymore, if the memories are clear or if they're shiny, if I'm still who you say I am or if I'm what you say they turned me into. But other times it's—" and he glanced over at Peter, giving him an almost imperceptible smile.
"Other times it's better."

"Then we just have to hope it'll keep getting better," Peter said, and Steve's heart gave a lurch at his sincerity and determination. "Right, Papa?"

"Absolutely, little guy," Steve murmured as he squeezed Peter's shoulder. "And you're doing a great job of it."

"Петр мой друг," Bucky said, so softly that Steve had to strain to hear him.

"He said 'Peter's my friend', Papa," said Peter with a proud smile. "'Cause I am."

"Yes, he is, Bucky," Steve said. "Peter is your friend, and he's not the only one. There are so many people here who are willing to help you as long as you'll let us."

Bucky flexed his metal left hand, turning it over in his lap.

"Да" he answered. "Друзья."

"I'm pretty sure that means, 'friends'," Peter whispered.

"Friends," Steve repeated. "You have lots of friends here, Bucky, and we'll all be with you til the end of the line. You have my word."

He reached a tentative hand towards Bucky, placing it carefully on his shoulder. Bucky flinched at the touch, but to Steve's relief he didn't try to pull away.

"Друзья," he whispered.

"That's right, Bucky," Steve said. "And friends always help each other get back up when they've been beaten down, right?"

Bucky's chin started to shake, tears welling in his piercing blue eyes. "Я хочу вспомнить," he said quietly.

Steve looked helplessly at Peter, who only shrugged as he pulled out his phone. "JARVIS?" he asked. "Can you please display what Uncle Bucky just said?"

A lump rose in Steve's throat when the words, I want to remember appeared across Peter's phone screen.

"And we're gonna help you," Steve said, as fiercely as he dared. "I promise."

Bucky looked up at him then, his expression tortured and intense. "Я не заслуживаю вашей помощи."

I do not deserve your help, scrolled across Peter's phone.

"It doesn't matter whether or not you deserve it," Steve said. He tightened his fingers on Bucky's shoulder, looking straight into his eyes. "Because you have it anyway."

He looked away for several seconds, his metal fist opening and closing in his lap.

"Благодарю вас," he finally said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Peter. "Would it be okay if I come back tomorrow sometime, Uncle Bucky?"
Papa's going on another trip in the morning, but I'll still be here.

Bucky's lips curled into a slight smile. "Да." He glanced at Steve, tilting his head. "Another mission?"

"No, not this time," Steve answered, smiling sheepishly as his cheeks flushed. He held up his left hand, wiggling his wedding ring. "Um… it's my honeymoon. Mine and Tony's."

Bucky's smile grew even wider until it was practically cheeky, and for a moment he looked so much like his old self that Steve nearly burst into tears.

"Стивичик," he said. "You rascal."

"Got that right," Peter mumbled, smirking.

"Tony and I will be gone for two weeks," said Steve. "But I'll come and see you again once we get back if that's okay."

"Да," replied Bucky. "Have fun. Don't do anything stupid."

"Thank you," Steve said softly. "Take care, Buck."

At Bucky's nod he and Peter stood up from the bed and exited the room. "He is getting better, Papa," Peter said once they were in the elevator. "It's just gonna take awhile."

*Ever the optimist,* Steve thought fondly as he ruffled Peter's hair. *I should take some lessons.*

"I know, little guy," he said. "It's just… it's hard for me to see him like this. He was always so full of life, even larger than life, and now—"

"He won't ever be exactly the same as he used to be, Papa," Peter said. "But we can still help him be the best that he can be now."

Steve gave him a sad smile, trying hard to contain the flurry of emotions swirling inside him. Steve knew that if the science of what HYDRA had done to Bucky was unclear to even Bruce and Tony, two of the most intelligent people in the world, then he himself would be very hard-pressed to understand it.

Unfortunately, that knowledge didn't help much. Watching Bucky struggle to remember him almost hurt more than when he thought he had lost him for good.

And besides all that, he and Tony were leaving for their honeymoon in only a matter of hours, and it wasn't going to be fair to Tony for Steve to be so distracted by what was going on with Bucky.

"You're absolutely right, Peter," Steve said, a lot more emphatically than he felt. "And it doesn't do any good to dwell on things that we can't change, right?" *Isn't that what I'm always saying to Tony?"

"Right." He shot Steve a rather wary look as they stepped into the penthouse. "I still can't believe your ma let you wander around Brooklyn when you were not even five though."

"Who's wandering around Brooklyn?" Tony asked as he entered the living room.

"No one is wandering around—" Steve started.

"Papa was," Peter cut in. "He just told Uncle Bucky and me a story about how he was walking to get ice cream before he was five."
Tony quirked a stern eyebrow in Steve's direction. "Uncle Bucky? Are we really there already?"

Peter shrugged. "It's no big deal, Dad. I felt weird just calling him Bucky, and if he's gonna be living here with us from now on, why not?"

"Mmm," Tony grumbled. "Okay, so who's wandering around Brooklyn now?"

"I was when I was five, Tony," Steve said with a huff. "And I've made it perfectly clear to Peter that things were very different back then and that under no circumstances is he allowed to do the same."

"Damn right he's not," Tony stated. "And you just heard me say that, right, bud?"

"Loud and clear," muttered Peter. He bit his lip, his eyes shifting between Steve and Tony. "Do you think we could watch a movie tonight since you're leaving again tomorrow?"

"Ahh," Steve said, hesitating as he glanced over at Tony. It was already close to Peter's bedtime, but since they were leaving in the morning he supposed they could be a bit more lenient than usual.

"Sure, bud," said Tony. "Go on and make your popcorn."

"Woohoo, thanks!" Peter exclaimed. He took off bounding towards the kitchen, with Tony turning to Steve as soon as he was out of earshot.

"You did tell him that there's no way in hell—"

"Multiple times, Tony," Steve assured him. He wound his arms around Tony's waist, pulling him close. "I told him multiple times. And he's a good kid, he wouldn't do something that he knows we wouldn't approve of, and especially while we're out of town. And besides, he's being followed around by too many people to be sneaking off anywhere on his own."

"Yeah, maybe," said Tony. "But he's also smarter than hell and so damn light on his feet that he's just about scared the bejeezus out of me more than a few times. I'm surprised he hasn't gotten you yet."

As a matter of fact Peter had actually managed to completely surprise Steve on a couple of occasions, but he hadn't wanted to broadcast that information to anyone else. A good soldier didn't allow people to sneak up on him, no matter how light on their feet they might be.

"Anyway, I'm sure we have nothing to worry about," Steve said. "Peter understands the dangers out there; he's not going to do anything foolish." He brushed a kiss across Tony's temple. "Did you finish packing?"

"More or less," Tony said, giving Steve a sly wink. "It's not like we're gonna need all that much anyway, right? Isn't this pretty much a clothing-optional vacation that we're going on?"

"Well… I'm not sure if it's completely clothing-optional," Steve said, his cheeks already flushing hot. He'd been blushing so much in the past day or so he was surprised that he hadn't permanently turned pink.

"But I am thinking that—"

"And I'm thinking that I can't wait to see you in some of the stuff I packed for you," Tony cut in. He smirked as he pressed his lips to that spot on Steve's jaw that never failed to make him shiver. "You are going to be looking mighty fine there, Captain."
"Tony!" Steve said on a gasp, his fingertips digging into Tony's hips just as Peter entered the room with a truly gigantic bowl of popcorn. He immediately wrinkled his nose, grumbling about how mortifying it was that his dads were always pawing at each other.

"You guys are leaving in like less than twelve hours," he said with a frown. "Can't you wait?"

Tony shot Peter a rather evil grin as he planted another kiss on Steve's jaw. "You'll understand when you're older, Pete."

"Yeah, sure," mumbled Peter. He plopped down onto the couch so hard that some of his popcorn bounced out of the bowl, motioning for them to join him. "Aren't you guys coming?"

"Absolutely," Steve murmured as he took his place next to Peter, with Tony on his opposite side like always. Peter immediately cuddled up right next to Steve, yanking on Tony's arm to get him closer until there was no space at all between any of them. Then Peter laid his head back against Steve's chest and held out the popcorn bowl.

"Want some, Papa? I made extra for you."

"Thanks, little guy," whispered Steve. He grabbed a handful of popcorn and pressed a kiss to the top of Peter's head, once again thanking the heavens for both his precious boy and the man who allowed him to become a parent.

*I'm never going to let anything happen to you,* he thought, wrapping his arm around Peter as the opening scene of Jurassic Park filled the screen.

*Not while I'm still breathing.*

Peter was exhausted. And cold, colder than he had ever been in his life. It was the damp kind of cold, the kind that seeped past his clothes and his skin to settle deep inside his bones. He was so tired and cold that he could hardly even muster up the energy to shiver.

"Where—? Where are you taking me?" he managed to choke out past his nearly frozen throat. He was only barely aware of being dragged by his legs along a glinting snow-covered road or sidewalk by men who seemed to be speaking German.

"Please?" he asked, finally managing to work up the strength to lift his head. "Where are you taking me?"

When the men didn't answer he raised his head even more, and immediately cried out as he saw the trail of blood being left behind, staining the otherwise pristine snow a bright crimson colour.

There was something wrong with him. His left arm… it was like half of it was missing. But how was that possible?

"P-please?" he stammered through his violently chattering teeth. "Where are you t-taking me?"

"Do not worry, young man," said a heavily accented voice, one that Peter couldn't place. "All will be made clear very soon."

"B-but, b-but, where's my d-dad?" Peter demanded. "Where's my p-papa? I'm—I'm hurt, I n-need to see them. Where are they?"

"As I said," replied the voice, so eerily it made Peter's skin crawl. "All will be made clear very
"Please?" Peter begged, truly starting to panic now. "Please, why can't I see my dads? Where are they?" His head was spinning and his heart was thudding madly, made worse by the continuous flow of blood from his injured left arm.

"Daddy?" he tried to scream, only managing a sort of weak croak from his frozen throat, trying desperately to stay conscious as his head started to swim. "Papa? Are you there? My arm is hurt and I need help!"

Where are you?

He came to on some sort of uncomfortable metal gurney, strapped down so tightly that he could barely wiggle. He was in some kind of strange hospital room surrounded by weird, shiny metal instruments, the sickening smell of blood filling the frigid air combined with the scent of burning electricity. Suddenly one of the instruments—a drill of some kind—scraped against something metal, startling Peter such that he cried out, his lungs screaming for relief from the stale, freezing air.

"The procedure has already started," said the same creepy voice from before, just out of Peter's line of sight as the sound of the drill grew louder. "I'm afraid it is too late to turn back now."

"Peter!" Papa's voice suddenly called from somewhere above him, laced with barely concealed panic. "Peter! Grab my hand, little guy, you just need to grab my hand!"

"Papa!" Peter screamed, nearly tearing his throat with its intensity as the drilling noise reached nearly deafening levels. "Papa, where are you? I can't see you?"

"Peter! Don't you let go, son, all right? I'm gonna get to you, you just have to hold on!"

Burning hot tears stung Peter's freezing eyes, spilling down his cheeks. "Papa, I can't see you? Where are you?"

"Peter, no!" Papa screamed, his voice echoing as if he had yelled Peter's name from the top of a mountain.

A face appeared then, a balding man wearing a pair of funny-looking round glasses, almost Harry Potter-like. Peter watched as Glasses Man looked him up and down, his thin lips curling into a sort of maniacal smile as he leaned closer to Peter.

"You are to be the new fist of HYDRA," he said. And then he looked over at the man holding the drill and said with a nod, "Put him on ice."

"No!" Peter cried out as he woke, bolting upright on his bed so fast that he slammed his forehead into his knees. He squeezed his eyes closed as he rubbed at the spot, the throbbing pain spreading out to his temples like a spider-web.

"Are you all right, Master Peter?" asked JARVIS. "Do you need me to summon Mr Wilson or Agent Romanoff?"

"No, please don't," Peter begged, still huffing and puffing and clutching his forehead. He inhaled a deep, shaky breath, shivering as a layer of sweat broke out all over his body. He was absolutely not in the mood for any sort of impromptu counseling session in the wee hours of the morning, and he knew how much Auntie Nat despised getting her sleep interrupted.

"I'm fine, JARVIS," he added. "I think—, I just need a shower and I'll be okay."
"As you wish, Master Peter. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance."

Grunting, Peter swung his legs over the side of the bed, grabbing onto the headboard when they wobbled a bit as he stood up. He thought that he'd gotten used to having bad dreams every night, but that particular one had shaken him badly, and for reasons that he really couldn't quite quantify.

Stepping into his shower, Peter groaned in relief as the hot water cascaded over his head and down his back, chasing away the stiffness in his bones from the nightmare. The dream had felt so real it was almost as if Peter had really been there in the snowy mountains, really been in that creepy, shimmering hospital room with the screeching drill and the heavy smell of burning metal.

Really seen that guy with the round glasses who just looked like some sort of super-villain maniac.

"You will be the new fist of HYDRA," creepy Glasses Man had said.

Not real. None of it was real.

"HYDRA is dead," Peter said out loud. "Dad and Papa and the rest of the team killed it."

Or at least that's what they were in the process of doing. The Avengers had already managed to take out seven of the former HYDRA bases across various parts of Eastern Europe, and Papa had already formulated plans for at least five others, one of which he strongly suspected was the hiding location of Loki's long-lost sceptre.

"HYDRA is dead," he repeated as he towelled himself dry, dressing in a clean set of pyjamas. He then crawled back into bed, wrinkling his nose at the slightly musty smell of his sheets but in absolutely no mood to try and change them himself.

Dad and Papa had only been gone for a few days. If Peter was going to survive their absence he had to start learning to take care of himself a bit, and that didn't include running to his auntie or one of his uncles whenever he had a bad dream, no matter how creepy it was.

And at least he still had Spider-Man. If he were being truly honest, Peter wasn't quite sure what he would do without Spider-Man. Besides stopping petty street crimes and helping people, Spider-Man provided him with an outlet with which to vent his frustration at the world for how messed up everything had to be.

Spider-Man was something that Peter could control, instead of everything else always controlling him.

Sighing, Peter rolled onto his side, pulling one of his spare pillows against his chest and trying not to wish he had his dads to cuddle with him.

The dream wasn't real, he thought as he closed his eyes, waiting for sleep. Glasses Man wasn't real. HYDRA is dead or close to dying, so none of it was real.

My family is real.

Spider-Man is real.

The dream was just a dream.
on their first day on the island, and while the burn was completely gone by the next morning it had still been uncomfortable enough that Tony had been extra liberal with the sun cream ever since. He didn't want any injuries hampering their honeymoon, no matter how minor they were.

Plus, applying the sun cream gave Tony another excuse to run his hands all over his husband, which was never a bad thing.

They were staying in a luxury villa in Sardinia, complete with a full house staff and private beach, and within walking distance of three five-star restaurants. Tony had been to Italy many times before, both as a child and as an adult, but this was the first time that he had actually been able to appreciate the sheer beauty of the place. The beautiful water of the Mediterranean that they could see from their bedroom window was the same colour blue as Steve's eyes and so clear that you could see straight through to the bottom, and the fine sand was almost as white as snow, nothing like what Steve said he remembered from when he was in Italy during the war.

Steve had also told him that he wanted them to come back sometime with Peter, to which Tony had readily agreed.

With a happy sigh Tony tipped his head back against the padded lounge chair, smiling as a small wave crashed against Steve, splashing water up into his face. He immediately got to his feet, the muscles in his back and shoulders flexing deliciously as he brushed his sodden hair out of his eyes.

*He really has no idea how gorgeous he is,* Tony thought, rather possessively as his tongue poked out to wet his dry lips. *No Maxim cover model has anything on Steve Rogers.*

And he was all Tony's now. The titanium ring with the faint blue stripe in the middle that encircled the third finger of his left hand was an ever present reminder to both he and everyone else that Tony Stark, once considered one of the most eligible bachelors in the world, was officially and irrevocably off the market.

As Steve continued to splash around in the water, Tony tried to turn his attention back to the tablet sitting on his lap. He had told Pepper that he would work on finishing the specs for the upcoming release of the newest StarkPhone, as they wanted to have it available for the beginning of summer, but he realised after only a few minutes that it was pointless. How in the hell could he possibly concentrate on anything work-related when his gorgeous husband was right there, on full display?

And then, as if he could sense Tony's eyes on him Steve turned around and waved, with Tony grinning widely as he waved back.

"Looking damn good out there, babe!" he called, his heart leaping like a lovesick teenager when Steve blew him a kiss in response. Ancient Roman sculptors would have killed to have had a model like Steve Rogers, and yet here he was, now married to Tony.

Married to *Tony,* of all people.

*I am so goddamn lucky.*

Steve had asked Tony to come into the water with him, as he usually did whenever he went for a dip, but hadn't been surprised when Tony declined. Even now, after all the time that had passed since Afghanistan and identifying that he did in fact have some aspects of post-battle trauma, as Steve liked to call it, Tony still couldn't seem to work up the nerve to voluntarily immerse himself in water. Sometimes it was so bad that even the mere thought of it was enough to push him into a panic attack.

And Steve, being the absolute gem of a person that he was, never took it personally when Tony
declined and never, ever tried to push him.

Because Steve still had his share of demons too, and while his didn't restrict him from stepping into bodies of water, there were certain conditions that said body of water had to meet before Steve would consider it. The water—pool, ocean, or bathtub—had to be above a certain temperature before Steve would even set more than a toe inside it, and he was still loathe to allow himself to be completely submerged over his head, preferring to simply splash around rather than actually swim.

All of which suited Tony just fine. It was much easier to watch his sexier-than-hell husband frolic in the water when he kept himself above its surface.

Several minutes passed, and Tony found himself so relaxed and peaceful that he felt his eyelids growing heavier and heavier until Steve suddenly stood straight up again, his gaze trained on another small wave approaching the shore. And then, to Tony's utter shock, Steve clasped his hands together over his head and executed a nearly perfect dive, directly into the wave. Tony bolted up in his chair, counting the seconds until Steve emerged from the water, rubbing his eyes and smiling triumphantly, with Tony's heart thudding against the arc reactor as the magnitude of what Steve had just accomplished washed over him.

Steve had just conquered one of his demons.

As if he needed any more reasons to be perfect.

With an almost child-like eagerness Steve hurried out of the water, the smile still plastered across his beautiful face as he playfully showered Tony with water droplets from his hair before dropping down onto the chair to give him a deep, sensual kiss. He tasted like sun cream and salt water, combined with a bit of the delicious white wine they had enjoyed with lunch, and Tony let out a whimper as he buried his fingers into Steve's damp hair, holding him close.

"Did you see what I did out there?" Steve asked once they broke apart, his lips trailing soft kisses across Tony's nose and cheekbones.

"Course I did, babe," Tony replied, breathless. "You should know better than to think I would dare to take my eyes off of you."

A sweet blush coloured Steve's pale cheeks, and he leaned down for another kiss, his thumbs brushing along Tony's cheekbones.

"I'd like to ask you something," he murmured as he kissed his way across Tony's cheek to his ear.

"Oh yeah? What's that?" answered Tony, his chest heaving. It had only been a couple of hours since they'd last made love, and yet here he was completely wrecked from just a couple of Steve's kisses.

Steve's lips circled Tony's earlobe as he whispered, "Will you come into the water with me? It's so beautiful, Tony. So warm and peaceful, I really think you'd enjoy it."

Tony immediately let out a violent shiver, Steve's hot breath on his neck contrasting sharply with the panic threatening to flood his body.

"Uhh," he stammered. "Honey, you know that I—"

"Yes, I do, sweetheart," Steve said gently. He took Tony's face in his hands, kissing his forehead before pressing their foreheads together. "And you know that I won't pressure you either. If you say 'no', then it's 'no'. But if you decide that you'd like to try, I promise I'll hold onto you the whole time. I won't let go until you say so, and we can get out as soon as you say the word."
Tony inhaled a shaky breath as he started deeply into Steve's—his husband's—gorgeous ocean blue eyes, the very same eyes that had so captivated him nearly two years ago, when he first came to live with Tony and Peter. Before Tony was even strong enough to let go of his stupid preconceived notions about anything Captain America and allow himself to see Steve Rogers for the incredible man that he was.

The man who had saved Peter's life in that horrible desert without hesitation. The man who had proven multiple times that he would protect Peter and Tony with his life if necessary, without hesitation.

And the man who Tony fell head-over-heels in love with, pretty much without hesitation. Because if Tony were being truly honest with himself, he started falling in love with Steve way back in that damn military hospital in Afghanistan, when he realised he could implicitly trust Steve with Peter enough to actually get some sleep while Peter was sick.

"Steve," Tony whispered, almost pleadingly so and hating himself for being so weak. "I'm not—I don't—I don't think I'm strong enough, honey. I'm not strong, not like you are."

Steve pursed his lips. "You know I don't believe that, sweetheart. You underestimate yourself all the time, but you're so unbelievably strong that any of the rest of us would be thrilled to have even a fraction of it." He curled his arms around Tony's waist, enveloping him into one of his patented bear hugs that Tony—and Peter, for that matter—absolutely adored. "Beidh mé i gcónaí leat."

"Huh?" Tony said as he jerked his head back, looking at Steve in confusion. "What did you just say?"

Steve smiled his million-dollar smile, pressing a soft kiss to Tony's lips. "I said, 'I will always be with you'. I might've brushed up on my Irish some before the wedding, thinking I could use it once we got to Ireland. But I guess it decided to come out a bit early."

Tony could only stare at him in awe. "Are you telling me that you speak a whole other language and I'm just finding this out now?" he exclaimed. "Cause damn, babe, that's almost too sexy for words!"

"My ma and I used to speak it at home," Steve whispered. "An dtiocfaidh tú isteach san uisce liom?"

Warmth bloomed across Tony's chest, spreading rapidly throughout his body as his fingertips dug into Steve's arms. Steve speaking in his old Irish language was seriously one of the sexiest things he had ever heard in his life, and he couldn't believe that Steve hadn't used any of it before now.

"What does that mean?"

"I said, 'will you come into the water with me?'" he answered. "Geallaim nach ligfidh mé duit dul. I promise I won't let go of you."

Tony's lower lip trembled, and he caught it between his teeth as he buried his face into Steve's neck, trying to focus on the strong arms of his husband anchoring him to reality instead of the demons threatening to drown him into his nightmare.

"It's not the same. We're in Italy, not Afghanistan, he thought as he pressed his palm to his chest, finding the outline of Steve's dog tags through his breezy linen shirt.

"We're not prisoners, we're on our honeymoon."

"Steve is with me, he won't let go of me. He's got my back."
I am Iron Man, damnit. I've faced down both terrorists and aliens, and plenty of corrupt government officials. There's no way I should be afraid of something as basic as water.

If Steve can do it, I can do it.

I'm gonna kill this goddamn demon.

"Okay, Steve," Tony whispered against Steve's skin. "I'll do it."

Steve huffed in a surprised breath as he pulled back, his blue eyes going wide. "Really? Are you sure?"

"I am at the moment," Tony choked out over the mad thudding of his heart. "So unless you want me to change my mind we better get going, like right this second."

"All right, sweetheart," Steve breathed. He pressed a quick but firm kiss to Tony's lips and then took his hand, leading him down to the edge of the surf to where the sand was barely damp. "We'll go as slow as you need to, okay? Let's just start with your toes first."

"Yeah," Tony murmured. He tightened his grip on Steve's hand, flinching as the water washed up to meet his toes. It was warm, almost tendril-like, a soothing contrast against the sun-baked sand beneath his bare feet and nothing like the freezing cold and metal-laden water the terrorists had used for his torture.

"Good?" Steve asked after several seconds had passed.

At Tony's nod, Steve guided him a few more steps until their feet were completely submerged, curling his arm around Tony's waist.

"We'll stay here until you're ready," he whispered in Tony's ear.

Tony breathed in slowly, closing his eyes as he tried to focus on Steve's presence next to him, the strong arm around his waist, his warm breath on Tony's neck, and the delicious scent of his damp skin.

Steve won't let me drown. He's got my back.

I can do this.

"Okay," he murmured into Steve's chest. "I'm ready."

Steve's arm instinctively squeezed around Tony as he nodded, then released him to take his hand, stepping out in front of him.

"We'll get out as soon as you say, okay?" he said as he started walking backwards, not taking his eyes off Tony's face. Tony gripped Steve's hand with white knuckles as the water level slowly crept up his legs, past his knees to his thighs, lapping gently against him. "Just look at me, Tony, don't look at the water. I've got you. I'm not letting go of you."

Don't let go of me, he thought. Please, don't let me drown.

Steve will never let me drown. He's got my back.

Steve continued guiding him further in until the water reached his waist where he paused, gathering Tony into his arms.
"I've got you," he murmured in Tony's ear, gentle and reassuring. "Just hold onto me, I promise I won't dunk your head, okay?"

"'Kay," Tony said shakily. His arms tightened around Steve's shoulders as Steve sank slowly to his knees, submerging them up to their chests. Tony's legs immediately wrapped around him as he gasped, burying his face into Steve's neck as his entire body trembled.

"I've got you, sweetheart. Everything's okay, I've got you," Steve whispered, over and over again until Tony's heart rate slowed down and his death grip on Steve's shoulders loosened enough for him to raise his head. The clear blue water was swirling around them, warm and graceful, while Steve's protective hands held Tony close, rubbing soothing circles on his back.

"I've got you, Tony," he said again, just before brushing his lips across Tony's. "I'll always have you. Is breá liom tú an oiread sin."

"You've got me forever," Tony rasped, tears stinging his eyes as he fought the urge to break down completely. "God Steve, you've got me for beyond forever. I can't—I don't know what I would do if—"

"Shh," Steve whispered, covering Tony's lips with his fingers. "It's okay, I'm here. I've got you. We're okay, sweetheart. We'll always be okay if we have each other. Ní fhágfaidh mé tú riamh."

A tear tracked down Tony's cheek that Steve quickly brushed away, cupping Tony's chin in his palm with his blue eyes radiating such pure and unadulterated love that Tony had to fight the urge to look away. Even now that they were married it was still hard for him to contemplate how Steve could possibly love him as much as he loved Steve.

"I love you," he said on a gasp. "I love you so damn much, and I—"

He was cut off by a kiss, one that started off sweet and gentle but quickly turned more passionate as Steve's hands slid down Tony's back to his ass, cupping it in his hands and squeezing. They remained there in the water, kissing and fondling and holding each other until the sun began to dip towards the horizon. Then Steve gathered Tony into his arms and carried him back to their villa, peeling his wet clothes off as soon as they were inside.

"I need you, sweetheart," Steve said as he led Tony to their bed, laying him down and covering him with his solid warmth. "Ní féidir liom maireachtáil gan tú. I can't survive without you. You're my everything, you and Peter, and I love you more that I can't even tell you." He traced his fingers down Tony's temple to his jaw, smiling that soft smile that never failed to give him the warm fuzzies.

"You're so brave, and strong, and I can't wait to tell Peter what you did today when we get home. He's going to be just as proud of you as I am."

Tony could only nod as he wrapped his hand around the back of Steve's neck, too choked up to even speak as he tugged him down for a kiss, his tongue tracing the seam of Steve's lips. He let out a soft whimper as Steve granted him access and their tongues began an elaborate dance, his hands roaming along the expanse of Steve's beautiful body, wanting more of him. Always wanting more of him.

And as the sun set down over the majestic blue sea where both Steve and Tony had conquered their demons, Tony once again lost himself in Steve, in the taste, scent, and feel of him as he brought Tony to such incredible heights of pleasure that Tony could only cling to him lest he fall, right back into that water and drown.

Steve was Tony's saviour, both literally and figuratively, and as their kisses and caresses slowly became less frantic and more languid, Steve sat up in the middle of the bed and pulled Tony onto his
lap, brushing his lips across Tony's forehead.

"You're incredible," he whispered, his hands cradling Tony's face. And once again, as he reached a tentative hand to brush the damp hair from Steve's forehead, Tony found himself too overwhelmed with emotion to form words. How could he possibly express just how much Steve meant to him when the words simply didn't exist, not in any language?

But as usual, Steve knew exactly what he couldn't say.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he murmured, that smile on his face that he reserved only for Tony. "I love you too."

Peter huffed as he landed gracefully on the roof of an old-school record store, the pulsating beat of the music reverberating throughout the building and reminding Peter way too much of Dad. Peter had been looking forward to his patrol all day, hoping it would help take his mind off of how much he was missing his dads, but the afternoon had been so slow and boring that it hadn't quite worked out that way. The only thing that had required his attention, another cat caught up in a tree—and really, why the hell did all the old ladies in Queens let their cats roam around in trees?—had happened over an hour ago and had taken only mere seconds to resolve. The rest of the time he'd just been flying around, looking for more to do and unfortunately not finding it.

"I guess I might as well head back," Peter murmured under his breath. He was getting a bit low on his web fluid anyway, down to his last cartridge in each shooter, so it probably wouldn't be a good idea to push things. He made a mental note to refill his cartridges tomorrow at school, as long as he could escape from Ned's eagle eyes long enough to do so. Sometimes Peter swore that his dads were secretly paying Ned to spy on him with how close he'd been sticking to Peter lately.

Activating his web shooter, Peter was just about to launch it when a strange flash of light caught his eye. He paused, scanning the area where he saw the light until he saw it again, a flash lasting only for a split-second and coming from a narrow alleyway between two buildings, about a half a block down.

"What the hell is that?" he muttered, his eyes narrowing as he attempted to make sense of the light. A second later a man carrying what looked like a metal briefcase stepped out of the alleyway, looking both ways before continuing up the street towards the building where Peter was perched. As Peter watched him approach another man emerged from the alleyway, stumbling as he walked like he was drunk or on drugs or something, shaking his head and mumbling to himself. The first man kept walking, paying no attention to the second man as he began bumping into passersby and his steps became more and more unstable.

"Well, that's just not okay at all," Peter said, his brow furrowing in anger. He considered drug dealers to be some of the worst of society, and if Peter had a chance to stop one of them he was going to take it.

Aiming his web shooter at the stoplight, Peter launched the web, grabbing onto it just as Stumbling Man abruptly stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and dropped to his knees, shaking like he was having a convulsive fit.

And then to Peter's absolute shock, the man's eyes suddenly started glowing orange, an orange that grew brighter by the second and sent Peter's stomach plummeting down to his knees.

Glowing orange eyes. Just like the fire monsters that he had seen in his nightmares.
"Holy shit!" Peter exclaimed, his heart racing as the glow grew brighter and brighter until it encompassed Stumbling Man's entire face, and he let out a scream that sent such a painfully violent bolt of ice down Peter's back that Peter almost lost his grip on the web. It was like he was watching one of his nightmares come to life, only this time there was no way he could wake up from it.

"No, no, no, no, no," Peter whimpered, releasing the web and slapping his hands over his ears, trying to drown out the sound of Stumbling Man's horrific screams as the glow grew impossibly brighter, completely engulfing him. "Not real, it can't be real, it just can't!"

*It was only a nightmare! Not real, it can't be real!*

And then the man suddenly exploded, sending a shockwave rippling down the block and shattering every window in its vicinity. Peter cried out as the force of the blast blew him onto his back, knocking the wind out of him. He quickly rolled onto his side, gasping and choking as he tried to regain his breath, his eyes watering like faucets and his heart thudding so fast and hard that he felt dizzy.

*What the hell was that?*

Pushing himself back up, Peter quickly launched another web at the stoplight, wanting to get the hell out of the area as soon as possible. His head was pounding and his heart was in his throat the entire way back to Midtown, and as soon as he slid into the backseat of Happy's car he cuddled right up to Auntie Nat, burying his nose into her pretty red hair that smelled like lilacs and willing himself to stop shaking.

"Hey there, kiddo," Auntie Nat said, her slightly gravelly voice kind and soothing as she patted Peter's head. "You're looking a little extra pale this afternoon, is everything okay?"

"You should be glad that you weren't over in Queens this afternoon, Peter," Happy piped up from the driver's seat. "They had some sort of explosion on the street out there and no one can figure out what caused it. It was like some spontaneous human combustion or something."

"Maybe not the best thing to be talking about right now, Happy?" Auntie Nat hissed as she drew Peter closer. "Here, kiddo, how's that?"

"Better," mumbled Peter. He drew in a shaky breath, loosening his hands which were clenched into such tight fists that his fingernails had broken his skin. *It was exactly like spontaneous human combustion, that's exactly what it was.* "Bad day. Lots of noise. Eyes hurt. Have a headache."

"I see. You missing your dads?"

"Yeah."

"Mmm, well, that's understandable," Auntie Nat said as she raked her fingers through Peter's hair. "Only four more days til they're home, though."

Peter sniffed as he nodded. "I know. And I'm sorry, I don't mean to be such a crybaby. I just… like I said—"

"You don't have to apologise to me for anything, kiddo," said Auntie Nat. "I understand." She gave Peter a sly smile as Happy pulled into the Tower's garage. "Wanna build another Lego castle tonight after dinner?"

"Uhh, sure," Peter said. He inhaled a deep, shaky breath, letting it slowly out. He knew Auntie Nat found building with Legos relaxing, so maybe it would help him relax some too.
"Yeah, that sounds like fun."

And it was. After eating three helpings of Uncle Sam's awesome fajitas, Peter and Auntie Nat spent the rest of the evening starting on their own version of Hogwarts Castle, complete with an Astronomy Tower and Owlrey. And by the time his bedtime rolled around, Peter did feel a bit better.

But the good feeling evaporated as soon as Peter's head hit the pillow. The nightmares had gotten weird enough lately that he'd started having more trouble relaxing enough to fall asleep, often staying awake until the wee hours of the morning before finally giving in to exhaustion. And now, after what he'd just seen, which the news was calling another suicide bombing, one that had left three people dead and another dozen or so injured, Peter was afraid to go to sleep at all. He was afraid if he did that he'd unleash even more of the horrors lurking deep inside his subconscious, almost as if he could personally dream them into reality.

Tears stung Peter's eyes as he hugged his spare pillow to his chest, wishing with all his might that it was his dad or papa instead. He had spoken to his dads earlier, after dinner, and they had both looked so happy and peaceful that it had taken every ounce of Peter's strength to hide how rattled he was from everything. They were laughing as they told Peter a story about getting a flat tire on some bumpy hill road between two small Irish villages, and there was no way he wanted to be responsible for ruining their fun on their honeymoon.

"JARVIS, can you please turn on the rain sounds?" he asked. He highly doubted they would help all that much, but at least they wouldn't hurt.

"Of course, Master Peter," JARVIS answered, filling his room with the soothing sound of falling rain. Peter breathed in slowly as he closed his eyes, trying to focus on the comforting white noise that he'd always loved instead of the maelstrom going on inside his head.

*It was supposed to only be a dream,* he thought, forcibly stamping down the panic welling up inside him. *Just a really bad dream.*

*It wasn't supposed to be real.*

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*Stop by and see me on tumblr, I'm [geekymoviemom](https://geekymoviemom.tumblr.com) and [geeky-writes](https://geeky-writes.tumblr.com) there! :)*

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Chapter End Notes

I can’t wait to see what you guys think! Please don’t hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

Peter trembled, trying desperately to stamp down the panic threatening to overwhelm him as he glanced around the room, wondering what the hell was going on. He was surrounded by a bunch of weird-looking instruments and devices, including something that looked like the kind of space capsule one might see in a Star Trek movie, and the walls and ceiling were all shimmery, kind of like the reflection of the sun off the floor of the desert.

Blinking, Peter tried to focus his eyes, not an easy task when he was so exhausted that he could practically taste his fatigue. He hated when he got like this, when his enhanced sensory input became so jumbled and wonky that his eyesight transformed into that panoramic, honeycomb-like structure that always gave him an instant pounding headache.

There were men in the room, some holding rifles, some just leaning against the shiny walls staring off into space, almost as if they were waiting for something to happen.

"Help," he croaked as he raised his head off the cold metal table, his throat as dry as the Afghanistan desert. Gulp, Peter ran his tongue along his cracked lips that were littered with deep
indentations from his own teeth, where he’d bitten down in anguish as they worked on his injured arm. Either the men hadn’t given him any pain medicine before they started or whatever they did give him hadn’t worked, because Peter had felt every single part of whatever they had done to him, and the pain had eventually gotten so horrific and intense that he couldn’t take it anymore and passed out.

"Please, help me?" he asked again, barely able to get his voice above the softest whisper. "Please?"

When no one responded Peter dropped his head back down, clenching and unclenching his fists and struggling to take deep breaths through his parched throat. His left arm still felt weird, and his arms and legs were pinned down with three different sets of metal wraps, making him unable to wiggle more than a couple of centimetres and only intensifying his feeling of claustrophobia. Ever since Afghanistan Peter had had an intense aversion to being pinned down, for reasons he could never fully understand or explain. Even when he was cuddling with one or both of his dads he had to be positioned in a certain way so he could either hear Dad's hum or Papa’s heartbeat, otherwise his first instinct was always to panic and lash out.

Finally, after what seemed like forever and a half, Peter heard the sound of approaching footsteps, shivering as the ice bolts started racing down his back.

"Well, well, well," said the creepy accented voice of Glasses Man, forcing Peter to swallow against the rising bile in his throat. "It seems that you did quite well with the procedure, young man. Of course, I never doubted that you would, given your… special abilities."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Peter spat out, glaring bullets at Glasses Man. "I'm nobody special. I'm just a kid—"

He was cut off by Glasses Man's laugh, a laugh so maniacal and looney that Peter's skin pebbled with goosebumps.

"Who are you?" Peter demanded, which only made the man laugh even louder. Peter winced as the ice bolts grew even stronger and faster, until they were coming so fast that he couldn't tell where one ended and another began.

"You ask who I am, young man?" Glasses Man finally said, his voice still laced with mirth. "I am the one who created you! I am your creator, and you, you are my greatest creation."

Peter's eyebrows shot up at his choice of words. "What do you mean, your greatest creation?"

"Why, exactly what you think I mean," Glasses Man answered, clapping his hands together like an excited child. "I have finally perfected my design after years of research and experimentation. You have no idea what an honour this truly is, young man. You are going to be the first of many. You are the prototype, as it were."

"Prototype of what?" asked Peter. Maybe if he could keep Glasses Man monologuing it would give his dads more time to find him. What was it about bad guys who always felt like they had to monologue?

"A soldier, the first of many, as I said, which will constitute an army designed exactly for one purpose," said Glasses Man. "To create chaos."

"Why the hell would you wanna do that?" Peter demanded. "Chaos is... well, it's chaos! It's the opposite of order, which is usually what people like you look for. Especially with an army, isn't it an army's job to keep order?"
Glasses Man grinned so widely that his teeth showed, sending another freezing cold bolt down Peter's back.

"You're a rather audacious one, aren't you?" he said. "Do not worry, young man, all will become clear when it is meant to."

"Yeah, right," Peter said as Glasses Man began looking him over, like he was inspecting him for flaws or design imperfections as his words echoed around Peter's mind, almost as though they were hanging in a cartoon cloud above his head.

'You are my greatest creation,' Glasses Man had said. What a weird thing to say. Peter was a person, not a piece of machinery, and if they really wanted to get technical about things then it was actually Dad and Agent Parker who had created him, not creepy-as-hell Glasses Man.

And besides that, where had Peter heard that before? He'd heard it somewhere, why couldn't he remember? And why did Glasses Man look so familiar? Where had Peter seen him before?

Why couldn't he remember?

"Where's my dad?" he asked instead. "And my papa? I wanna see them."

Glasses Man's eyes crinkled at Peter's questions, almost like he was amused by them. "They are... preoccupied at the moment."

Peter's heart skipped a beat, and he bit his lip, flinching at the pain.

"What do you mean, 'preoccupied'?"

"You're an intelligent boy," Glasses Man said with a chuckle. "I'm sure you know what preoccupied means." He tapped his chin with his index finger, pushing his glasses up his pointy nose. "Yes, I believe you'll do." Turning to one of the other men standing against the wall, he jerked his head in Peter's direction. "Get him up. He's ready to begin."

"What? What do you mean? Ready for what?" Peter demanded, cut off by a loud clanking sound as his restraints fell away. Two rough hands then shimmied under his armpits, hauling him off the uncomfortable metal table and onto his feet. Peter wobbled as his legs threatened to give way beneath him, and he reached for the table to support himself, grabbing onto it with his left hand to keep from crumpling onto the freezing concrete floor.

It took his muddled mind a second or two to process the fact that there was something very wrong when he realised that he couldn't feel the metal of the table beneath his fingers, couldn't register its coolness and rigidity. Slowly, as his legs continued to tremble, Peter turned his head, a gasp lodging in his throat as his eyes struggled to process what he was seeing.

His entire left arm was now encased in a shiny, silver-coloured metal. It had been fused onto his body at the shoulder, like Dad's arc reactor was fused into his breastbone. The flesh surrounding the metal was bruised, scarred, and tender to the touch, so it apparently hadn't been there for very long.

Is this what they had been doing to his arm? He had been injured, how he couldn't remember, but he'd never thought—it hadn't seemed like it was so bad to require... whatever this—what was this? Some kind of metal prosthetic?

And where was this place, with what looked like instruments of torture and the wonky shimmering walls? Where were Dad and Papa? Why hadn't they tried to find him, to stop this from happening to him?
Or maybe they had, and he just couldn't remember.

Why couldn't he remember?

"What—what's happened to me?" he asked, barely able to choke out the words, his hand gripping the table so tightly that it started to warp. "What is this, what did you do to me?"

Glasses Man smiled again, that creepy, maniacal smile that sent another lightning bolt of ice racing down Peter's spine, so strong it nearly caused him to double over.

"It is as I said, young man. I created you. A Super Soldier of my very own, born out of a groundbreaking combination of science, medicine, and technology." He stepped closer, reaching for Peter's metal arm and running his fingers along it. "You, my greatest creation, are to be the new fist of HYDRA."

"No!" Peter shrieked, his head spinning as his belly swooped, nearly bringing him to his knees. "No, I don't wanna be anything for HYDRA! HYDRA is evil, you guys are evil! I'm not—where's my dad? Where's my papa? I wanna see them, where are they?"

But Glasses Man only shook his head. "I've already told you, young man, your… fathers," and he spat out the word, almost like it disgusted him, "are otherwise preoccupied."

"You're a liar!" Peter yelled, squeezing the metal table even harder, which let out a loud groan as it moulded to his fingers. The sound only made the ice bolts worse so Peter wrenched his hand away, clenching it into a fist as his right hand started to attack his left shoulder, scratching at the fusion point between his skin and the metal, trying to get the hateful thing off of him. He yelped as his fingernails dug into his skin, the pain radiating across his neck and chest, but the arm wouldn't budge. He couldn't get it off.

"I want this goddamn thing off of me!" he cried, trying hard to ignore the stinging pain in his skin from his own fingernails. "You're a liar, and you hurt me, and I wanna see my dads!" His voice grew louder and more frantic as he scanned the room, still scratching away as the rifle-wielding guards readied their weapons. And then Glasses Man started to laugh, that creepy, horror movie-like laugh that caused Peter's blood to curdle, which only made everything a thousand times worse.

"Daddy!" he screamed, drawing back his right hand to find bits of his own skin clinging to his bloody fingernails. His head was swimming and his stomach was swirling, he wouldn't be able to stay conscious for too much longer. "Papa! Help me, please, you gotta help me!"

"You gotta grab hold of his hands, babe, he's already clawed his shoulder all to hell!"

"He's so strong, Tony, I almost can't hold him!"

"Peter!" a familiar voice suddenly said, firm but still compassionate, meant to get his attention rather than chastise. "Peter, wake up, buddy! It's just a bad dream!"

"No! Let me go!" Peter screamed, struggling to catch his breath and trying to fight against the strong, vice-like grip holding both of his wrists. He continued to struggle for several seconds, almost managing to break free a couple of times until the familiar voice repeated his name.

"Peter," it said, gentle and soothing. "It's okay, buddy, you just gotta wake up. We're both here with you."

Peter's eyes flew open, rapidly blinking as the kind face of his beloved papa came into focus, the very same papa who was holding on to his wrists, trying to keep him from hurting himself more than
he already had.

"I'm gonna be sick!" he cried as he lurched to the side, vomiting into the trash can next to his bed as a gentle hand patted his back. As soon as he was done he collapsed back onto the bed, looking up into the very worried faces of his fathers.

"Daddy!" he gasped, his eyes flying up to land on his dad's face, who was kneeling on the bed near his head, stroking his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair.

"Yeah, buddy, it's me," Dad said gently, his face etched in worry and fatigue. "Papa and I are both here, bud. You're safe."

"I'm safe," he repeated as he grabbed onto his left arm, which appeared to be completely fine even as his shoulder was stinging badly. "My arm… it's okay… it's not—"

"You're okay, little guy, it was just a bad dream," Papa said as he tugged Peter up, cradling him in his lap like he was a baby. Peter immediately dropped his head down, pressing his ear against Papa's chest so he could hear his heartbeat.

"It was just a dream," he whispered, still shaking like a leaf. "Just another dream."

"That's right, buddy," Dad said. "Just another bad dream. We've got you, you're safe."

*But was it really just a dream? Or is this one gonna come true too?*

Dad's fingers were still carding through his hair as Papa curled an arm around him, shifting all three of them so Peter could hear Dad's hum as well. It was the same high-pitched, continuous humming noise that it had always been, and the sound of it combined with the deep *ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump* of Papa's heartbeat enveloped him as he tried to shove the horrible images from his nightmare out of his mind.

"There you go, little guy," Papa said softly into Peter's hair as his breathing finally began to even out. "We've got you. You're safe. It was just a bad dream."

*I'm safe. It was just a bad dream. Not real.*

It had just been another bad dream.

Just a horrible, no good, very bad dream.

He burrowed even further into his dads' arms, concentrating only on the sound of their hearts.

*My dads are real. I'm safe. It was just a nightmare.*

"My shoulder hurts," he said a couple of minutes later.

"Yeah, well, when we rushed in here you were clawing at it like it had offended you somehow," said Dad, trying and failing to sound casual. "You've got some pretty sharp fingernails there, Pete."

Peter let out a violent shudder, sniffing when Papa's arms tightened around him. "I'll help you get cleaned up in a few minutes, little guy," Papa said softly. "You should be a lot better in the morning with how fast you heal."

"Uh huh," whispered Peter. He ran his right hand down his left forearm, still trying to convince himself that it'd only been a dream.
Not real. It wasn't real. It was only a dream.

But it sure seemed pretty damn real.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" asked Papa. "You know Uncle Sam always says that talking about the dreams can help."

"I know he does," Peter answered. He squeezed his eyes closed, grabbing a fistful of Dad's shirt. "I don't really want to though. It was—it was just really scary, and—"

"Well, you may not want to, Pete, but I think this time you might need to," Dad said. "'Cause I'll be honest here, having to hear you scream bloody murder and then rushing in to find you trying to tear your arm off… it damn well scared the hell outta me, and I know it scared Papa pretty bad too. Especially since he almost couldn't stop you."

Tears welled in Peter's eyes and spilled over, streaming down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, I never meant to—"

"Stop, buddy," said Dad. He pressed his fingertips into Peter's scalp, trying to soothe him. "You don't need to apologise, Papa and I just need to know what's going on so we can help you. I mean, you were hurting yourself, bud, and that's just not okay."

"I know, but—"

"Why don't we get you fixed up first?" Papa said. "Then I'll make us all some hot chocolate and we can talk, okay? Dad is right, Peter. I think we've moved beyond just regular nightmares now, so we need to know what's going on."

Sniffing, Peter nodded against Papa's chest. "Uh huh. I'm sorry that I woke you guys, I know—"

"We weren't even asleep, buddy, so it's no big deal," Dad said as he kissed Peter's head. "Jet lag's a killer."

"Yeah, I bet."

"All right then, let's get you cleaned up," Papa said. He hoisted Peter into his arms and carried him to his bathroom, grabbing the first aid kit. His eyebrows shot up as he inspected Peter's bloody right hand and left shoulder. "Do you want to take a shower first?"

Yeah, I think so. I feel pretty gross."

"Okay, then I'll go start the hot chocolate," said Papa. "Just take your time, little guy."

"Do you want some help, Pete?" Dad asked.

Peter's cheeks burned as he shook his head. He hadn't needed help with bathing since he was eight or nine. "No, I'll be okay."

"All right, bud," Dad said with a reluctant nod. "Just yell if you need anything."

"Uh huh."

As soon as Dad closed the door behind him, Peter peeled off his bloody and sweat-dampened pyjama shirt, gasping as he caught a glimpse of the damage he had done to his shoulder in the mirror. Deep scratches that spread out from the cap of his shoulder down to his pectoral were still oozing blood, almost like he'd been clawed by a wild animal, and there were several bruises as well, all in
the exact shape and size of Peter's fingertips.

If Dad and Papa hadn't stopped him when they did, Peter could've done some pretty severe damage.

*I must really be going crazy,* he thought as his heart started to thud. *Who else but a crazy person would do this to themselves over a nightmare?*

Shuddering, Peter stepped underneath the shower spray, choking on a gasp as the hot water splashed against his open wounds. More tears streamed down his face, both from pain and anguish as he struggled to decide what to do. At the moment he couldn't see how he could explain what was scaring him so badly without giving away Spider-Man, and that would only lead to a whole new slew of problems that frankly Peter just didn't want to have to deal with.

Not to mention the fact that he would probably be grounded until he turned eighteen, which would really, really suck. Peter needed Spider-Man, in ways that he couldn't even quantify or explain. Despite the nearly constant pang of guilt that nagged at him whenever he put on his suit, Peter craved the control Spider-Man gave him, the adrenaline rush from flying and flipping through the air, and the joy it brought him to help people. He craved Spider-Man like Papa craved his runs and boxing workouts, like Dad craved coffee and driving too fast and building new armour and uniforms for the team.

The last thing Peter wanted was to give up Spider-Man.

*But I can't keep doing this, night after night, afraid to go to sleep because of what I'll see once I get there.*

*I just can't.*

*I'll go mad, like I did tonight.*

Things might've been easier if Peter felt like he could confide in someone, but there really wasn't anyone. Ned was out of the question since he couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it, having proven that multiple times over the course of their friendship, and there were no other close friends that Peter had at school that he could consider either.

Uncle Sam was a possibility. Peter had told him some pretty private things over the course of their discussions, and he knew Uncle Sam was bound by confidentiality to not repeat things to anyone. But Peter also knew that the confidentiality wouldn't apply to something this big since Peter was a minor. Uncle Sam would have an obligation to report it to Peter's parents, and Peter had no doubt in his mind that he would.

Which left him only the option of keeping it all to himself, as horrible as that seemed. But without being willing to give up Spider-Man, Peter didn't see that he had any other choice.

A swift knock on the bathroom door shook Peter from his dreary thoughts.

"Pete?" Dad called from the far end of the bathroom. "You still awake in there?"

"Yeah, I'm still here."

"Okay, but it's been almost twenty minutes, bud. You're gonna turn into a raisin if you stay in there too much longer."

"Yeah, okay. Be out in a few minutes," Peter replied. He quickly soaped up, cringing once again at the burning sting from his open wounds.
"I left you some clean pj's on the counter," Dad said. "Give us a shout once you're done and we'll come and fix up your shoulder, yeah?"

"Uh huh."

*I'll just tell them I changed my mind, or I'm too scared to talk about it,* he thought as he shut off the water. *Wouldn't be the first time.*

And so Peter did just that. As Dad held Peter's hand and Papa carefully cleaned his cuts and scratches, applying ointment and bandages to the deepest ones, he explained that he was too tired and spooked to relive the nightmare at the moment and asked instead if they could just cuddle with him until he fell asleep again. They both agreed, although reluctantly, as Peter figured they would. As much as they didn't like to talk about it, both of Peter's dads still suffered from their own pretty frequent nightmares and neither one of them liked talking about them either, no matter what Uncle Sam was always saying. Dad had always been loathe to talk about anything that bothered him, even before he met Papa and became Iron Man, so it only made sense that Peter would be reluctant as well. And for all of his talk about the importance of getting help, Papa himself never liked to admit or show weakness, especially around Peter.

But once they had finished their hot chocolate and Peter was curled up between his two dads on his freshly made bed, the same fear that had plagued him every night since he had witnessed the weird, glowing-eyes exploding man returned with a vengeance, nearly stealing his breath with its intensity. Before that incident Peter had been able to remind himself that his nightmares were just nightmares, that they weren't real. But now he could no longer even do that.

And if the dreams kept getting worse, like they steadily had, Peter had no idea how he would be able to handle it. He'd nearly clawed off his own arm this time, so who's to say that the next time wouldn't be something even more freakish?

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Tony watched fondly as Steve finished securing their brand-new fishing boat to the trailer attached to his truck, double checking all the fastenings just like a good soldier. He and Peter were getting ready to go fishing at the lake about five miles away from the new Avengers Compound—aptly named by Peter the first time that he laid eyes on the vast, newly renovated Stark Industries warehouse complex turned renegade SHIELD headquarters.

It was their third day up at the Compound, and while Tony admittedly wasn't the best at picking up on subtlety most of the time, he had already noticed that Peter had changed for the better. Being away from the city, away from the hustle and bustle—again, Steve's words—and all of its stressors seemed to be doing a lot of good for their beloved boy. He was less stressed, less snippy and grumpy, and even his sleep had been better. In fact, he hadn't had a single one of his really bad nightmares since they had arrived, giving Tony and Steve more opportunities for their precious alone time.

"Peter will be starting high school in the fall, Tony, and that's a pretty overwhelming time for a kid on top of everything else," Steve had told him about a week ago, while they were still discussing how long they should stay at the Compound. "I think a couple of months out of the city will do him a lot of good, help him relax a bit more. I know I'm looking forward to it."

And for Steve—the quintessential New Yorker himself, albeit from a time when New York was quite a bit different—to admit that he wanted to get out of the city for the summer, Tony knew he had to be serious.

And of course Steve had been right, just like he usually was.
Not that Tony minded, really. The Compound was rather nice, and definitely a lot more relaxed than the Tower. Not being confined to the same space limitations that the Tower presented allowed Tony to design the buildings to fit the exact specs that he desired, both for the various team members and for his own family. With Steve and Peter's help, Tony designed their personal living quarters to include not only state-of-the-art labs for both Tony and Peter, but also a painting studio for Steve that any master artist would've been thrilled to be able to work in.

The living quarters for the rest of the team members were also designed with their personal interests in mind. Tony had Clint's quarters built into a rectangular shape to better accommodate his obsession for darts, as well as an extra sensitive speaker system so he would be able to hear everything better. He also had mirrors and a barre installed along the entire wall of one of Natasha's rooms so she could complete her morning stretches and calisthenics without having to trek to the gym fifty metres away.

The Avengers' cluster of buildings were separated by the SHIELD buildings by about three hundred metres per Steve's request, not wanting to give the impression that the Avengers were in any way under control by what was left of SHIELD. Ever since the Project Insight incident and the Battle of the Triskelion, the Avengers were very much what Steve liked to call 'free agents', under no one else's control but their own, with Tony making frequent trips to D.C. to mingle with the politicians in order to ensure that they were able to stay that way.

"Okay, little guy, I think we're all set," Steve said as he finished fiddling with the trailer. He clapped Peter on the shoulder as he hefted their fishing rods and tackle box into the bed of the truck, along with their massive cooler of food and drinks. "Go on and give Dad a hug before we go."

Obediently Peter stepped over to Tony, wrapping his skinny arms around Tony's waist and ducking his head, pressing his ear over the arc reactor. Tony hugged him close, breathing in the soothing scent of his green apple shampoo that he'd always loved.

"You have fun, bud, yeah?" he murmured. "Make sure both you and Papa put on your sun cream, don't want either of you pale boys getting burnt."

"Uh huh," said Peter. "What're you gonna be doing all day?"

"Oh, you know, same old, same old," Tony replied. Bruce, Clint, and Natasha were due to arrive in a couple of hours or so, and Tony already had plans for he and Bruce to start digging into more of the HYDRA files. They'd had a big breakthrough with the decryption two days before they had left for the Compound, and Tony was eager to see what JARVIS had found for them. Sam had asked Tony if he could bring Barnes up to the Compound as well, thinking the quieter environment and outdoors might do him some good, but Tony was reluctant to allow it until the files were completely decrypted. With his luck, something either at or around the Compound would set Barnes off somehow and then they'd be back to square one.

He patted Peter's back, ruffling his hair. "Love you, buddy."

Peter smiled his adorably boyish smile as he climbed up into the truck, sticking his head out the open window. "Love you too, Dad."

As soon as Peter was settled in his seat Steve stepped over to Tony, slipping his palms underneath Tony's t-shirt and nuzzling his temple as he said, "Now, since Peter and I will be relaxing, I'm going to recommend that you do some of the same, sweetheart. That is why we came up here in the first place, isn't it?"

"Well… yeah," Tony said, his eyes fluttering closed on their own violation at the feeling of Steve's hot breath across his skin and his warm hands splayed across his back. "Damnit babe, not in front of
"Not like he's gonna watch anyway," Steve murmured as he brushed his lips across that spot behind Tony's ear that never failed to make him shiver. "We embarrass him, sweetheart, remember? 'Cause we're always, what does he call it, pawing at each other?"

"That is what he says," Tony rasped, his fingertips digging into Steve's biceps to try and keep himself upright. "And I'd have to admit that he's right. Keeping my hands off of you would take a helluva lot more willpower than I've ever possessed or ever will possess in my lifetime."

"Good," Steve said cheekily, giving Tony's earlobe a light nip. "Ciallaíonn sé sin go bhfuil mo phlean ag obair."

"Ah huh," said Tony. "You better watch it, babe. You keep that up and you won't be going anywhere this afternoon. What the hell'd you just say?"

Steve grinned against Tony's cheek. "I said, 'That means my plan is working'."

"You and your plans," Tony huffed as Steve quickly kissed his way to Tony's mouth. The kiss was quick but firm, a promise of things to come later that night. "Go and spend some quality time with your son now, Captain, he's waiting on you." Then he slid his hands down Steve's back to his ass, squeezing the firm, round flesh. "'Cause tonight you're gonna be all mine. Or at least, as long as that fits into your plans."

Steve shot him a playful smirk. "I'm sure I can rearrange some things to accommodate you. It is our anniversary after all, isn't it?"

Tony's head immediately snapped back, his heart skipping a beat as he studied Steve's face. "Shit, did I forget something?"

"Um… it is?"

"Yep," Steve said, chuckling at Tony's obvious panic. "Two months."

"Oh!" Tony breathed in relief. "Um… I don't think people usually celebrate monthly anniversaries once they're married, Steve."

Steve just shrugged, the smirk still plastered across his gorgeous full lips. "Doesn't mean that we can't, does it?" He dipped his head to kiss Tony, deepening the kiss just long enough to get Tony to whimper before pulling back. "There. You just think about that while Peter and I are out, okay?"

"You're such a goddamn tease, Rogers," grumbled Tony, his fingertips still digging into Steve's arms. "You did that on purpose!"

"You're damn right I did," Steve said, winking as he pressed another firm kiss to Tony's lips. "Ní féidir liom cabhrú liom féin. See you later."

"Yeah, yeah, get out of here, you're distracting me too much," Tony said, shaking his head as Steve's smirk grew even wider. He watched as Steve started the truck and headed down the road towards the lake, in awe of what his life had become.

*My husband is taking my son out fishing for the day,* Tony thought as he headed back towards the main building. *Who would've thought?*

After stopping in the kitchen to refill his coffee, Tony meandered towards his lab, a stupid grin still
plastered on his face. He was working on yet another new uniform for Steve as his old one had gotten pretty trashed during their last HYDRA raid, as well as two new suits of armour, one for Rhodey and one for himself. After that both Natasha and Clint were due for upgrades to their uniforms, and he was also planning on testing out a new prototype propulsion system for Sam’s latest Falcon pack.

Not to mention the fact that Steve's birthday was coming up in less than a week, and Tony still needed to finalise all of the preparations for his party. Steve—with lots of help from Peter—had positively spoiled Tony rotten on his recent birthday, and so Tony was planning on going even more all-out than he had last year to try and top him.

Taking a quick sip of his coffee, Tony tapped his monitors to life, pulling up the specs for his newest suit. "JARVIS, how're we looking here?"

"I'm detecting no flaws in the design, sir," JARVIS answered as a life-size holographic model appeared in the open space near the workstations. "However, I would recommend that you allow me to run an additional diagnostic on the new interface. If your intention is indeed to pilot this armour remotely, I would hate for it to suddenly refuse to cooperate during a battle."

"What, you don't want him acting like a real human child throwing a tantrum?" Tony asked as he picked up his needle and thread.

"Not exactly, sir. Somehow I have a feeling that any proposed enemies of yours would not be, shall I say, amused at a suit of armour who's refusing to pick up its socks."

Tony let out an amused chuckle as he took another sip of his coffee. "Go ahead, J, knock yourself out."

"Thank you, sir."

As JARVIS began his diagnostic, Tony went to work on the torso area of Steve's uniform top, carefully inserting and securing the Kevlar panels and making sure that any seams were well-hidden so they didn't chafe against Steve's skin. The last thing Tony wanted Steve to have to worry about during a mission was rubbing uniform seams.

He had just about finished with his stitching when JARVIS spoke up.

"The diagnostic is complete, sir," he said. "Would you like me to commence with rendering?"

"Yeah, J, get it up and running," answered Tony as he set down his sewing. "And when you're done with that go ahead and pull up those new HYDRA files, yeah? I wanna see what we've found."

"Very good, sir. And may I report that Dr Banner, Agent Romanoff, and Agent Barton have arrived. Dr Banner wished me to inform you that he will be down shortly, apparently he has some rather exciting news to share."

Tony's eyebrows shot up. "Exciting? Bruce actually got excited about something?"

"That was his choice of word, sir," said JARVIS. "I'm afraid he did not elaborate any further."

"Well, well, well, I can't wait to see what's got Bruce all excited," said Tony. "In fact, I better get some more coffee before he gets here."

"If you insist, sir," JARVIS replied.
Bruce was already in the lab by the time Tony returned with fresh coffee, his glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

"You are not gonna believe what got decrypted this morning right before we left," Bruce said, not taking his eyes off the monitor. He tapped three more keys before stepping back. "Take a look at this."

Tony donned his own glasses as he stepped forward, squinting as he read through the old-fashioned typed-up document, compete with ink smudges.

Subject has been displaying increased side effects from electro-shock treatment following missions, including dangerously increased blood pressure and muscle weakness. Availability of new memory-control medication should hopefully eliminate the need for electro-shock, and therefore reduce the risk of possible asset damage.

Tony pursed his lips as he read the document again. "This doesn't say that it's specifically referring to Barnes. You think that's who they're talking about?"

"I can't imagine why it wouldn't be him, Tony, it's a HYDRA document," said Bruce. "We haven't found any indication that there were more than one of Barnes, have we?"

"No, but we've still only managed to decrypt about sixty percent of the files," Tony said. "So who knows what could be in the rest."

"That's true, but I still think this is important. Didn't you say that Peter was given a mind-control drug by the Ten Rings?"

Tony immediately flinched, his right hand curling around his aching left arm. He absolutely hated being reminded of what those assholes did to his beloved boy.

"Yeah. What of it?"

Bruce shot him one of Peter's duh looks as he gestured at the monitor. "Don't you see? What if the drug this document is referring to, that I assume they were giving to Barnes, is the same thing that the Ten Rings gave to Peter?"

"But... I'm not sure if that means... oh hell," Tony stammered. He squeezed his eyes closed as the pain in his arm started radiating to his chest. "That doesn't make sense, big guy," he said, forcing the words out. "As far as we know the Ten Rings weren't associated with HYDRA until after Pete and I escaped. It wasn't until the SHIELD agents that turned out to be HYDRA were sent to tail Obie that he got his invitation to the exclusive HYDRA party."

Bruce huffed out a sharp breath, clearly frustrated. "Yes, I understand that. But I'm telling you that I think these two drugs are one in the same, which would mean—"

"Which would mean that the Ten Rings and HYDRA were connected before Afghanistan?" Tony interrupted. "I don't see how that's possible. Obie knew about the Ten Rings because he was dealing them weapons under the table, but according to the documents I found about Pete, Obie wasn't aware of HYDRA until those agents came to him."

Bruce paused for a moment, carefully removing his glasses. "Maybe it's better if we start earlier on. Let's think this through logically, yeah?"

"Sure, I'm all for logic," Tony said quickly. Logic is sure as hell a lot less painful most of the time.
"Okay, so," Bruce started, pointing at the monitor with his glasses. "This document states that 'the subject', who we're assuming is Barnes—"

"You're assuming is Barnes," Tony cut in.

"Yes, I'm assuming is Barnes," Bruce conceded. "But for the sake of argument, let's just assume that I'm right, okay?"

At Tony's reluctant nod, he continued. "Okay, so Barnes'… handlers, for lack of a better term, send him out on one of his missions, then give him the electro-shock therapy once he's done to wipe his memory. He can't remember what he just did, and with the portions of his brain that they removed early on his moral compass is all whacked out too, so once they're done with the shock therapy he's good to go. Then they put him on ice or however they were storing him in between his missions, and so on and so forth. But then after awhile, a couple of decades maybe, they start to see these side-effects show up, because let's face it, long-term electro-shock therapy isn't good for anyone. And they don't want to damage their asset, right? So they go looking for another way to wipe his memories without having to resort to shocking the hell out of him, and voila. We have this drug."

"Okay, so that all sounds horrible for Barnes, but I still don't understand how it ties into Pete," Tony said. He pressed his palm to his chest, running his index finger along Steve's dog tags. "This stuff you're talking about was taking place decades ago."

"That's true," said Bruce, again pointing to the screen. "This particular document is dated mid-September 1965. But think about it, Tony. What was going on at SHIELD in the mid-sixties?"

"Aahh, probably the same stuff that was going on at SHIELD up until they imploded," Tony answered, barely holding onto his patience. "Why does that matter?"

"The Cold War, Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, all of those crises happening at the same time, I bet most of SHIELD was running around like chickens without heads trying to stay on top of everything. It would've been a perfect time for someone with some questionable scruples to go digging around in your father's files, wouldn't you think?"

Tony's eyebrows shot up. "You think Obie knew about HYDRA being inside SHIELD way back then?"

"Maybe not specifically, but I wouldn't've put it past him to have had some suspicions. And from what you've told me about this Obadiah Stane guy, he seems like the type who'd be willing to wait patiently for something he considered worth waiting for."

"I'm not sure 'patiently' is the right word, but yeah, I can see that," admitted Tony. "After he failed to talk me out of taking over the company when my parents were killed, he never said another word to me about it. Not until Pete was born."

"Okay, and how long was that?" Bruce asked.

"Seven years. And then when Pete was born, Obie tried to give me this whole song and dance about how I could never take care of a sickly kid and run a huge company at the same time. But it was all a bunch of bullshit and he and I both knew it, so after I told him to shut up about it, he did." Tony paused, gripping the dog tags just a bit tighter. "Or, at least he did to my face."

"Okay," Bruce said patiently. "And in the meantime, Stane was just always there in the background, right?"

Tony gave a shrug. "He was my CFO, so yeah. But the only thing he really cared about was the
bottom line staying above a certain point. He didn't really poke into too much else." At least, not that I knew of.

"Okay, but as CFO he had access to pretty much anything at Stark Industries, right?" asked Bruce.

"Well... yeah," answered Tony. "Not that he knew how to work much of anything, but yeah."

"So it wouldn't have been out of the realm of possibilities for him to have stumbled upon some of your father's SHIELD files at some point?"

"Obie knew Howard was working with SHIELD, it wasn't exactly a secret, big guy," said Tony, his lips curling into a frown. "Howard bragged about his super-secret-agent work almost as much as he bragged about Steve."

"Right. So your father wasn't exactly the best at keeping secrets, was he?"

Tony scoffed, scowling. "No, and he got a thousand times worse when he was drunk. That was always when I heard all about the greatness that was Steve Rogers, and how I'd never match up to him."

"Yeah, well, I think we've at least laid all of that to rest now, haven't we?" Bruce said, quirking an eyebrow as he pointed to the ring on Tony's left hand. "So, it's not unreasonable to think that maybe Stane might've taken advantage of your father's divided attention and started poking his nose where he shouldn't've been? And then maybe he managed to get mixed up with HYDRA somehow? I mean, they had HYDRA's main scientist working there right at SHIELD, right under their noses, along with who knows how many others!"

Oh shit, Tony thought as his belly dropped to his knees. If that's really the case, then...

"You're thinking that Obie was in with HYDRA all along? Even before the Ten Rings?"

"Honestly, we may never know exactly when Stane got mixed up with HYDRA, Tony," Bruce said, pointing to the monitor. "But if the drug referred to in this document is indeed the same drug that the Ten Rings gave Peter, then I'm thinking it's more likely that Stane at least knew about HYDRA before you and Peter were kidnapped. And didn't you also tell me that there were several things that Stark Industries developed for the military that were all rejected for one reason or another?"

"Well, yeah," said Tony. "But they never rejected anything that I designed, only stuff—"

"Presented specifically by Stane?" finished Bruce. "And where exactly would he have gotten the money to have all these items developed that were never officially purchased by the military? Don't you think as CFO, that would've bothered him?"

"Goddamnit, Bruce," Tony muttered. He slumped into a chair, rubbing his temples. "I'm pretty sure this isn't what Steve had in mind when he told me to relax this afternoon."

"C'mon, Tony, this is important—!"

Tony slammed his palm onto the counter, so hard that his coffee cup almost skittered over the edge. "Don't you dare try and tell me how important this is!" he yelled. "This is my son we're talking about, so I know damn well how important it is! If you think it was Obie that gave those Ten Rings fuckers that drug that they used on Pete, and that it was the same drug that HYDRA used on Barnes, then so be it! But I still don't understand how that helps us! It still doesn't tell us what they fucking did to Pete that he can't remember, or whatever the hell it is that's causing him to dream up such
horrible things that he wakes up trying to claw off his own arm!"

Bruce clenched his jaw, staring straight at Tony as he finished his rant.

"Are ya done?" he said evenly.

Tony breathed in as deep a breath as he could, clutching Steve's dog tags through his shirt. "Yeah. I'm done."

"Good. Now, I know this doesn't tell us what they did to Peter, and as much as it may surprise you, the fact that we don't know what they did to him eats away not only at me, but everyone else too. I know you and Steve are his parents, Tony, but please don't ever discount how much the rest of us care about him, all right? There's not a single member of our team that wouldn't willingly jump in front of a bus for that kid of yours, and I'd even go so far as to say that Barnes would agree with me."

Shame hit Tony like a repulsor blast to the chest. "Yeah, big guy," he muttered. "I get it."

"Okay. So, let's see what you think of this. The night that Peter had that nasty nightmare of his, when you said you and Steve found him scratching at his arm?"

Tony shuddered at the horrible memory of rushing into Peter's room to find him screaming bloody murder, with his clothes and sheets covered in his own blood and with bits of his own skin embedded under his fingernails.

"Yeah? What of it?"

"Well, I was talking to Sam the next morning, and he told me that Bucky had had a particularly nasty nightmare that night too, one so bad that JARVIS alerted Sam about it and he had to rush down to comfort him. And when Sam asked him about it, Bucky told him that he'd been dreaming about the first time he'd discovered what HYDRA did to his arm."

Tony froze at Bruce's words, and he shivered like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over his head.

"Are you trying to tell me that Barnes and Pete, my Pete, were having the same dream?"

Bruce held up his hands. "I don't know for sure, but it does seem to be an otherwise pretty big coincidence. And since we don't know all that much about this drug, I'm saying that it's a very distinct possibility."

Tony breathed in a deep, shaky breath. "Pete never told us what he'd dreamt about that night," he said softly. "We asked him, but he said he was too afraid to talk about it." Tears filled his eyes, and he choked on a sob. "Oh God, I can't imagine how terrifying that must've been for him."

"From what Sam told me it was pretty terrifying for Bucky, so it was probably even worse for Peter," Bruce said sadly. "I'm so sorry, Tony."

"Yeah, well, 'sorry' doesn't exactly help anything, does it?" Tony said, a bit more harshly than he intended. "So what the hell do we do now?"

"Well, I think we first need to find out more about this drug," said Bruce. "I think we should have JARVIS focus on finding everything that he can about it. You found the name of it in that one document where they talked about giving it to Peter, correct?"
"Yeah, it was Cortexiphan, I think. That right, J?"

"That is correct, sir."

"But we haven't been able to uncover anymore information on it," Tony added. "None of the other documents have mentioned it."

"Until now," said Bruce, pointing at his monitor. "So I say we keep going on these particular documents and find out as much information about it as we can. And maybe there'll be something in there that we can use to try to help both Bucky and Peter regain their memories."

"Whoa, big guy, just hold on for a second," Tony said quickly as another wave of panic washed over him. "I'm not exactly sure that—I mean, I don't know if—goddamnit—" He broke off then, nearly doubling over with the anguish. He knew the not knowing was worse for Steve, as Steve had confessed that very thing to him after he'd punched through the wall in the Tower gym one morning, shortly after the battle in D.C. Steve had seen so many horrors during the war, he couldn't stand the thought of someone hurting Peter like he'd witnessed in his past.

And Tony, he just couldn't bear to think about it at all, lest he slip right into another panic attack. The sound of Peter's desperate cries for Tony to help him while Tony laid there sprawled out on the freezing cold floor of the cave, immobilised with agonising pain and unable to move, haunted him nearly every night.

He just wanted to forget. He just wanted Peter to be able to forget.

But was that what was best for Peter?

"Damnit, Bruce, why the hell did they have to mess with my son? If they had just wanted me, why'd they have to drag Pete into all of it?"

Bruce was quiet for several seconds, contemplating. "I hate to say it, Tony," he finally said. "But it seems like Stane did quite a bit of orchestrating behind the scenes to make sure that Peter was there on that trip with you. If I had to guess, I'd say that the Ten Rings and/or HYDRA might've been more interested in him than they were in you."

"Gah!" Tony gasped, gripping Steve's dog tags so tightly he was surprised he hadn't torn his shirt. "So you think Obie might've known about his funky genes too?"

"It's a definite possibility, and one we should probably investigate," answered Bruce. "You've still got all of his stuff there at Stark Industries, don't you?"

"Well... yeah, but I highly doubt that Obie would've kept the spreadsheets for his evil plan on the SI servers, big guy. He may have been an asshole, but he wasn't stupid."

"Regardless, it's a place to start, especially since JARVIS would've made a note of anything that Stane transferred off site. Wouldn't he?"

"You are correct, Dr Banner," said JARVIS. "I will begin compiling the data immediately."

"Thanks, J," Tony whispered. He huffed out a deep breath, slumping in his chair. "So, once we find out what Obie's been hiding, then what?"

Bruce gave him a sympathetic look. "I think we need to start tracking their dreams. If Bucky and Peter are linked somehow through their experience with this drug, then what they're dreaming about just might give us the clues that we need to find where the rest of HYDRA is hiding. And then once
"Now hold on just a minute there, Bruce," Tony cut in. "If being away from Barnes is helping Pete to sleep better, then what makes you think I'm gonna allow Barnes to come up here? The poor kid has been through enough, don't you think? He needs a break!"

"Yes, Tony, I know Peter's been through a lot," answered Bruce. "But I also think that Peter wants all of this to stop just as much as the rest of us, and if he has a chance to help it all stop, then I think he'd take it."

"Goddamnit Bruce, he's just a kid!" Tony said in a rush. "He's not a goddamn superhero, we shouldn't have to ask something like this of him!"

"I know, Tony, believe me, I know," said Bruce. "And if there was any other way that I could think of, I'd tell you. But there isn't. Unless JARVIS is able to uncover some new information that changes my mind, this is how I see us getting rid of HYDRA once and for all."

"And the Ten Rings," Tony said with determination. "They're just as much to blame for all of this as HYDRA. And if Obie really is still alive and somewhere out there, then I want to be the one who takes him down."

Bruce gave an emphatic nod. "So, then is it all right if I tell Sam he can bring Barnes up here?"

Tony pursed his lips, his fingertip tracing along the rim of his coffee cup. "I'll need to talk to Steve about it first, and if he agrees then we can talk to Pete. And then if he agrees, I'll need to fortify one of the spare rooms for Barnes before we do anything."

"You still think that's necessary?" Bruce asked. "Barnes hasn't shown any violence towards anyone since the first time Peter went in to talk to him."

"Can't be too careful, right?" Tony snapped. "If we're gonna be having Barnes recall how he was tortured and used as an assassin, then I'm gonna take as many precautions as I can to protect both my son and everyone else here."

"All right, Tony," Bruce said, raising his hands in surrender. "You got it. Whatever it takes."

*Whatever it takes.* That was something that Steve often said during his pre-mission pep talks, and Tony knew it certainly applied here as well.

"Yeah, big guy," he whispered. "Whatever it takes."

"Sweetheart, please talk to me," Steve murmured as he trailed his fingertips softly up Tony's trembling bare arm, trying to soothe him. Tony had been extra nervous all evening, having told Steve that they needed to talk as soon as he and Peter had gotten back from their fishing trip but that they had to wait until Peter was asleep. But then as soon as JARVIS confirmed that Peter was in fact sleeping peacefully Tony had practically jumped on Steve, dragging him into their bedroom and nearly tearing his clothes off, saying over and over that he just needed to forget for awhile, to get out of his own head. And while Steve had obliged—sex was a wonderful distraction, after all—now that they were done and cleaned up Tony was once again practically vibrating with fear in his arms.

"Please?" he asked again. "I want to help, but I can't unless you tell me what's wrong. Ní maith liom é nuair a bhíonn eagla ort."

Tony breathed in against his chest, curled so tightly against him that Steve could feel the arc reactor
pressing against his ribs. "I think—I think I've changed my mind, babe. I'm not sure I wanna talk about it anymore."

Sighing, Steve shifted so he could look Tony in the eyes. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but that's not gonna fly with me tonight. You're too scared for me to just brush off whatever this is."

"I'm not—" Tony started, then dropped his forehead against Steve's shoulder, burrowing even closer to him. "Bruce and I may have found something this afternoon."

"Yeah?" Steve said gently. "What about?"

"About Pete. And Barnes."

"About them both?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah."

"Okay. Can you tell me what you found?"

Tony lifted his head, his beautiful brown eyes glassy as they bored into Steve's. "Bruce found a HYDRA document stating that in the mid-sixties they started giving 'their asset', who we're assuming is Barnes, a drug designed to wipe out his memory between missions. The document stated that the asset was starting to develop side effects from prolonged exposure to the electro-shock, and so they started using this drug instead."

"Okay," Steve said after a short pause, his heart already aching for poor Bucky. "And how does this relate to Peter?"

"Bruce thinks that it's the same drug the Ten Rings gave Pete while they were holding us," Tony said, practically spitting out the words. "Cortexiphan."

Steve's arms froze across Tony, a violent shiver racing down his spine.

"Are you sure?"

"No. I still haven't found anything in the SI files about it, and JARVIS is still working on the damn HYDRA files," said Tony. "And I don't really want to believe it either, even though Bruce says it makes sense."

"How does it make sense, Tony?" Steve said, trying to hide his frustration. "The mid-sixties were forty-five years ago, so how does that match with what—"

"Because Bruce told me that the night Pete had that horrible dream where we found him scratching the hell out of his shoulder, that Barnes had a nightmare that night as well. And when Sam asked him about it, he told him he'd dreamt about the first time he saw his prosthetic arm. Now, I don't know about you, but I think that's too big of a coincidence to just be a coincidence."

"Oh my God," Steve breathed, his eyes welling with tears. "And so you think that's what Peter was dreaming about too? I should've figured this out, why didn't I figure it out?"

"It makes sense, don't you think?" asked Tony, shuddering. "Pete was trying to rip off his left arm, and that's the same arm that Barnes lost."

"Yeah, it does." Steve's arms tightened around Tony, holding him as close as he dared. "I should've been able to put two and two together long before now, sweetheart, I'm so sorry I didn't."
"This isn't your fault, Steve," Tony said into Steve's neck. "I didn't put it together either. But now Bruce wants to bring Barnes up here and see if—if it can happen again. If Barnes and Pete can… dream-share again, or whatever the hell it is. He's thinking that it might give us some crucial information on HYDRA so we could find them and take 'em down once and for all."

"Okay," Steve said carefully after a short pause. "But Peter was given the drug by the Ten Rings, not by HYDRA."

Tony huffed out a sharp breath. "Yeah. Bruce is thinking that Obie was in bed with HYDRA even before those agents were sent to tail him. He's thinking that Obie's been one of HYDRA's lackeys since shortly after Pete was born."

Steve's jaw clenched, his hand clenching into a fist at Tony's hip. The thought of Peter growing up around a Nazi was enough to make his blood boil.

"And do you agree?" he asked.

"I don't know, Steve," Tony said, frustrated. "That one document that I read didn't make it sound that way, but I suppose Bruce's idea makes sense given everything that we know now. Obie was always jealous of Pete. He tried to talk me out of going down to the hospital when Pete was born. He's the one who arranged the interview with Rosa as his nanny, insisting that I couldn't take care of Pete on my own, and it turns out she was HYDRA too, or at least under their thumb. He's also the one who made sure that Pete was on that trip to Afghanistan with me and who supplied the Ten Rings with the drug that they gave him. So yeah, I guess I agree, I just really fucking wish that I didn't!" He raised his head, staring deep into Steve's eyes. "I mean, it's Peter, Steve! How could anyone want to hurt him? Obie should've loved him like a grandfather, and instead—"

"Shh, sweetheart," Steve murmured, forcing the words past the marble-sized lump in his throat. "I can't imagine how anyone could want to hurt Peter, you know I can't."

_But Stane is a Nazi, and Nazis are the worst kind of scum to have ever walked on the Earth, so maybe I actually can._

They were quiet for several minutes, with Steve carding his fingers through Tony's hair until another thought occurred to him. Maybe Stane hadn't been in bed with HYDRA all along, given what Tony had found in the initial HYDRA documents that mentioned Peter, but Steve wouldn't doubt for a second that Stane had been involved with the Ten Rings for quite a long time. From what he and James had discussed way back when they were still searching for Tony and Peter in the desert, the Ten Rings had been just another small terrorist group for several years before they suddenly started taking credit for larger and more destructive events.

Which, from what Steve understood, must have meant that they had suddenly gotten their hands on a larger cache of money, money that they could then use to purchase illegal Stark Industries weapons. But then when Tony and Peter survived their captivity and Tony shut down his weapons manufacturing, well, that blew a big hole in their operation.

A hole that HYDRA could then fill.

"I can hear you thinking, babe," Tony mumbled.

Steve smiled despite himself. "That's usually my line."

"Yeah well, I guess both our thoughts are being extra loud tonight," Tony said as he lifted his head. "You wanna go first?"
With a heavy sigh, Steve shook his head. He never liked discussing his mission plans before he was done formulating them, and this was no exception.

"No. If it's okay with you, I'd like to ponder it a bit more myself first."

"Yeah, okay."

"Can you tell me what you're thinking?" Steve asked.

"I'm thinking about Pete," Tony said grimly. "And how this whole thing really fucking sucks."

"It does," Steve whispered. He pressed a soft kiss to Tony's forehead. "But that's not all, is it?"

"No, it's not."

"Can you tell me?"

Tony flopped backwards onto the bed, scrubbing his palms down his face. "What the hell kind of father am I if I'm thinking about the best way to use my own child in this crazy dream-sharing experiment? I mean, who's to say that it'll even do anything besides scare the hell out of Pete even more than he is already?"

"You're the best kind of father," Steve said firmly. He sat up in the middle of the bed, gathering Tony onto his lap. "Only someone who loves his child as much as you do would even consider doing something like this, because you know it's what's best for him, even if it's going to be incredibly painful for us to have to watch."

Tony's lower lip started to tremble. "Oh God, Steve, how in the hell are we gonna be able to do it? I don't know if—I don't think I could watch him hurt himself like he did, I don't think I can—"

"We won't let him get to that point, sweetheart," Steve said, cupping Tony's face in his hands. "We'll be watching to make sure that doesn't happen again. We'll both be with him."

"Both of us," Tony whispered. "Together."

"Both of us," Steve repeated. "Peter is my son too."

"Damn right he is," said Tony. "He was yours from the very first moment you saw him, just like he was for me."

Steve's breath hitched as he recalled the first time he laid eyes on his beloved boy. How close to death he had been, with his cold, mottled skin and blue lips, and the intense panic in Tony's eyes and voice as he begged Steve to do something—anything—to save him.

Tony had told Steve the story about the first time he saw Peter a couple of times. Peter had only been about twelve hours old, didn't even have a name yet, and the first thing the doctors had told Tony when he arrived at the hospital was that they weren't sure if the baby would last through the night. He was almost two months premature with underdeveloped lungs, and so couldn't rid his little body of enough carbon dioxide in order to get enough oxygen into his blood to keep him alive. He was on a respirator, and the doctors were doing all that they could to help him, but they warned Tony not to get too attached.

But from what Tony had told Steve, he'd had no choice but to get attached. Because as soon as he had laid his eyes on baby Peter for the first time, he was a goner.
And of course Peter had survived, defying all the odds stacked against him. He was small, but strong. "Steady as a rock," the doctors liked to say during his convalescence.

He was a survivor, just like Tony. Stark men really were made of iron.

And the neonatal unit of Mount Sinai hospital now had an entire wing named after the Starks, thanks to Tony's generous donations over the years for taking such good care of Peter.

"Peter is so strong, Tony, and I don't mean just physically," Steve said. "He can do this. We can help him do this."

Tony's shoulders sagged as his forehead thudded against Steve's collarbone. "This just sucks, Steve. I hate it. I hate all of it."

"Me too, sweetheart," Steve murmured into Tony's hair. He pressed his lips to Tony's temple and gently laid him back down, his head resting on Steve's chest. "Can you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Tell me another story about when Peter was little?"

He felt Tony chuckle against him. "Have I told you the one about when I found him trying to scale the outside of the second-floor bannister at the Malibu house when he was two?"

Steve's eyes went wide, his heart quickening. "No, not yet."

"Oh, that was a fun one," Tony said sarcastically. "I was down in the garage; I didn't know that he'd woken up from his nap and Rosa was off running an errand, so she wasn't around. I'd just moved him from his crib to a toddler bed a couple of days before that because he kept climbing out of the damn thing, so he was able to get out of bed, and we always kept the door cracked open because he freaked out when it was closed all the way, I could never figure out why."

"He still doesn't like his door closed tight most of the time," Steve said. Only very rarely did Peter ever have his bedroom door latched tight, it was usually cracked open a few centimetres.

"Yeah, that's true," agreed Tony. "So anyway, the little stinker wandered out of his room and into the hallway, and you would think that he'd call for someone, wouldn't you? But no, Pete apparently took one look at the safety gate across the top of the stairs, decided he didn't like it, and proceeded to climb up and over the damn thing and onto the outside of the banister."

"Oh my God!" Steve exclaimed, his heart leaping into his throat. "Tony, that would've been at least a—"

"He would've fallen at least fifteen feet if he'd've let go," Tony said grimly. "Yeah."

"So what did you do? And why didn't JARVIS warn you about what he was doing?"

"JARVIS wasn't quite to that point yet," answered Tony. "I got him there pretty quick after that happened, but it'd never even crossed my mind that the kid would climb up over the banister, you know? I mean, he was tiny, barely the size of a normal fifteen-month-old, and I didn't even think—"

"Shh," Steve said, halting Tony's self-deprecation in its tracks. "How'd you end up getting him down?"

Tony huffed out a sharp breath. "I heard him screaming for me. It's this weird thing when you're a
parent. You can be listening to music or be in the middle of a big crowd or something, but the moment your child yells for you it's like everything else goes silent and that's all you can hear. I had my music on so loud I'm surprised that Pete could even sleep at all, but when he yelled 'Dada' in the most panicked little voice it was like it cut right through everything else. And I don't think I ever raced up those stairs faster than I did that afternoon."

"Oh," Steve said, tears welling in his eyes. He didn't have to imagine Tony's panic, it was the same as he'd felt that first time he saw Peter clinging to his bedroom ceiling. "How'd you get him down?"

"I caught him," Tony said simply. "By the time I got there his little chubby hands were already slipping on the wood, so I just stood underneath him and held up my arms. I told him, 'you gotta let go, Petey, Daddy's gonna catch you.' And then he looked down at me, and he let go—"

"And you caught him," Steve whispered.

"Yeah, I did," Tony said, sniffing. "And I'm pretty sure I didn't put him down again for a long, long time. In fact, I might've set up another toddler bed in the garage after that, so he could nap where I could see him."

"That's 'cause you're such a good father, Tony," Steve said. "You always catch him."

Tony raised his head, looking deep into Steve's eyes. "I have to, Steve. He's my son. Our son."

"That's right, he's our son. You're not alone anymore. Now we're both here in case Peter falls, and we can both catch him." Steve paused, cupping Tony's cheek in his palm. "You don't have to do this alone, I'm right here with you. Beidh mé i gcónaí anseo leat. I'll always be here with you."

Tony's lower lip trembled, and he caught it between his teeth. "He'll be okay, right?"

"He will, Tony, I promise you," Steve said. "We'll make sure of it. Both of us."

"Together," Tony murmured.

Steve nodded, pressing a soft kiss to Tony's forehead.

"Together."

"Okay, guys, I think we're ready," Bruce said as he attached the final electrode to Peter's temple. Bucky was already set up in his room on the opposite side of the floor, with Sam and Clint keeping physical watch along with continuous video monitoring feeding into Bruce's workstation. It hadn't taken long at all to convince Bucky to go along with the plan once he learned how much Peter was suffering. He had been so despondent over what he considered his part in Peter's misery that even Tony had tried to comfort him, telling him it wasn't his fault that he'd been captured and tortured by a terrorist organisation.

In fact, that was something that both Bucky and Tony had in common.

"Thank you, Bruce," Steve murmured as he clung to Peter's hand, waiting for the sedative Bruce gave him to kick in, one that was specially designed not to interfere with the stage of sleep necessary for dreaming. Tony was perched on his opposite side, his fingers combing through Peter's hair as Peter stared up at the ceiling, his jaw set tight and his brown eyes determined, even as Steve could see the fear threatening to break through.

"You're gonna be okay, little guy," Steve said, softly enough that only Peter could hear him. "Dad
and I won't leave your side, okay?"

Peter gave him an almost imperceptible nod, rolling onto his side and cuddling a spare pillow to his chest. His eyelids were getting heavier, struggling to stay open against the sedative. It wouldn't be long now.

"Sleep tight, buddy," Tony whispered as he smoothed the hair off of Peter's forehead, leaning over to kiss him. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

"Uh huh," Peter murmured. "'Night, Daddy."

Three minutes later he was sound asleep.

"Okay," Bruce said quietly as he tapped a command into his keyboard, displaying a readout of Peter and Bucky's brain waves. "If we see both of them enter into REM sleep around the same time, chances are good that they're dream-sharing."

"And that means, what?" Tony asked.

"It means we watch, and we wait," Bruce said. "And if it gets to the point where they start thrashing around like they're going to hurt themselves, then I'll administer an antidote to the sedative and we wake 'em up. Simple as that. And if that doesn't happen, then once they're out of the REM stage, we wake them up and see what they remember."

"Yeah," Tony said with a huff. "Simple as that." He looked up at Steve, fear evident in his eyes. "Whatever it takes."

Steve's jaw was tight as he nodded, reaching around their sleeping boy's head for Tony's hand. This had to work, it just had to. There was too much at stake for it not to.

"That's right, sweetheart," Steve murmured, giving Tony's fingers what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. "Whatever it takes."

Stop by and see me on Tumblr, I'm **geekymoviemom** and **geeky-writes** there! :)

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see what you guys think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a comment! :)
The wind was cold and dry as it whipped past Peter's cheeks, the streetlights bathing the darkened two-lane highway in a pale, yellowish light that shimmered, almost like it was glowing. He was driving a motorcycle, very similar to the vintage motorcycle he and Dad had just given Papa for his birthday, intended to replace the one that was lost in the Malibu house bombing. The steady hum of the motor was loud but not painfully so, and Peter found it almost soothing as he approached the old Cadillac with the New York license plates that was carrying the objective of his current mission.

They never fully explained to him the purposes behind any of his missions, and he never bothered to ask. He figured it was easier to concentrate on the hows if he didn't have to know the whys. Why he'd been ordered to kill that engineer in Iran when he had a wife and several children back at home. Why he'd been ordered, by any means necessary, to confiscate the contents of the metal briefcase in the trunk of that important SHIELD scientist's car so close to Christmas.

Why he'd been ordered to fire missiles at a mansion on the Malibu coast, and kill someone named Steve Rogers.

And why did that name sound so familiar?
He didn't like knowing the names of his targets. It was easier when he didn't. Attaching names to faces always made his target seem more human, and Peter was no longer a human.

He was a monster. Moulded and warped into a killing machine, a mindless assassin whose only purpose was to carry out his mission.

Peter downshifted as he came up alongside the Cadillac, pulling out his gun and shooting out the front passenger tire. The car immediately swerved, crashing head-on into a tree as Peter flew past it. He circled around, his gun at the ready as he approached the trunk, easily popping the lock with his metal hand. Inside sat the briefcase, just like he'd been briefed. Peter quickly opened it, ensuring that its contents were unharmed—which looked vaguely familiar for some reason—then walked around to the front of the car, where the driver, a white-haired man probably in his early seventies, had just fallen out onto the ground.

"There can be no witnesses," his handler's voice said inside his mind, and Peter cringed at the reminder. It's not like there was any way they were going to find him. He was a legend, a ghost story. Something his Soviet trainers probably told their children about in order to get them to mind.

"You better behave, or the Winter Soldier will come and get you."

Even so, he'd been ordered to leave behind no witnesses, and Peter was a good soldier. He always followed orders.

"Help my wife, please," the man was mumbling as he attempted to crawl free of the crashed-up car. His head snapped up in horror as Peter stepped over to him, gun in hand.

"Please, my wife, you have to help her," he said, his eyes narrowing as his head tilted slightly, almost like he was trying to place Peter.

"Do I know you?" the man asked, his breath coming in stilted gasps, sending small puffs of white into the frigid night. "You look so... familiar?"

The man made a face then, one of confusion mixed with suspicion and one that looked so much like one of Dad's expressions that it suddenly hit Peter, like a punch to the gut.

He'd been ordered to kill Howard Stark. He'd been ordered to kill his own grandfather.

"Who are you?" Howard asked, more out of curiosity than panic now. "You look so much like my son, who are you? What's your name?"

But Peter didn't answer. He wasn't supposed to engage with his targets. He was only supposed to eliminate them.

"Tell me your name, son," Howard said, pleading now as he fell back against the side of the car. Blood trickled down the side of his head, staining the pristine white collar of his shirt. "You look so much like my own son, I have to know your name. Please, tell me your name!"

"Quiet!" Peter blurted out, the word being forcibly pulled from his frozen throat as he holstered his gun. "I don't have a name!"

"Everyone has a name, son," Howard said. "Everyone. Even people like you."

People like me, Peter thought, his lips twitching in indignation. What the hell?

"What does that mean, people like me?" he demanded. "What's wrong with me?"
"Nothing," Howard said quickly. He reached for his necktie, blotting the cut on his head with the end of it. "Absolutely nothing."

Suddenly, it was as if a switch had been flipped inside Peter's mind. Peter looked down, gasping as he noticed the metal covering his left arm and hand.

"No, no, no, no," he whimpered, trailing the fingertips of his right hand down the smooth, cool metal. "This isn't right, I'm not supposed to have this. I'm not who you think I am, I'm not! I swear that I'm not!"

"Then who are you?" Howard asked. "Tell me your name."

"I'm not… this!" Peter cried, holding his metal arm out into the beam of the streetlight, squinting as the shimmery yellow light glinted off its surface and shone into Peter's eyes. "This isn't me! I'm not the Winter Soldier, I'm just a kid! I'm not supposed to be here!"

"Tell me your name, son, and I can help you!" Howard said, more forceful now. "All you have to do is tell me your name!"

Peter's chest heaved and tears stung his eyes as he grabbed the gun out of the holster on his hip, tossing it deep into the wooded area off the side of the road.

"This isn't me!" he yelled, his words echoing in the freezing night air, bouncing off the trees and causing him to clap his hands over his ears, his metal fingertips digging painfully into his scalp. "My name is Peter Stark-Rogers, and this isn't real!"

"Peter Stark-Rogers?" Howard said slowly, disbelieving. "Are you sure?"

"Peter Stark-Rogers," Peter repeated. "My father is Tony Stark, and my papa is Steve Rogers."

"Are you sure?" Howard asked again, his voice echoing inside Peter's head as Peter dropped to his knees, curling into a tight ball in the middle of the freezing street.

"My name is Peter Stark-Rogers. I'm thirteen years old. My father is Tony Stark. My papa is Steve Rogers. I live in New York, in Avengers' Tower. This isn't real, I'm not supposed to be here!"

What is real, if not this? asked the voice inside his head.

"I'm real!" Peter cried, letting out a pained gasp as his metal fingertips dug further into his skin, reciting his frantic mantra faster and faster. "This isn't real! My name is Peter Stark-Rogers. I'm thirteen years old. My father is Tony Stark. My papa is Steve Rogers. I live in New York, in Avengers' Tower. I work in Qu—"

"I said that's enough!" another voice suddenly said, one that Peter couldn't see but seemed to be coming from directly beside him. "He's hurting himself again, get him the hell outta there right now!"

"Please, Bruce, you gotta get him back now!" commanded yet another voice, a bit less panicked than the first but just as frantic. "Little guy, it's gonna be okay, just try and concentrate on my voice, all right? You're gonna be okay, Dad and I are both here with you. You're safe."

"Goddamnit, Bruce, what the hell's taking so long? He's trying to crush his head in!"

"His metabolism is a bit faster than I thought, Tony, just give me a second!"
"Steve, you gotta get ahold of his hands, like right this damn second!"

"It's all right, Peter, you're gonna be all right. We're both here with you."

"My name is Peter Stark-Rogers!" Peter screamed, his head nearly splitting in two from the pain as something strong wrapped around both of his wrists, trying to yank his hands away from his head. "I'm thirteen years old! My father is Tony Stark! My papa is Steve Rogers! I live in New York, in Avengers' Tower! I work in—"

"Peter, wake up!"

Peter gasped as his eyes flew open, barely registering where he was before leaning over the side of the bed and barfing up the entire contents of his stomach into the trash can.

That's so unbelievably disgusting! he thought as his heart skittered in his chest, squirming from the icky layer of sweat covering his body. He slumped back onto the bed, his stomach still churning from the strong scent of blood, blinking his eyes open as the frightened faces of his dads came into focus.

"Careful there, little guy," said the shaky but soothing voice of Papa, looking more worried than Peter had seen in a long time as he took a small towel from Uncle Bruce, pressing it against Peter's scalp behind his ear. "Your head's bleeding a bit, let me help you."

"Gah!" Peter gasped, his eyes squeezing closed as Papa carefully blotted the blood from his head. "I freaked out again. I thought I was—I was—"

"Shh, it's okay, buddy," whispered Dad, patting Peter's head. "You're back now. You're safe."

"But I'm not!" Peter cried, wincing at the rawness of his throat and shuddering as Dad's fingers raked through his sweaty hair. "How can I be safe when I see all of these horrible things?"

"They're just dreams, buddy," Dad said, low and tight. He was really upset, and also doing a really lousy job of hiding it. "They're just really scary dreams, they're not real."

But they are! Peter screamed inside his head. Because I saw them, I saw my grandfather, I saw how Uncle Bucky took out his car, I saw it because…

"I was Uncle Bucky," he blurted out. "It was like I was him when he—when he—"

"When he what, Peter?" Papa asked.

"Damnit, Steve, the poor kid doesn't have to go through the whole thing again right this second, does he?" barked Dad. "Can't we help him get cleaned up first?"

"Of course we can, but Bruce said if they don't talk about what they saw fairly soon that they'll start to forget, so I just thought—"

"Steve, I don't think—" Uncle Bruce started.

"I don't fucking care anymore, Steve!" shouted Dad, prompting Peter to clap his hands over his ears, disrupting the cuts that Papa had just blotted clean. "Don't you think that our son's health and sanity is worth more than a few goddamn scraps of tactical information?"

"Tony," Papa said, his eyes radiating hurt. "You know that I do."

"Please!" Peter cried as he curled into a tight ball on the bed, his head pounding so hard it felt like it...
was splitting in two. "Please, Daddy, just… please stop yelling, it's too loud!"

"Oh God, Pete," Dad said, his face crumpling as he gingerly reached for Peter, positioning him so his ear was pressed up against the arc reactor. "I'm—I'm so sorry, buddy. I should've known better."

"I think we're all a bit freaked out here," Uncle Bruce said, rather tactfully. "So maybe it would be best if you guys helped Peter get cleaned up while I go and check on Bucky, yeah?"

"Thank you, Bruce," Papa said with a nod. He waited until Uncle Bruce left the room, then turned back to Peter. "I think Dad should help you tonight, okay little guy? You're still pretty shaky and I don't want you to fall, especially since your head is still bleeding."

Peter shivered, his teeth chattering as the adrenaline seeped from his body. As much as he wished he could just forget what he saw, he knew that the whole experiment would be for nothing if he didn't at least tell them about it.

Plus, he absolutely hated when his dads bickered. Especially about him.

"I was Uncle Bucky," he said again. "The night he—the night he killed—"

"Buddy, just stop, okay?" Dad murmured into Peter's hair. "You don't have to do this."

"Dad's right, Peter," Papa said with a sigh. "You don't have to talk about it if it's too hard."

Peter glanced up at Dad, whose jaw was so tight that Peter was surprised all of his teeth were still intact. "If I don't it'll all be for nothing, right?" he said, frowning when Dad rolled his eyes and glared at Papa. "The video we saw in the HYDRA documents didn't show us everything because of the camera angle, but this time I saw more, so—" He paused then, inhaling a shaky breath. "I know why Uncle Bucky was sent to kill Dad's mom and dad."

Dad's fingers halted their combing through Peter's hair, the frown lines between his eyebrows deepening.

"Okay, little guy," Papa said gently, placing a tentative hand on Dad's arm. "Can you tell us?"

"He was after something that Grandpa had in his trunk. It was in a briefcase that was locked, some kind of medicine or something."

"Medicine?" Dad asked, barely holding his temper intact. "Why the hell would Howard be transporting medicine? Howard wasn't involved at all on the pharmaceutical side of Stark Industries so that doesn't make any sense, and it doesn't make any sense that HYDRA would even care either, so—"

"It was blue," Peter blurted out, the memory of why the medicine bags had looked so familiar hitting him like a sledgehammer. Peter had read all the comic books, and Papa had told him the story of his transformation into Captain America so many times that he had the whole thing memorised, and he highly doubted that it was just a coincidence.

"It was blue, just like Papa's serum," Peter repeated. He raised his head, looking directly into his father's worried eyes. "I think Grandpa had developed another super-soldier serum, and I think HYDRA knew about it so they killed him. They killed him so they could take it."

A leaden silence filled the room as both Dad and Papa struggled to process the information. Finally, Papa looked at Dad, gently squeezing his arm.
"It makes sense, Tony, don't you think?" he murmured. "Agent Coulson told me way back during the Chitauri invasion that various agencies and organisations had been trying to replicate Dr Erskine's formula ever since he was killed. Even Bruce was involved in a project like that for awhile, so it makes sense that Howard would've been too."

Dad was quiet for a long time, breathing slow, deliberate breaths, his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists on Peter's back. "He just couldn't leave well enough alone, could he?" he finally said, so low that Peter had to strain to hear him. "He was so goddamn obsessed that he just had to do it. And look where it got him. Dead."

"I highly doubt that Howard did it all on his own, Tony," Papa said gently. "I have to think that the other scientists at SHIELD had some involvement with it too."

Dad scoffed, his lips curling into a sneer as he stared at Papa. "Doesn't really matter though, does it? He was so goddamn obsessed with you that he just had to do it, and all it ended up doing in the end was get my mom killed and the damn stuff stolen!"

"Dad, none of this Papa's fault," Peter said, very carefully as he crawled off of Dad's lap, turning to face him. "You know that, right? I mean, he was still in the ice when all this was happening, so there's no way that he could've—"

"Peter—" Papa started.

"I know it, Pete," Dad interrupted. "But it still doesn't change the fact that Howard's obsessions ended up pushing him away from everyone that mattered and got my mother killed."

"That may be true, Tony, and you know how sorry I am about that," Papa said as he gently curled his arm around Dad's waist. "But we can't do anything about it now. What we should be concentrating on is trying to figure out what HYDRA did with the serum after it was taken."

"Hmph," Dad grumbled as he looked away. "Why don't you just ask your old buddy there down the hall, I'm sure he'd know."

"Daddy, it wasn't Uncle Bucky's fault either. He didn't even know who Grandpa was until—"

"Until what, Pete?" asked Dad. "Until he bashed in Howard's head? Until he choked my mother to death? Is that when he figured it out?" He shoved Papa's arm off of him, looking more angry than Peter had seen in a long time. "I want that asshole out of this building. Right now, I want him gone."

"Tony, it's almost three in the morning—"

"Now, goddamnit!" Dad snapped. "All Barnes has done since he's been around us is cause everyone a whole lot of grief, and I want him the hell out! Now!"

"Daddy, please, listen to me!" Peter cried as he grabbed onto his father's arm. Tears welled in his eyes, spilling down his cheeks as he recalled that panicked feeling when he—or Uncle Bucky—recognised who Howard was. "This wasn't Uncle Bucky's fault! He didn't even know what he was doing because HYDRA had control of his mind. And I know this because I can feel it when I dream." He paused as he glanced over at Papa, whose face had gone completely white. "It's like you're just a puppet, with HYDRA or whoever else controlling the strings. In this last dream I didn't know my name, I didn't know anything about Grandpa, I didn't even know that Grandma was in the car until Grandpa said so. And they always say to leave no witnesses. Before every mission they say to leave no witnesses, so Uncle Bucky couldn't help it. He was only doing what he'd been programmed to do, Dad, he couldn't help it."
Dad shot Papa a murderous look, his fingers slowly curling around his left forearm. "If all that's true, buddy, then why were you yelling your name over and over while we were trying to wake you up?"

Peter let out a hard shudder, prompting Papa to gather him close, rubbing his palms up and down Peter's arms. "Because while I was still in there, I finally realised that something was wrong. Grandpa kept asking me who I was, what my name was, and then it was like something just snapped inside my head and I realised that I wasn't supposed to be there. That it wasn't really my dream."

"It's all right, little guy," Papa murmured into his hair. "You're safe now."

"But you can't know that, Steve," Dad said, sounding so defeated that Peter's heart gave a lurch. "There's no way you can plan or strategise for any of this, there's no way that we can predict the next time that Barnes will worm his way into Peter's mind and start messing around. There's no way we can know—"

"I'm well aware of that, Tony, you don't need to tell me," Papa said. "But I also know that there's no way that Bucky would ever try and hurt Peter. Peter is his friend, right now even more so than I am, and Bucky would never willingly hurt any of his friends."

Dad's jaw dropped, gaping at Papa. "He tried to kill you, Steve! Multiple times! He tried to kill Peter, he tried—"

"As the Winter Soldier, Tony," Papa stated in his Captain's voice. "Only as the Winter Soldier. As Bucky, I can't count the number of times that he saved my life, both before the war and during it. He even saved my life on the day that I thought he died." He reached tentatively for Dad's hand, relieved when Dad didn't try to pull it away. "Please, sweetheart, this isn't Bucky's fault. You have to trust me."

It was a testament to how much Dad loved Papa that he was even able to consider what Papa was saying without completely flying off the handle, and Peter knew that Papa knew it. Despite his brave words earlier, he was still shaking so badly from his nightmare that it was all he could do to stay still enough to keep the shampoo from getting into his eyes as Dad rinsed it out.

"There ya go, buddy," Dad murmured as he gently patted Peter dry. "That should help you feel better."

"Thank you," Peter whispered.
A rather sad smile played on Dad's lips as he handed Peter his pyjamas. "It's been awhile since I've done that for you," he said. "I've kinda missed it."

"It's no big deal, Dad," Peter said, stifling a yawn as he pulled his shirt over his head, careful to avoid his wounded scalp. "I'm tired."

"I'm not surprised. You've had quite the eventful night," Dad said. They exited the bathroom to find Papa talking to Uncle Bruce, who was packing up his equipment.

"Is Uncle Bucky doing okay?" Peter asked as he crawled onto his freshly made bed.

"He's better now. Sam's in there with him," Papa answered. "He wasn't quite as rattled as you were, little guy, probably because he understood the context better than you did. He was mostly upset about the fact that you had to experience it with him."

"Mmm," Peter grumbled. His head was still throbbing where he'd bruised it, and his whole body ached from stress and exhaustion.

"Tired. Wanna sleep now."

"Yeah, okay," Dad said as he cuddled up next to Peter, with Papa taking his place on Peter's opposite side. "Goodnight, buddy."

"Sleep now, Peter, we're both here with you."

"Uh huh. Night." Peter closed his eyes, trying to focus only on the sound of Dad's hum and Papa's heartbeat as he waited for sleep to take him, and ignore the images from his nightmare replaying in his head like some messed up photo slideshow.

The images that included a perfect view of the contents of that metal briefcase in Howard Stark's trunk, and the five intravenous bags of serum placed carefully inside.

Five intravenous bags of serum, for five additional Winter Soldiers, bringing the total to six.

Six Winter Soldiers.

Just like in Peter's nightmares.

Steve sighed as he approached the closed door to Bucky's room, rubbing at the stubborn crick in his neck. He hadn't been able to sleep at all the previous night, spending half of it watching Peter go through his nightmare and the other half lying awake next to him, wondering how in the world he was going to be able to plan or strategise his way out of this. Tony was right; there was no way they could ask Peter to willingly go through something like that again, especially since Steve had been barely able to keep Peter from severely injuring himself in the process.

Steve didn't like to admit it, but Peter was stronger than him, and that strength would likely only continue to increase as he grew.

Unfortunately, no one seemed to be sure how they could prevent Peter's nightmares from occurring without halting his REM sleep patterns completely, which, in speaking with Bruce and Tony, wasn't healthy either for a child Peter's age. Bruce had theorised that Peter's close proximity to Bucky was at least partially responsible for triggering the shared nightmares, aided by his theory that Bucky and Peter both received the same memory-control drug. Steve supposed that made sense, but given the fact that Peter had been suffering from pretty intense nightmares ever since they returned from
Afghanistan, he felt there had to be more to it than that.

Perhaps it even had something to do with Peter's extra premonition sense, which Tony had taken to calling his Spider Sense? Steve couldn't really argue with that, especially since they didn't really even understand why or how Peter's Spider Sense actually worked aside from the obvious ability to sense approaching danger.

The only fault with the Spider Sense theory was the fact that the worst of Peter's nightmares seemed to be the ones that he shared with Bucky. They were all Bucky's dreams, as if Peter had just somehow been dropped into them. Those had been the only dreams—at least so far—that had resulted in Peter trying to hurt himself.

Which happened to be the main reason why Steve was hesitating outside of Bucky's door. None of this was Bucky's fault, Steve was absolutely convinced of that. But trying to convince Bucky of the same would be difficult, made even more so by the fact that Tony wanted Peter to stay away from Bucky for awhile. Bucky adored Peter, and was already feeling tremendous guilt over what had happened the night before. He was sure to start missing him as the days wore on.

Bucky had been tortured and used by HYDRA for over half a century. The last thing he needed now was more guilt weighing on his conscience.

Squaring his shoulders, Steve knocked on the door. A couple seconds later he heard the click of the lock as it unlatched and it opened a few centimetres to reveal Bucky's piercing blue eyes.

"Стив," Bucky said, low and gravelly. There were deep purple circles under his eyes and his hair was unkempt, hanging over his forehead. He obviously hadn't gotten anymore sleep the previous night either.

"Hey, Buck," Steve said quietly. "Do you mind if I come in?"

Bucky hesitated a few seconds before nodding and stepping back, holding open the door as Steve entered the room. It was laid out much like his room at the Tower, minus the padded walls and Hulk-sized bed. Sam had recommended that they keep Bucky's environments as similar as possible to avoid confusing him, adding things slowly to give him time to adjust. As such, there was now an easel and a selection of paints set up in one corner of the room, closest to the windows to take advantage of the natural light, and the walls were decorated with a couple of posters of the Brooklyn Dodgers and another of the World's Fair, the very same World's Fair where both Bucky and Steve saw Howard Stark for the first time.

Steve sat down in the armchair next to the loaded bookshelf, with Bucky taking a seat on the end of the bed, awkwardly flexing and contracting his metal fingers, his face impassive.

"How's Петр?" he asked after several seconds of uncomfortable silence.

"He was able to get some sleep after… everything, so he's doing all right," answered Steve. "I took him to the gym with me this morning, and he's with Tony in the lab right now, they're working on something or other. We're trying to keep him busy… Tony thinks it'll help, maybe tire him out more so he can sleep better."

Bucky gave a nod, dropping his gaze to his hands. "That's good. Keeping busy is good."

"Bucky, what happened last night wasn't your fault," Steve said gently. "Tony and I don't blame you for it, and neither does Peter."

"Maybe not," Bucky said as his eyes filled with tears. "But I do. I don't want Петр to get hurt..."
because of something I did."

Steve huffed out a heavy sigh. "He was fine this morning. Peter heals pretty fast, like you and I do, so the cuts on his head have mostly healed up already."

"It's not the cuts on his head that I worry about," said Bucky, shaking his head. "I don't want him… messed up. Messed up like I am."

"You're not messed up," Steve said quickly. "You're just… HYDRA had you under their control for almost six decades, Buck, and that's not something that you can get rid of just like that. Sam says it's a miracle that you're doing as well as you are, and I agree."

Bucky's lips twitched in the corners. "Петр мой друг. Я не хочу причинять ему боль."

"Peter is your friend, and you're not hurting him," Steve said, slow and deliberate. He'd been working on his Russian lately at Sam's recommendation. "What's happened is all HYDRA's fault, not yours. HYDRA took you and turned you into something that you're not, and Peter is so intuitive and empathetic, it's no wonder that he can feel what you feel so strongly. He might have told you this already, but he can… sense things, dangerous things, and he doesn't sense anything like that around you. He only sees you as another member of his family, and like pretty much all the members of his family, we all need a bit of help every now and then."

"Maybe, Стив," Bucky said sadly, avoiding Steve's eyes. "But I'm not sure that I'm worth all of this. I've already caused so much trouble, and—"

"I disagree," Steve said in his Captain's voice. "And so does Peter."

"Но как насчет Тони? Я не хочу причинять ему боль также. Я его уже достаточно боль обидел."

Steve pursed his lips, his eyes trained on the wedding ring encircling his finger. "Tony knows that what you did wasn't your fault. He and his father had a… complicated relationship, so it's taking some time for him to come to grips with what happened now that he knows the truth. But he doesn't blame you. Not really. What you did all those years, that wasn't you. You didn't have a choice."

"I know," Bucky answered, as easily as if Steve had just told him that the sky was blue. "But I still did it."

"That's actually one reason why I'm here," Steve said after a short pause. He squared his shoulders, looking Bucky straight in the eye. "I'd like to ask you some questions, if that's okay? Ever since the whole mess with Project Insight we've been trying to hunt down and eliminate the rest of the scattered HYDRA cells, and it would help us quite a bit if there was anything you could tell us that you've seen in your dreams lately."

Bucky dropped his head, his long hair hanging across his face. "Go ahead," he said softly.

"All right," Steve murmured, clearing his throat. "Peter told us last night that he saw what you were after when you… something that Howard Stark was transporting in his car. Some kind of medicine or serum?"

"Yeah?" Bucky murmured.

"Can you tell me what it was? Please? Peter said it was blue, which leads me to think that it might've been—"
"Петр прав," Bucky said, in that cold, calculating voice that Steve had already grown to hate. "HYDRA этого хотели."

It took Steve a moment to translate what Bucky said in his mind, his heart pounding as it came to him. "Was it a super-soldier serum, Bucky?"

"Да."

"Can you tell me who you gave it to?"

"Мои обработчики," he replied. "Они этого хотели."

"Your handlers. HYDRA wanted it," Steve said.

"Да."

"What for?" Steve asked, dreading the answer. Please no, please no, please—

"They wanted to make more of me," Bucky stated, his words piercing Steve's heart like a bullet. "I'm not the only Winter Soldier. There's five others. During the Cold War, the HYDRA cell in the Soviet Union theorised that the right person in the right place at the right time with the right skills could be more effective than an entire army."

"Oh my God," Steve breathed as he slumped back into the chair, his hands clenching into fists. From all the stories Natasha had told him about the legends of the Winter Soldier, one of them was bad enough. There was no telling the havoc that could be unleashed with six of them available.

"Why?" he asked, again, dreading the answer.

Bucky let out a morbid chuckle, his lips curling into a sort of half-smirk.

"Why not? They're an elite death squad, with more kills than anyone in HYDRA history. They can speak thirty languages, can hide in plain sight. Infiltrate, assassinate, destabilise. They could take a whole country down in one night, and you'd never see them coming."

Steve shook his head. "Do you know where they are?"

"Да," answered Bucky. "В сибири."

"Siberia," Steve repeated slowly as his blood ran cold. *Oh God, why'd it have to be someplace like that?* "Are you sure? Could they have been moved somewhere else after HYDRA was discovered?"

"Not likely," Bucky replied. "My mission to confiscate the serum wasn't sanctioned by the whole of HYDRA. It was specific to the Soviet Union handlers in charge of where I was kept."

*Thank you, Peter, for your adoration of history,* Steve thought. What had once been known as the Soviet Union was still just Russia the last time Steve had been aware, prompting Peter to spend nearly an entire week over that first summer in Malibu explaining to Steve all of the changes that had happened in world governments since 1945.

"And after the Soviet Union fell?" he asked.

"That was only like a week or so later," Bucky said with a shrug. "As far as I know the rest of HYDRA didn't know about them. They could still be up there, on ice."

Steve let out a violent shiver at the thought. Even now after all the time that had passed, he still
couldn't shake the fear of being immersed in ice again.

"Still be frozen," he said.

"Да."

"Then we should probably go and make sure for ourselves," Steve said, almost more to himself than to Bucky. *So much for a relaxing summer.*

"Who? You?" asked Bucky.

"Not alone, I'll take Natasha and Clint with me," answered Steve. "And we should leave as soon as possible. If these guys are as bad as you say they are, then I want to know where they are." He got to his feet, prompting Bucky to do the same. "Do you think you can describe the facility for me?"

A shadow fell across Bucky's face, and he gave his head a slight shake, his eyes flitting over to the easel set up by the windows. "I can do you one better than that, Стивичик. I can draw it for ya."

Steve let out a smile as he clapped Bucky on the shoulder. "You're right, that's even better. Thank you, Buck."

"Не за что, Стивичик," Bucky said with a nod. "I would offer to come with ya, but I'm not sure if —"

"That's okay," Steve said quickly, squeezing Bucky's shoulder. "I think you've had enough of fighting, haven't you?"

Bucky gulped as he nodded. "Да. Хватит на всю жизнь."

"Then I wouldn't ask you to——"

"I'd still do it, though," Bucky interrupted. "For Петр."

Steve's heart lurched at Bucky's words, so similar to the words he'd spoken to Steve just before they had set out to destroy HYDRA during the war. Tony was right, there wasn't a person alive who could resist their beloved boy. He would even go so far as to believe that Peter could have somehow talked some sense into Hitler if he'd been given the chance.

He also hoped beyond hope that there would never be a need for Bucky to fulfill that particular vow. For everyone's sake.

"Let's hope that I'll never have to take you up on that," Steve said quietly. "For now you just concentrate on getting better, all right?"

Bucky nodded as he stepped towards the easel, picking up a piece of worn charcoal. "I think I am," he said as he started making broad, sweeping strokes on the huge pad of paper that quickly blended into the shape of a bunker. "There are things that I'm starting to remember, and others that are becoming clearer. I can better see the difference between the clear memories and the shiny ones now."

"Shiny," Steve said, his brow furrowing. "You mentioned that before, what does it mean?"

"I dunno yet," answered Bucky, now starting down at the far corner of the paper with thinner, winding strokes that became a road surrounded by thick evergreen trees. Bucky had always been much faster at drawing than Steve. "Sam likes to say that time will tell, and I suppose he knows
better than me, so…"

"It will, Buck," Steve said, thick with determination. "I promise, it will."

"Always with the promises, Стивичик," said Bucky with a sort of sad smile. "Don't go on making promises that you can't keep."

"Bucky—"

"I should have this done by tonight," Bucky said dismissively, turning back to his drawing.

Steve's face fell as he nodded. "All right. Thank you."

"Да. You're welcome."

"You're gonna go where?" Tony snapped, glaring bullets at Steve from the doorway of their bathroom, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"You heard me, Tony," Steve said as he scrubbed at his face with a washcloth, probably a bit too roughly for how pink his cheeks were when he was done. His patience was already wearing thin, and he was not in the mood for one of Tony's lectures at the moment. "Natasha, Clint, and I are heading to Siberia in two days. Bucky thinks that—"

"You're heading to Siberia. But why in the hell are you heading to Siberia? Oh, wait, don't answer that. You don't have to because I already know."

"Tony—"

"It's because Bucky told you to go there, isn't that it? And of course if Bucky thinks you should go then you're just gonna go, right? I mean, if he says jump, you say—"

"Don't," Steve snapped, dropping the cloth into the sink. He stepped over to Tony, taking him carefully by the arms. "Please, just don't. I know you don't really mean it, but I still don't want to hear it. Not tonight."

"Oh, you know me so well," Tony grumbled, even as his head tipped forward, thudding against Steve's collarbone as his hands fisted into the front of Steve's t-shirt. Emotion welled up inside Steve as he curled his arms around Tony's waist, burying his nose in his hair.

"I do know you so well, sweetheart," he whispered. "And because of that I know you tend to lash out when you're scared. But please, I wouldn't do this if I didn't think it was important."

"I know that, honey," Tony mumbled into his chest. "But geez, Siberia? I mean, how're you gonna be able to handle going someplace like that?"

"I'll be fine," Steve said. At least, I hope so. Truth be told Steve wasn't at all thrilled about the prospect of going to a place that would so closely resemble where he was frozen for so many years, but he didn't see how he had a choice in the matter. If Bucky said those other Winter Soldiers were being kept in Siberia, then the team needed to go there and investigate.

"I should go with you," Tony said. "You know I hate when you go off on these missions without me."

"No, not this time," answered Steve. He pressed a kiss to Tony's temple, hugging him even closer. "Peter needs at least one of us here with him right now, and it's just a reconnaissance mission
anyway, so the fewer the better."

"Yeah, so, then why do you have to go?" asked Tony. He lifted his head, staring up into Steve's eyes. "You could just send Clint and Natasha by themselves, you know. They're better spies than you are anyway."

"I know, but..." Steve's voice broke off as he struggled with how to articulate exactly why he needed to go as well. "Like I said, it should be a quick mission. One day out, three days at the most gathering intel, and one day back. I can be back in time to take Peter fishing again next weekend."

"Mmm," Tony said with a deep frown. "Your 1940's fatherly gallantry is showing again there, honey."

*Of course Tony would pick up on the exact reason why I need to go on this mission.*

"Is it?" Steve asked, rather sheepishly.

"Yep. And while I'm sure that Pete would agree that it is gallant of you, he would also agree with me when I say that it's not necessary for you to have to prove that you love him. He's very well aware of that fact, and so am I. There's no need for more of your unnecessary Gryffindor bravery."

Steve was quiet for several heartbeats. "I know it's not necessary," he finally said, hoping he sounded more convincing than he felt. "But I still need to anyway. He's my son, Tony, and I can't stand to watch him suffer like he's suffering. So if there's a chance that this bunker in Siberia can give us some of the answers that we're looking for, I'm gonna take it."

"Ah huh. And what're you gonna do if you find these other Winter Soldiers there?"

"I don't know," Steve said with a huff, another thing he always hated to admit. "Probably call Director Fury, he'd be the most likely person who'd know what to do with them. If they're as bad as Bucky says, it wouldn't be a good idea to have them out there, so—"

"Yeah, I'm sure Fury still has some connections he could tap into," said Tony. He sighed as he curled his tense body further into Steve's arms, his palms trailing up and down Steve's back.

"It's gonna be okay, sweetheart," Steve whispered. "I pro—"

"Don't, Steve," Tony cut in. "Don't say it because there's no way that you can. Just... let's go to bed, yeah?"

"Mmm," Steve murmured as he buried his nose into Tony's hair and closed his eyes, breathing in the intoxicating scent of his husband. It never ceased to amaze him how he could go from being furious with Tony to wanting him so badly it was almost painful in only a matter of seconds.

"To bed? Or to sleep?"

Tony let out a chuckle, leaning back and quirking an eyebrow. "What do you think, hot stuff? You're the one who's gonna be gone for almost a week."

Steve growled as he angled Tony's chin up so he could kiss him, his other hand slipping down to cup Tony's gorgeous ass. "JARVIS?" he asked as they broke for air. "Is Peter all right?"

"Master Peter is currently sleeping peacefully, Captain," JARVIS answered. "His vital signs are within his normal parameters."
"Okay, thank you."

"I believe we have a go, Captain," Tony said, already mouthing along Steve's jaw as Steve hiked him up, carrying him over to the bed.

_Tony was right_, Steve thought as he stripped them both out of their clothes with military-like precision. _Sex really is a wonderful distraction._

And married sex was by far the best kind.

"JARVIS, what's the time?" Tony asked as he flopped onto his stomach, knocking the tablet he'd been working on onto the floor. He had promised Steve before he left that he wouldn't stay up all night in the lab waiting for updates, but that didn't mean that he was able to actually get any sleep. Tony had gotten so used to sharing his bed with Steve that now it just felt huge, cold, and empty when he wasn't there.

"The time is currently 3:23am, sir, which is precisely eleven minutes later than the last time that you asked," answered JARVIS. "Which means it is currently 1423 at the location of Captain Rogers."

"Yeah, yeah, thanks," Tony grumbled. He leaned over the side of the bed, nearly pitching off as he struggled to pick up the fallen tablet. Steve's transponder signal was still broadcasting as strongly as ever, which at least meant that he and the others were all right, but the signal also hadn't moved more than a few metres in the last three hours either, which could mean any number of things.

And in Tony's worried and pessimistic mind, most of those things weren't good.

With a heavy sigh, Tony reached for the coffee cup resting on the bedside table, groaning when he realised it was only about a third full and completely stone-cold.

"I swear one of these days I'm gonna put a coffeemaker in every goddamn room of this place," Tony muttered as he slid off the bed, padding his way down the hall towards the kitchen. He was wearing one of Steve's sweatshirts, with the sleeve cuffs hanging down over his palms in something that Peter liked to call "sweater paws", and he burrowed down into it as far as he could as he got the coffee brewing, breathing in Steve's lingering scent.

He had just returned to the bedroom when the blinking blue dot on his tablet began to move, exiting whatever structure Steve was in and heading back towards the Quinjet.

"JARVIS," Tony said as he took a sip of his coffee. "Call—"

"Sir," JARVIS cut in. "Captain Rogers wishes to know if you're awake. Shall I tell him the truth?"

"Hell, yes, JARVIS, tell him to get on the damn line!"

Not three seconds later Steve's tired face appeared on Tony's tablet, sending Tony's heart rocketing into his throat. Steve looked spooked, and that was never good.

"Babe, what's going on—?"

"Are you and Peter all right?" Steve asked in his Captain's voice.

"Yeah, we're both fine," answered Tony. "JARVIS? Is Peter still fine?"

"Master Peter is currently sleeping peacefully, sir," JARVIS said. "However, you, sir, are not."
"Yeah, yeah," grumbled Tony. "See, babe? Pete's okay, and JARVIS could've told you that from there."

"I know, but I didn't want to use JARVIS too much inside the bunker in case there was surveillance," said Steve. He sank down onto one of the seats in the back of the jet, carefully removing his cowl. "They weren't there, Tony. The Winter Soldiers weren't there. We saw the capsules where they were being kept, but they were all empty. All five of them."

Tony's stomach dropped at the news. "Oh, shit," he said as he slumped back against the headboard, cursing again as hot coffee sloshed out of his cup onto his fingers.

"I don't think burning yourself is gonna help anything," Steve muttered.

"Nevermind that now," Tony grumbled, shaking the scorching hot droplets from his hand. "Just tell me what we're supposed to do next."

Steve's jaw twitched, the worry wrinkle forming between his eyebrows as he leaned closer to the screen. "That's the big problem, Tony," he said, almost like he was confessing a secret. "I don't know what to do next. I mean, right now we have no way of knowing how long they've been missing or where they are. Natasha and Clint are still in there trying to see if they can decipher anything that might answer these questions, but otherwise—"

"They could be anywhere," Tony finished. "Right? Isn't that what Barnes said? They can hide in plain sight?"

"Yeah."

"Well, shit."

"Yeah."

"Okay, so… best thing to do right now is for you guys to get your asses back here then," Tony said. "Don't you think?"

"We will as soon as Clint and Natasha are done in the bunker," replied Steve. He sucked in a shaky breath, his worry wrinkle growing deeper. "There's something else I need to tell you though, sweetheart."

Tony's belly gave a swoop at Steve's solemn tone. "Well, as long as you're not gonna tell me that you're leaving me for Barton, I think I'll be okay."

That at least drew a slight chuckle from Steve. "No way in hell," he said with an emphatic shake of his head. "In fact, I've been pretty much the third wheel on this trip. I think Clint's trying to pay me back for all the times he's walked in on us."

"What?" Tony exclaimed just as a hundred mental pictures that he had no business seeing flashed across his mind. "Jesus, Steve, I didn't need to know that!"

"I'm pretty sure that I didn't either," Steve said, shuddering. "Anyway, sweetheart, this is pretty serious. Are you sure you're okay hearing it over the phone?"

Tony gulped as his heart started to thud. "Well, now you gotta tell me, Steve, you know I have pretty much zero patience."

"Yeah, I know," Steve said quietly. He let out a heavy sigh, his blue eyes radiating shame and
worry. "While we were searching the bunker, Natasha came across a container of notebooks, not too unlike the old notebooks of your father's that we went through back before you created the vibranium for your arc reactor. They're encrypted, written in some version of Russian shorthand or something, but Natasha was able to translate enough of one of them to give me some pretty incredible information."

"Yeah, okay," prompted Tony. "So, what is it?"

"So, it turned out that Howard still had some samples of my blood, from the forties after I underwent the serum procedure. And he used those as the backbone for his new serum, the batch that was stolen on that night in 1991—"

"Yeah, yeah, Steve, I get it," Tony interrupted. "Get to the point."

"What was stolen was the final product, Tony, the perfected batch, so to speak. But there were a few less-than-perfected batches along the way, and one of those was what he used on you when you were a baby. When you were sick, just like Peggy told us."

"Yeah," Tony whispered after several heartbeats of silence. "Yeah, that makes sense. That would explain how my genes got altered like they did."

"Right," answered Steve. "Dr Cho said that your gene wasn't quite as altered as mine because the serum wasn't perfected, but it was still enough to save your life."

"Sure," Tony said as he took another gulp of his coffee, cringing as it burned a fiery path down his throat. "But why the hell would this information be in some secret Soviet Siberian bunker?"

"Because the drug used to wipe Bucky's mind was also based on these unperfected batches of serum," Steve said. "And—"

"Yeah, I suppose that would also make sense," Tony started.

"And so was the drug that the Ten Rings used on Peter," Steve rushed out. "And according to these records, that drug's final development occurred at Stark Industries."

It took a few seconds for it to completely sink in.

"What?" exclaimed Tony. "Are you telling me that—?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you, Tony," Steve said, his jaw clenched as tightly as Clint's bowstrings. "Bruce was right, the two drugs are related, if not completely the same, and they were both based on information that Howard got from my blood samples." His voice broke off, and he hung his head in shame. "This is all my—"

"Don't!" Tony yelped. "Don't say it, don't even think it, Steve, 'cause it's not true."

"Tony—"

"I said, no!" yelled Tony. "Just, no, okay? That's not gonna get us anywhere." He bit down on his lower lip, nearly drawing blood. "Did the notebook say who their contact was at Stark Industries?"

"There wasn't a name listed anywhere that we could find," Steve answered. "Just a codename, Iron Monger."

Tony gasped, the coffee cup slipping from his hand and spilling all over the bed next to him as his
"That was my initial thought as well," Steve said, so full of self-loathing that Tony winced.

"There's no thought about it," Tony said as he clenched his left hand into a fist. "I know it's him. Obie used to tell me that we were iron mongers because we were so good at designing weapons. There's no one else that it could be." He scrubbed his palm down his face, his mind racing. "Does it tell you who the Iron Monger's contact was in the Ten Rings?"

"Yes, but again, it's just another codename," replied Steve. "The Mandarin."

"Oh my God," Tony breathed. He squeezed his eyes closed, curling his fingers around his left forearm and cursing the tingling pain. "The Mandarin is the leader of the Ten Rings, Steve. Yinsen told me that while we were prisoners."

"That was Nat's conclusion as well," Steve said. "I had her and Clint look things over to double-check me. I was… a bit upset."

"Ah huh," said Tony. "What'd you punch this time? Another wall?"

Steve looked up at him through his impossibly long eyelashes. "Yeah. Pretty sure I busted my pinky again too, damn thing was pure concrete."

"Steve—"

"I'll be fine, Tony—"

"Yeah, and you're a horrible liar," Tony snapped. "So don't even try with me, all right? Just tell me when you're coming back."

"Soon as Clint and Natasha are done looking around. I have all of the notebooks that we found here, I figured you and Bruce would want to take a look at them."

"Yeah, good call."

"All right. We'll be wheels-up as soon as Clint and Natasha get back, so should be back in about fourteen hours."

"Just in time for dinner," Tony said. He touched his fingers to the screen, wishing he was touching Steve's face instead. "Be safe, babe."

"We will," said Steve. "Tell Peter I'll see him soon. Love you."

"Love you too."

As soon as the screen went blank Tony slumped backwards, groaning as he rubbed at his temples. *Goddamnit, Howard. You got your goddamn super soldiers, so I sure hope that you're happy.*

"JARVIS?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is Pete okay?"

Tony could've sworn that he heard JARVIS sigh. *Master Peter is sleeping peacefully, sir. His vital signs are all within his normal parameters.*
"Yeah, okay. Thanks."

"Might I be so bold as to suggest that you attempt to do the same, sir?" asked JARVIS.

"You can go right ahead and suggest it. Won't do any good, though," Tony said as he stood up from the bed, frowning at the coffee stain covering the sheets. He'd have to deal with that later. "I need to get to the lab."

"I am sure that Captain Rogers does not expect you to be working at this hour, sir," JARVIS said as Tony skidded to a halt in the lab.

"Yeah well, I don't expect him to go on punching walls either, do I?" muttered Tony as he tapped his monitors to life. "Pull up the SI databases, J, pharmaceutical branch. Search for any drug starting with the letter C or with a C in its designation. Probably gonna be protein-based, so start with those first."

"Running search, sir," answered JARVIS as a holographic image of the database appeared next to Tony.

"There is nothing, sir," JARVIS said a moment later.

"Ah huh. Now look at the files that Obie pulled off-site, same search parameters."

Tony paced back and forth, fiddling with his wedding ring as JARVIS searched, jerking to a stop when the scrolling halted on a large molecular structure designated CTX-616.

"That it?" Tony asked as he studied the molecule, noting that its large size would limit it to being administered intravenously.

"It would appear so, sir," JARVIS said. "The structure is in some ways similar to various drugs used for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease."

"Which is probably how Obie managed to get it past all the regulations," muttered Tony. "Can you track its development?"

"Most of the documents are heavily redacted," JARVIS said, displaying a document covered in heavy black lines striking out most of the text. "However, it does mention that the drug never received official FDA approval."

"Ah huh," Tony said. "Does it say where it ended up?"

"There is a storage vault listed. However, that particular vault is currently empty, sir. Records show that the last time it was accessed was exactly three days prior to your trip to Afghanistan."

Tony huffed, gripping Steve's dog tags through his shirt. "And I don't suppose that it says where it got taken?"

"No, sir."

"Yeah, okay. Keep searching though, yeah? Any mention of the drug, Iron Monger, Obie, The Mandarin, anything, you let me know right away."

"Very good, sir. And Captain Rogers wishes for me to let you know that he, Agent Romanoff, and Agent Barton have taken off from Siberia."

"Good. Thanks."
In true anti-climatic fashion—or at least according to Tony—the rest of the summer passed rather uneventfully. Steve, Clint, and Natasha returned from Siberia with the notebooks in tow, which Tony and Bruce proceeded to spend the next few weeks pouring over, cross-referencing any snippet they found with information from the decrypted HYDRA documents and Obadiah's records from Stark Industries.

Unfortunately, they weren't able to make all that much headway on anything. As soon as they were able to make another small connection at least three roadblocks would fall in front of them, blocking any further progress, including a possible identity for the Mandarin. The lack of more usable information only served to frustrate everyone, including Peter, who begged and begged and begged to be allowed to see "Uncle Bucky" again so much that Tony finally couldn't take it anymore and gave in.

As much as Tony hated to admit it, he was afraid that there would be no way to crack anything else until Peter had another one of his funky dreams.

They celebrated their final weekend at the Compound by inviting Ned and his parents up for a huge birthday party for Peter, complete with a bonfire and fireworks. Three weeks later was Pepper and Happy's wedding, a grand affair held at the Four Seasons with both Tony and Peter serving as attendants in the ceremony and Steve looking as dashing as ever in his Army dress uniform. So dashing, in fact, that later that night after Peter was asleep, Tony and Steve decided to recreate all of the best parts from their own wedding night.

Tony was up to his elbows in armour components and propulsion system parts one afternoon when the music suddenly cut out in the lab.

"Incoming call from Ms Potts, sir," announced JARVIS.

"Yeah, J, put her through."

"Hey, Tony," Pepper said as her slightly tanned face appeared on the monitor. She and Happy had spent a week on some tropical island for their honeymoon, and had only returned a couple of days prior.

"Yeah, Pep, what's up? If you're looking for the new tablet specs I have those just about done, I just wanted to recheck a couple of things on the new processor before I—"

"I'm sure that the tablet specs are fine, Tony," Pepper interrupted. She frowned, fiddling with a pen on her desk. "This is a bit ridiculous, but I'm only calling because Happy insisted on it. I have an appointment on Friday to meet with someone who's looking to add Stark Industries as a financial partner in some think tank that he's developed over the last ten years. According to him he's on the verge of a major breakthrough, but they've recently hit a snag and run out of money."

"Gee, never heard that one before," grumbled Tony. "You probably get about thirty of these requests a week, Pep, so what's so special about this one?"

Pepper cleared her throat. "It's a guy who I used to work with who used to ask me out all the time, and I made the mistake of telling Happy about it, so now—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Tony said. Petty jealousy wasn't foreign to Tony in the least. "What time's the appointment?"
"Friday at ten, in the conference room down the hall from my office. Happy didn't want this guy seeing my office, kept going on and on that it'd be a security risk, so… I'll make sure there's coffee available."

"Coffee always sounds good," answered Tony. "Yeah, I suppose I can squeeze you in. It's the least I can do for the woman who's running my company for me."

Pepper shot him a grin. "Thanks, Tony."

"Oh, and what's his name?" Tony added. "I'm sure Happy'll check him out too, but no harm in doing a bit of preliminary snooping"

"Yes, I'm sure Happy would appreciate it," Pepper said, rolling her eyes. "His name is Aldrich Killian."

"Mmm, never heard of him," said Tony. "No biggie, I'll look him up."

"Great. Don't forget it's Friday at ten, and please don't be late. I really don't want this appointment to take any longer than necessary."

Tony chuckled. His lack of punctuality had always been a sore point with Pepper in the past, but ever since Steve came into his life it hadn't been as much of an issue.

"Nah, Steve'll make sure I'm on time," he said. "No need to worry."

"Well, thank God for Steve," said Pepper. "See you tomorrow."

"Yep. JARVIS?" Tony said as soon as the monitor went blank. "Can you pull up a bio on a guy named Aldrich Killian?" Now that he thought about it the name did sound vaguely familiar, but he couldn't figure out from where.

"Yes, sir," answered JARVIS as the picture of a very well-dressed blond man appeared on the screen. "Mr Killian is the founder, CEO and owner of the technology company AIM, which stands for Advanced Idea Mechanics."

Tony stared at Killian's image, his nose wrinkling in disgust. "Guy definitely needs a new tailor."

"Hmm, nope, still not coming to me. No big deal, I'm sure I'll be able to let him down easy."

"I suppose you will, sir," answered JARVIS. "Shall I place the appointment on your calendar?"

"Yeah. Thanks, JARVIS. And pull up the specs on the processors for the new tablets while you're at it, I know Pepper will appreciate it if I can get those done."

"Very good, sir. And may I remind you that it is Tuesday, which means that Master Peter will be in the Robotics Lab until 6pm."

"Oh, yeah, thanks for the reminder," Tony said as he expanded the holographic image of the tablet processor, checking it for flaws. "I can't wait to see what Pete's been working on in there once he's done."

"I'm sure it will be quite exciting, sir," said JARVIS. "And hopefully non-explosive."

Tony grinned as he made a minor adjustment to the processor. "Nah, that's what DUM-E is for. Right, DUM-E?"

DUM-E beeped in agreement, and Tony's grin grew wider.
"There," he said as he made his final tweak to the design. "Go ahead and send the preliminary render to Pepper, J. These should be good to go now."

"Very good, sir. And Captain Rogers wishes for me to inform you that he, Dr Banner, and Mr Wilson are on their way up."

"Cool, then Sam can look at his new pack design for me."

"Yes, sir. Captain Rogers also states that they may have uncovered some new information regarding CTX-616."

Tony let out a sigh. "Oh yeah?"

"That is what he said, sir."

Not thirty seconds later Steve, Bruce, and Sam all arrived in the lab, with Bruce carrying one of the notebooks they'd been trying to decipher. Bruce—with a lot of help from Natasha—had been working practically nonstop on translating the obscure Russian shorthand dialect used in the majority of the notebooks.

"Hey, babe. JARVIS said you guys might have something new?" Tony asked as Steve slipped his arm around him.

"We think so," Steve answered, and Tony frowned at his grim tone. "Bruce found something pretty interesting just this morning."

"Here," Bruce said as he shoved one of the notebooks under Tony's nose, pointing the tip of his pen at a particular set of symbols that he had outlined in red. "This set of symbols was bothering me for a long time, but I think I finally figured it out. It's a list of the possible side-effects, or rather just effects of the drug—"

"CTX-616?" Tony asked. "The drug they gave Pete?"

"Yeah," said Bruce. "And Bucky. Cortexiphan is the name that HYDRA used, while the Ten Rings referred to it as CTX-616 because that was the Stark Industries designation."

Tony's heart started to thud, with Steve's heart thundering against his side.

"Go ahead, Bruce," Steve said gently.

"Well, there's a bunch of things," Bruce started. "But the one that stood out to me the most was empathic transference. I'm pretty sure that this effect is the reason why Peter's subconscious is able to insert itself into Bucky's nightmares, especially since Bucky was also exposed to this drug."

Tony huffed as he glanced up at Steve, trying to draw strength from him. "Okay, but so far it's only gone the one way. Pete's only been dropped into Barnes's dreams, never the other way around. Or at least that we know of."

"That's the same question that I had, Tony," said Steve. "Unfortunately, we don't have a clear answer for it. We know that the drug Bucky initially received was an older version, but since he was still being used as the Winter Soldier after Afghanistan, then it's likely that he also received this newer version at some point as well."

"Everyone's mind is different, Tony, so it could be that not everyone who receives the drug experiences the same effects," added Bruce. "Sam suggested that the fact that Peter is a child who's
still growing may also have something to do with it."

Tony flinched at Bruce's words, prompting Steve to tighten the arm around him.

"Anything else listed that's interesting?" Tony asked quietly.

"Yeah, a few others," Bruce said as he adjusted his glasses. "Most of them are common to all injectable protein-based drugs, things like injection site pain and swelling, possible allergic reaction, stuff like that. Oh, and the whole memory loss effect, although I wouldn't really call it a side effect since that's what they were using it for in the first place. There was one other that caught my eye, though."

"'Kay, what is it?" Tony whispered. He curled his fingers around his left forearm, trying to concentrate on the feel of Steve's heartbeat against his side.

"Pyrokinesis" said Bruce, pointing to the coded word with his pen.

What the… hell?

"Holy shit!" Tony exclaimed as his heart plummeted to his knees. "Are you telling me that my son is in danger of spontaneously catching fire?"

"I had the exact same question, sweetheart," Steve said quickly. "And Bruce assured me that it's unlikely because of Peter's healing factor, and because he only got one dose of the drug."

"That and the fact that his DNA contains components from a spider," added Bruce. "Since spiders can't thermoregulate and Peter seems to always be cold, I'd say it would be extremely unlikely that he'd develop this effect."

"But not completely out of the question!" Tony snapped, running a shaky hand through his hair. "JARVIS, display Peter's vitals for me!"

Tony gulped as Peter's vital signs scrolled across his monitor. Body temp 36.1 degrees, heart rate 85 bpm, respiratory rate 22, blood pressure 99/65.

"Master Peter's current vital signs are within his normal parameters, sir," JARVIS said.

"Okay, so I want a continuous readout of his vitals displayed on the monitor at all times from now on, do you understand me?" Tony barked, his chest heaving as he breathed. "And send him a text, tell him that Steve and I will pick him up from school after the last bell today. Robotics Lab has been canceled until further notice."

"Tony, just hold on a second," said Sam. "Do you really think that's necessary? I mean, you might as well just keep him locked in his room all the time if you're—"

"Not now, Sam, please," Steve said in his Captain's voice. "Tony and I need to discuss this between ourselves before we decide what else to do." He turned to Tony, his blue eyes radiating his own barely-concealed fear. "I've already contacted Helen Cho, sweetheart, and she's gonna be on her way here in a couple of hours. She'll hopefully be able to give us some more answers."

"But—but, that incident in Queens last spring, that was a guy who witnesses said just blew up in the street, right in front of their eyes!" Tony shrieked. "What if he was one of the missing Winter Soldiers! What if he was one of them and then he was just roaming around in New York, and—"

He was cut off as Steve crushed him against his chest, winding his long fingers into Tony's hair and
digging his fingertips into his scalp. "Shh, sweetheart," Steve whispered into his ear. "We're gonna figure this out, I promise. Táimid le chéile leis seọ."

Tony's chest was so tight he felt like he was having one of Peter's asthma attacks as his hands fisted into the front of Steve's shirt, fighting to keep the horrible image of Peter suddenly bursting into flame out of his mind. "Steve!" he managed to choke out. "What the hell is going on here? I mean, why? Why's it have to be Pete?"

Steve's arms tightened even more as he nodded towards Sam and Bruce, waiting until they had exited the room before continuing.

"I don't know why this is happening, Tony," he said once they were alone. "But I do promise you this. We will figure it out, and we'll make sure that Peter is safe. Whatever it takes, we'll do it. All right? Cibé a thógann sé."

Tony sucked in a long, pained breath, his teeth clamping down on his lower lip as he struggled to focus on the strong arms of his husband supporting him instead of the fear threatening to crush him.

Where the hell would he be without Steve?

That was one question Tony absolutely did not need answered.

"We'll do it together," he sobbed into Steve's chest. "God, Steve, I don't know what I'd do—I can't do this alone, I can't!"

"Shh," Steve whispered against the top of his head, choked up but still firm. "You're not alone, sweetheart, I'm with you."

"Together," Tony said.

To which Steve replied, "Yes, mo grá. Together."

"I'm gonna assume that that's an endearment of some kind?" Tony asked after a short pause.

"It means, 'my love,'" Steve answered, brushing a soft kiss across Tony's temple. "And I can hear what you're thinking. I don't think we need to lock Peter in his room, but I do agree that I'd prefer to keep him close as much as possible. Once Dr Cho gets here hopefully she can give us some better answers."

Tony gave a heavy sigh, tilting his head up to meet Steve's eyes. "I don't know if there are any answers, honey. I mean, Helen is good and all, but without a basis for reference she's not really gonna be able to tell us much of anything."

"I know," Steve said, his forehead pressing against Tony's. "But you never know, maybe Dr Cho can tell us something that'll be helpful. We seem to be picking up clues in all sorts of places, so maybe she'll have a couple more for us."

"This is all a bunch of super-secret, spy-novel stuff," Tony said with a frown. "And I don't like spy novels, Steve. I don't like feeling like I'm always three steps behind, especially where my son is concerned."

Steve's Adam's apple bobbed as he gulped, his grip tightening on Tony's waist. "I don't either, sweetheart. If there was any way that I could change places with Peter, you know that I'd do it."

"I do know it," Tony said with a nod. "I knew it the first time I saw you, the first time you saw him.
The look on your face… babe, I'll never forget it."

The corners of Steve's lips curled into a slight smile, and he checked his watch, planting another kiss on Tony's temple.

"C'mon. Our son is waiting for us, and I'm sure he'll be full of questions."

Yeah, he probably will, Tony thought as he took Steve's hand, heading for the elevator. But the biggest question is, when will we actually have any answers for him?

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Stop by and see me on tumblr, I’m geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :)
Peter huffed as he arrived at his locker, twirling the combination lock by pure muscle memory as he dropped his backpack onto the floor and unzipped his jacket. He was so angry with his dads that he'd barely been able to look at them that morning as they drove him to school, and even worse than that was the fact that he couldn't even tell anyone why he was so upset. He had no one that he could vent to, and so all of his frustration was just continuing to build up, like a solution percolating over a Bunsen burner that was about to reach critical mass.

"If this keeps up I really will spontaneously combust," he grumbled under his breath, careful to stay out of JARVIS's constantly listening ear. Dad had informed him when he and Papa picked him up yesterday that JARVIS was now going to have a continuous lock on his vital signs, which likely also meant Dad had tweaked JARVIS's settings to pick up on keywords that might indicate that Peter wasn't feeling well.

Which, of course, was just perfect. Just what Peter needed, now that he was fourteen and a high-school freshman, was even more supervision and hovering by his dads.

If Peter hadn't been so upset by it—or more like embarrassed, but that was yet another thing that he wasn't going to admit—he might have tried to understand where his dads were coming from. But he
wasn't there yet, and if he had a choice he wasn't planning to get there for a long, long time.

"Hey, Peter!" Ned suddenly said from behind Peter's shoulder, startling him such that he dropped his physics textbook onto his foot. "Have you seen the new Lego catalog yet? There's gonna be a ton of new sets coming out for Christmas this year!"

"No, not yet," Peter said, hoisting the textbook onto the growing pile in his arms. None of his morning classes were located anywhere near his locker, which really sucked because it meant that he had to lug around three classes worth of books around every morning.

"Ooh, it's so cool! There's like ten new Harry Potter sets, and a new Death Star that's coming out next year that looks like it's gonna be amazing. I think I'm gonna ask for the new Quidditch Pitch set for Christmas, it even has the different flags that you can set up for the teams, and…"

Ned continued his rambling about Legos as they walked towards their algebra glass, with Peter only half listening as he tried to come up with different ways to try and convince his dads to not be so stupidly strict and dreading the next day at the same time. Dr Cho would be landing at the Tower in a couple of hours, which meant that tomorrow would be filled with even more blood tests and medical exams.

And while Peter never looked forward to medical tests, he had to admit that he was more than a bit nervous about what Dr Cho's tests might end up revealing.

*Nothing like already being a freaky spider mutant who now might be in danger of spontaneously exploding.*

*Because, why the hell not?*

Of course there was always the distinct possibility that the tests might not show anything at all, which, if Peter dared to admit, would probably be even worse. Peter had been trying to discreetly keep up on everything that Dad and Uncle Bruce had discovered about the drug he'd been given by the Ten Rings, as well as wracking his brain to try and come up with glimpses of anything that he could remember from his time in the cave that might help.

But so far he hadn't been able to come up with anything.

For all of the wacky and horrible dreams he'd been having ever since Afghanistan, Peter found it very frustrating that he could never remember what had happened to him in the cave. He could remember some of the little details; the gross smell of the cot mattress, something like gunpowder and metal mixed with stale sweat that he would be completely fine with never smelling again. The bone-shattering chills from his high fever, made worse by the chilly, damp air rusting through the hairs on the back of his neck. The stinging, throbbing pain from his infected head wound, and the intense tightness in his chest from his asthma that required so much of his concentration and energy just to breathe in and out. Tightness that would continue to get worse and worse as the days went on until it was so bad that Peter felt like he was trying to breathe through a massive jar of honey.

He could vividly remember the confrontation between Dad and the bad guy who always carried the Stark Industries rifle, how the guy had demanded that Dad build one of his new Jericho missiles for them, and when Dad told him basically that they could all go to hell until they got Peter some medicine.

And then he remembered his terror when the men grabbed onto him and hoisted him up, hearing the panicked cries of his father echoing off the walls of the cave as they dragged him away. And then they took him into that room that looked like a hospital room from some futuristic dystopian YA
novel, laid him out on the horrible, freezing cold metal table, held down his shoulders and legs, and plunged a needle the size of a straw into his arm.

And after that, there was nothing. And Peter still had no idea how long he was in that room or what the men did to him while he was in there, something that he knew gnawed at Papa especially. Every now and then he would get a tiny glimpse, like a sound or a smell or a small flash of colour would trigger something in Peter's mind, but otherwise the only things he could vividly remember were the scary faces looming over him, the strong hands pinning him down on the table, and the painful prick of the huge needle as it pierced his skin.

And now he was going to be forced into having yet another blood test just so Dr Cho, Uncle Bruce, and his dads could try and figure out exactly what he couldn't remember.

The whole thing just really, really sucked.

"So do you think that I might be able to come up to the Tower sometime soon?" Ned asked as they took their seats. "I mean, your dad did let me and my parents come up to the Compound for your birthday, so I thought that maybe—"

"I don't know. I'd have to ask him," said Peter. "Since the Tower is home to most of the Stark Industries offices there's different rules for it, and I don't know if Dad's allowing visitors inside just yet."

"Aww, man!" Ned said as his shoulders sagged. "I haven't been inside the Tower since your dads' wedding, and that time we couldn't even go to your room! I wanna see that huge castle that you and your Auntie Nat built!"

"We already took it apart, Ned," Peter said, rather impatiently. "And I sent you a picture of it anyway, didn't you get it?"

"Well, yeah. But it's always more fun to see it in person," Ned said with a shrug.

Peter frowned. "Yeah, I guess that's true. I'm sorry, dude. I can talk to my dad about it again, but I don't know what he'll say. 'Cause now he's even more paranoid than normal so it's probably not even worth asking.

"Yeah, okay," Ned said as their teacher arrived in the classroom, signaling the end of the conversation. Not really needing or wanting to pay attention to the lecture, Peter instead spent the entire classroom sketching out an upgraded design to his web shooters, one that would render them a lot more streamlined and sleek, cutting down on the wind resistance flying between webs.

If of course Peter was ever allowed to resume his patrols, which at the moment didn't look all that promising. So far he had only missed one, but it was already affecting his mood more than he wanted to admit. School was boring; he felt like he could do most of the work in his sleep if he had to—if in fact he could actually get any halfway decent sleep—and while he still had his ballet lessons with Auntie Nat and sparring sessions with Papa and working in the lab with Dad to keep him occupied, it still wasn't enough. Peter wanted to feel like he was special, like he was making a difference in the world, and Spider-Man gave him that opportunity.

Without Spider-Man, Peter was just another kid. Just a small, skinny kid with two extremely overprotective dads and an extended family made up of a bunch of superheroes.

"So I was thinking that since I can't come to the Tower, maybe I could ask my mom if you could come home with me after school tomorrow?" Ned asked as they left the classroom, dodging the
massive upperclassmen—and why the hell were the upperclassmen always waving their arms around in the hallways anyway?—as they headed down the hall to their history class, yet another subject that Peter could practically do in his sleep thanks to the wealth of information that was his papa. "I mean, I know I don't have as many Legos as you do, but I bet we could still come up with a castle that was a decent-enough size, and—"

"I'm not gonna be in school tomorrow, Ned," Peter cut in, rather petulantly. "I gotta do some more… allergy testing."

Ned's eyebrows knitted together. "Again? Didn't you just have some not too long ago?"

"Well, yeah," Peter said with a gulp. "But they couldn't tell us everything that we needed to know that time, so now I have to do more."

"Oh. It really kinda sucks that you have to have all those tests all the time, doesn't it?" asked Ned. Peter bit his lip as he nodded. "Yeah, it does."

_If only you knew the half of it._

"All right, Peter, here's what I'd like to do," said Dr Cho—Helen—as she sat down on the chair opposite Peter in one corner of Bruce's lab. Dad and Papa were sitting on either side of him, each holding on to one of his hands. "I'd like to start with both blood and cerebrospinal fluid samples, to see if I can detect any of this drug that you were given. I was able to modify one of my machines to look for the specific structure of CTX-616, so if for some reason it's still circulating around in your bloodstream or CSF my equipment should be able to pick it up."

"Um..." Peter said in a shaky voice as Dad squeezed his hand. Peter had experienced lumbar punctures a few times before when he'd been really sick, and they were even more horrible and traumatising than blood tests. "That seems like a pretty long shot though, don't you think? I mean, it's been over two years since—"

"It is a long shot, bud, but not completely unheard of," Dad said. "There are certain drugs that stick around in the body for quite awhile, especially protein-based drugs like this one. And since it primarily affects the brain, there is a fairly decent chance that it might still be floating around in your CSF."

"Okay, but—" Peter started.

"Is there anything that we can give Peter before the procedure?" Papa asked. He had turned positively green when Helen mentioned the lumbar puncture, squeezing Peter's hand almost to the point of pain. "Anything to help calm him? This sounds like a pretty invasive test."

"We could try, but given his enhanced metabolism and healing it's highly unlikely that it would work," Bruce said. "In fact, with Peter's enhanced healing ability Helen's going to have to work pretty fast to obtain enough of a sample to work with before his skin starts to reknit itself around the catheter, so I think it'd be easier on everyone if we just relied on you two to hold Peter still."

Peter's heart gave a lurch, and he looked up at Papa with panicked eyes, shaking his head. _Oh God, please, I don't think I can handle it if they have to hold me down!_

"Papa, I don't know if I can—"

"It'll be okay, little guy," Papa said as he wrapped his arm around Peter's shoulders. "If Dr Cho can
be as quick as she's saying you probably won't even feel it."

"Papa's right, buddy," added Dad. He was scared too, and as usual doing a poor job of hiding it. "It'll be okay. Helen's the best, she'll be able to get it done fast enough so you won't feel it too much."

"Uhh, then I guess I don't have a choice, do I?" Peter mumbled as he squeezed his eyes closed, tipping against Papa as his stomach churned with anxiety.

_I hate this! I hate all of it!_

"That's not true, Peter," Papa said firmly. "Dad and I are in no way going to force this on you. You always have a choice."

_Yes, but do I really?_ Peter thought, trembling against his papa's side.

"If I don't do this then nothing changes. Helen would've flown out all this way for nothing, and HYDRA and the Ten Rings will still be out there.

_I'm a Stark, and Stark men shouldn't be afraid of needles. Even really freaking long needles getting poked into your back._

_Stark men are made of iron._

_My name is Peter Stark-Rogers. My dad is Iron Man. My papa is Captain America._

_And I'm Spider-Man. And superheroes are supposed to be brave._

Inhaling a deep, shaky breath, Peter gave a quick nod. "Fine. Then let's do it right now, please."

"All right, bud," Dad said as he kissed the top of Peter's head. "Let's get you ready."

Helen had Peter remove his shirt, then laid him down on a padded examining table which was thankfully nothing like the freezing-cold metal table from the hospital-room cave, a fact that Peter recited over and over in his head as Helen positioned him curled up on his side, his knees up to his chest. He flinched as Papa's long fingers wrapped around his shoulder and hip, with Dad giving him a wink as he slipped his armoured fingers into Peter's tight grip.

"It's gonna be okay, buddy," Dad whispered. Peter nodded, shivering as Helen swabbed the small of his back with betadine.

"All right, Peter," Helen said, laying her gloved hand down on his side. "Here we go."

As soon as the needle pierced his skin Peter gasped, instinctively fighting to straighten his back against Papa's tight hold.

"Hurts!" he cried, squeezing Dad's fingers so hard that dents started to form in the armour as he was suddenly hit with a wave of memory fragments. Tiny, split-second snippets, almost like the flash of a camera began invading his mind like an enemy army, playing across his consciousness as though they were wearing banners. The fine grey Italian wool of a perfectly tailored suit jacket. The glint of harsh artificial light off a particular gold watch. The faint scent of a very expensive cologne.

A cologne that Peter had only ever smelled on one person.

"Daddy, it hurts!" Peter shrieked, jerking so badly that Papa had to dig his fingertips into Peter's skin to hold him still. "It hurts, Daddy, you gotta make it stop! Please, make it stop!"

"Peter!" Papa's voice said from somewhere above him, thick with barely-controlled emotion. "Dr
Cho's almost done, little guy, it'll all be over soon!"

"Pete, you gotta hold still, bud, okay? Papa can't hold onto you if you're thrashing around."

_No, no, no, no! Why're you here? Why're you hurting me! Why're you letting them hurt me! Why? Why? Why?_

_I thought you were our friend! Our family!_

_Why?_

"Daddy!" Peter gasped, crying out as Helen removed the needle from his back. His entire body was trembling so badly he felt like he was convulsing. "He was there, I saw him! He was there in the cave when they—when they—!"

"You need to hold him still, Captain," Helen commanded from somewhere behind Peter. "He shouldn't move for at least fifteen minutes after a lumbar puncture."

"Shh, buddy, it's okay," Dad soothed as he kissed Peter's forehead, still clinging to his hands. He shot a furtive glance up at Papa, giving him an almost imperceptible shake of the head. "Try and calm down, okay? We don't want you tearing anything that's not supposed to be torn."

"But—but, Daddy, I remember!" cried Peter. "He was there in the cave when the bad guys—"

"Who was, little guy?" Papa asked, earning a fierce scowl from Dad. "Who was there?"

"Steve, do we really have to—?"

"It was Obie," Peter whispered. "When they took me away from you, Obie was there, waiting in that room where they brought me. And I saw him, or I guess what I really did was smell him, but I don't know if I was supposed to know he was there, so—"

Dad's lips curled into a nasty sneer as he extricated one of his hands free from Peter's grip, stroking it through his hair. "Shh, buddy, it's okay. Just try and rest now, yeah? Obie's not gonna hurt you again."

"I'll need to get the blood sample now, Peter," Helen said, gently extending Peter's right arm. "Just lie still for me, okay?"

Peter's breath caught in his throat as he met his father's eyes, clouded with anger and fear.

"But, Dad—"

"I promise it's gonna be okay, buddy," Dad murmured, as if Peter had just skinned his knee or something. "Don't you worry."

_But... how? How in the hell can you promise that?_

"Here, little guy," Papa said as he covered Peter with a warming blanket, tucking it carefully around his curled-up body. He kissed Peter's cheek when he was done, smoothing the hair off his forehead. "Just try and relax now, okay? Dad and I will talk about this later."

"But—!"

"Papa's right, Pete," Dad said firmly. "Why don't you see if you can nap for a bit while Helen runs her tests, yeah? You were up for most of the night last night, you gotta be tired."
As much as Peter hated to admit it, Dad was right. Nightmares and nervousness had kept him awake for at least half of the night, even sandwiched between his dads.

"My back hurts," he said, grimacing against the burning and shooting pain travelling up and down his spine and hating himself for sounding so pathetic. He was fourteen years old for heaven's sake, not four.

*Superheroes don't pout about owies. Superheroes are supposed to be brave.*

Dad's eyebrows knitted together into that worried look that he got whenever Peter was hurt or sick. A look that Peter had always dreaded seeing.

"I know, buddy, but try anyway, okay?"

"Uh huh."

"That's our boy." Dad gave him a wink, kissing Peter's forehead and getting to his feet. He felt Papa kiss his cheek again, tucking the blanket up over his shoulder.

"You're so brave, little guy," Papa whispered. "You're the bravest of all of us, don't ever forget that."

Peter bit down hard on his trembling lower lip, blinking back tears as he looked into his papa's frightened eyes. "I don't feel very brave," he muttered. "I hate this, Papa."

"I know you do, Peter," answered Papa. "But try and remember; most of the time bravery is just fear that's been redirected. You're strong because even though you're scared, you're not giving in to it, you're not letting it control you. You're still fighting against it, despite it, and that's what true bravery is."

Peter was quiet for a moment, contemplating his papa's words.

"Okay," he said. He still wasn't quite convinced, but he at least could see where Papa was coming from. And he felt even better when he noticed the way Dad was looking at Papa, that pure admiration mixed with the intense adoration that Peter never knew Dad was capable of before Papa came into their lives.

"Your Papa's a pretty smart guy, Pete," Dad said, ruffling Peter's hair. "Rest now."

"Uh huh."

Steve was pacing back and forth in Bruce's lab, his hands clasped tightly across his belt buckle and his mind swirling with minute details as Tony, Bruce, and Helen discussed the results of Peter's tests. Peter was sound asleep on the exam table, having been far more exhausted than he had wanted to admit. His was not a peaceful sleep, though, with his brow furrowed in anguish and his hands tightly clenched around the blanket. The sudden rush of returning memories had frightened him, and it was all Steve could do at the moment to keep his focus on his pacing and plotting so he could fight off the nearly overwhelming temptation to put his fist through yet another wall.

*I'm gonna kill that man,* he thought. *I'm gonna kill him and all the rest of the Ten Rings for what they did to Tony and Peter.* Steve was vaguely aware that his thoughts should have startled him far more than they did, but found that he didn't care in the least. Stane and the Ten Rings had taken his husband and son against their will and tortured and hurt them both, something that Steve was finding increasingly impossible to overlook. He had always said that his intentions were never to kill anyone, and over the years he had killed only when necessary, only taking life when he had absolutely no
other choice.

But that was no longer the case. Steve was now a husband and a father, and it was his responsibility to protect his family without hesitation or prejudice.

And if the opportunity presented itself, it was also his responsibility to avenge them.

*They're all the worst kind of bullies. Stane, the Ten Rings, and HYDRA. They're all just a bunch of Nazis.*

And apparently, despite being told when he woke up from the ice that the U.S. had won the war, Steve had never been able to stop fighting them. He had watched as the look of sheer panic crossed Peter's face as soon as Dr Cho began her procedure. He'd been focusing on Peter's expression so as to avoid glancing over at the massive needle Dr Cho was poking into his son's back, and as such he was able to catch the exact second that the memories flashed across Peter's mind, memories that Peter had obviously kept buried so deeply inside his subconscious that he hadn't even realised they were there at all.

It was that moment that Steve literally heard his heart crack in two.

No child should have to go through what Peter had gone through, but Peter least of all. Peter was the best of them, he was everything that was pure and innocent and good in the world, and he needed to be protected at all costs. Both he and Tony agreed on that without question.

And they both loved him beyond reason.

*Whatever it takes.*

And if it took Steve killing Obadiah Stane in order to protect his son, then he was going to do it.

"You trying to wear a path in the floor there, babe?" Tony said as he came up behind Steve, startling him enough that he flinched, clenching his fingers around his belt. That was yet another thing he needed to work on. Lately he'd been stuck so far down inside his own mind that he wasn't paying as close attention to his surroundings as he should, which for a soldier was completely unacceptable.

Steve twisted towards his husband, swallowing his angry retort as soon as his eyes landed on Tony's face. He should've known that Tony's glib remark was only a cover for his own roiling emotions, as it often was.

"No," he said, rather shortly. "What did you guys find?"

Tony's face fell, and he swallowed hard as he reached for Steve. "C'mon, Helen can show you."

Taking his hand, Tony led Steve back over to Dr Cho's work area, where papers covered with what looked like large chemical structures and graphs were laid out on the counter next to one of her machines.

"Okay, Captain," Dr Cho began as she picked up the first paper, circling one of the structures. "This is the result of Peter's lumbar puncture, and as you can see, the drug CTX-616 is still detectable."

Steve's jaw clenched as he nodded. "And is that normal?" he asked. "I know I'm not as well-versed in medical issues as the rest of you, but wouldn't Peter's body have tried to get rid of it by now?"

"That's actually exactly right, Steve," said Bruce. "But the size of the drug structure itself is so large that a normal person wouldn't be able to eliminate it. It's too big to cross the blood/brain barrier to
get metabolised, so it just keeps circulating around in the cerebrospinal fluid."

Something about that didn't sound right to Steve. "Okay, but if that's the case, then why did HYDRA have to keep giving it to Bucky after each of his Winter Soldier missions?" he asked. "If Bucky's body couldn't eliminate it, wouldn't a single dose of it have been enough to keep on suppressing his memories?"

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Bruce asked, and Steve had to stamp down his irritation at Bruce's obvious excitement. Bruce was a scientist, and Steve knew that all of this had to be completely fascinating to him, but his fascination wasn't nearly tempered enough for Steve at the moment.

"Yes, I would," Steve said, his tight jaw twitching when Tony's fingers tightened around his.

"It's our theory, Captain, that since Sergeant Barnes has enhanced healing abilities, his body was able to identify the drug as a foreign entity and therefore break it down enough to remove it," said Dr Cho. "Or, at least remove enough of it between his missions and being frozen to require additional doses."

"Okay, but then Peter has enhancements that are pretty similar to Bucky's," said Steve. "So why—?"

"Steve, Pete didn't have his enhancements when he got the drug," Tony said softly. "And since it was present in his system once those enhancements kicked in, they wouldn't necessarily have recognised the drug as something foreign."

Steve huffed out a sharp breath, shaking his head. "Okay, so then can you explain why Peter had that memory flashback as soon as you poked him in the back?"

Bruce shot Tony a wary look, and Tony squeezed Steve's hand.

"We think it's probably because they administered the drug to him that way, babe," Tony said. "Helen says its structure is too big to get in there otherwise."

"And with how smart Peter is and how well his body can repair itself, it's also possible that when Helen took her sample, the slight decrease of the amount of the drug in his body was enough to trigger the memories," added Bruce. He paused for a few seconds, as if he was weighing his next words. "Which could also mean that if we removed more of the drug, more of his memories might come back."

"What?" Steve exclaimed. "You mean remove even more of the fluid from his spine like that?"

"The cerebrospinal fluid, babe. And yeah, that's exactly what Bruce is saying," Tony answered.

Steve's eyes went wide at Tony's tone, which was far too detached and clinical for Steve's taste. The thought of Peter having to be stuck in the back like that potentially multiple times was almost too much for him to stomach.

"But Tony, it was so painful for him!" he yelped. "And isn't it dangerous? You said something about tearing things if he moved, so how in the world could you suggest that we even consider—!"

"I'm not saying that we should do it, Steve!" Tony snapped as his well-constructed mask finally splintered into pieces, revealing that he was just as frightened and uncertain as Steve. "In fact, I'd be absolutely fine if Pete never remembered another thing that happened in that goddamn cave ever again. I know I wish I could forget it."
"Oh my God, sweetheart," Steve whispered, ashamed of his insensitivity as he curled his arms around Tony's shoulders, pulling him flush against him. Tears stung his eyes as he buried his fingers in Tony's hair, rubbing his scalp as Tony trembled in his arms. Tony always tried to hide his negative emotions when he was around people who weren't family, and Steve should've known better.

"I'm so sorry, mo grá," he murmured in Tony's ear. "I wasn't thinking."

"I know this is a lot to take in, gentlemen," Dr Cho said, rather diplomatically. "And we don't have to decide on what to do right now. Dr Banner is correct, it is likely we could remove more of the drug from Peter's body with another spinal, but Captain Rogers is also correct in that the procedure would not be without risk. Aside from the invasiveness of the procedure itself, Peter's reaction to the sudden memory input could potentially put him at risk of further injury. And from what you've explained about what's been going on, I'm not convinced it would be what's best for him."

"Yeah, can you just give us a couple minutes?" Tony said, slightly muffled against Steve's chest. "I think we're both pretty freaked out here, in case you hadn't noticed, and—"

"Of course, Tony," said Bruce, fiddling nervously with his glasses. "Helen and I can go... get some coffee."

"Thanks, big guy."

As soon as Dr Cho and Bruce left the room Steve let out a sharp breath, burying his nose into Tony's hair and wishing desperately that he knew what to do.

And at the same time, angry as hell that he didn't. He was Captain America. He was always supposed to know what to do. That was the main reason why Director Fury had sent him to rescue Tony and Peter in the first place, because he had felt that Steve was their best hope in finding them.

But mapping out search patterns in the desert and defence strategies against attacking alien armies and planning raids on HYDRA bases was all a hell of a lot different than trying to figure out how to literally pull deeply-buried memories from his own son's subconscious.

His own son's subconscious.

This wasn't a bunch of strangers in some isolated Austrian village that they were trying to keep safely out of HYDRA's path, or a group of civilians pinned down inside a bank in New York. This was Peter they were discussing. This was discussing whether or not to subject their son to a risky and painful procedure just to see what possible memories of his torture they could force him to dredge up. Torture done under the watch of an insanely jealous madman who should have loved Peter like a grandson.

"Tony," Steve murmured into Tony's hair. "I don't—I don't know what to do, sweetheart. The only thing I can think about is how much I want to find and kill Obadiah Stane, but I don't—I don't know how, and—"

"Shh, babe, it's okay," Tony whispered. He tilted his head up, his beautiful brown eyes clouded with anger and fear as they bored into Steve's, his hands trembling where they rested on Steve's arms. "I'm so fucking angry right now that I can barely see straight, much less even think straight, so I think you're still ahead of me on that one."

"I'm not—I'm not so sure that I am," Steve stammered. "I'm not—we can't ask Peter to do this, Tony, we can't. We shouldn't've even asked him to do the dream-sharing with Bucky, because ever since then—"
"Ever since then we've gotten even closer to figuring this stuff out, Steve," Tony said, quirking an eyebrow. "And yeah, the whole thing really fucking sucks, but what's done is done. We can't change it, so there's no sense in second-guessing ourselves now."

Steve couldn't help but let out a light chuckle. "Now you're starting to sound like me."

"Yeah, well, you know, maybe you're finally starting to rub off on me," Tony said, his lips twitching slightly. "Besides, one of us has to."

"Oh God," Steve whispered, his stomach clenching in fear and rage. "Tony, I don't think I'm strong enough to find out what Peter's mind is hiding. I don't—I don't want to put him through that. We already have enough evidence linking Stane to both the Ten Rings and to HYDRA, so I'm thinking we should just concentrate on hunting him down for now and let Peter try to heal."

Tony was quiet for several heartbeats, his fingers idly tapping on Steve's biceps. "It's gonna take him a long time to heal, babe," he finally said. "But I can't think of anyone better to help him through it than you."

Steve immediately shook his head. "Tony, don't say that. You're—"

"Just as broken as Pete is," Tony cut in. "And you're just as broken as the both of us. But the remarkable thing about all of our busted-up pieces is that they somehow all seem to fit back together into something that's even better." He paused to cup Steve's cheek, angling his jaw down for a kiss. "As long as we're together we can get through this. We can all get through this, all three of us."

"Together," Steve forced out past the knot in his throat. 'Cause I can't do this without you.

"That's right," Tony said firmly. "Together."

"You'll have to excuse Mr Stark, he's been quite busy lately with several other ongoing projects," Pepper was saying as Tony skidded to a halt just outside the doorway of the large conference room located on the thirty-eighth floor of the Tower. He'd had half a mind to cancel his planned appearance for this meeting, and if it had been anyone else besides Pepper who had asked for his presence he would've done so, but Tony had never been able to say no to Pepper when she asked something of him. She didn't do it very often; Tony could probably count on one hand the number of favours she had asked of him in all the years that she'd worked for him, so when she did, Tony knew it was a big deal.

Even if this particular favour was asked mainly to appease Pepper's new and very overprotective husband.

"Yes, yes, quite busy," Tony said as he stepped inside, shooting Pepper what he hoped was an apologetic look. He was only seven minutes late, which for him wasn't really late at all, but he could tell Pepper was still a bit annoyed. He squinted slightly as he held out his hand towards the tall man with perfectly coiffed blond hair standing next to Pepper, dressed in a dark grey pinstriped suit accented with a burgundy silk shirt and tie.

"Tony, this is Aldrich Killian," Pepper said as the man grasped Tony's hand. His palm was very warm to the touch, almost uncomfortably so, and Tony had to fight against the strong urge to pull his hand away. "Mr Killian is the chairman of the think tank known as Advanced Idea Mechanics. Mr Killian, this is Tony Stark, our company's namesake and its founder's son."

"Yes, Mr Stark, or may I call you, Tony?" said Killian as he finally released Tony's hand, sitting down on one of the plush conference room chairs. "You may not remember, but we've actually met
"Oh?" Tony said as he poured himself a cup of coffee, pleased to see that it was the same strong brew that Pepper knew he preferred. "And where was that?"

"At a technical conference in Bern, Switzerland, New Year's Eve 1999," answered Killian. He made a vague gesture at himself. "Although I did look quite a bit different back then, so I'm not at all surprised that you seem to have forgotten."

Tony gave him the smile he usually reserved for reporters and members of government. "Well, don't hold it against me, I don't even remember what I had for breakfast this morning."

"Well, anyway, we're not exactly here to discuss what Tony had for breakfast," Pepper interjected. She took a small sip of her coffee, setting her cup down deliberately. "I believe you had a proposal to discuss with us, Mr Killian?"

In an instant Killian's expression morphed from the rather amused yet challenging look he was giving Tony into pure charm as he turned to Pepper.

"Yes, that's correct," Killian said. "And please, call me Aldrich."

Pepper blinked, her eyes flitting to Tony for only a split second before resuming her straight-backed and refined posture.

"You know, I think I actually do remember meeting you at that conference," Tony said, his eyes slightly narrowing. "And if I recall correctly, you came up to me in the hallway of the hotel just as I received a phone call from my toddler son's nanny telling me that he was very sick and was being transported to the hospital."

Tony let out a shudder as he recalled that frantic phone call from Rosa, informing him that Peter had had a fever and trouble breathing for most of the day, and that it had gotten so bad that she had called for an ambulance. Tony had managed to get out of the hotel and into the air about an hour later, having had to beg the Swiss government for clearance for his jet to take off through the mass of fireworks blasting around the country for the New Year's Y2K celebration.

Killian's wide, toothy smile wavered just for a moment. "Yes, well, I hope you can forgive me for that. It's not often that someone like me can just literally run into someone like the great Tony Stark. I was only trying to jump on the unbelievable opportunity when I could."

Pepper cleared her throat, fiddling with her pen and giving Tony her best don't you dare look. "Your proposal, Mr Killian? You said something about a new advancement in biotechnology?"

"Yes, that's correct," Killian said. He squared his shoulders, placing his folded hands on the table. "It's taken quite a bit longer than I had originally hoped, mainly due to the ban on what former presidents were calling 'immoral biotech research' and a couple of unexpected glitches that we encountered along the way. Glitches that I believe could have been avoided with the addition of your expertise, Tony."

Tony's hand gripped his coffee cup as he breathed in deeply through his nose, trying to keep from sneering at the arrogant, goading bastard sitting across from him. "I'm only here as a favour to Pepper, he thought. Not to be guilted into helping yet another idiot with his science project."

"Yes, I'm sure they would've," Tony said evenly, taking another sip of his coffee. "Sounds to me that it was just a case of some really bad luck on your part, Mr Killian."
Again Killian's smile wavered, his eyes narrowing. "Well," he huffed. "I definitely believe that I've had more than my share of bad luck in my lifetime."

"Yes, well, I'm sure we could all trade stories on our experiences with bad luck," said Pepper, shooting Tony another rather scathing look. "Does your project have a name, Mr Killian?"

"Why, yes," answered Killian. "We call it Aminacin."

"That sounds rather ominous, don't you think?" Tony asked.

"Not necessarily. I like to think of it more as… attention-grabbing," said Killian. "I'm sure you can understand the importance of being able to capture someone's attention, can't you, Tony?"

Pepper let out a sigh. "And what exactly does this Aminacin do?"

"Well, I'd like to think that its applications are infinite," said Killian. "But if I had to be specific, then I would say that it is meant to help prevent the natural shrinking of brain power and mental ability as one ages, as well as aiding in harnessing our bioelectrical potential to its fullest degree." He pulled a small remote from his pocket and pressed a button, filling the conference room with a holographic projection of what looked like the synapses of a brain.

"Humans are only able to utilise a portion of our overall brain capacity," Killian continued. He pointed to a darkened area on the hologram, enlarging it. "So basically, Aminacin gets inserted into this empty slot here, allowing the recipient to—over time, mind you, because too much input too soon is never good for anyone—to begin to utilise those portions of his or her brain that are just sitting there doing nothing. And once that's done, well… I hope I don't have to explain the infinite possibilities one might have with that much added brainpower."

There was a pause as Killian glanced cautiously between Tony and Pepper. "Do I?" he asked.

"No, you don't," Tony said fighting to keep his expression neutral. "And pardon me for asking, but how exactly does this… thing just happen to know which areas of the brain to turn on?"

"Aminacin is specifically designed for each of its recipients based on their individual DNA," answered Killian. "In layman's terms, we basically are hacking into an individual's hard drive and recoding it."

Both Tony and Pepper's eyebrows shot up. "Um… that sounds a lot like enhancement to me, Mr Killian," said Tony.

"Well, that's because it is, Tony," Killian said, that damn arrogant grin back on his face. As if this asshole thinks that he's smarter than me! "Perhaps not in the way that you might think given the company you keep, the likes of Steve Rogers and Bruce Banner and all, but just think. You had to leave that conference in Bern because your small son was very sick, so imagine being able to cure the person you love the most from any and all illnesses, even before he has them."

Tony's upper lip curled into a sneer. "Actually, Pete's gotten quite a bit healthier in the last couple of years and he's already a certified genius, so I'm pretty sure he's gonna be fine."

And besides, there are two people who would qualify as who I love the most, and neither one of them need to worry about illnesses.

At least, not any physical illnesses.

"Any human can become better, Tony," said Killian. "I'm sure even you can understand that."
"I can understand it just fine, Mister Killian," Tony said. "But I'm going to have to apologise anyway. You see, Stark Industries no longer makes weapons of mass destruction, which is exactly what this... Aminacin could do if it were to happen to fall into the wrong hands."

Killain's eyes flashed with anger. "I assure you, Mister Stark, it has never been my intention that—"

"Yeah, but how does that old saying go, about the road to hell and good intentions?" interrupted Tony. He clenched his left hand into a fist, trying to keep it from shaking. "You're talking about recoding a person's DNA which sounds a lot like personal enhancement to me, and I'm sure I don't need to tell you how well that's gone for a lot of people."

Killian was silent for several heartbeats. "I see," he finally said. His jaw was tight as he turned towards Pepper. "Miss Potts? It was my understanding that you were in fact the chief executive officer of Stark Industries now, so I'm curious as to why—?"

"That is correct, Mr Killian, I am the CEO of Stark Industries," Pepper said firmly. "But as Mr Stark is the son of our company's founder and also the person responsible for most of the ideas behind our technological projects, I would never consider funding something like this without his express approval. And since that's not likely to happen—"

"Not at all likely," Tony cut in.

"Then I'm afraid I must decline to fund your project," Pepper concluded. She straightened the stack of papers in front of her, folding her hands on top of them. "Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr Killian, but the answer is 'no'."

Killian huffed, shooting Tony a glance that could only be described as murderous. "I guess I was mistaken, then," he said. "When I first approached Tony about AIM thirteen years ago and he turned me down flat, I just chalked it up to the fact that while even though I'd thought it was the opportunity of a lifetime, that perhaps I'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But it seems as though Tony's reputation, and ego, is still hovering like a grey cloud over this company even if he's technically no longer in charge of it."

Pepper blinked, giving Tony an almost imperceptible shake of her head as her expertly painted lips stretched into a thin, bright pink line. "It's gonna be a no, Aldrich," she said as she got to her feet. "I'm sorry."

"Well, I can't say that I'm not disappointed," said Killian, nodding slowly as he stood up, buttoning his suit jacket. "But as my father used to say, 'failure is the fog through which we glimpse triumph'."

"Wow, that's deep," Tony said sarcastically as he pushed himself back from the table, picking up his coffee cup. "Have a nice day!"

The words were barely out of Tony's mouth before the conference room door flew open and Happy's broad form filled the doorway. "All right, Mr Killian," he said, only barely politely. "I'll escort you out."

Pepper's head tilted to the side as she rolled her eyes. "Thank you, Happy," she said, turning to Tony with a scowl as soon as the men disappeared down the hall. "What in God's name happened the first time the two of you met? I thought I was gonna drown in all the testosterone!"

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, his fingers curling around his left forearm. "I was in Switzerland the night of the whole Y2K thing. Pete, he'd been sick on and off for the entire winter so I hadn't wanted to leave him, but I had been asked to give a speech by someone pretty important and Obie insisted
that I go. I had just gotten done with the speech and was schmoozing with a few people—that's actually the first time I met Yinsen, if you feel like having some irony with your coffee—when Rosa called, saying that Pete had spiked another fever and couldn't stop coughing. I was racing towards the elevators, still on the phone, when Killian rushed at me from the opposite direction. He looked a bit different back then, all hunched over and limping with these big-ass buck teeth and a head of hair like some 80's hair band guitar player. And he starts going on and on about how he's a huge fan of mine and how his new think tank needed someone of my expertise and how awesome it would be if I got in on the ground floor, blah, blah, blah. And as much as I tried to get him to stop, he just wouldn't listen. It got to the point where I had to put Rosa on hold so I could tell Killian to get the fuck away from me so I could figure out how to get the hell out of there and back to my son."

"Oh my God, Tony," Pepper said softly. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, I definitely didn't think I'd ever see him again," Tony said bitterly. "Guess one of my demons came back to haunt me."

"Telling someone to back off while you're trying to take care of your sick toddler from halfway across the world does not make you a bad person, Tony," Pepper said. "I wish you would've told me this before, there's no way I would've agreed to even see Killian if I had known."

Tony shrugged. "You know how bad I am with names," he said. "Besides, he looks like he's spent the last thirteen years in some magical Swiss spa with how different he looks now."

"Yes, I have to admit it didn't look like he needed our money all that much," said Pepper. "That suit he was wearing easily cost five figures."

"And it still fit like a goddamn potato sack," retorted Tony. He glanced up at the wall clock, gulping down the rest of his coffee. "Anyway, I'm heading back up, Pep. Let me know if you need me to stare down anymore of your old boyfriends."

Pepper snorted as she picked up her pile of papers. "Thanks, Tony. I'll let you know."

Tony held the door open as they exited, then made a beeline back to the penthouse. Steve was out showing Barnes around their old Brooklyn neighbourhood with Sam, so Tony grabbed some more coffee and headed directly for the lab. He had just gotten Obie's old databases pulled up when JARVIS announced that Rhodey was on the line.

"Yeah, J, put him through."

"Hey, Tony," Rhodey said as soon as he appeared on the monitor. He looked impatient, and completely exhausted. In fact, Tony didn't think he'd seen him look that tired since their days at MIT.

"Rhodey," Tony said. "What's up?"

Rhodey sighed, leaning closer to the monitor. "I know you're pretty busy right now, but I was wondering if you'd managed to get my new armour upgrade done yet?"

"Ah, yeah, pretty much, there's just a few tweaks here and there that I gotta finish," Tony said. He scrubbed his palm down his face, frowning. "Why? What's the hurry?"

"It's classified, Tony," Rhodey said, shaking his head. "I'm not supposed to tell you. I'm only supposed to—"

"Yeah, but when's that stopped you before?" Tony asked. "And who the hell would I tell, anyway?"
Rhodey dropped his chin to his chest, huffing out a sharp breath. "There was another suicide bombing the other day, not too far from the Mann's Chinese Theatre that took out a bunch of civilians," Rhodey said after a short pause. "A couple hours later the president received a phone call from someone calling himself The Mandarin, taking credit for the bombing."

"The Mandarin!" exclaimed Tony. "Holy shit, Rhodey, that's the leader of the Ten Rings! Are you sure they're actual suicide bombings and not just another one of those damn Winter Soldiers blowing themselves up?"

"I know who The Mandarin is, Tony, and since he's taken credit for the attack we have no reason to believe that it's anything other than just another suicide bombing, so—"

"But you're still gonna investigate it, aren't you?" Tony demanded. "Because this sounds a lot like that incident in Queens where the guy just spontaneously blew up, and Steve and I both think that—"

"I know that you and Steve think that The Mandarin is somehow in cahoots with Obadiah, but—"

"We don't think he's in cahoots with Obie, we damn well know that he is, and we've got the documentation to prove it!" Tony retorted. "Let me give Steve a call. We could all be on the jet within a couple of hours and get rid of this asshole once and for all!"

"And I'm telling you that a bunch of notebooks written in Russian gibberish are never gonna convince the Joint Chiefs to treat this as anything other than a terrorist attack on American soil," said Rhodey. "So there's no way they're gonna allow the Avengers to go storming into a foreign country and start poking around when we're not even exactly sure where this guy's hiding."

"No way they're going to allow us?" asked Tony, aghast. "How in the hell could they stop us? The Avengers don't answer to anyone but ourselves, and especially when it directly involves my son!"

"I know that, Tony," Rhodey said, pleadingly. "Believe me, I know it. But I'm telling you right now, as both your friend and your active military advisor, that if the Avengers were to suddenly invade a foreign country located in an active war zone that it would cause a helluva lot of diplomatic headaches. It would appear to the rest of the world that you guys were acting on behalf of the United States government, which is exactly not what the President wants right now with all the uncertainty still out there with the whole SHIELD/HYDRA thing. He wants to take care of this problem with only the U.S. military and intelligence agencies, just as he would any other terrorist threat."

Tony tapped his fingers on the counter, his blood pressure already skyrocketing. "That's fucking ridiculous and you know it," he said. "The Avengers are and have always been under the leadership of Steve Rogers, and no one else."

Rhodey huffed out a sharp breath. "I know that, Tony. But not everyone else is convinced, and I'm sorry, but now's not the time to try and convince them. Once this problem is taken care of, I'm sure I could arrange a meeting where—"

"I've had enough of their goddamn meetings!" Tony snapped. "Where were all of their goddamn committees when Pete and I were blown up and kidnapped, huh? Where the hell were they back then? Oh, let me guess. They were too busy schmoozing around with both sides of the conflict and trying to come to some sort of fucking compromise to even care about trying to find us. Isn't that how it happened? Isn't that why Nick Fury had to ask Steve, who had only been unfrozen for two fucking weeks, to come out looking for us?"

Hurt flashed in Rhodey's eyes. "I was there too, Tony, in case you've forgotten. It wasn't all just
Steve.

Tony's shoulders sagged as he slumped down into a chair. "No, I haven't forgotten. Sorry."

"Look," Rhodey said after a short pause. "You know how much I care about Peter, and I want to get to the bottom of this just as much as the rest of you, but now isn't the time. I know it sucks, but you're just gonna have to trust me on that."

"Yeah, okay."

"Good. Now, the armour—?"

"I'll have it done by the end of the day," Tony interrupted. He squinted slightly at the monitor, trying to place Rhodey's surroundings. "You down in D.C. or out at Edwards?"

"D.C."

"Kay. You want Barton to fly it down there to ya? I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I asked nicely."

"Nah, I'll stop by and pick it up. Can't be too careful," answered Rhodey. "And thanks, I appreciate it."

"Sure thing."

Rhodey quirked an eyebrow, tilting his head. "Look. I have an entire boatload of leave stocked up, so how 'bout I take some of it once this is all over and help you guys with your search? I know you won't be able to rest until this is all taken care of, so—"

"It's not just me, Rhodey," Tony said. "It's Steve and Pete too. Steve, it's eating him up inside that he can't seem to strategise his way through this."

"That's 'cause he's too close to the situation, Tones," Rhodey said gently. "Just like you are. Hell, just like all of us are when it comes down to it."

Tony's throat tightened, his fingers curling around his aching left arm.

"Yeah."

"Yeah. So I guess I'll see you tonight? I'll fly in around 2100 if that's okay, so have the landing pad clear for me."

"Will do," answered Tony. "See ya then."

As soon as the screen went dark Tony tipped his head back, slapping his palms over his eyes. "Goddamn government types always thinking they know what's best for everyone," he muttered under his breath. "They wouldn't know a good strategy if it hit 'em square in the nose."

"Pardon me, sir?" JARVIS said. "I didn't quite catch that."

Tony let out a light chuckle. "Nothing, J. Just grumbling."

"Ah. Well, that's nothing new."

"Hmph." Tony kneaded his temples with his fingers as he checked the monitor displaying Peter's vitals. Everything looked relatively okay, Peter's heart rate was slightly elevated but he had mentioned something about a physics quiz earlier that morning when Tony had dropped him off, so
that was probably the culprit.

"All right, J," Tony said as he got back to his feet. "Pull up the specs on Rhodey's latest armour for me, yeah?"

A second later the latest design of the War Machine armour appeared in the open space next to Tony's workstation. Tony walked slowly around it, tapping his chin as he made some minor adjustments to the propulsion system and to the left shoulder-mounted rifle.

"Yeah, he's good to go," he said several minutes later. "Go ahead and start on the render and assembly, Rhodey'll be flying in to pick him up at nine."

"Very good sir," answered JARVIS. "And Captain Rogers is inquiring if you would like him to bring home some pizza from Brooklyn?"

A soft smile stretched across Tony's lips. *There's that 1940's chivalry again.*

"Yeah, that sounds good, J," Tony said as his machinery whirred to life, assembling Rhodey's armour. "Tell him thanks for me, yeah?"

"I will indeed, sir."

Steve grunted as his right fist made contact with the punching bag, the loud *thwack* echoing throughout the empty gym. He immediately pulled back his fist, hitting the bag with a quick left-right-left sequence of punches that left it swinging wildly on its hook. Huffing in frustration, Steve grabbed onto the bag, stilling it before hitting it with a massive uppercut that sent it flying completely off the hook and into the wall several metres away, spilling sand as it went.

"And there goes another one," Steve muttered under his breath, brushing the sweaty hair out of his eyes. Tony had already spent hundreds of dollars on various punching bags for him, trying to find one that could hold up to Steve's fists when he was especially upset. He had attempted to make one with the fabric that he used for their uniforms, but so far they hadn't been able to find a combination of padding and durability that Steve hadn't managed to destroy.

"At least it wasn't a wall this time," Steve added as he headed over to clean up the mess, disposing of the bag and the spilled sand into the trash bin. "Far less chance of breaking my fingers against a punching bag than a wall."

"Say again, babe?" Tony suddenly said from behind him. Steve whipped around, embarrassed that he'd allowed himself to be snuck up on yet again, his retort dying on his lips when he noticed that Tony was dressed in exercise clothing.

"Are you here to work out with me?" he asked, blotting his sweaty face with a towel and trying to not sound too surprised. He bent down to give Tony a quick kiss, his embarrassment at being snuck up upon forgotten as he breathed in the intoxicating scent of his husband.

"Yeah," Tony answered once they broke apart. "Pete's with Natasha having another ballet lesson, I think she's thinking it might help his mood a bit since he's been so cranky lately, and I'm pretty sure Clint's taking a nap, so… I thought I'd see if you wanted some company."

"You know that I'd never turn down your company," Steve said with a wide grin. "But I will admit that the gym isn't usually where I look for it."

"Hey, now, I'm not a complete couch potato, you know," Tony protested. "I exercise… sometimes."
"Sometimes," Steve repeated, winking. "More like the bare minimum. If I didn't give all of you guys your weekly training requirements I'm not sure if you'd ever—" 

"Yeah, yeah, I get your point," Tony said, scowling playfully. "It's not my fault if I don't see the need for me to be practising hand-to-hand combat on a daily basis when I'm always wearing a suit that can fly. I'm much better at a distance. You know, the whole 'I've got your back' thing?"

"Yeah, and if your suit ever happens to lose power it'll be good to have this experience," Steve pointed out. He slipped his hands around Tony's waist and nuzzled his temple, smiling when Tony shivered in his arms. "Besides, it's more fun to spar with a partner than with a wooden pillar." He planted another kiss on Tony's temple then stepped back three paces, raising his hands. "First position, Tony."

Tony huffed, throwing Steve another scowl as he complied.

"All right, now attack me," Steve said. His heart quickened as Tony lunged for him, aiming a chop directly at Steve's midsection. Steve stepped back as he blocked the chop, sending Tony's arm off to the side as he aimed his own blow towards Tony's flank. Tony deflected the blow, not as easily as Steve but effectively nonetheless, which pleased Steve to no end. Tony may crack the occasional joke about his laziness, but when it came down to it he was just as fit as a man of his age and health could be. He'd even beaten Clint at sparring a few times, of which he never failed to remind Clint when given the opportunity.

"Good!" Steve exclaimed as they continued to exchange blows and blocks, their swift movements getting faster and faster. "You're doing great, sweetheart!"

"Ah huh," Tony said, panting as he blocked yet another shot, ducking underneath Steve's arm. "And all you're doing is getting sexier. Jesus, Steve, it's almost not fair!"

"I never said it was gonna be fair," Steve said, rather cheekily as he managed to grab onto Tony's arms, pinning them to his sides. He then hooked his leg around the back of Tony's knees, taking his feet out from under him and sending them both tumbling down to the mat.

"Now, that's really not fair," Tony gasped, his chest heaving and his gorgeous face glistening with sweat as he stared up at Steve, squirming slightly under Steve's hold.

"Don't care. God, you're beautiful," Steve breathed. He pressed his hips flush against Tony's, heat racing down his spine when Tony let out a soft moan.

"Am I?" Tony said on a gasp as Steve latched his lips onto Tony's pulse point. He wrapped his legs around Steve's waist and Steve instinctively ground his hips down, drawing another moan from his husband which he answered with one of his own.
"Steve, please!"

"Please what, mo grá?" Steve whispered. He slid his hand underneath Tony's lower back, pressing him even tighter against him. "Is mian liom tú phléisiúr, inis dom conas. Tell me what you want."

Tony moaned again as he cupped Steve's chin, looking him straight in the eye. "I want you, baby. I'll always want you."

Steve's jaw twitched as he gazed at the gorgeous flushed face of his husband, tracing his fingertips down Tony's temple and cheek to his lips. "You've got me," he whispered. "You'll always have me." And then he dipped his head and pressed his lips to Tony's, his tongue plundering Tony's mouth, devouring him.

"Aww, c'mon you guys, really?" came the sudden voice of Clint Barton just before an arrow pierced the mat about five centimetres above their heads. Steve immediately jumped to his feet, his heart in his throat as he tried to adjust himself and glaring fiercely at Clint, who was doubled over with laughter.

"You're such a fucking asshole, Barton!" Tony rasped, still down on the floor and looking thoroughly debauched. He held out his hand to Steve who pulled him up to his feet as he tried to calm his heaving breaths. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Apparently doing what I do best," Clint said through his laughter, his eyes glinting mischievously as he retrieved the arrow.

"You're such a complete cockblock?" said Tony. "Why the hell didn't you knock first?"

"Knock? Knock on what, the wall? The damn elevator opens right into the gym," said Clint. "And besides, either you guys were being unnaturally quiet for a change or I need some new hearing aids again."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure you do," Tony grumbled. "But before I get to making 'em, I'm gonna have Steve kick your ass so I can watch!"

"It's all right, Tony," Steve said, shaking his head. Of all the lousy timing…

"Pardon me, gentlemen," JARVIS suddenly cut in. "But I have just received a video message from an unknown source, and I believe it is something that you would wish to see."

"A video message?" Steve asked. He glanced over at Tony who gave him a puzzled shrug. "And you don't know who it's from?"

"No, Captain," answered JARVIS. "The message was rerouted through an innumerable number of servers and ghost servers before arriving at the Tower. I have already begun a trace, but be aware that it may take some time before it is complete."

"Ah, just delete the thing, JARVIS," Tony said. "Stark Industries gets bombarded with tons of emails trying to act like viruses so they can hack us, and I'm sure it's nothing important anyway."

"That was my first thought as well, sir," JARVIS said. "However, this particular message is completely free of both spyware and viruses, and I do believe you will wish to view it." He paused then, almost as though he was weighing his next words. "It involves Master Peter, sir."

"What? Why the hell didn't you say that first!" Tony shrieked. Steve promptly grabbed his hand and headed towards the elevator, turning halfway there to gesture to Clint.
"Clint, I'd like for you to come as well," he said in his Captain's voice. "If this does involve Peter then I want everyone to see it." *Help me maintain at least a shred of objectivity.*

"Sure thing, Cap," said Clint as he shouldered his bow, his expression one of fierce determination as they all crowded into the elevator. They were silent as they rode up to the penthouse, finding Peter and Natasha waiting for them as the doors opened into the living room.

"JARVIS said he got some video message about me, do you know what it's about?" Peter asked. He was pale and obviously frightened, but trying very hard not to show it.

"Not yet, little guy," Steve said. He cupped his hand on Peter's shoulder as they all crowded around the living room monitor.

"Go ahead, J," Tony said.

The video opened with a long view of the outside of Peter's school, zooming in on a particular window on the first floor near a large clump of bushes. Steve's eyes narrowed as nothing else happened for several seconds, and he was just about to tell JARVIS to shut it off when the window suddenly slid open from the inside and Peter proceeded to crawl out of it, sticking to the outside brick of the school building as he made his way around the corner and out of sight.

"What the hell is this?" Tony muttered as the video suddenly cut to an alleyway between two tall buildings. Once again there was nothing for a few seconds, then suddenly Peter appeared, shoving what appeared to be the last of a sandwich into his mouth as he set his backpack down onto the ground and pulled something out of it, something that looked to Steve's eyes like some sort of uniform. After ensuring that no one was watching, Peter changed into the uniform, a tight red and blue suit that was very similar to the suits worn by Natasha, complete with a mask and a large black spider emblem stitched into the centre of the chest. The legs were a bit crooked and uneven, but it was definitely recognisable as a spider.

"I don't believe it. I can't believe it," Tony muttered, over and over again as the video cut from scene to scene showing Peter doing various things, from rescuing cats stuck in trees to halting bicycle thieves to stopping a speeding car from hitting a bus. He appeared to be shooting a kind of web-like rope from devices around both of his wrists, ropes that he would use to fly between buildings, often flipping in midair.

"Peter?" Steve whispered through his tight chest, his mind swirling with emotions that he couldn't quite quantify. Peter flinched at the sound of his name but refused to look up, his bottom lip caught between his teeth and his entire body trembling under Steve's hand.

And then the video shifted again, this time to the top of a building, the camera trained directly on Peter as an explosion suddenly rocked the area, knocking Peter backwards. Steve shuddered as he watched his shaken son get slowly back to his feet, shooting off one of his web ropes and fleeing just as the sound of sirens appeared.

"So, Iron Man, Captain America," a robotic voice suddenly said, obviously altered. "Apparently all of your elaborate security protocols and spies weren't enough to keep your beloved child from sneaking around behind your back, so what makes you think you can keep him from us?"

And then there was nothing. Just a blank monitor.

Stunned, not a single one of them moved for several heartbeats until Natasha tugged on Clint's arm, leading him silently to the elevator. Steve breathed in the deepest breath he could as he watched his teammates exit their home, reaching for Tony with his free hand as soon as the doors closed.
"Peter," Steve said quietly, his hand shaking where it rested on Peter's shoulder. "I need you to be completely honest with us right now. Was that you on that video?"

Peter gulped as all the remaining colour drained from his cheeks.

"Uh—uh huh."

"I see," Steve said, squeezing Tony's hand. "Then I'd like to hear your explanation of what we just saw."

Tears welled in Peter's eyes as he glanced between Steve and Tony, his mouth opening and closing three or four times before he was finally able to speak.

"I—I didn't," he whispered. "I mean, I just wanted to—"

"You, you didn't?" Tony snapped. He was trembling too, his hand shaking in Steve's and his other fist pressed up against his chest. "And exactly what didn't you do? You didn't sew together your own superhero suit, or build those fancy web-shooting gadgets? You didn't intend to blatantly disobey us when we were trying our absolute damndest to keep you safe? Was that it? Or was it that you didn't intend to get caught? 'Cause that's sure as hell what it seems like to me!"

"Daddy—"

"What the goddamn hell were you thinking Pete?" Tony ranted. "You're supposed to be smart, and this is one of the absolute stupidest things you could've possibly done! There are people out there who want to kill you, and you're running off, shirking your security detail and dressing up in some goddamn Halloween costume just so you can fly around Queens and rescue cats from trees?"

"Tony," Steve started. In his utter shock at seeing the video he hadn't quite processed what was said at the end, which was now replaying on a continuous loop in his mind.

"What makes you think you can keep him from us?"

"Daddy!" Peter cried, tears spilling down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, okay? I just wanted to help people, and I thought that—"

"Is this some goddamn teenage rebellion thing? 'Cause if so, I sure as hell don't think—"

"Tony!" Steve shouted, his heart lurching when Tony jumped, looking up at him with wide, shocked eyes. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he continued in a quieter voice. "I know we're all very upset by this, and there will definitely need to be some form of punishment for Peter's disobedience, but what we should be focusing on right now is the threat. Whoever made this said that we wouldn't be able to protect Peter from them, so I think we need to concentrate all of our efforts on finding out who this is and where they are."

Tony breathed in a long, deliberate breath. "Yeah, yeah, Steve, you're right. As usual."

"All right. So—"

"So it's gotta be Obie that sent this," Tony cut in. "He's the one who has a personal vendetta against Peter, and he knows where Pete goes to school. And I obviously need to have Happy completely revet all of the security people, because someone on that team must've been responsible for filming at least the school part, and—"

"Daddy!" Peter suddenly shrieked. "Something's not right! I think—I think—!"
"No, this is where you zip it, child!" Tony retorted. "The adults are talking!"

"No, no, no, it's not about the video!" Peter insisted. He turned to Steve, grabbing onto his arm with wide, frightened eyes. "Papa! I think that—!

"Hold on," Steve hissed, his eyebrows knitting together as he glanced towards Tony's lab. He could've sworn that he'd heard something, a strange noise coming from the direction of the landing pad, but it had appeared and disappeared so fast that he couldn't be sure.

"What the hell is it?" Tony asked impatiently.

"I thought I heard something," Steve whispered. He held his index finger to his lips as he tucked Peter behind him, motioning for Tony to do the same as he tilted his head, listening for the noise to reappear.

"JARVIS?" Tony said after a few seconds. "Anything weird going on?"

"Nothing that I can detect, sir," JARVIS answered. "However, I am—"

But JARVIS was cut off by the sudden piercing sound of shattering glass a split-second before six men came bursting into the living room from the lab. Steve immediately launched himself at the leader, tackling him to the floor just as his ears picked up one of the highest-pitched noises he had ever heard in his life and an absolutely paralysing pain shot through his body, a pain that stole all of the breath from his lungs and left him completely unable to move. He was barely able to grunt as the man that he'd tackled shoved Steve off of him, leaving him sprawled flat out on the floor, wracked with the searing pain and completely helpless to protect his family.

"P-Peter," Steve managed to stammer, his eyes flitting frantically around the room searching for his son, who as far as he could tell had hit the floor only a metre or so away.

"Peter!" Steve choked out again, barely able to gasp against the pain coursing through his veins as he felt the life slowly burned out of him. He had always thought that being frozen was the worst kind of torture he could fathom, but even then he had still survived the ice.

He wasn't quite sure he could survive this.

"Well, well, well, Captain," came the slimy voice of Obadiah Stane as he stepped over to Steve, looming over him with a wide smile plastered across his face. He removed a set of strange-looking earplugs from his ears and crouched closer, so close that Steve could feel his breath. "You know, you really have been a persistent thorn in my side these last couple of years, I can understand now why Tony hated you so much growing up."

He paused for a moment, adjusting the knot on his tie as he jerked his head towards one of the other men, none of whom Steve recognised.

"Do you know how long I've spent trying to get rid of this goddamn pest of a kid, Captain?" Stane continued. "I was supposed to have been the heir to Stark Industries, but then the little brat was born and all of Tony's focus and energy turned to him. And I was pushed away, brushed to the side like I was nothing more than an annoyance even though I was the one who was always looking out for the best interests of the company!"

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"Please, don't hurt the boy," he whispered, so softly he was surprised Stane could hear him. "Take me instead."
Stane's ugly smile grew even wider until he resembled one of the demented Nazi comic book villains from the old Captain America propaganda pamphlets.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Stane said, dripping with false politeness. "But you're not the one that I came for."

No! Oh God, please, don't let them take him!

And then Stane got up from the floor, straightened his suit jacket, and nodded to the men he was with, who all disappeared beyond Steve's line of sight, somewhere behind him. There were five of them, all wearing masks and equipped with the same earplugs as Stane along with rifles exactly like the one that Bucky used to carry as the Winter Soldier. Steve heard Peter's immobile body being lifted up and carried past him, out towards the landing pad.

"Please, don't hurt him!" Steve managed to choke out, his eyes burning with unshed tears that he couldn't blink away. He could hear Tony's panicked gasps coming from somewhere off to his side, but he couldn't even turn his head enough to actually see him.

"Oh, don't worry, Captain," Stane said, his upper lip curling into a sneer. "It's not my intention to hurt the boy. It's my intention to break him."

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Stop by and see me on tumblr, I'm geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there! :)

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering why I changed the name of Killian's "drug" from Extremis to Aminacin, in canon Extremis was the brainchild of Maya Hansen, not Killian, and Killian only met her through her association with Tony. In this universe since Tony was already a father when he went to Switzerland, he wouldn't have necessarily gone looking for a hook-up while there and likely wouldn't have met Maya.

As for what exactly Aminacin is, you'll have to keep reading. :)

And as always, I can't wait to see what you think! Please don't hesitate to leave me a review! :)
"Good morning, Captain Rogers," JARVIS said, startling Steve out of his trance-like daydream. "The time is currently 0700. It is a blustery day today in New York City, with an estimated high of minus five degrees and winds out of the northeast at ten to fifteen miles per hour. There is currently no precipitation expected until later this afternoon, if you wish to partake in a morning run after dropping Master Peter off at school."

Several seconds ticked by before Steve was able to work up the energy to respond. Ever since—well, ever since, it was though his mind had turned to molasses, unable to process thought patterns with any sort of speed or agility. Most of the time Steve felt like he was sleepwalking through a nightmare, even as he knew that he'd had plenty of nightmares that were paradises compared to this.

If it wasn't for Peter, and the fact that he was so young and still needed a parent to take care of him,
Steve wasn't sure what he would've done. His entire body hurt from the constant weight of his grief, and his chest felt like it had been carved out with a dull pocketknife. It was empty. Hollow. A constant gnawing ache where his heart used to be.

The heart he had buried right along with the love of his life.

Blinking, Steve glanced over toward the bedroom window—the bright winter sunlight already glinting off of the surrounding buildings, the din of people shouting hello as they walked to their jobs and the taxicabs honking as they drove by—and let out a heavy sigh. It just seemed so wrong for the morning to be so cheerful and bright when the inside of Avengers' Tower still felt like the frigid Arctic water where he'd been frozen for over sixty years.

"Thank you, JARVIS," he finally said. Steve tipped his head back, thudding it against the top of the squishy armchair where he'd spent part of the night, the arc reactor that had been resting on his lap dropping onto the floor. He immediately lunged for the reactor, cradling it against his chest as he rubbed at his scratchy eyes and raked his fingers through his hair, shuddering at its greasy feel. He hadn't had a haircut or bothered to shave with any regularity since—well, ever since, and had just been avoiding mirrors lately so he didn't have to look at himself.

"Is Peter awake yet?"

"Yes, Captain. Master Peter is currently taking a shower."

"Thank you. Do you happen to know if he was able to stay asleep after I left his room?"

"I believe so, Captain, as his vital signs after you departed did show patterns consistent with sleep. However, I do not believe that it was a sufficient enough quantity for a child of his age."

"No, I'm not surprised," answered Steve. Peter's nightmares had been especially bad lately as well, not surprisingly, and Steve had spent a good portion of the night in his room with him, trying to reassure him that everything would be all right again someday.

Someday.

When exactly that might be, though, Steve had no idea.

At the moment it only seemed impossible.

"Thank you, JARVIS," Steve said.

"You are most welcome, Captain," JARVIS replied. "Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance."

Pushing himself up to his feet, Steve shuffled into the bathroom and turned on the shower, nearly stepping inside with his sleeping clothes still on in his mindless haze. He scrubbed at his hair and body viciously, as if he could somehow wash away the almost overwhelming layer of grief that had fallen over him like a steel veil ever since—

Well, ever since.

But so far nothing had worked, not even in the slightest. It was as though Steve was dipping his paintbrush into what he thought was the colour yellow, but finding it to be black instead.

It just couldn't be done.
Finally dressed, Steve made his way to the kitchen where he found Peter, sitting idly at the counter with his head resting against his palm, his school backpack on the floor next to his chair and an untouched bowl of Lucky Charms in front of him. Steve approached him carefully; with how little Peter had been sleeping lately he had been far more jumpy than usual, and Steve didn't want to startle him.

"Hey, Peter," he said as he placed a gentle hand on Peter's shoulder, his gold wedding band picking up a sliver of sunlight from the nearby window. "You ready for school?"

Peter shrugged, looking up at Steve with red-rimmed, glassy eyes.

"Yes, Papa," he said, his voice gravelly from lack of sleep. "Not too much going on today, just a physics quiz but that'll be really easy, so… I do have that field trip for chemistry coming up at the end of next week though, and I have a permission slip that you'll need to sign for it, but I—I don't know where I put it, and I—" He broke off, swallowing hard. "And I keep forgetting to ask for another one, so—"

"It's all right, son, don't worry about it," Steve murmured. "I can send your teacher an email later, would that work?"

"It should," Peter said with a small nod. "Thanks."

Steve ruffled his son's hair, leaning down to kiss the top of his head. "Of course. But can you do me a small favour before we leave for school?"

Peter looked up at him again, and Steve's stomach clenched at the intensity of the misery in his beautiful brown eyes, the eyes that were so very much like his father's.

"What?" Peter asked.

"Can you try and eat your breakfast before we leave? Or at least some of it? I don't want you passing out at school from hunger again, son, okay?"

Peter's lower lip trembled, and he caught it between his teeth.

"Uh huh," he whispered. "I can try."

"That's my boy," Steve replied as he kissed him again, watching with pride as Peter picked up his spoon and shoved a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

*He really is the best of us,* Steve thought. *If anyone can survive this, it'll be him.*

They headed down to the garage as soon as Peter was done, Steve's hand on his son's shoulder as it always was, guiding him towards the truck. Sam had told Steve that trying to get Peter back into his normal routine was one of the best things he could do for him, and Steve was determined to do whatever it took to make things easier for Peter.

Pulling onto the street outside the Tower, Steve pointedly ignored the massive billboard the employees at Stark Industries had designed as a memorial to their fallen former-CEO. It was a beautiful portrait of Iron Man, painted to appear as though he was about to take off from the ground towards the viewer, but Steve had already seen it way too many times. He didn't need to be reminded yet again that his beloved husband was gone, and that Peter had lost his father.

There were plenty of other reminders that haunted Steve nearly every second of his life, ever since—
Well, ever since.

"Have a good day, Peter," Steve said as they pulled into the school’s parking lot, his shoulders sagging as Peter shot him one of his *duh* looks.

"I mean, *try* to have a good day, okay, son?" Steve murmured. He curled his arm around Peter's skinny shoulders, pulling him into a hug. "I love you."

"Uh huh. Love you too, Papa," Peter mumbled into Steve's chest. "See you later."

Steve watched as Peter shuffled towards the school's entrance, his head down and his eyes trained on the ground. He felt a small pang of regret for essentially forcing him to go to school, knowing that Peter would probably rather be anywhere else than having to face his classmates and teachers everyday after what happened, but Sam and everyone else had said it was what was best for Peter and Steve had no choice but to trust their judgement. Ever since that split-second of time when he suddenly became a single father, Steve had been in uncharted waters, unable to navigate at all without the help of his teammates.

And even now, nearly three months later, he was still needing their help with navigating. If it weren't for James, Bruce, Natasha, Clint, and Sam, and even Happy and Pepper, Steve was certain that both he and Peter would be in far worse shape than they already were.

And that was something that Steve couldn't even imagine.

As soon as the school doors closed behind Peter and JARVIS confirmed that he was heading towards his locker, Steve drove back to the Tower, once again ignoring the memorial billboards. Arriving in the penthouse, he headed directly for his art studio, retrieving the notebook that he used to plan out the training schedules for the Avengers. For all of Sam's advice to help Peter resume his normal routine, Steve had yet to really do so himself, and it was beyond time for him to start setting a better example for his son.

Not only that, it would likely help to jumpstart the rest of the team as well. Despite all the support they had been giving to Peter and himself, they had all been under a similar fog ever since—well, ever *since*, and when it came down to it, it really was Steve's responsibility to try and lift them out of it.

After all, he was the Captain.

Even if it felt like the heaviest thing he'd ever lifted in his life. Even if he had no idea where to begin.

And, as Nick Fury had so succinctly pointed out, possible threats don't just take a breather because one of the heroes happens to die, a statement that would've earned him a massive punch to the jaw if he'd've had the gall to say it to Steve's face instead of over the phone.

"JARVIS, is Natasha at home?" Steve asked as he opened the notebook, flipping through the well-worn pages.

"Yes, Captain, Agent Romanoff is in her apartment," JARVIS answered.

"Good. Can you call her, please?"

A few seconds later Natasha's face filled the monitor, dressed in the clothes she often wore when she danced. She had told Steve a long time ago that ballet was one of her outlets, much like painting was for Steve and building things was for Peter, and he was proud that she had been able to get back into it lately.
"Hey, Cap, what's up?"

"Um… I was wondering… do you have a few minutes?" Steve asked. He held up the notebook, clearing his throat. "I'm thinking that we need to start some training again, try and get back into… things, but… I'm not—I'm not quite sure if I can… do it alone. At least, not yet, so I was wondering —"

"Steve, it's okay," Natasha interrupted, giving him a soft smile. "I can be up there in ten minutes, does that work?"

Steve huffed as he nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"Don't mention it," Natasha said. "See you then."

To pass the time while he waited, Steve padded into the kitchen, preparing two large mugs of the jasmine tea that he knew Natasha enjoyed. For how tired he was coffee would have probably been more useful, but he hadn't yet been able to bring himself to even touch the coffeemaker, ever since—

Well, ever since.

"Agent Romanoff is on her way up, Captain," JARVIS announced once Steve finished preparing the tea.

"Thanks, JARVIS."

He had just taken a seat at the kitchen table when Natasha breezed into the room, heading directly for her mug of tea.

"Mmm, jasmine," she said, blowing on it before taking a small sip. "My favourite."

"I thought I remembered that," answered Steve. "I'd offer to make you something more substantial, but I'm afraid—well, I haven't really been cooking all that much, since—since—"

Well, ever since.

"Steve, it's okay," Natasha said quietly. "You don't need to explain yourself to me, I understand."

Something about the tone of Natasha's gravelly voice, and the gentle way that she patted Steve's hand in comfort—much like the way Steve had seen her do so many times for Peter—caused all of Steve's internal floodgates to open and he suddenly burst into tears. And being the wonderful, kind, and compassionate person that she was, Natasha simply sat with him, occasionally squeezing his hand as he cried himself out over the next several minutes, finally getting up to retrieve some tissues from the nearby bathroom when she was certain that Steve could handle her leaving.

"I'm—I'm so sorry!" he sobbed, blotting at his puffy eyes with a tissue. "I didn't call you up here to watch me cry into my tea, I just—I just—"

"Steve, I said it's okay," said Natasha. "It's not good to keep your emotions in check all the time. I know you're trying your damnedest to be strong for Peter and that's admirable, but it's not healthy for you in the long run, and I personally feel that it's okay for Peter to see that you're struggling too." She gave him a rather sheepish grin as she took another sip of her tea. "Or, at least that's what Sam's always saying. I know it's a lot easier said than done sometimes."

"More like all the time," Steve muttered, still scrubbing at his eyes. "I just—I just feel like I should be able to get past this agony at least a little, you know? I mean, I've lost people before, during the war,
but—it still hurts so much that sometimes I can't even breathe—like the very air itself is trying to choke me, and—"

"Steve, this was your husband," Natasha said. "And it's only been three months, I'd honestly be worried about you if I thought you were moving on already. You're a widower and a single dad now, it's gonna take time for you to adjust to that. And that's completely understandable."

Fresh tears welled in Steve's eyes, and he shook his head. "I don't know if I'll ever adjust to it," he admitted. "I mean, I drag myself out of nightmares each morning—if I even sleep at all—and it's no better than the nightmare I just left. And I'm trying—I'm trying to do what I keep telling myself that I need to do, but I just—I just don't know how. And poor Peter, he never really stopped having his nightmares, even before—but lately they've gotten so much worse again, and I just don't know how to help him. I mean, just the other night he woke up screaming like he was being attacked, and I ran into his room to find him scratching and picking at his arm. And when I asked him about it, he told me that he'd been dreaming he was back in the cave and hooked up to some kind of medicine drip that was making him see things."

"Oh my God, the poor kid!" Natasha exclaimed. "That's horrible!"

"Yeah, it really was," Steve agreed. He curled his hands around his mug, the heat burning into his palms. "And the whole time I was trying to comfort him, he kept repeating, 'it's not real, Papa, it's not real. Uncle Bucky says that I need to wake up'. Almost as if he knew it was a dream, but he couldn't quite figure out how to get out of it."

"Uncle Bucky?" Natasha asked, confused. "He doesn't mean Barnes, does he?"

"I guess, I don't know who else he would mean," Steve said sadly. "But I think it's a bit of a stretch for Peter to be calling him 'Uncle' when Bucky tried to punch him in the head the only time that he saw him."

"Yeah, you're right, that doesn't make much sense," murmured Natasha. "I'm so sorry, Steve. I can't imagine how scary that must have been."

"Yeah, it was pretty awful," Steve said, shuddering. "I was just glad that he didn't manage to break the skin on his arm, but he was so scared and confused—" He paused, looking intently at Natasha. "And I haven't told anyone else this. Peter asked me not to, I think he was embarrassed, so if you don't mind—"

"Of course, you don't need to worry about that," Natasha assured him. "I'm just sorry you had to go through it alone."

Steve hung his head, sniffing. "I just feel so useless because I can't seem to help him like I should. I'm his father, but… I just can't seem to plan my way out of this. I can't seem to figure it out."

Natasha was quiet for a moment. "Sometimes there just isn't a plan, Steve. Sometimes, and I know you're good at this because I've seen it, sometimes you just need to rely on your instincts. And that's okay."

Steve ran his fingertip around the rim of his mug, contemplating Natasha's words. His Army superiors had always taught him to trust his instincts, and he had passed along that knowledge to both the Avengers and to Peter. But Steve was a master strategist; he always had been, even before the serum, and it was so hard for him to admit that there were just some things that he couldn't strategise his way out of.
"Where'd you get to be so knowledgeable about this stuff?" he asked, trying to smile. "I doubt that they taught very many classes on compassion in the Red Room."

"No, no, they absolutely did not," Natasha said with wide eyes. "Compassion was considered worse than a four-letter word in the Red Room." She paused to take a sip of her tea, setting the mug down carefully. "I actually learned it from you guys. Well, maybe a bit from Fury and SHIELD, but mainly from you guys, 'cause you know, it's Fury."

"Ah yes, I think I understand," Steve said, his smile widening ever-so-slightly.

"Yeah, I'm sure you do," Natasha said with a smirk. "So, I pretty much came from nothing, and then I was trained to be a ghost from the time I was old enough to write my name. Just an assassin, mindlessly following orders. I didn't understand what it was like to have real friends, to have… a family, until I got to the Avengers. You guys became my family, and I—I'm so much better now because of it. Better than I ever thought I was capable of being."

"And we're better for it too, Nat," Steve managed through his tight throat. "All of us are, and so was Tony."

Natasha gave him a wink as she drained the rest of her mug. "Well, I'm sure Tony had his moments. Now, you mentioned something about starting up some training sessions?"

Taking the hint, Steve opened his notebook to a fresh page. "All right, let's get to work."

They ended up spending the next three hours planning out training exercises, both for the individuals and the team as a whole, with Steve making sure to include some exercises for Peter as well. He had begun joining the rest of the team on some of their training sessions right before—well, right before—and had proved himself to be quite adept at meshing right in, so adept that while Steve was in no way ready to call his young teenage son an official Avenger, he at least knew that Peter could definitely hold his own if it ever became necessary.

"Well, I think we got a lot accomplished this afternoon," Natasha said once they were done, absentmindedly chewing on a pizza crust left over from their hastily ordered lunch. "This is a great start, Steve."

"I couldn't have done it without you," Steve said. He got to his feet, gathering up the pizza box and the empty drink glasses. "Thank you, Nat."

Natasha gave him a smile as she patted his arm. "You're welcome. And don't forget, it's okay to ask for help sometimes. You're not in this alone."

"I know," answered Steve as he let out a heavy sigh. "I think I just tend to forget that sometimes. I mean, I know our jobs are more dangerous than most, I guess I just never thought—" He broke off, not wanting the tears to start flowing again, he'd already taken enough advantage of Natasha's patience and sympathy. "I just never thought that—"

"Steve, it's okay," said Natasha. "I'm not sure any of us ever thought all that much about it. Tony was… always so full of life, it just doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, he was," Steve said. Right up until the second he wasn't.

"Okay, so we'll start this schedule next week, then?" asked Natasha.

Steve gave a nod. "Yep, on Monday. Right after I take Peter to school."
"All right. I guess I'll see you then, if not before."

Steve walked Natasha to the elevator, not exactly feeling what he would call "light", but definitely better than he had been that morning. Unfortunately, almost as soon as the doors closed behind Natasha the heavy sadness he had managed to push aside during their work came roaring back with a vengeance, nearly bowling Steve over with its intensity.

He could plan all the Avengers' training sessions that he wanted, but it still didn't change the fact that the team was now one member down.

And in Steve's eyes, they were down the most important member. Tony had always been what Steve liked to call the heart of the Avengers, and he still had no idea how in the world they were going to survive without their heart.

No one can live without a heart, Steve thought miserably as he made his way back towards his bedroom. Especially not me.

Stepping inside the bedroom, Steve's eyes were immediately drawn to the huge painting hung on the wall above the bed, the painting he had presented to Tony as a wedding gift. Tears stung Steve's sore eyes as he remembered that wonderful day spent at Coney Island, how happy and full of life they all had been, he, Tony, and Peter, celebrating Peter's birthday.

What a razor-sharp contrast to the misery he was in now.

"JARVIS, is Peter doing okay?" he asked.

"Master Peter's vital signs are within his normal parameters, Captain," answered JARVIS. "He is currently attending his chemistry class."

Well, at least there's that.

"All right, thank you."

"You are most welcome, Captain."

Suddenly exhausted, Steve picked up the arc reactor and collapsed onto the chair, pressing the reactor to his chest and closing his eyes. He had about ninety minutes before he had to pick Peter up from school, so… may as well see if he could catch up on some sleep, even if he never seemed to like what he saw while there.

But as he felt his exhausted body sinking slowly towards unconsciousness, even more disturbing thoughts flitted across Steve's mind. That nightmare of Peter's that he'd described to Natasha had occurred only two nights ago. It hadn't happened again since then, and Peter had begged Steve not to tell Sam about it, but Steve couldn't help but be worried. As bad as Peter's nightmares were he'd never woken up trying to hurt himself, and Steve was now living in near-constant fear that it would happen again. And with Peter's strength still increasing as he grew, Steve was also afraid that he wouldn't be able to stop him.

Not to mention the fact that Peter was suddenly claiming a connection with Bucky, of all people. The last time Steve had seen Bucky he'd been barely coherent, holed up in his padded room at the mental hospital where he'd been living ever since he took a swing at Peter. Tony had insisted that Bucky be removed from the Tower immediately, and Steve had relented, not wanting to risk Peter's safety again.

There was no way Bucky could have been communicating with Peter when he couldn't even take
care of himself.

*I need to get Peter some help,* Steve thought miserably. *I can't do this alone. Not anymore.*

Because the absolute *last* thing that Peter needed, was for Steve to fail him again.

"Pardon me, sir," said JARVIS, startling Tony awake from his fitful sleep, sweating and gasping for breath. "But it is currently 7am, and Master Peter has just awoken to prepare for school."

It was several seconds before Tony could even bring himself to move, much less respond to his UI's unwelcome but helpful reminder. He had fallen asleep—if one could really call it that, it was more like the lightest of dozes, what Peter often called a twilight sleep—in the lab again, bent over the countertop with his face pressed into his keyboard. Next to his head sat a highball glass containing a double-shot of whisky, the very same glass that he had poured the night before when his grief had become almost unbearable. He hadn't actually drank any of it, though. At most he had only sniffed at it a couple of times before setting it down, as if the very vapours from the liquid would be enough to help him. As much as he desperately wanted a drink—or twelve—on the really bad nights, he had still managed to avoid the temptation of giving in.

At least, he had managed to so far. Mainly for Peter's sake.

And also because he knew how disappointed Steve would be if he did. For some reason that Tony had never been able to wrap his mind around, Steve had always thought the world of him, and Tony was loathe to want to tarnish that now. Even if it technically didn't matter anymore.

Even so, Tony couldn't deny that it was getting more and more difficult to resist the draw of the alcohol. The thought of just drinking himself into complete oblivion so he could maybe, just maybe, forget how lonely and miserable he was for awhile was so alluring that he was actually shocked that he'd managed to restrain himself as well as he had.

After all, it was always how he had dealt with his problems and sorrows in the past. Drink to forget.

But then again, now he had Peter to take care of. And Tony's beloved son deserved far better than to lose his only remaining parent to the bane of alcohol, no matter how enticing that bottle of whisky looked sitting on his counter.

"Sir?" JARVIS said again.

"Yeah, J, I'm awake." Grunting, Tony slowly pushed himself up from the counter, rubbing at the painful crick in his neck and cursing his aching lower back. His back had been bothering him so much lately and while it wasn't something completely new, it was definitely worse now than it had ever been before—

Well, *before.*

"Is Pete doing okay?" Tony asked, grimacing at the awful taste in his mouth and his general overall feeling of ickiness. When was the last time he'd brushed his teeth? Or had a shower?

He probably didn't want to know.

"Master Peter's vital signs were consistent with light sleep after you departed his room, sir," answered JARVIS. "However, I do not believe that it was sufficient enough sleep for a child of his age."
"No, I'm not surprised," muttered Tony. He got to his feet, groaning as various joints snapped and popped in protest. He felt like he was close to a hundred years old with how stiff and sore he was.

The irony of which was not lost on him. Even though Steve had often joked that he technically hadn't even turned thirty yet, Tony never let him get away with calling himself anything less than the ninety-some-odd years old that he actually was.

At least, he was before—

Well, before.

"Might I be so bold as to suggest a shower and a change of clothes before you accompany Master Peter to school, sir?" said JARVIS. "And perhaps tonight you will consider attempting to sleep in your own bed? You have now slept in that chair for the past three nights, if you indeed choose to call dozing off out of sheer exhaustion, sleeping."

The very thought of even attempting to sleep in his bed—in their bed—alone hit Tony like a repulsor blast to the chest, and he immediately shook his head. He could barely stand to sleep there when Steve was out on missions without him, and that was before—

Well, before.

"Not likely, J," he said gruffly. "Besides, the counter seems to be holding up okay."

"I see," answered JARVIS, rather petulantly. "Then might I suggest that you at least bring a pillow with you into the lab? It just might make it a bit easier for you to move once you have awoken."

"Mmm, maybe I'll borrow one of Pete's stuffed animals," Tony said as he headed down the hallway towards the bedrooms. "They seem to work okay for him most of the time."

"Sir, I don't believe that—"

"I know, J, okay?" Tony cut in. "I know Pete's been sleeping like crap lately, I don't need you reminding me. Lord knows I can't blame him."

"It is not a question of blame, sir," JARVIS said carefully. "I am more concerned with Master Peter's overall health, as I am yours."

"I'm fine," Tony said quickly as he pulled a clean t-shirt out of the dresser. His throat tightened as he recognised it as the vintage Led Zeppelin t-shirt that Steve had bought him for his fortieth birthday, before they were even married, and one that Peter had helped him pick out. Almost instinctively Tony's eyes were drawn to the bed, to the huge painting hanging above it, the painting that Steve had presented to him the day after their wedding. The portrait of their family, happy and relaxed as they celebrated Peter's birthday at the Malibu house, with fireworks exploding in the background and Peter lying back against their legs, a huge, happy smile on his sweet face.

Their perfect little family, that was suddenly ripped to shreds in the blink of an eye.

Why'd it have to be him, Tony thought as he pressed his fist to his chest. Steve didn't deserve it. He was always the better of us.

Why couldn't it have been me?

It was a question he asked himself almost constantly.
Unfortunately, there was never an answer.

Stepping inside the shower, Tony turned on the faucet, gasping and cursing when the ice-cold water splattered against his back. He reached into the soapdish, searching for the plain Ivory soap that Steve had used. Tony had always preferred to use his own fancier body wash that smelled like his favourite cologne, but that was before—

Well, it was before.

Finally dressed, he found Peter sitting in the kitchen, his head resting on his arms and his backpack on the floor by his chair, with an untouched bowl of Honey-Nut Cheerios sitting in front of him. Tony's heart lurched at the sight of him, so small and miserable but still trying to hide it as much as he could because he thought that he should.

"Hey, kiddo," Tony said quietly as he approached, not wanting to startle Peter. With how little Peter had been sleeping lately he had been even more jumpy than usual, and the last thing Tony needed at the moment was to have to jerk out of the way of Peter's flailing limbs again.

"Hey, Dad," Peter answered, muffled against his arms.

"Got all your stuff for school?" asked Tony. He still felt a twinge of guilt for essentially forcing Peter to go to school, but Sam had told him that one of the best things he could do for Peter was to try and maintain his usual routine, so… that's what Tony was trying to do.

Peter slowly raised his head, giving Tony a brief nod. "Uh huh. Not too much going on today, just an algebra quiz that'll be no big deal. Oh, and that field trip that we're taking for physics next week, I'll need you to sign the permission slip." He paused for a moment, gulping nervously. "Um… that's if I can remember where I put it, I don't know—"

"Hey," Tony murmured, laying a gentle hand on his son's shoulder. "It's okay, kiddo. I'll have JARVIS send your teacher an email and it'll be fine."

"Uh huh. Thanks."

Tony leaned down, pressing a kiss to the top of Peter's head. "Not a problem. Now, how 'bout you eat some of that cereal before it gets all soggy and gross, yeah? Don't need you passing out at school again."

Peter huffed, giving Tony a scowl as he picked up his spoon. "Fine."

"That's my boy," Tony said fondly as he ruffled Peter's hair, his gold wedding ring catching a glint of sunlight from the nearby window.

_Papa would definitely be proud._

As soon as Peter was done eating they headed down to the garage, with Tony's hand resting on Peter's shoulder the whole time. They were quiet during the short drive, purposefully avoiding the huge memorial billboards to Captain America that lined almost the entire length of the route. Some of them were cheesy as hell, designs left over from his 1940's-era comic books, but some of them were so beautiful and realistic that they were too painful to even glance at.

Tony especially hated the one of Steve wearing his stealth suit, his shield in his hand and that determined, "give 'em hell" look on his face that he always wore during missions. The stealth suit had always been Tony's favourite, and the possessive side of him hated the fact that so many people were now able to see his late husband wearing Tony's favourite uniform.
Captain America may have been Steve's identity to the rest of the world, but to Tony he was simply his husband, and Peter's papa.

And now he was gone.

"Here we are, kiddo," Tony said as he pulled into the school's parking lot. He curled his arm around Peter's skinny shoulders, pulling him in for a hug. "Try and have a good day, yeah?"

"Mmm," Peter mumbled against Tony's chest. "We'll see."

Tears welled in Tony's eyes as he kissed Peter's forehead, watching as he slowly shuffled towards the building with his head down. He had half a mind to say the hell with Sam's advice and pull Peter out of school for the rest of the year, but he honestly didn't think it would help. At least at school Peter was around his friends and teachers, other people. At home there was just Tony, and Tony sure as hell wasn't any good company lately.

Returning to the penthouse, Tony headed directly for the lab, unsure of exactly what he should do. There were any number of things he could do, basic necessities such as eating and drinking being at the top of that list, but he couldn't seem to move at the moment. He was numb, his entire body like a lead weight glued to the chair, idly staring off into space.

"Pardon me, sir," JARVIS suddenly said, an innumerable amount of time later. "But Director Fury is on the line."

Tony scoffed, his upper lip curling into a sneer. "Take a message, will ya, J? I have no desire to talk to that goddamn pirate."

"I do apologise, sir, but he is insisting," answered JARVIS. "He says it is of the utmost importance."

Tony slammed his fist onto the counter, causing the highball glass to jump. "What the hell could be so goddamn—oh nevermind. Put him through then!"

As soon as Nick Fury's face appeared on the monitor Tony's sneer grew even deeper. He looked perturbed, and in Tony's mind he had absolutely no right to be angry at Tony for anything at the moment.

"Thanks for finally taking my call," Fury said, thick with barely concealed disdain. "As much as I'm sure you don't think about it, Tony, my time is rather valuable."

"Yeah, yeah, isn't everyone's?" Tony grumbled. "What the hell do you want?"

"Look, I know this is probably pretty lousy timing," Fury began. "But I need you to start thinking about getting the team up and going again. These threats that are out there aren't just going to go away simply because—"

"Stop!" Tony exclaimed, startling himself with his intensity. "Don't even fucking say it, Nick, I'm warning you!"

Fury's visible eye narrowed in defiance. "Just because one of our team members is down," he continued. "In fact, I'd say that our threat level is even higher now because of it."

Tony breathed in slowly, his left hand clenching into a fist as his fingers curled around his left forearm.

"Maybe you should've thought of that before Steve was—," he said, unable to bring himself to finish
the sentence. "Before—"

Well, *before*.

Fury tilted his head and sighed, his expression morphing into something that almost resembled sympathy. Or at least it would’ve been if Tony hadn't already convinced himself that Fury was incapable of it.

"Tony," he said quietly. "I understand what you and Peter have lost. I know you probably don't believe me, but I do. But unfortunately that doesn't mean that we can all just sit around mourning Captain Rogers forever. We need to get the team back up and running, and we need to do that as soon as possible."

Tony's lower lip trembled as a lone tear streaked down his cheek, landing on his unkempt goatee. He had literally no idea how in the hell Fury expected *him* to be able to do anything at the moment, much less try to motivate an entire team of superheroes into preparing for new possible threats. Steve had been the leader of the Avengers. *He* had been the one responsible for organising their training sessions and planning out their missions. How could Fury expect Tony, or anyone else, to just step into Steve's shoes?

"I don't—I don't know how, Nick," he whispered. "I can barely keep myself and my son alive at the moment, and Pete, he's been having these terrible dreams lately, and—"

"And you haven't been sleeping at all, is that correct?" asked Fury.

Tony could only shake his head.

"Mmm, thought so. You look like shit, Tony."

"Yeah, well, why don't you just fuck off, Nick!" Tony snapped, his fingers tightening around his arm. "How dare you come on here and—"

"Ah huh, there it is!" Fury said, rather triumphantly. "I knew there was still a bit of the old Tony deep down in there somewhere."

**Oh no you didn't!**

"My husband is dead, you asshole, and you're on here trying to goad me into—!"

"I'm not saying it has to be you, Tony," Fury cut in. "In fact, it'd probably better if it wasn't. I'm sure that you and Steve discussed possible contingencies if something like this were to happen." He paused, leaning in closer. "Didn't you?"

Tony immediately opened his mouth, then snapped it closed again just as fast. As a matter of fact, Steve *had* managed to persuade Tony to discuss that very thing over all of Tony's rather vehement protests. He hadn't wanted to even consider the possibility that one of them might someday be killed in action, but Steve was always the practical one. Always thinking ahead and planning for every possible roadblock that might pop up. It had been one of the main reasons why he had officially adopted Peter before their wedding. Just in case something ever happened to Tony, Steve hadn't wanted to risk the possibility of losing Peter too.

That and the fact that he had loved Peter beyond compare and wanted to be his papa not only in name but in the eyes of the law and everyone else.

And Tony had loved him even more for all of it. As much as Tony could never imagine sharing
Peter with anyone when he was a baby and small child, now he couldn't fathom having to parent Peter alone again for the rest of his life. Now Tony would give anything, all of his tricks and toys, the Tower, the Compound and every last dime of his money, if he and Peter could have just five more minutes with Steve.

Or even three minutes, Tony could be satisfied with three. Just long enough to tell Steve how grateful he was for saving Peter's life in the desert, how much better he was because of him.

And how much he loved him. More than he ever thought he could love anyone.

"Tony?" Fury said, snapping Tony back to reality. "Didn't you?"

Swallowing hard, Tony gave a nod. "Yeah," he whispered. "Steve… he stipulated that the shield should—should go to Sam in the event of—the event of—"

"I thought so," interrupted Fury. "And I have to say that that's a brilliant choice. So what I'm suggesting is that you get out your sewing machine and start on a uniform for our new Captain America. And once that's done, I'd like you to present it and the shield to Sam, and then let him get the ball rolling on all the rest of it. All right?"

Tony instinctively shook his head. At the moment he couldn't fathom creating a Captain America uniform for anyone besides Steve.

But then again, he couldn't fathom anyone else creating it either, which would likely be the case if he refused. Being stuck with some crappy, half-assed uniform created by some lower-level SHIELD agent working in a basement office up at the Compound was the last thing that Tony wanted for Steve's appointed successor to the shield.

"Yeah, yeah, okay, Nick," Tony mumbled, so softly he was surprised Fury even heard him. "I'll uh… start on it in the next couple of days."

"Thank you," said Fury. "I'll check back with you then. And take care, Tony. As much as I'm sure you won't believe me, I do care about you. I care about both you and Peter, so please don't think that you're completely alone in this."

Tony waved a dismissive hand, the lump in his throat so large that he couldn't even croak out a goodbye as the monitor went blank. His heart was racing, and he slumped into the chair with his fist pressed to his chest, over the arc reactor.

I can't—I can't do this, he thought miserably. I can't do this without Steve, I can't—how in the hell am I supposed to go on—how in the hell am I supposed to live like this, without—without him—I can't—I can't—I'm not strong enough—

Tony had given his heart to Steve, freely and completely, and now with him gone that meant Tony's heart was gone too. Buried right along with him.

And all that was left behind was an empty shell and a hunk of metal stuck in his chest.

Gasping, Tony stumbled from the lab, barely making it down the hall to the bedroom before his legs gave out completely. He collapsed onto the bed, his hands fisting into the squashy comforter that Steve had always disliked, complaining that it was too hot for his taste. He stayed there, his face pressed down into the bedding until he could no longer breathe before flipping over, coughing and gulping air into his starving lungs.

"I can't do this, you goddamn son of a bitch!" he cried into the vast emptiness of the room. "I just
fucking can't! I was never meant to do this without you!

His head turned then, almost on its own accord, until his eyes landed on the red, white, and blue vibranium shield leaning against the wall by the door, the very same place where Steve had always stored it when he wasn't using it. Tony lurched forward, falling off the bed and crawling on his knees to grab hold of the shield, placing it over his chest as if to try and protect himself from the crushing weight of his grief.

And to protect him from himself as well. Because if Tony were truly honest, the only thing preventing him from ripping the arc reactor right out of his chest right then and there was the fact that Peter still needed him. He was still just a kid, a grieving kid who had already lost one of his parents. The absolute last thing he needed was to lose the other because he was too damn selfish to try and deal with his misery.

Peter still needed Tony, and as painful as it was, Tony was not about to fail him.

Not again.

"Hey, Peter," Steve said fondly as Peter slid into the front seat of the truck. He leaned over to kiss Peter's head. "How was school?"

Peter sniffed, giving Steve a noncommittal shrug. "Eh, it was okay, I guess. Flash at least left me alone, so that was good."

That kid damn well better leave you alone, Steve thought as he pulled the truck out onto the street. "And your quiz? How'd that go?"

"I aced it," Peter said, shrugging again. "Wasn't that hard."

"No, I suppose not," Steve said, a small but proud smile stretching across his lips. "I know Dad would be very proud of you."

Nodding, Peter gave Steve a split-second of a smile before turning his head towards the window, his cue that he didn't feel like talking anymore. Steve patted him once more on the knee, remaining silent for several minutes until they were only a couple of blocks away from the Tower.

"What're you hungry for tonight?" he asked as he stopped at a red light. "Pizza? Mexican? Thai?"

"I dunno," Peter mumbled, not taking his eyes off the window. "Whatever you want is fine."

Steve's belly gave a swoop at Peter's tone, and he quickly pulled into one of the fifteen-minute parking spaces on the street, directly outside their favourite Thai restaurant.

"Son," he said softly, giving Peter's shoulder a slight shake. "Can you look at me, please?"

Peter sniffed before turning his head, revealing his shaking chin and watery eyes. "I'm—I'm sorry, P-Papa," he stammered as he swiped at his nose. "I-I just— I just really—I just really miss him, and— I don't know why it's so bad today all of a sudden, but—it just is, and I can't—I mean... I'm—"

"Hey, hey, hey," Steve said as he unbuckled his seatbelt, sliding across the seat so he could hug Peter properly. Tears welled in his eyes as Peter wrapped his arms around his neck and he buried his face into Steve's chest, his skinny body shaking with sobs. "You never, ever have to apologise to me for missing your dad, okay? Not ever. I'm not gonna get upset at you or be offended by it or anything, I promise you." He pulled back to cup Peter's cheeks, kissing his forehead. "I miss him too,
okay? Sometimes I can't even breathe because it hurts so much. And Peter, I'm not ashamed to admit that you're the main reason why I haven't just given up on everything, okay? You're helping me to be stronger, just like I hope that I can help you to be stronger. But it's also okay for us to not be strong sometimes too, because sometimes the pain is just too much for us to handle. And that doesn't mean that we're weak, all right? It just means that we're human."

"Uh huh, Papa," Peter said, rubbing his nose on Steve's shirt. "I just—sometimes I wish I didn't have to be human, because then I wouldn't have to feel, and it wouldn't hurt so much."

"Oh God, Peter, I know exactly what you mean," Steve breathed, crushing Peter so hard against that he grunted. He kissed Peter's cheek, brushing his tears away with his thumbs. "Now, since we're already here at the Thai place, should we just get Thai for tonight? I don't want you going hungry."

Peter snorted. "Uh huh, that sounds fine."

"All right," Steve said. "You want your usual?"

"Yeah."

They ended up having a halfway decent evening, sharing their chicken fried rice and pad Thai and even playing a game of chess after Peter finished his homework. Peter even managed to fall asleep rather easily, something that had been a huge struggle ever since—well, ever since, allowing Steve some extra time to go over the new training schedule again before he felt his eyelids getting heavy and set the notebook aside.

Steve wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep—it seemed like only a few minutes—when he was suddenly jarred awake by a horrible, bloodcurdling scream coming from Peter's bedroom. Bolting up on the chair, Steve raced down the hall and into Peter's room to find him lying on his bed with his arms and legs completely rigid, almost as though he was being held down.

"It's not real!" Peter screamed, so loudly that Steve's ears started to ring. "Let me go, this isn't real! Where's my Dad? Where's my Papa? I need to find them!"

"Peter!" Steve said sharply, grabbing onto his son's shoulders and giving him a light shake, his heart trying to thud its way out of his chest. "Peter, it's okay, son, I'm here! You just gotta wake up!"

"No!" yelled Peter as his eyes flew open, frantic, no, almost feral as they flitted around the room, finally landing on Steve's face.

But instead of being comforted by the sight of Steve, Peter practically snarled as he planted his palms on Steve's chest and shoved him away, so hard that he nearly fell backwards off the bed. Steve cried out as he barely was able to catch himself, scrambling to get back to Peter just as he sat up and tore back the left sleeve of his pyjama shirt.

"No, no, no, Peter, don't!" Steve shrieked as Peter began clawing at his arm, digging into his skin with his fingernails like he was trying to peel it off.

"Not real, not real, it's not real!" Peter sobbed, over and over again as he continued to attack his arm, fending Steve off with his flailing legs and elbows. Blood pooled inside the deep scratches, resembling a network of very messed-up railroad tracks. "Let me go, this isn't real! Uncle Bucky says it's not real!"

"Peter!" Steve yelled as he attempted to grab onto Peter's right wrist, nearly getting head-butted in the chin as Peter twisted away. "Son, it's Papa! I'm here, just try and listen to my voice! You just gotta wake up!"
"Not real, not real, Uncle Bucky says it's not real," Peter repeated, over and over again as he managed to elude Steve's grip for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, Steve was able to grab hold of his bloodied arm, squeezing it just hard enough to make Peter cry out, a horrible, pathetic sound that cut through Steve like a spear. He immediately pinned Peter's arms to his sides and pulled him close, positioning his head against his chest so Peter could hear his heartbeat, the only thing that could really calm him after a nightmare as bad as this.

"It's okay, son, I've got you. You're safe," he murmured through his panting breaths into Peter's ear, running his fingers through his hair. Steve's chest felt like it was being squeezed in a vice as he kept talking, trying to soothe his son the only way he knew how.

"But it's not real!" Peter whimpered. "None of this is real, Papa, you've gotta believe me! Uncle Bucky says that we're all asleep, that they've got us all asleep, and I need to save you!"

"Shh, Peter, I've got you," Steve whispered as Peter finally went limp against him. He grabbed one of Peter's spare pillows, placing it over his injured arm to help stem the bleeding. "It's okay, you're safe now."

"No," Peter said, so detached and low that chills raced down Steve's spine. "I'm not safe, and neither are you." He lifted his head, his brown eyes boring directly into Steve's. "None of this is real, Papa. It's all just… an illusion. A dream. No, more like a nightmare. But none of it's real."

Steve sucked in a sharp breath, his eyebrows knitting together in anguish as he pressed a kiss to Peter's forehead. "Sometimes I wish you were right, Peter, I really do. I'd love for all of this to just be one big nightmare so we could both wake up from it. But it's not, and—"

"Yes it is, Papa," Peter interrupted. He leaned closer, almost conspiratorially. "They don't know that I know, but I do. Uncle Bucky told me, so I know this isn't real, and now I just gotta figure out how to get us out of it."

Oh my God, now he's talking about people who aren't here? Steve thought. And Bucky again? Peter had talked—or rather, screamed—at people in his nightmares before and had mentioned Bucky a few times, but never after he was already awake again, which could only mean that he was getting even worse.

I don't—I don't think I can help him with this.

"Peter, I think I'm gonna call Sam, all right? See if—"

"No!" Peter cried. "That won't help us because Sam's not real either! I don't know where he is, but this Sam isn't real."

"Peter—!"

"Tell me how Dad died," demanded Peter, his brown eyes narrowing into slits. "Well, go on, tell me!"

"Uhh… um…" Steve stammered, the question hitting him like a sucker punch to the gut. Come to think of it, in that moment Steve really couldn't remember the exact details of how Tony had died, only that it was very sudden and very unexpected.

And that he blamed himself for it. There was no way he could forget that.

"Peter, um…"
"You can't remember, right?" Peter barked. "That's because you don't \textit{know}!" He bit his lip as he picked up Steve's left hand, pointing to his wedding ring. "This is \textit{wrong}! It's supposed to be titanium, not gold, and I know because I helped Dad to make it! This is \textit{wrong}, Papa, because it's not \textit{real}! All of this, none of it is real!"

Tears spilled down Steve's cheeks as he stared at his son, horrified by what he was saying and having no earthly clue what to do next. The only thing he could possibly contemplate was that all of the unimaginable trauma that Peter had been through ever since Afghanistan had finally caught up to him, and now his mental health was declining to the point where he was trying to talk to a mentally deranged man and harming himself in his sleep.

"Son, we need to call Sam, see if we can't—"

"No!" Peter yelped. His eyes filled with tears, and he shook his head so hard that his hair flopped down over his forehead. "No, Papa, \textit{please}! Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'll—I'll stop now, try and go back to sleep."

"Peter—!"

"Please, no!" Peter begged, his exhausted body crumpling against Steve's. "\textit{Please}! I just—I just—my arm hurts."

"That's because you were scratching at it," Steve said gently. He carefully extended Peter's arm, inspecting the bloody rivulets cross-crossing his forearm and trying to ignore his own shaking hands. "I need to go get the first-aid kit, okay? Can you stay here and wait for me?"

At Peter's sheepish nod, Steve kissed his head and hurried into the bathroom to fetch the kit, his heart splintering with every single one of Peter's tiny whimpers and gasps as he cleaned and bandaged the wounds. With Peter's healing factor Steve knew they would be mostly healed by morning, but Steve also knew from experience that having accelerated healing didn't mean that the injury hurt any less.

Once Peter's arm was bandaged and Steve had changed the blood-stained sheets on his bed, Steve tucked Peter up against him with his head resting on his chest, directly over his heart. He ran his fingers through Peter's hair, whispering comforting words as Peter slowly relaxed against him, finally falling asleep about twenty or so minutes later.

\textit{I wish this wasn't real}, Steve thought as he tipped his head back, wincing as it thudded against the headboard. He didn't dare move, too frightened of what Peter might do if he did, and his chest was so tight he felt like he was having an asthma attack, something that had been happening more and more ever since—

Well, ever since.

Tony had breathed so much life into Steve that now that he was gone, Steve couldn't seem to remember how to breathe on his own anymore. It was as if all of the air around him was toxic, slowly poisoning him, suffocating him.

\textit{How am I supposed to breathe with no air?} he thought as burning hot tears streamed down his cheeks. He made no effort to brush them away, instead letting them pool in his scruffy facial hair. \textit{How do you expect me to live alone, to raise this child alone?}

\textit{I can't breathe without air.}

\textit{I may as well be drowning again.}
His arms tightened around Peter, who snuggled up even closer to him, sighing in his sleep.

*I wish this wasn't real, but it is.*

And Steve was going to have to learn to live with it, even if it meant learning to breathe all over again.

He *had* to, for Peter's sake.

He couldn't fail him again.

"Hey, kiddo," Tony said as Peter slid into the car next to him, slumping down into the fine leather seat. "Have a good day?"

Peter shot him one of his *duh* looks. "Eh, it was okay. Flash at least left me alone, so—"

"He damn well better be leaving you alone," Tony said gruffly. "'Cause if he doesn't then I'm gonna blast his ass into the Pegasus Galaxy." *And I'm not joking.*

"Yeah, I know, Dad," Peter mumbled. He turned away then to look out the window, Peter-code for, 'leave me the hell alone'. Tony took the hint, staying silent until they were only a couple of blocks away from the Tower.

"So, feel like having pizza tonight?" Tony asked as he stopped at a red light. He wasn't hungry in the least, not surprisingly, but Peter would need something. He had already passed out twice at school from not eating in just the last couple of months.

"No, but if that's what you want it's okay with me," Peter answered, not taking his eyes off the window. "I'm not really that hungry."

Tony huffed, reaching over to pat Peter on the knee. "I know, kiddo, but you still need to eat. Your metabolism is too fast for you to go without, and I don't want you—"

"I know, Dad, okay?" Peter snapped. "Just… please, leave me alone!"

Frowning, Tony lurched the car forward as soon as the light changed, swerving in and out of the dense New York traffic until they arrived inside the Tower garage. Cutting the engine, Tony placed his hand on Peter's shoulder, squeezing it gently.

"Hey, Pete, look at me, yeah?"

Slowly, Peter turned his head, the misery in his brown eyes so intense that Tony nearly choked.

"What?"

"Tell me what's going on, kiddo," Tony said, cringing internally at the sheer idiocy of the question. Peter hadn't been the same since that fateful trip to Afghanistan almost three years ago, and having to deal with puberty and his new enhancements and everything else had been harder than hell on him. But despite all of it, despite all the crap life had thrown at him, Peter had still managed to stay the same kind and lovable boy that he always was, at least before—

Well, *before.*

Now, of course, everything was different.
Now it was as though Peter was constantly sleepwalking, an automaton with no emotions or feelings except for the constant weight of his grief.

He was completely numb, and Tony had no idea how to help him start to feel again.

And the fact that Tony felt the exact same way didn't help matters in the least.

Peter's lower lip started to shake, and he bit down on it hard enough for Tony to wince. "I'm—I'm sorry, Dad," he stammered, swiping at his nose. "I-I just—I just really miss him. In our gym class today we had to watch a couple of those videos that Papa made for the school, you know the cheesy ones for the—"

"For the Captain America fitness challenge," Tony cut in, his lips curling into the slightest of smiles. "Yeah, I remember when he filmed those, they were cheesy as hell."

"Yeah. Well, before we started the coach pulled me aside and said I didn't have to participate if I didn't want to, but I thought it would just make things worse because then everyone would be looking at me and talking about me again, so I did anyway, and now—" He broke off, swiping his hand across his nose. "Now I just wish that I hadn't. It was so hard to hear his voice there in the room with me, but not have him actually there, you know? And—I'm sorry, Daddy, but—"

"I'm gonna stop you right there, kiddo, okay?" Tony said as he leaned over the console, pulling Peter into a hug. "I don't wanna hear anymore about how you think it's not okay to be missing your papa, all right? You don't ever have to apologise to me for missing him. Not ever."

"Uh huh," Peter said into Tony's shoulder. "I just—I just—sometimes I think—I mean, I only knew him for three years, but—"

"You still loved him, Pete," Tony murmured. "And you couldn't've loved him any more if you'd grown up with him your entire life, and that's okay. I'm not offended by it or anything ridiculous like that, so don't go getting that into your head, okay?"

"Uh huh."

Tony squeezed him even closer, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "You wanna know something?" he said after a short pause.

"Hmm?"

"I miss him too, Pete. I miss him so much that it hurts even more than when I got this damn thing," and he tapped his chest, over the arc reactor. "And I'm not too full of myself to admit that you're the biggest reason why I haven't just packed it all in and called it quits, kiddo, okay? You're so strong, Pete, and you're helping me to be stronger just through osmosis. I don't—I don't know what I would do without you."

Peter sniffed, rubbing his nose against Tony's shirt. "Uh huh."

"Good. Now, let's get upstairs and order some pizza for you, yeah?" Tony said, ruffling his son's hair. He desperately needed a haircut as his curls were hanging in his eyes and getting tangled in his eyelashes. Yet another thing that had fallen by the wayside lately.

Steve had always taken Peter for his haircuts, before—

Well, before.
The evening ended up passing rather uneventfully. Despite his protests, Peter ate a halfway decent dinner, and even helped Tony in the lab for a bit after he finished his homework. Tony had half a mind to ask him to help design Sam's new uniform, but decided against it. He was already missing his papa badly, and Tony didn't want to rub any more salt in that particular wound.

Peter even went to sleep relatively easily, and as Tony kissed his forehead and tiptoed out of his room, he debated whether or not he should head back to the lab or try and get some sleep himself. He was exhausted, in fact the very thought of sleep was enough to make him yawn, but he also didn't think he was ready to sleep in his bed alone yet.

Not quite yet. Not alone.

With a heavy sigh, Tony padded down the hall to the lab, plunking himself down at his workstation. As soon as he sat down his eyes fell on the decanter of whisky sitting next to his monitor and the highball glass with the double-shot sitting next to it. Tony stared at the amber liquid for a long time, wanting so badly to give in just this once, just to take a bit of the edge off. Maybe it would even help him sleep a little.

But Steve would be so disappointed, Tony thought. Those damn eyebrows of his would never let me hear the end of it.

In the end, Tony shoved the glass to the very back of the counter, hiding it behind a stack of cleaning rags.

The alcohol would only cloak the problem, not take it away, and Peter deserved better.

And the last thing Tony wanted was to fail him again.

"Петр, are you there?" asked Uncle Bucky. "We need to talk."

Peter flinched at the sound of Uncle Bucky's voice, his eyes blinking open. He was in his same Hufflepuff-themed room that he'd always had and lying on his bed, but his arms and legs felt like he was being held down by something very strong, like they were being deliberately pinned down.

It didn't make any sense.

"Can you hear me, Петр?"

"Yes!" Peter answered, forcing the word past his bone-dry throat as he glanced furtively around the room. "I can hear you just fine, but I can't see you. Where are you?"

"We're trying to find you guys, kiddo," said Uncle Bucky. "Наталия and the bowman were able to track you down to somewhere either in southern Florida or Cuba, but we need a more accurate location because if we guess wrong, the Colonel said that someone'll get their ass in a vise and then it'll be even harder to find you."

"But... I'm right here, in my bedroom. How's that gonna help anything?" Peter asked. He licked his dry lips, shuddering at the awful taste. Had he forgotten to brush his teeth before he went to bed?

"That's what they're makin' you think, Петр, but it's not real. They've got you and Стью and Тони, and this is the only way we can figure out where you are."
Peter gulped as he shook his head, which felt like a lead weight attached to his neck. "But—but—that doesn't make any sense! Dad's dead, Uncle Bucky. He was—he was killed, so how can he be—and Papa says that I'm not really talking to you, he thinks I'm completely losing it, I know he does, so—"

"No, no, that's not true, Hemp, that's only what they want you to think," said Uncle Bucky. "That's how they're trying to break your mind, but I know you're stronger than that. I know you are, you just gotta trust me. You think you're awake right now but you're really asleep, and where you're asleep is where they're keepin' ya, and that's what we need to find out."

Again, Peter shook his head, making another futile attempt to move his limbs. "I can't move, Uncle Bucky," he said. "It's like my arms and legs weigh a thousand kilos each or something."

"That's probably 'cause they've got you tied down, kiddo," Uncle Bucky said.

Peter let out a hard shudder. "How do you know that?"

"'Cause that's what they always did to me," Uncle Bucky said, rather grimly. "They always had to tie me down whenever they shot me full of... whatever that shit was that they shot me up with."

"Oh!" Peter gasped. "That—that sounds so awful, I'm so—"

"Nevermind that now, Hemp. just listen to me. The nerdy guy with the glasses says that you need to wake up. He told me to tell you that you have to wake up and look around so you can tell me where you are."

"Nerdy guy with the glasses? You mean Uncle Bruce?"

"Yeah, that's probably him. Do you understand what I'm tellin' ya, Hemp? We need you to wake up and tell us where you are!"

Peter breathed in, grunting as he tried once again to raise his arms, his panic level skyrocketing when he realised he couldn't. With every passing second he was getting more and more claustrophobic, and his heart was thudding so hard it felt like it was going to burst right out of his chest.

"I can't!" he cried. "Uncle Bucky, I can't do it! Whatever they're holding me with is too strong!"

"Yes, you can, kiddo!" Uncle Bucky said. "I know you can! You managed to get through the muddled mess of my head, so I know you can get through yours. You're so strong, Hemp! Now, do it! Wake yourself up!"

Peter squeezed his eyes closed, his hands fisting in the bedding beneath him. None of this was making any sense.

Maybe Papa was right. Maybe he really was going mad.

"But, how is that gonna help?" he asked. "If what you're saying is true and this really is just a dream, then how am I supposed to be able to tell you where we are once I wake up?"

He heard Uncle Bucky sigh. "Because you probably won't be able to stay awake for too long, kiddo. If the Colonel is right about who's got you then you're probably being watched like a hawk, so once you wake up you won't have too much time."

"What the hell does that mean?" Peter shrieked. "What're they gonna do to me?"
"Nothin' if they know what's good for 'em," replied Uncle Bucky. "But what they'll probably do is put you back to sleep, and then it'll be awhile before we can talk again."

"Awhile? How long is awhile?"

"That depends on you, Peter. It all depends on you. You're the strongest of us—"

"But—!"

"And don't you even try and tell me that you're not, because I know better. Now, wake up, Peter! Wake. Up!"

Peter's head was pounding, almost as though it was literally splitting in two as he tried desperately to make sense of the madness. There was no other good explanation for him being able to hear Uncle Bucky in his head unless Uncle Bucky was speaking the truth, but at the same time it was preposterous. Almost like some weird episode of Star Trek.

But then again, certain things in his so-called real world weren't making much sense either, so…

"All right," he said under his breath. "I'll do it."

Gritting his teeth, Peter clenched his hands into fists and began curling them upward, straining against the invisible bonds holding his arms in place. Almost immediately his body was flooded with what felt like a million gigawatts of electricity and he cried out, gulping in as much air as he could as he continued to fight against the impossibly strong restraints. Several new voices suddenly appeared all around him, protesting in various languages that Peter couldn't understand.

"C'mon, Spider-Man! Peter thought. They're counting on me!"

"Keep going, Peter, keep going!" Uncle Bucky shouted through the growing din of the other voices. "You're doing it, you're almost there! I knew you could do it, I just knew it!"

And then all of a sudden Peter felt himself break through, the sound of metal clanging against concrete echoing throughout what appeared to be some kind of cell. His right hand shot up immediately to protect his eyes from the harsh overhead light just as the bolt of ice ran down his back and one of the Winter Soldiers attempted to reach for him.

"No!" Peter screamed as he drew back his fist, hitting the soldier square in the nose and knocking him flat against a set of bars, the sickening crack from the soldier's shattered nose and cheekbone making him cringe. He quickly grabbed onto one of his leg bonds, trying to work it loose as another soldier rushed at him from the opposite side.

"Оставайся внизу!" the soldier shouted just as Peter managed to break the restraint holding his right leg. He immediately sent a kick flying into the soldier's midsection, causing him to slam his head into the solid metal table Peter was sitting on and knock himself out.

Panting, Peter quickly freed his left leg and tore the IV needle from his arm, jumping down from the table just as three more Winter Soldiers entered the cell, followed a short distance behind by a blond-haired man wearing a really fancy suit that Peter had only seen one other time before, in another dream.

"Aahh!" Peter cried as two of the Winter Soldier grabbed onto his arms, pinning them behind him as the third rammed his fist into Peter's stomach, causing him to nearly bite through his tongue. Peter doubled over, gasping for breath and spitting blood onto the cement floor as the blond man stepped forward, clapping his hands.
"Well, well, well, you're definitely a feisty little one, aren't you?" Suit Man said, his syrupy voice grating against Peter's nerves like rough sandpaper. "I'm actually quite impressed." He stepped back, inspecting Peter from head to toe. "You know, when your father said that you'd gotten quite a bit healthier lately, I didn't know whether to take him at his word or not because let's face it, Tony Stark isn't exactly known for keeping his word, I think we all can agree on that. But I do have to admit that my illustrious colleague Mr Stane was right; out of my three prizes, you're definitely the most valuable."

"Who the hell are you? Where is this place? Why're you hurting us?" Peter yelled, the sound echoing throughout the concrete structure. His head hurt so badly that he felt dizzy, and his eyes couldn't seem to focus no matter what he tried, the images shifting in and out of his view like a really messed-up cartoon.

Suit Man shot him a toothy grin, sending another bolt of ice down Peter's spine and causing him to shiver. He attempted to yank his arms free without success, crying out in pain from his damaged forearm that was dripping blood all over the floor of the cell.

"Oh, you mean you've never heard of me?" Suit Man asked, pacing back and forth in front of Peter, his head throbbing in time with Suit Man's clacking footsteps. "I'm surprised, I would've thought that my reputation preceded me, but—"

"Reputation for what?" Peter rasped as he spat out another mouthful of blood. "Being a complete psychopath?"

"Actually, I prefer the term, 'sociopath', but you know, we don't need to really be getting technical about this, do we? I mean, it's not like it really matters, or that you'll remember in the long run." He jerked his head towards the Winter Soldier on Peter's left, who immediately landed another punch to Peter's stomach before dragging him back towards the table.

"Make sure you strap him down even tighter this time, the metal for those restraints doesn't grow on trees, you know!" Suit Man said as the soldiers threw Peter onto the table, pinning his arms and legs down as he tried futilely to thrash away. Uncle Bucky was right; they weren't gonna let him stay awake for very long.

"And get the sceptre while you're at it," Suit Man added. "This one's mind is a bit stronger than I anticipated."

Summoning all the strength he could muster, Peter jammed his elbows into the chests of each of the soldiers and sat back up on the table, blinking rapidly as he tried to focus on his surroundings.

"We're in some kind of concrete structure, like a bunker. I don't think we're in the desert 'cause the air is thicker and smells tropical, so I'm guessing we're on an island somewhere. I'm in a barred cell with lots of really bright lights, and there's more cells off to my left where they might have Dad and Papa. The Winter Soldiers are here, and some guy wearing a really fancy suit who knows my dad.

And please hurry, Uncle Bucky! I don't know how much longer we can hold on!

And please hurry, Uncle Bucky! I don't know how much longer I can hold on...

And then Peter's head was slammed against the back of the table and a needle jabbed into his arm, flooding his entire body with searing pain just as the bright blue light of Loki's sceptre appeared in front of him, with Suit Man's eyes glowing orange as he leaned closer.

Please hurry, Uncle Bucky! I don't know—I don't know how much longer—not much longer—I don't
And then, everything went black.

Stop by and see me on tumblr, I’m geekymoviemom and geeky-writes there!

Chapter End Notes

I can’t wait to see what you think! Please don’t hesitate to leave me a comment! :)

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