Summary

Tony finds a young boy in the hands of an off-brand Hydra group called Fénix with a past he won't talk about and too many unanswered questions.

Against the suggestion of the other Avengers, he takes him home instead of leaving him in Shield's hands.

Notes

Hello and welcome to a new story :)

Please enjoy!

Warning: descriptions of child trauma and experimentation, nothing graphic or overly descriptive, however.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

The base is underground west of Tucson, Arizona. They find the entrance in a large crevice between two mounds of red dirt. It belongs to a Mexican side-branch of Hydra called Fénix. The Avengers have been after them since the emergence of a 'Super Villain' (as the media deemed her) going under the alias of Queen Cobra. They caught her and sent her to the Raft for handling, but she'd made her affiliations known with notes left at the scenes of her crimes.

"I rise from the ashes, baby. Like a Fénix."

They don't know if they've been witness to all of her powers, but there are enough to know she'd been homebrewed much like Captain America.

Super strength and hearing. Inhuman agility and flexibility. She produces venom in her mouth that can kill anyone she bites, and it's known that she'll collect it to coat her weapons.

She'd been trained and fought well, but hadn't been much of a match for the Avengers. There was something about her taunts and jeers that were leading them to believe that she had chosen this life which was causing them the most discomfort.

The last thing they need is some over-confident scientists creating supers in a lab out of deranged civilians.

Weeks of research and digging later, here they are.

The jet lands on the top of the mountain and they walk to the opening. Natasha and Clint rappel down first and crawl through some hidden vents to investigate the area and report back their findings.

There are several floors filled with various lab equipment and research and testing facilities. There are some living quarters for the scientists and only a handful of guards with guns.

"Come on in, boys," Natasha says into their team comms. She slips out of the vent and disarms the two men walking down a hall bathed in artificial white lights.

Tony blasts open the hidden entryway and they rush inside. Steve and Rhodey are with him, Bruce is staying in the jet as backup.

There are a few gunshots, but nothing that lands and the guards are quickly taken care of. No one puts up much of a fight at all, they aren't met with any enhanced individuals. They separate and start rounding up the scientists.

A few minutes later, the lights start flickering and there are clicking sounds as Natasha hacks the security system to unlock all the doors.

"Stack these guys in a room somewhere, we'll get them picked up later. Let's find their data and see if they've started creating another Super."

Everyone agrees.

Tony takes a tazed doctor's keycard and locks him in a bare room. Down a hall, there's a one-way mirror next to a thick metal door. Tony stares through it, but it's difficult to see what's in the darkened room.
"That's where they put you when you're bad," a small voice says behind him.

He whirls around and raises his right gauntlet, ready to shoot.

It's a young boy, Tony isn't good with ages but thinks he's somewhere between five and ten. His brown hair tickles his ears and there's a hint of curls beneath the greasiness of it; that and the smudges of dirt on his cheeks, hands, and bare feet indicate he hasn't had a shower in far too long. There are dark circles under his bright brown eyes and his cheeks are sunken from malnourishment. He's pale, enough so that Tony wonders if he's ever been outside of this base.

He's only wearing what look like track pants and a loose black t-shirt that hangs off his thin frame and the collar slips low to show a protruding collarbone. His hands are clasped behind his back and he's rocking back and forth from his heels to his toes. There are several feet between them, but he unnerves Tony with his closeness anyway.

The boy doesn't flinch.

"Who are you?" Tony asks.

"I'm Defect," the boy says, matter-of-factly.

"What are you doing here? Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know who I am?"

"No, sir." His head tilts and his eyes look him up and down, but the boy only shakes his head. "Are you a robot?"

Tony chuckles, "No, kiddo." The plaque lifts off his face, "Just a man in shiny armour. My name's Tony Stark."

His lips part and his eyes widen in wonder. It's the armour, not the name, that warrants that reaction.

"Let's get you somewhere safe until we clear this place out, alright?"

"Yes, sir."

He leads the boy into one of the rooms he'd come across further down the hall. It's a little kitchenette and he glances around to find somewhere for him to hide.

"Are you gonna tell Dr. Ortiz that I'm here? He'll be mad if he can't find me."

"Don't worry about it, kid, I'll take care of everything."

He slides open a cupboard next to a small fridge and finds it empty. He gestures to the opening, "Think you can get in here?"

"Yes, sir."

That's starting to annoy him but he has things to do and ignoring it is probably easier than addressing it.

"Good. Don't make any noise and don't get out until I come to get you, okay?"
There's another, "yes, sir," and the boy slips into the cupboard. He fits in smoothly and Tony closes the door after him.

He leaves the room with a last glance back at the place where the child is hiding. There could be a lot of reasons he's here. Maybe he's someone's kid and it was bring your kid to work day. There are worse possibilities that he's choosing not to think about quite yet.

Natasha asks him to meet her in what seems to be the control room and he follows Friday's directions that will lead him to her.

It's on the lowest floor and locked by several highly secured doors. She'd gotten through them relatively easily.

The room goes deep and the walls on either side are stacked with running hard drives with crisscrossed wires hanging all over. There are flickering lights and one main hub station towards the back. In the middle of the room, seated against some flashy panels, is a man in a long white trench coat.

He's Hispanic, much as most of the people in the building had been so far, with thick black hair, brown skin, and the unmistakable Spanish accent.

"The phoenix will always rise from-"

"Yeah, yeah, give it a break," Natasha cuts him off and gestures for Tony to join her by the computer.

It makes his fingers twitch. It's running on Windows 95. How have they survived this long? But they seem to have made their own modifications.

"Getting into this manually is going to take a while, it might be faster to try and find the code. This thing's built like a Nokia."

There's a simple prompt for a password, but several of her attempts to get into the command screen have failed so far.

"Can't you get it out of this guy?" Tony gestured to the man on the floor. His hands are tied behind his back and he's pretty sure his ankle's broken, judging by the awkward angle.

"Hydra and their partners are built to be resilient. It wouldn't be quick."

"I doubt we'll find it written somewhere."

"They had a total of nine guards in a base this large; they didn't expect to be found. They could have been careless. There's no harm looking around for some clues and try to hack this the old fashioned way. We might find some research notes too."

Before Tony can respond, her gaze moves over his shoulder and he follows it to see Rhodey standing in the doorway.

With an arm wrapped around a young boy's waist and hoisting him against his hip like a basketball.

"Hey guys, found this pipsqueak making a ruckus in a research lab. Knocking bottles over and making quite the mess. Not sure what it was about and he won't say anything."

"I told you to stay hidden, kid," Tony reprimands. The boy won't meet his gaze.
Rhodey sets him down and he takes two steps away from him. He's staring at the floor and doesn't say anything.

"Know this kid?"

"Saw him a couple of floors up. Told him to hide until I could get back to him. I was going to ask him more questions after we were done here."

"You've found our little defect, maybe he'll be more useful to you than he's ever been to us."

Tony points to the scientist though doesn't acknowledge his words, "Is this your dad?" He asks the boy. The boy's looks are enough for him to know he likely has no Hispanic roots, but he has to ask, just in case.

He shakes his head in answer.

It's the man's following words that make him clench his hands into knuckles to keep from blasting him in the face.

"Bah! Don't offend me! I would never spawn such a useless creature."

"Right," he says lamely to fill the tense silence.

"Well, alright kid, why don't you stay here with Rhodey. That's this handsome fella," he points to him, "while we go in search of a code."

The boy's head tilts. "For the computer?"

"Yup."

He shifts from one foot to the other and quietly says, "I know the code."

"What?!" The scientist snaps, "How would you know the code?"

"I saw," he shrugs. "With my eyes."

Tony holds back a laugh and spots Rhodey's raised eyebrows.

"I... think I know the code. They use the same one for all the big computers."

Tony moves aside and gestures towards the brick that claims to be a piece of technology, "Go on then, give it a try. No obvious bypasses, but at least this old tech gives us infinite tries."

He sees Natasha pull back and there's hesitation in her movements. She's watching him like a hawk would their prey. The boy walks between them, head bowed down, and steps in front of the large computer.

"I've found a few documents. It's all coded so I'm bringing it with me. I'm going to keep looking for anything important," Clint's voice comes through the comms and Rhodey gives a response for them.

"Sounds good. We're at the mainframe and we're going to try and get into it."

"Roger that."

The boy rocks onto his tiptoes and stares at the keyboard. He's frowning in thought and then he's
carefully inputting a code, cautious of every key pressed. It's a long one.

Tony's not sure how the kid could have 'seen' it; being told and then having to remember it would be difficult enough without having to memorize it from view alone.

"Do you think they'll let you out of a lab, Defect? Don't fool yourself into thinking they'll take better care of you, you'll always be the defect. Always."

The boy doesn't seem bothered by the man's taunts, but Natasha turns around and fires a quick tazer into his stomach. He slumps down unconscious.

And then the boy presses enter and the air goes still.

A bright blue screen appears with several icons set in a row on the left side. Internet Explorer is the only browser on the screen and it legitimately disgusts Tony.

The boy takes a step back and looks up at Tony for a reaction.

"Good job, kiddo!"

He reaches out to pat his head, spots the flinch, and decides not to.

Tony takes his place in front of the computer and starts clicking around. Natasha joins him and the boy fades into the background.

There are folders within folders within paths. Tony flips open a panel in his wrist plate and pulls out a USB cord linked to Jarvis. He plugs it into the motherboard.

"Download everything, and see if there's anything about 'Queen Cobra' or any other similar projects."

"Yes, boss."

He's staring down at his wrist when he feels Natasha turn at his side. The screen goes black; white commands roll up and up. He looks to her and startles as she's pointing her gun at the child. He's standing next to the wall, hand hovering over a small switch.

"Woah, Nat!" He moves his right hand, and gauntlet, in front of her gun.

"That's a killswitch, Tony. He's on their side, not ours." The safety is clicked off. The boy's only looking at her. He doesn't appear frightened.

"Virus detected. Disconnecting from port," Jarvis cuts in.

Tony tugs the plug out of the motherboard and presses a few keys on the keyboard. The screen remains blank. Some of the lights on the walls flicker out.

"Don't shoot him!" He orders her over his shoulder.

The boy simply... walks away. Her gun follows him, but she doesn't take the shot. He stops next to the fallen scientist and sits on the floor, back pressed against the wall. His arms wrap around his knees, drawn up to his chest, and he stares down at his toes.

The room is quiet.

Rhodey looks at Tony, Natasha is still armed.
Tony reaches out and pushes her arm down until the gun isn't aimed at another person. He leaves the ruined computer; the killswitch activated a virus that's now running its course through every electronic in the building. He lowers himself to one knee in front of the boy and takes off his helmet so they could be eye to eye.

"Hey, kiddo," he says kindly.

Whatever this is, it's not what Natasha thinks. He can tell.

(He ignores the voice in his head reminding him he'd been betrayed by people he'd trusted more often than is normal and that Natasha is a trained spy).

The boy looks up just enough that his eyes are on his chin.

"What's your name?" He asks.

"Defect," the boy repeats himself from earlier.

"I know they call you that, but do you have a name?"

He shakes his head, "That is my name. Or... they used to call me Four-seven. Maybe that's my name?"

Tony hums softly. That's baggage to unpack later, he decides.

"Want to tell me what that was about?" He points over his shoulder to the computer. The boy's eyes fall back to the ground. "No? Okay. Do you understand what we were doing?"

He nods once. "You want information."

"And do you know why?"

"For research."

Tony has to focus to understand the words. He wants to bomb this whole facility.

"Not quite. We want to understand what's been going on here, not recreate it. Do you understand that these aren't good people?"

"What makes a person good?" The boy asks.

Tony smiles, "Good point. Did you like this man? Was he nice to you?"

The boy looks at the slumped scientist. Tony knows that look; he thinks he's being tricked, somehow.

Tony remembers that on his own face, every time Howard would ask pointedly, "And what did you do today?" It didn't help he'd only ask that when Tony was in trouble.

He can't tell, however, what the deal is with this kid. He's completely acclimated to this environment. There's been no shouting or crying. If he had any loyalty to the Fénix gang, then surely he'd be more upset about this man or about what was happening to their home, but on the other hand, he'd deleted all the information that could have helped them.

"If I behaved, Dr. Ortiz-" Ah. Tony knew that one. The big honcho in town apparently. "would bring me a new book. That's very nice."
"Books are quite nice," Tony agrees. He brings up his right arm and presses a couple of buttons, "Do you know this woman? Friday, show us Queen Cobra."

A hologram projects out. She's a tall woman with black skin, brown eyes, muscular arms and thighs. In the image, she's sneering. They assume she's in her early twenties, but know nothing of her actual identity.

His eyes widen, "Yes! That's Eight-five. She's... she's not very nice, but she's nice to me."

"Do you know where she is now?"

He shakes his head, "No, sir. She left to fight people and didn't come back."

"Who was she fighting?"

"I don't know," he says. Tony believes him.

"We know she has certain special abilities, are there others here like her?"

"No, sir."

"Alright, well I imagine you had your reasons for what you did. Maybe we can talk about that more another time. But I want you to understand that we're here to put a stop to what's happening here. These doctors are hurting people, and I think they've hurt you too." The boy's eyes drift down. "Do you have any family that you know of?"

"Everyone's dead."

Tony nods resolutely, "Alright. We're going to bring you back to New York with us and we'll see what we can do to help you there."

"Tony!" Natasha says, "You can't be serious. We can't trust this kid."

"And do you think it's easy for him to trust us?" He asks in return, "Like you said, he's a kid and I'm not leaving him here for Shield to collect."

"That doesn't mean he hasn't been trained," she presses.

Tony can follow her thought process; he doesn't know how old she'd been when she'd gone out into the world as an assassin, but she'd been fighting and learning since birth. This boy could be tricking them. He's not inclined to believe that though.

It's Rhodey who speaks next, however, "The kid probably weighs fifty pounds soaking wet. I think we can take him if he decides to turn on us."

Natasha sighs in defeat.

"Fine, if you say so."

"Glad that's settled. Kid? Do you have anything you want to take with you? You won't be coming back here, so bring everything you want."

"Can I bring my book?" He asks softly.

"Of course you can. Rhodey will stay with you, okay? Tell him where to go find this book of yours."
"Yes, sir."

Tony stands and doesn't offer the boy a hand. He's not ready to be flinched at again so soon.

"Nat and I are gonna keep looking around. When you've got what you need meet us back at the entrance."

Rhodey nods. The plate covering his face is withdrawn and he smiles kindly to the young boy, trying not to frighten him. He gestures to the exit, "Come on, bud. Let's get your stuff."

The boy stands and leaves the room with Rhodey trailing after him.

He stays a step behind the young child, keeping an eye on the back of his head. He knows Natasha is a force of nature, probably has been since she was this kid's age, but he isn't seeing a threat in him the way she is. He'd found the boy throwing bottles of colourful liquids against walls and knocking over tables with expensive equipment on them.

Then he's hit the killswitch.

"In that room where I found you, were you destroying more evidence?" He asks. He keeps his tone neutral, not trying to accuse or cause any distrust.

The boy's hands link in front of him and he's fiddling with his fingers. He continues to walk and doesn't respond.

"Did they tell you to do that, if someone infiltrates the building?"

When he gets no response, he drops it.

They go a couple of floors up in silence, other than the chatting in Rhodey's comms.

"Are we sure it's safe to take this kid on the jet with us?" Steve asks.

"No," Natasha responds. "He destroyed their data completely, nothing is salvageable. They're using a cute face and sad eyes as a trick."

"He's also a child. If they've brainwashed him, it's still our responsibility to help him out," Tony retorts.

"Then leave him for Shield to handle."

"If the kid turns on us and tries to shank you, I promise to fly him off to Shield myself."

"And destroying evidence isn't enough to convince you he's on their side?"

"It would be, but I'm not convinced that's why he did it."

"Why else would he do it?" Clint is the one to ask.

"I've got a few ideas. Look, guys. The kid looks like he hasn't eaten in days and there's hardly a speck of muscle on him. He thinks his name is 'Defect' because that's how they address him around here. That's not how you treat an asset; he's no more a spy than I am."

At this point, Rhodey tunes them out to focus on the child who's stopped in front of an open metal door. There's a panel to the side with a green light.
"This your room?"

The boy nods and then heads inside. Rhodey leans on the doorframe and watches his every move, just to be safe.

It's bare.

It's four reinforced walls, he's thinking titanium, but that seems excessive and expensive. There's no windows and only one singular lightbulb in the ceiling as a source of light. He spots a dirty blanket in one corner with a flat pillow where he likely sleeps. The boy goes straight to the furthest wall where a collection of books is stacked.

Rhodey gets closer to look at them.

There's around twenty or thirty of them, some with library tags on their side. They range from 'Genetic Data Analysis for Plant and Animal Breeding' to 'Guide to Gems' to 'The Complete Book of Tractors and Trucks'. Rhodey can instantly tell that the information found in them can't be used practically by a prisoner.

"You read all this stuff?" He asks.

"Yes, sir." He turns back with a book on astronomy in his hands. There's a constellation on the front and he's holding it tightly to his chest.

"You like it?"

"Yes, sir!" He says more enthusiastically, "I like to read. When I'm good, I get more books."

"And when you're bad they take them away?"

"Yes, sir," his enthusiasm is gone.

Simple conditioning; if you're good, you get good things. If you're bad, you lose those good things.

They keep the kid quiet with books but don't give him anything he could learn from and use against them. Even novels could prove disastrous, should he get any ideas from the hero's story. The room alone is enough for him to know the boy's a prisoner, not a member of the group, but this solidifies that for him.

"Is that the only one you want to bring? We can bring them all." Rhodey gestures to the other books.

"I'm finished those."

"Oh, okay. Any... clothes or... stuff?" There's nothing else in the room, not even clothes. The boy only shakes his head. "Alright, let's get out of here."

The whole operation is in their hands now, there's not another person in sight as they head to the front entrance. The other's join them shortly.

Clint greets the boy, "Hey, squirt! Heard you're coming with us. You excited?" When there's no immediate response he introduces himself, "I'm Clint. Got a name?"

He's staring at the archer with wide, wondering eyes and he still doesn't speak. His gaze falls on the bow and quiver peaking out over his shoulder.
Clint pulls out the bow and holds it between them, "This is my bow. Ever seen one of these before?"

Steve walks into the room next with some folders in his hands and stays quiet and watches the interaction with Rhodey.

"No, sir. But I've read about it! It's from the... the pale-o-thic, no, pale-o-li..." he stammers on the word and Clint smiles encouragingly.

"Paleolithic era," he says and the boy repeats it.

"Paleolithic era. Yes. That. I thought people only use guns now."

"Nah, not for this guy. I like my weapons to require talent," he says with a grin. His eyes move over the boy's shoulders to Tony and Natasha who'd just walked in.

She glares, "I'll show you where to put that talent."

"Here's what I've got," he puts away his bow and holds out some documents he had in his other hand.

"I've found a few things as well," Steve adds. "It's all in code."

"We'll have Jarvis decrypt it back at the Tower. Jarvis, bring up the jet." The AI activates the auto-pilot and steers it their way.

"What have you got there, kiddo?" Tony asks.

"A book," the boy says. It's not said with any sass, but Tony still chuckles.

"I see that. Are you a fan of stars and sh-stuff?"

"It's interesting," the boy says in answer.

"They only gave him textbooks," Rhodey explains, "That's all there was in his room. And a blanket to sleep on the floor."

"Hm." Tony looks at Natasha with a raised brow and she only rolls her eyes.

"Smart kid," Clint says, "Don't think I could get through any textbook even if I was in jail."

The jet lands then, and the focus shifts. Tony still sees the discomfort on the boy's face at the praise. They all step inside and the boy follows with wandering eyes.

"Have you ever been on a jet before?" Tony asks him. He's debating whether or not he should give the kid something against nausea.

"Um... I think so. I've been on something they called a plane, is that the same thing?"

"Yeah, just about. Did you feel sick on the plane?"

"No, sir."

"Alright, take a seat. We'll be in New York in a couple of hours."
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the positive reaction to the first chapter! I hope you enjoy chapter 2!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter Interlude...

Four-seven is surprised when his door clicks open. He's never tried to escape - where would he go? - but they keep him locked in anyway at all times.

There's been shouting and running in the other halls, and he wonders if something's happened. If there's another fire. Maybe they've been found again.

The last time they'd been found, Dr. Ortiz put him on a plane to this new home and that had been very exciting. He didn't go outside a lot, he'd enjoyed seeing the real sky. Maybe he'll get to see it again.

He walks up to the unlocked door and presses his ear against it to listen. Things are quieting. Dr. Ortiz will be mad if he leaves his room, but he's curious. They've tried to beat that out of him, but it's not going anywhere. He tries the handle and the door opens smoothly. Straining his ears, he can hear the sound of heavy steps and the whir of electronics. He follows it, walking quietly and listening attentively.

There are few places in this building he doesn't know intimately. He knows the halls, the floors, the rooms, the sounds. He hears a gunshot a couple of floors above him and wonders about it but doesn't think it too out of place. Dr. Ortiz shoots when he gets upset. He gets upset a lot.

When he peers around the next corner, he sees a tall red robot standing in front of the quiet room. There's only a chair in there. They'll strap him in and leave him there when he's been bad and isn't listening. He knows this room better than most.

"That's where they put you when you're bad," he says. He walks closer to the robot. He's never seen it around before and wonders if Dr. Ortiz has started a new project. Those are always nice; it means Four-seven is less important for a little while.

The robot turns around and holds a hand out like a gun. There's gold in its design as well, and it's very tall and lifelike. Four-seven doesn't think Dr. Ortiz could have made something so fascinating.

"Who are you?" It asks. He's surprised by the human-like voice coming from the metal mouth.

"I'm Defect," he replies. Its arm lowers.

"What are you doing here? Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir."
"Do you know who I am?"

"No, sir. Are you a robot?"

It laughs. "No, kiddo. Just a man in shiny armour. My name's Tony Stark."

There's a man inside the robot. That's... amazing. How is that made? How does it work? He wants to ask but doesn't. He doesn't know that name, doesn't know the face. Who is this man that's walked into their home?

"Let's get you somewhere safe until we clear this place out, alright?"

He doesn't feel the need to disobey. The man has a gun, but his voice is soft.

"Yes, sir."

The man leads him to a kitchen. He's not allowed in these areas; they'll bring his food to his room. He ends up crawling into the cupboard because it's asked of him. He doesn't understand why he's supposed to hide, but he doesn't ask questions.

When the door closes, he leaves his hiding spot and presses his ear to the door as he'd done in his room.

"Meet me on floor seven. I found the main computer. If we hack it we'll get all the info we need."

It's a woman's voice, he's not sure where it comes from but he hears it in the distance as the man is walking away.

He waits until his footsteps are nearly out of hearing range and slips out of the kitchen.

Those words hold a lot of weight.

These aren't friends. They want Dr. Ortiz' research.

That's... a terrifying thought.

He takes the stairs down a floor to the research labs. There's one room he knows in particular which he locates easily.

They've taken him there on occasion for new injections. They never tell him what they're for, but he knows the room's contents.

There's a table to one side where they'll make him sit as they press needle after needle into his skin. When they know it'll be painful, they'll make him lay down and tie him so he can't thrash and make them miss. The walls are lined with glass cases of various temperatures containing beakers of fluids. There are a couple of tables with small scales and tubes and measuring equipment.

He goes to the tables and knocks them over, relishing in the sound of broken glass.

This room has given him nothing but misery. He pulls open a case door and grabs the various beakers and containers. He throws them to the ground one after another. They're all sorts of colours, clear and blue and green and yellow. These things are swimming inside of him. There are labels on them with words he doesn't understand.

He wishes he understood them. Understood what was going on with his body.

The colours mix together in an unpleasant blend.
He's so distracted by the sound of breaking glass that he doesn't hear the door open.

"Having fun?" A voice breaks through his trance. The bottle in his hand falls out of his loose grip and breaks at his bare feet. He looks up and sees another robot at the door. Now he knows this must be a man, not a robot. This one's grey and black, not nearly as colourful as the other one.

He doesn't answer. His hands clasp in front of his stomach and he stares down at the floor. He's going to be in a lot of trouble. What will these strangers do to him?

"Are you alright?" The man asks, slowly approaching him. Glass crunches under his metal boots.

"Yes, sir," he mumbles quietly.

His muscles tense as he gets closer, but he's not hit as he expects.

"Whatcha doin' in here?"

He doesn't respond.

"What is this stuff?" The man moves next to him and grabs another bottle from the shelf. He seems to recognize the fluid and places it down on the counter. "Any reason you're destroying this?"

Again, he says nothing.

The man stares at him, he can feel his gaze, and eventually, he speaks again, "Let's get out of here."

Four-seven doesn't follow. The man wraps an arm around his stomach and he doesn't protest as he's lifted off the ground. He lets him carry him out of the room without saying anything. Is this man with Tony Stark, or does he work for Dr. Ortiz? Or are they all together and this was a cruel test?

He wouldn't be surprised.

They go to the seventh floor and the man steps into the control room where the other man and a red-headed woman are standing in front of the main computer.

To the left he sees Dr. Ortiz sitting against a wall. His ankle is broken and he looks angry.

"Hey guys, found this pipsqueak making a ruckus in a research lab. Knocking bottles over and making quite the mess. Not sure what it was about and he won't say anything." He sets him down gently.

"I told you to stay hidden, kid."

He can't bring himself to respond. He's scared into silence.

"Know this kid?" The grey robot says.

"Saw him a couple of floors up. Told him to hide until I could get back to him. I was going to ask him more questions after we were done here."

Four-seven keeps an eye on Dr. Ortiz, frightened by what he might be thinking. These people are here to take their research; that much he can figure out. Will they kill him once they find out he's useless? Or will they use him as Fénix has done?
"You've found our little defect, maybe he'll be more useful to you than he's ever been to us."

The words hurt. It's not the first time he's heard them, but that doesn't make it better or easier.

"Is this your dad?"

He shakes his head. He's never had a parent. Dr. Ortiz made sure he knew that; made sure he knew that there was no one waiting for him should he leave them. His only family are the people who've named him Defect.

"Bah! Don't offend me! I would never spawn such a useless creature!"

He wonders about his mother and father sometimes. He knows how it works; that much he's been taught. Two people made him. Who they are, he has no clue.

"Right."

"Well, alright kid, why don't you stay here with Rhodey. That's this handsome fella," he points to the man who'd brought him into the room, "while we go in search of a code."

The man's kind disposition has him asking, "For the computer?"

"Yup."

He knows the code. He's fairly certain, anyway. They have computers in several rooms, and the few he's been in the passcode has always been the same. It's a random series of letters and numbers that don't mean anything.

When he's laying on the table, drowsy and nauseated, he sees Dr. Ortiz type in the information and memorizes the movements of his hands. At the time, he didn't know this could serve a purpose. Now he knows it might.

"I know the code."

Dr. Ortiz is upset, but now his life is in these new people's hands.

He approaches the computer and steps up to the keyboard. He's never actually used one before. The woman is eyeing him carefully. She scares him.

"Do you think they'll let you out of a lab, Defect? Don't fool yourself into thinking they'll take better care of you, you'll always be the defect. Always." Four-seven is terrified of Dr. Ortiz, in general. But right now, the doctor is on the ground and two robot-men and a scary lady are surrounding him. He pays the words no attention.

He presses the keys slowly, mirroring the movements he's seen so many times in his life. When he presses the big 'enter' key, he takes a deep breath full of hope. The screen changes colour and he knows he's succeeded. He steps back so that they can take his place.

"Good job, kiddo!"

The man reaches out to him and he moves back in fear. He'd done good, why would he hit him? Did he do something wrong? His eyes move to the ground waiting for impact but there is none.

Tony walks up to the computer and leaves him. He doesn't understand what that was about, but he's relieved by the short reprieve. How long it'll last, however...
The scary lady moves up next to Tony and Four-seven steps away from them toward the wall. He inches to the right slowly. No one is paying him any attention.

There are a lot of things he knows about these people - the doctors and scientists and guards - and just as much about the building and their equipment and their safety protocols. Being the Defect, the castoff, comes with the benefit of invisibility.

Four-seven is nothing; became nothing by his own weaknesses and strings of failures. He is nothing to them and they talk as if he isn't there.

His hand reaches out and he removes a simple cover over a small switch. He flicks it down. There's a span of five seconds where he could undo this action, but he chooses not to.

The computer screen goes dark and the woman turns to him. She's so quick he hardly sees her pull out her gun.

"Woah, Nat!"

"That's a killswitch, Tony. He's on their side, not ours."

He knows guns. She clicks off the safety and he knows what that means, but he isn't frightened. Fénix ensured he isn't scared of death; it's everything leading up to that he needs to be wary of.

"Virus detected. Disconnecting from port." A robot voice comes out of the robot suit, and it's fascinating if it weren't likely to kill him in the next few minutes.

"Don't shoot him!"

Four-seven assumes now will come the questions and takes a seat next to the unconscious doctor. He's known this man his whole life, and now what? Will they both be killed here? Or will they take him away to a new group of doctors who'll experiment on him?

He'd rather be dead, he thinks.

His feet are dirty. They're not very interesting, but he keeps his eyes trained on them as the man, Tony, kneels in front of him. He can see his face out of the corner of his eyes.

"Hey, kiddo."

This is a game he's familiar with.

Dr. Ortiz was kind for a very long time. Training him, teaching him. He didn't cause him any harm, that was always Dr. Wallis.

He would say, "I'm sorry, Four-seven, this is going to hurt but it'll make you so much stronger and you'll become the phoenix rising from the ashes of our failures. You will make us proud."

Dr. Wallis was cold and uncaring. She had never played any games

And then Four-seven became Defect, and Dr. Ortiz was no longer kind. He came to realize that hadn't been kindness at all. It was pretend.

It's always pretend.

He looks up slightly.
"What's your name?"

"Defect."

"I know they call you that, but do you have a name?"

"That is my name. Or... they used to call me four-seven. Maybe that's my name?"

"Want to tell me what that was about?" The man gestures to the computer. He says nothing. He continues to say nothing. Tony doesn't become impatient or violent. When he asks, "Did you like this man? Was he nice to you?" he's wary.

He looks at Dr. Ortiz. What does it mean to be 'nice'? He has a roof over his head. He has food and water. He's taken care of; he's always been told that that's kindness by those around him.

"If you're a good boy," which means be quiet, be still, listen and obey, "you'll get a second helping of dinner tonight. Wouldn't that be nice?"

He likes extra food, his stomach is always tight and cramping from hunger. There are bed days, where they let him sleep the hours away after a grueling training or testing session. They give him new clothes when he outgrows the old ones, or when they get too dirty. They let him use the washroom when he needs to go, usually. Some of the instructors would say, "good job" or nod with what felt like encouragement. Those are nice things.

"If I behaved, Dr. Ortiz would bring me a new book. That's very nice." The books are his favourite part.

When Tony shows him Eight-five, he's caught off guard for a second.

"That's Eight-five. She's... she's not very nice, but she's nice to me."

They'd brought her in a few years back after Four-seven had been named the Defect. She's very aggressive and loud; she's what they'd wanted him to be, except better. He likes her, she doesn't hurt him on purpose. She calls him sweetie and is the first person to press a kiss to his forehead. He doesn't know where she's gone, and he tells them as much. She's been away for a few weeks now.

There's no one else like her; she's the Fénix star, their phoenix rising from the ashes.

He knows pretty much everything that goes on in this building. He confidently says that there are no others.

The woman doesn't trust him. He recognizes the look in her eyes, the way her hand hovers near the gun she hadn't wanted to put away. She protests his joining them.

He doesn't know what 'New York' is and what awaits him there. They mention 'Shield'; he's heard of that organization but knows little of them.

They leave Dr. Ortiz in the room and he's left to lead Rhodey to his bedroom.

He's asked why he'd been destroying things in the room full of medical things, but he can't bring himself to answer. After everything he's gone through, he wants no one else to suffer that way. He wants everything gone, like it had never existed. The only victims would be Four-seven and Eight-five and that's okay.
There's nothing in his room he cares to bring, other than the book he's currently reading. He'll go through them four or five times before moving on to the next one so as to avoid getting through his books too quickly. He does anyway, it can't be helped. All the books in his room have been read over and over, all that's left is his book on astronomy. He was hoping for a new one soon.

It makes him quiet. Fénix likes quiet.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed! Please feel free to leave a comment, they always make my day :)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the positive feedback so far!

Irondad will save us from post-Endgame depression I promise.

Bruce is in the jet waiting for them. He smiles at the boy and introduces himself briefly, and then follows Tony to get more details.

The Iron Man suit disassembles into a briefcase that he sets next to his seat at the console and then inputs their destination. The others put away their weapons and take their seats along the two sides of the jet. It sets off into the sky and Tony looks over his shoulder; the boy is seated on the floor at the very back, cross-legged with his book in his lap.

He debates going back there but decides against it for now.

"That boy is incredibly underweight, Tony. Look at his face and his arms. Has he been in this place his whole life?" Bruce asks him, voice hushed.

"I think so," he responds. "I think he was an experiment or something. They called him by a number."

"I didn't see any marks on him." He doesn't look abused, only neglected. It's not better, not really, but it's different.

"When we get home, I want you to do a full checkup." Bruce nods in agreement, "Wish I had some food for him right now though."

"I'm sure he's fine with waiting a little longer. At least he's in good hands now."

"Except I don't think he knows that."

Bruce looks at him questioningly, but he doesn't pursue the subject. He doesn't have a rearview mirror to see what's happening behind him, but he listens.

"Hey, kiddo. Want to come sit up here with me?" Clint asks, patting the empty spot beside him.

Tony appreciates that as the only one of them with children, he's trying. When the kid says, "I... I'm alright, sir," Clint doesn't press.

The boy has no name. He tries to think of one for him, because they can't keep using nicknames forever and 'Defect' and 'fouirty-seven' are going in the trash immediately. Maybe he already has an actual name, buried in the research and data that had been deleted. How did he even know about the killswitch? That's his big question and he's sure Natasha is wondering the same thing.

No one says anything after Clint's attempt. Natasha doesn't want to and both Rhodey and Steve are uncertain how to proceed. There's a long list of questions to ask, but they don't want to interrogate him.
After ten minutes of near perfect silence, Tony puts the jet on auto-pilot and stands. He ignores his teammates questioning looks and walks over to the boy.

He's reading quietly and only looks up when Tony stands in front of him.

"I'm far too old to be sitting on the ground so get up here." He points to the bench right beside the boy.

It's an order and he complies. He keeps his thumb in the correct page of his book, stands, and gently sits on the very edge of the bench. Tony sits down beside him.

"Where are you at?" He asks, pointing to his book.

He flips it open again and Tony can see he's reading about the Ursa Major constellation.

Tony hums softly, "I've never been big on astronomy. I'm an inventor; things up there don't really help me out down here. But I'm always up for learning new things. Tell me about Ursa Major."

The boy looks down at the page and then back up at Tony. It's the same look as before; is this a trick?

"It's a constellation in the northern sky. It means 'great she-bear' in Latin. It was one of the 48 constellations listed by Ptolemy in his almagest back in the 2nd century. There are now 88 known constellations and it's the third largest one. There's some roman mythology about it, where Ursa Major is Callisto, a woman that Jupiter was in love with, and Ursa Minor is Arcas, who might be their son." A few words are mispronounced (he says the silent 'p' in 'ptolemy') or misused (he actually says mythical rather than mythology). Tony puts the pieces together.

The jet is silent for a couple of seconds.

"How do you remember all of that?" Clint asks, clearly impressed.

"Oh," the boy grows shy, looking down at the pages, "I've read this two times already."

"Twice," Tony corrects kindly, "You can say 'twice' instead of 'two times'. When we get to the Tower I'll make sure you have new books. Jarvis, make a list for Happy. A few new books and clothes. Also get food, whatever kids are supposed to eat."

"Yes, boss."

The boy only stares at him cautiously.

"Have you ever seen these constellations yourself?" Tony asks.

"No, sir."

"Well, you are in for a treat," he says with a smile. He pulls out his phone and types in a few things. Then a hologram of the night sky is projected before them. The lights on the jet dim to make it easier to see. The backdrop is the jet, but there are sparkling dots that represent the stars as accurately as they are seen by NASA.

He can feel the others watching him, but right now he doesn't care. "Let's find this Ursa Major."

He presses a finger to the outer layer of the hologram and moves it, moving the sky with it. The boy is watching with obvious awe, the book forgotten on his lap.
"Think you can find it? Just put your finger like this and..."

He holds his hand out for the boy who slowly meets it. He takes his index finger and places it where his own had been. He gently moves his hand to move the hologram just as he'd done. The boy takes to the new technology with ease.

He points to a few stars and says, "This is Orion."

Tony pokes at the stars and they go from a pale yellow to a dark red. He traces the lines between them in a way that would be shown in the textbook.

He's met with a wide smile, completely different to everything the kid had shown them thus far.

They continue to move the sky and the boy points out other constellations. Tony marks them in red and every so often the boy will give him a little story attached to the name.

The kid is overjoyed when they find Ursa Major. Tony lets him mark the stars.

"You said there are 88 constellations right? Think we've found... 13 so far? Think you can keep going?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Alright then. Jar, dim a bit more."

He does. The jet is almost completely dark save for the daylight streaming through the front window. None of the other Avengers complain.

They spend a couple of hours just like that; the boy pointing out stars and Tony listening to his stories recounted from the closed book on his lap. He hears his stomach grumble and feels guilty that he can't do anything for it.

He could land the jet and get some food, and he considers it, but it's not a good idea to land a jet at a McDonald's and he knows a Big Mac would only make the boy sick.

Jarvis and Happy are conversing, details about food and clothing, but he stays out of it.

"This is Taurus," the boy points out.

"Do you know what zodiac sign you are? I'm a Gemini."

"No, sir."

"Do you know how old you are?" He asks next.

"No, sir."

"Alright, alright, I'm officially over this whole 'sir' thing you've got going on. My name's Tony Stark. Call me Tony, call me Stark, anything but 'sir'. Capiche?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

He sighs loudly, "Fine, that'll do. Let's go find Libra, the second best sign." He winks at Rhodey who rolls his eyes. There's an amused smile on his lips watching them.

Jarvis alerts them when they're nearing New York.
"What's New York?" The boy asks.

"It's where we live," Tony says, not quite understanding the question. "I own Stark Industries, and I made the Avengers Tower. We're the Avengers, by the way. Heard of us?"

"Yes," the boy frowns, "Dr. Ortiz doesn't like you."

"I imagine he wouldn't. I know you've been on a plane, but have you ever seen a big city before?"

"No, Mr. Stark. I always had to stay inside."

Tony turns off the hologram, they'd counted 67 constellations, and he stands.

"Let me show you New York." He gestures for the kid to follow.

He sets the book down on the bench and follows him to the front of the jet. His eyes widen almost comically as he looks out of the window. Tony stares at him as he stares at the city.

The boy doesn't say anything for a while, completely overwhelmed. His hands settle on the edge of the console and he leans forward to see as much as he can. Tony points out different buildings and explains what they are.

"That's Starbucks, they make expensive and delicious coffee. And there's Chase, a big American bank. That's a McDonalds, that's for greasy fast food you'll learn to love in no time."

He's not sure the boy understands half of what he's saying.

"Is that a dog?" The boy asks, pointing. Tony can't see what he's pointing to; they're too far in the sky for him to make out small details like that.

"Four paws and furry? Probably a dog. Read about them in one of your books?"

"Yes," he responds. "Border Collies are native to the British Isles and live on average up to 12 years of age."

He doesn't know if he's seeing a Border Collie; Pepper's told him a few times to get his eyes checked, maybe he should listen for once.

In the distance, the Avengers Tower becomes visible and he points to it, "That's where we live. You'll be staying there with me for a little while."

He meant to say 'us'. He doesn't correct himself.

"It's so... tall."

"Tallest building in the city," Tony says proudly.

They point out a few things and he talks about them. The boy's seemed to grow a bit more at ease around him and he doesn't want to discourage that.

It's not much longer before they land.

Natasha takes the documents from Clint and Steve, "I'll go down to the lab and have Jarvis go over these." She leaves the jet first.

"Let's head inside and get you some food," Tony tells the boy who nods once. The others follow
them. "Bruce, Rhodey, stay with me. You two can do your own thing or go help Nat."

Steve and Clint get off on their own floors. There's no point arguing with Tony.

The elevator takes them to Tony's floor next and he leads them to the kitchen that's been recently stocked. He sends a quick thank you text to Happy.

"Take a seat," he gestures to one of his island's stools.

The kitchen is large and lavish. The kid's looking around with interest and follows his instructions. He sets his book on the counter and then places his hands on the seat cushion to pull himself up to it and sits down.

"What did they give you to eat over there?"

"I get a piece of bread every day. Then rice, usually. Sometimes these long stretchy things if I was going to have a busy day."

"Do you mean pasta?"

"Yes, pasta."

"Was there a sauce on it?"

"Sauce?"

"Were the noodles red?"

"Um, no, just white or yellowish. I'm sorry. I don't know how to explain..." The boy's anxious by the line of questioning and Tony stops there.

"It's okay, kiddo. I just don't want to give you anything that'll make you sick." He pulls out a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter, "I'll make you some toast to start off with."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark."

Bruce and Rhodey stand nearby, but try to give him as much space as possible.

"Anything plain should be fine," Bruce says. "When he's done with the sandwich you can make some pasta. With some butter, it'll be good to fill him up."

Tony pulls out a plate, spreads peanut butter on two slices of bread, and then hands it to the boy to eat.

"Here you go, kiddo. Eat up."

He locks eyes with Rhodey, the man who's known him for over twenty years, and looks away.

The boy takes a large bite and his eyes go wide. Tony can't help the grin that stretches across his lips.

"Taste good?"

The boy nods. The food's gone faster than should be possible. He prepares a third slice and hands it over. He sees him smacking his lips at the unfamiliarly sticky food and places a glass of water in front of him too.
"Thank you, Mr. Stark," the boy says.

"No problem. Finish this and then you can go have a shower." He turns to Bruce and says, "I'll make some more food while he's washing up, and then we can do the checkup."

Bruce readily agrees, because at this point his basic needs are most important. When the boy swallows down the food, Tony has him follow him down the hall.

"I'll start the water!" Rhodey calls after him. Good call, Tony thinks. He knows how to cook, but he has to be in the right mood for it. He's not in that mood right now.

"Thanks, honeybear!" He calls back and looks down at the kid, walking beside him with his eyes on the hardwood floors. "How are you feeling, kiddo? Are you still hungry?"

The look he gets is one he's growing familiar with. He tacks on, "It's okay if you are. You'll get more food after your shower."

"I'm... good, Mr. Stark."

He drops it at that. This is his private floor and he's set a room aside for the kid because there's nowhere else he'd trust to leave him. He's not frightened of a small child; it's the other's he's worried about.

They wouldn't attack a child, he knows this much, but their mistrust is hard to ignore.

"I don't know how long you'll be staying here, we're doing this on the fly, but I prepared a room for you in the meantime." Tony stops at a nondescript wooden door and pushes it open. The boy walks in first and he follows behind him.

There's a double bed with a dark blue comforter, a big curtained window, and a dresser against the wall. There's a large stack of heavy books on the dresser. It's not impressive; a perfectly normal guest room. The boy looks like he's never seen anything as luxurious. He turns to Tony, his face falling blank.

Tony walks around him towards the dresser and goes through it. Happy had dropped off some clothes; he'd removed all the tags and sorted them away. He pulls out an Iron Man t-shirt and a pair of Hello Kitty pajama pants. Maybe he should have told Happy this was for a boy, but he doubts the kid will care about gender normativity. He finds a small assortment of socks and underwear and takes one of each.

He wonders if he should be embarrassed about it, but he isn't.

"You okay with wearing this?" He holds up the shirt and pants.

"I'm happy with anything you give me, Mr. Stark."

That's not the answer he wants but accepts it for now.

"You can leave your book here," he tells him. The boy sets it on the bed. "Let's get you to the bathroom."

Tony stops at the linen closet first to pull out a big fluffy towel and the next door over is the bathroom. There's a standup shower with a single sink and toilet. He has an ensuite bathroom in his bedroom and this is a spare for guests (mostly Rhodey, occasionally Pepper or Happy if they need it).
He sets the clothes and the towel on the sink and turns to the boy.

"You know how a shower works, right? One knob for cold water, the other for hot?" He nods once. Tony points to a small trash can next to the sink, "You can put your clothes in there, I never want to see any of it ever again. When you've dried off, put the towel in there," he points to a laundry bin.

Next, he grabs a bottle from a shelf inside the shower. It's a generic brand. "Use this for shampoo. This is body wash," he points to another bottle. The boy's eyes squint as he's trying to read the small print on the shampoo and he says, "This is for your hair. Do you know how to use it?"

"I'm sorry," the boy says immediately, distressed, "I don't..."

"You've washed your hair before, right? How did you do that?"

"I use..." His hands are in front of his body and he forms a rectangle with his fingers. He decides on a word, "Soap...?"

Tony smiles to reassure him, "It's alright. This is similar to a bar of soap, only liquid. Put some in your hand and rub it in your hair, like this," he mimics the action with his own hair. There's a bit of clarity in the boy's eyes and he takes it that he's understood.

"Think you got this?" He asks.

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

"Take as long as you need, there's no rush."

Tony leaves him to it and returns to his kitchen. He hopes the kid will figure it out.

"How is he?" Bruce asks. He's seated on a stool while Rhodey is in front of the stove.

He shrugs, "He's managing, but I'm pretty sure he has no idea what's going on."

"Did you see his feet?" Bruce asked. The other two can only stare at him. He rolls his eyes. "I've seen those kinds of feet before. The boy's never worn shoes in his life. He's nothing like that 'Queen Cobra' person. What do you think they were doing with him?"

"I'm not sure," Tony answers, "Maybe they wanted to turn him into a Super but it didn't work?"

"Maybe," Bruce agrees. He's not completely convinced; failure usually leads to death in those cases.

"Jarvis, have you made any progress on the documents we found?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Let me know when you make some headway." Jarvis affirms and Tony says to his friends, "The kid's not forthcoming with any information, but I'm willing to trust him, so we'll just take this one step at a time for now."

"We can do a DNA test, see if he comes up in the system somewhere," Rhodey suggests.

"He's going to need a lot of therapy," Bruce comments, "He'll need something stable. Maybe we should have left him to Shield."

"They would have tortured him for information he probably doesn't have. They'd only care about
what he could do for them."

"And what are you going to do for him, Tones?" Rhodey asks.

"More than Shield would," he retorts. He takes a seat next to Bruce. He sighs, "I don't know exactly what I'm doing, but this kid's brilliant and I don't want him in their hands. We'll see if we can find some extended family or something, and if not, maybe he can get adopted by some loving family that won't treat him like a number."

Rhodey wonders if he sees himself in the boy; alone with a memory for words and numbers with no one to be proud of it.

"I'm with you, Tony," Bruce says.

He's satisfied and they spend the next few minutes chatting since Tony doesn't have much else to say about the boy. It's nearing ten minutes when he finds them again. It's not as long as Tony would have liked; he hadn't wanted him to feel rushed but that couldn't be helped.

Jarvis had sent Happy the boy's approximately size, and the shirt and pants fit him better than what he'd been wearing before. Tony notes the absence of socks and thinks Bruce definitely had a point about the shoe thing. His hair is damp and he wrings his hands in front of him as he stops in the doorway.

"Hey, kiddo. Come on up, Rhodey's just about done."

He takes up his previous stool, still needing to hop on by using his arms to pull himself up. He's mostly rid himself of dirt, his fingernails still need a cleanup and Tony sees a spot behind his ear, but it's an improvement. Though it makes him look sicker, somehow. Like it doesn't make sense for him to be clean and worryingly thin and pallid at the same time.

"Not fond of socks?" Tony asks, pointing at his bare feet.

He shakes his head.

He'd likely have missed it if he weren't looking at him so intensely. There are goosebumps along his arms and a slight tremor in his body. He brushes their arms together and instantly feels the problem.

"Jesus kid, you're freezing!" Looking closely, his lips are definitely a tinge of blue that shouldn't be there. He reaches up and touches the boy's cheek with the back of his hand. It's cold. He's a little proud that he doesn't flinch away from the touch.

"I'll be warm soon, Mr. Stark," the boy says nonchalantly.

"Why are you so cold? I know there's plenty of hot water." His eyebrows draw down.

The boy doesn't meet his gaze again, eyes trailed on his chin. "I'm not allowed hot water."

Tony pauses. He's not sure what to say to this. Rhodey and Bruce share a look, but neither of them are willing to break the silence either. He takes in a deep breath and leaves the room for a brief minute. When he comes back, he's holding an MIT sweater taken out of his own closet.

"Arms up," he tells the boy.

He complies, staring at him with confusion. Tony bunches up the sweater and rolls it down his
arms. It's way too big on him, but it'll serve its purpose. When he's finished, he takes the boy's hands in his and rubs them to incite some warmth.

"As long as you're here, you're allowed as much hot water as you want. Okay?" His gaze is steady.

The boy hesitates, and slowly nods, "Yes, Mr. Stark."

He lets go of his hands and hopes the food will warm him further.

The pasta, fettuccine style, is drained and Rhodey mixes in a good tablespoon of butter. He plates a small bowl and slides it over the countertop with a fork.

The boy ignores the metal utensil and takes a strip of noodle in his hand and brings it up to his lips. Rhodey opens his mouth, but Tony meets his gaze and shakes his head. Teaching him how to use a fork is going to be a project for another day.

"So I've decided," Tony says to gain everyone's attention. He looks at the kid with a smile, "You're going to be called Peter. How do you like that?"

The boy puts more food in his mouth and his head tilts and his eyes wander his face in search of answers. "Peter?" He mumbles around the food.

"You can't just name the kid, Tony. He's not a pet," Rhodey chides.

"I know that, but I'm not going around calling him 'Defect' or 'kid' forever. He needs a proper name. Are you okay with it?" He asks the kid.

"What does 'Peter' mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything, it's just a name. Like my name is Tony."

The boy nods slowly. He puts more pasta in his mouth. He's eating slowly enough that Tony isn't concerned about him throwing it up.

"Why 'Peter'?" Bruce asks.

"Peter. Pepper. Close enough, isn't it? Who else would I name him after?"

"Again. Not a pet."

"I like it," the boy whispers. "Peter. It's nice."

"See? Kid likes it."

Rhodey shakes his head but says nothing further.

They leave it at that. The boy, now named Peter, continues eating the bland noodles with a seemingly never-wavering hunger. The men talk about the mission and Jarvis confirms that they're making some headway with the paperwork but not enough worth sharing. Rhodey refills the bowl with a little more food and puts the rest in a tupperware headed for the fridge.

Tony takes a lull in their conversation to place the back of his hand on the boy's cheek again. He's warmed since earlier.

Bruce has spent months out in poor cities giving medical examinations to adults and children alike.
He's seen all sorts of states of health; this boy isn't healthy but he isn't dying either.

"We'll do the usual checkup process, height, weight, blood pressure, reflexes. I also want to run a full blood count test and check his vitamin levels. He might need to go on some tablets for a few weeks to stabilize," he tells a nodding Tony.

"Keep some aside for a DNA test," Rhodey adds. "Should we try running his prints?"

"It's unlikely that they're registered anywhere at his age, but we can always try if nothing comes up with the DNA test."

They're interrupted when Peter pushes forward his bowl and looks to Tony, "Thank you for the food, Mr. Stark."

"Did you like it?" He asks because he's sure he would have eaten it even if it tasted bad.

Peter nods, "Yes, Mr. Stark."

"That's great. We're going to head down to the medlab to give you a checkup. Do you know what that means?" He nods and doesn't say anything. Tony's growing used to the odd silences.

Rhodey puts the dirty bowl in the sink and they take the elevator down a few floors to the Avengers personal medical facility. Everything is sterilized and properly organized. The beds are tucked in with fresh white sheets. This is a place Tony avoids and has little control over other than paying the staff.

They slip into a private room that has a bed, a counter with a sink, a paper towel dispenser, cupboards full of things Bruce recognizes, and a weight and height scale to one wall. On the way, Bruce grabs a Starkpad to note the information as the room doesn't have a computer. He gestures to the scale.

"Can you stand on that for me please?"

The scale has a large beam in its front that reaches up to measure height and balance weight. Bruce fiddles with it to get the exact weight and jots down the information as Peter stares blankly ahead.

"That, um... Hm." Bruce has Peter step off the scale, rebalances it, and makes him go back on to double check his findings.

"What is it?" Tony asks.

"It doesn't..." Bruce's hand reaches out and he stops it in front of Peter's stomach. He's looking at him now. "Is this okay? I just want to feel your stomach. It won't hurt, I promise."

Peter nods once.

He presses his fingers into his stomach, feeling his ribs. He's terribly thin and there's no fat under his skin. Bruce shakes his head and withdraws his hand. He inputs more information into the tablet and gestures next to the bed.

"Can you sit for me please?"

Peter pulls himself up to the white sheets and sits down, kicking his feet. His hands slip under his thighs but Tony sees the tremors. He frowns and waits.

Bruce pulls out a blood pressure monitor from one of the cupboards and pulls apart the velcro
holding it closed.

"Have you seen one of these before?" Peter nods, "Good, good. I'm going to put this around your arm and it'll squeeze tight, but it shouldn't hurt."

He does as he says he would and re-sticks the velcro together. It's attached to a small air pump that Bruce presses down until he starts to get a reading. Peter's arm tenses as the pressure builds. Bruce stops as soon as he gets accurate data and unstraps it from the kid's arm. He sets it on the counter and jots down the numbers. At least this much is normal.

He knocks the reflex hammer into the space below his kneecap and is met with an above average response. He traces the pad of his feet with his fingertips, unsurprised by the hard skin. There are no signs of bruises or scars on his skin when he rolls the pant legs up to his knees and looks over his arms and inspects his veins.

He's looking at his right hand when he points out, "Two of your fingers have been broken before. A few years ago, I believe, and they didn't heal properly. How did that happen?"

Peter shrugs his shoulder. "I don't remember."

"What about the ankle?" He drops his hand and reaches down to tap the left one, "Does it cause you any pain? The way its healed, I'm surprised you can walk on it."

"It's fine."

Bruce and Tony share a glance.

Then he goes on to prepare the needle to draw his blood.

Tony sees Peter's cheeks grow somehow paler and knows he's only sitting on his hands to stop the shaking.

"Wait! Stop," he interrupts Bruce. "Give us a minute?"

Rhodey frowns, watching from his spot near the doorway. He doesn't press it and steps out of the room.

"Sure, Tony." Bruce gently deposits the needle and leaves the room too.

He walks up to the bed and leans his hip against it beside the young child. He crosses his arms and looks at him. Peter only continues to stare at his feet.

"You're pretty freaked," he points out.

"I don't know what that means," Peter says.

"You're scared. Why?" His response is a shrug. "You're shaking like you're hanging from a rope over a pit of lava."

Peter finally looks up, probably more confused than amused by his words, but Tony counts it as a win.

"Are you scared of needles?" Tony prods carefully. There's another shrug. He sighs softly. He moves to stand in front of him. "I can't help you, Peter, if you don't talk to me. I'm not going to force you to do anything that scares you or makes you unhappy in any way. You've suffered enough already."
He reaches out and carefully moves the wet strands of hair out of his face. It's drying and curling, soft now that it's been washed. "I need you to use your words."

"I don't want you taking my blood," he admits.

Tony nods, "Then we won't. It's that simple." Peter's eyes are full of distrust. "But I want you to know that if we take your blood, we might be able to do a DNA test to find your family. Is that something you're interested in? Because otherwise, I don't... I don't really know where we're going from here."

Peter shakes his head, "There's no family. They made sure of it."

"Okay, then no blood test," Tony agrees.

The boy's a child. No more than ten and no less than five, he's gotten no closer at narrowing his estimate, and Tony knows it's his responsibility to care for him. At least to some degree. Peter, named as such since the Fénix gang hadn't bothered to give him a decent name, can't know what's on the horizon for him.

Tony, at the end of the day, will have to give him to child services to handle. He'll need years of therapy to figure out what they'd done to him and to fix the deep-seated trauma. He'll need parents to love him and raise him. He'll need time and patience.

At the end of the day, it doesn't involve Tony or the Avengers. But he can't help but want a part in it. This boy is smart, perhaps smarter than the evil corporation had ever known, and he's confused and lost and without anyone to care for him. Tony understands, a little bit.

"I don't know what we're going to do, but we'll do this together, okay?"

Peter nods because his tone suggests he wants a response.

Tony goes to the door and opens it, "You can come back in now," he calls out. Rhodey is leaning on the opposite wall with his arms crossed, but he can see Bruce approaching from down the hall. They all reconvene inside the room. Bruce heads to the counter and Tony stops him.

"No blood test. I know what you're both going to say, but no. No blood test. We're going to get some better food in him and that should fix up any vitamin issues and as for the DNA test, kid's certain there's no one to find."

"Tony..." Rhodey says. It's an exasperated sound. He remembers it from his drinking days as his roommate and best friend found him and inevitably cleared off the vomit covered sheets and redressed him. Rhodey knows him better than anyone else in the world. Even Pepper Potts, CEO extraordinaire.

"I know. But no. What does the rest look like?" Tony asks Bruce.

Bruce looks at the tablet and his lips purse, "It's alright. From some charts, I think he might be seven or eight years old. Blood pressure is a bit high, but today's been stressful, so... I agree with you. Proper diet and time should put him on the right path. Let me know Peter if at any point your hand or ankle starts to hurt; we might need to reset them." There's a hesitant nod from his patient. "Rhodes, do you think you can take Peter for some more food while I talk to Tony? I'm sure he's still hungry. A bit more should be okay."

"Sure," Rhodey says with no hesitation. "Come on, bud."
Peter, whose gaze had been fixed on Tony as if expecting deception, slips off the bed. He finally looks away and follows Rhodey out of the room so the two adults can talk.

Bruce waits a few seconds for them to walk some distance and then says, "His height and weight don't make sense."

"What do you mean?"

"See for yourself."

Tony steps beside him and looks at the data; there's the information plus several charts for what would be considered average. Peter's height is registered at four feet, four inches, which is noted as normal for eight to ten-year-olds, but his weight registers at forty-three pounds, which is closer to the five to seven-year-old range. The discrepancy is obvious.

"So he's... seven or eight years old?"

"Maybe. Either an underweight seven-year-old or tall eight-year-old. But usually malnourishment causes stunted growth and he wouldn't be that tall in the first place. It just... doesn't make sense."

"We don't know what they've done to him. They were doing all sorts of experiments."

"A blood test would really he-"

"No, Absolutely not."

"But, Tony-"

"I said no."

"Okay," he concedes. "No blood test."

When they get back to the kitchen, Peter is shoveling down some leftover pasta and Rhodey is chatting with him.

It's late-ish, at least a pre-teen's bedtime, and after he finishes his food Tony sends everyone off to their own floors. He guides Peter to his room where he lifts the corner of the blanket and pats the pillow.

"Get some sleep. Jarvis is always active, that's the AI you've been hearing. If you need anything, just say it out loud and he'll help you out. Or if you want me, tell him and he'll wake me up. Alright?"

Peter nods and sits on the edge of the bed and crosses his hands in his lap.

Tony leaves him with that.

After the day he's had, he reluctantly agrees to go to bed rather than back to his lab as he normally would. Then he gets sidetracked as he always does. Pepper will be grateful for the dozens of previously unread emails that are now getting responses.

There's some hesitation about leaving the child in his quarters without him nearby.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Ahhh I can't even with all the lovely comments you've left me! It really truly means the world, thank you so much!

I hope you enjoy :)

Jarvis has nothing to say that night and Tony wakes feeling rested. He slips out of bed and asks the current status of his young charge.

"Peter is still asleep, sir."

"Did he sleep the night through?" He riffles through his drawers for today's outfit. He's going for casual; there are lots to figure out with the documents found at the base and with Peter himself that it's unlikely he'll be leaving the building. He tugs on some jeans and a Pink Floyd t-shirt.

"No, sir."

"Give me a rundown."

"Peter sat on the bed from 9:17 pm to 9:26 pm. From 9:26 pm to 9:42 pm he explored the room. He looked at the books and he went through the dresser drawers. He looked into one of my cameras for 47 seconds at 9:39 pm. At 9:42 pm, he sat in bed and read until 10:18 pm. At 10:18 pm, he put down the book and turned off the lights. He was in bed at 10:19 pm and appeared unable to fall asleep. At 11:49 pm he left the bed and brought the pillow and blanket to the corner of the room where he then laid on the floor. He fell asleep at approximately 12:37 am and hasn't woken since."

"Did you say he's sleeping on the floor?" Tony's voice is muffled as he's tugging down his shirt.

"Yes, sir."

"Give me visuals." He takes his phone off his bedside table and Jarvis brings up the camera feed. It's in black and white and shows the room but no child. "Where is he?"

"Peter is sleeping below the camera's view, sir."

He blinks at the feed some more. At the very bottom, he can see the edge of a blanket.

"Huh." The boy had found the only blind spot in the room. He chuckles to himself. "Smart kid."

He pockets his phone and heads for the kitchen. He'll let Peter sleep for now, it's only seven in the morning. "When he wakes up, tell him he can join us in the kitchen for breakfast," he instructs Jarvis.

Tony goes to the internet for resources on what to feed him. Then ends up digging for the country's best therapist and finds tips on how to deal with youth trauma. It's a never ending pit of information and he settles at the island to keep on reading. An hour later, Bruce interrupts him as he steps into the kitchen.
"Hi, Tony."

"Hey, Brucie." He sets down his phone and looks up to meet his gaze. "Whatcha doing up here?"

An eyebrow raises. "Did the child of unknown age and origin disappear?"

"Well he certainly tried," he drawls. He shows him the feed to the bedroom and points to the bottom corner, "He's sleeping here, for whatever reason. Didn't try to run away though, so I suppose that counts for something."

Rhodey walks in shortly after, his own questions on his lips. "Everything alright?"

"Just peachy."

"Kid didn't try to shank you in your sleep?"

"Nope. Harmless, like I said." He doesn't appear to believe him. "Back off to Washington later?"

"I should. When's Pep coming back?" She's in Miami charming investors.

He doesn't need a babysitter. He grudgingly answers, "Tomorrow morning."

"Then I might stick around until then. No offense to you, Tones, but this kid's kind of got me on edge. That?" He points to the phone, "That's smart and I don't like it."

"Sir, Agent Romanoff, Agent Barton, and Captain Rogers would like to come in as well, shall I unlock the door?"

"Yeah, yeah, let's have the whole squad over for breakfast." Tony stands and goes for the fridge. He doesn't respond to Rhodey's comment, because he understands it too well to fight against it. "From what I read eggs should be fine, right?" He pulls out a double carton.

"That's fine. Plain eggs are gentle on the stomach," Bruce says.

While he's searching for a large pan to start frying up some scrambled eggs, the other Avengers march into the room and take their spots around the island.

They don't typically eat in his quarters, but he's not surprised to see them. Natasha glances around the room and frowns, "Still sleeping?"

"Yeah. Yesterday was a lot to take in for him, I think."

"Sure." She pulls the documents they'd found out of her pocket and splays them over the countertop. "Shield found other things too, so we'll be able to make a proper file, but what we gathered is that they somehow replicated Steve's serum and have been trying to mix it with animal qualities. This is dated from 2005 and talks about mixing the serum with spider DNA. I imagine it didn't work out and they moved on to snakes."

"Resulting in our lovely Queen Cobra."

"Exactly."

"Anything about Peter?"

"No," she says. "Nothing."
Tony turns on the stove. He cracks a few eggs into the pan, setting the shells back in the carton. He breaks the yoke with a spatula and it slowly begins to sizzle.

"We did his checkup yesterday. Kid's severely underweight, but otherwise pretty okay. He refused a blood test and insisted he has no living family. I know what that looks like, but we're not talking about that anymore. I think it's best to send him off to Child Services only after Shield's done with this. I don't want them after this kid. He doesn't deserve that."

"Whatever you say, Tony." She's not convinced, but she's done arguing.

"Eggs and toast good with everyone? Not sure I have anything else..." He checks the fridge and freezer, but there's no bacon or ham to pair up with the eggs.

There's agreement and he continues to cook in silence.

"We still don't know anything about him," she points out.

Tony shakes his head. The topic stops at that.

She's been up most of the night going over the paperwork and she's tired. She doesn't press because Tony is known for his stubbornness.

He scrambles the eggs and places some bread in the toaster. When it pops, he puts four more slices in their place. It's only when he's starting to set aside the dirty dishes and he's given the others food does he start to wonder about the child. He finds it odd that he could sleep so deeply in such unfamiliar territory. Though who knows what his mental state is like.

"Jarvis, has the kid stirred at all?"

"Yes, sir. He has been awake since 7:17 am."

That was almost as long as Tony's been awake. "Did you tell him to come for breakfast like I told you to?"

"I informed him that he could come to breakfast."

Ah. Wording. He could join them for breakfast and had chosen not to.

"Is he still in the room?"

"Yes, sir."

Tony takes up his phone and brings up the camera feed, trusting Jarvis to stop him should there be something he doesn't want to see. The boy's sitting cross-legged on the floor at the foot of the bed with the astronomy book in his lap. The blanket and pillow have been returned to their rightful place. He puts away his phone.

"I'll go get the kid, can you finish up honeybear?"

Rhodey rolls his eyes and slips into his newly empty place behind the counter.

Tony knocks on the bedroom door and says, "Peter? Kiddo? It's me, can I come in?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

He decides on his approach the moment he opens the door and spots the young boy sitting on the
floor with his own eyes.

"How are you feeling? Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark, thank you."

Peter's face is still pale; he needs nutrients. He needs more sleep. He needs a home that isn't a laboratory. He needs someone to listen, whether or not he'll talk.

Tony closes the door behind himself and takes a seat on the floor beside the boy. His back is going to hate him for it later, he knows it. One of his legs stretches out and he pulls the other one to his chest for his arm to rest on. He pokes the open page, depicting the Libra constellation.

"Learning a lot?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

He reaches out gently and grabs the book's front cover and closes it. He takes it out of the kid's obedient hands and sets it to his side.

"Alright, kid, we're talking. First, let's start from scratch. You don't need to call me Mr. Stark all the time. I'm sure you grew up being told you had to go around calling people 'sir' whenever you addressed them, but you don't need to do that here. Not to me and not to anyone else. I'm sure a lot of this is new and confusing for you, but I know you're smart and you'll catch on quick."

Peter's hands wrap around his ankles and he nods once.

"Good. Now tell me, what's your earliest memory? Doesn't matter what or how good or bad it is; I wanna hear it."

He frowns in thought. Tony wonders if he's been understood as the silence stretches on, but eventually the boy's lips part.

"I think..." His eyes flicker. Tony knows he's getting a lie, but he's okay with that. "Dr. Ortiz gave me a book about horses. It was a lot of fun to read. It would have been nice to read it again."

"What happened to it?"

"Oh, well... I was bad, so they took it away."

"I see. And why were you with the Fénix group? How'd you end up there?"

"I was always there," he says with a shrug. "They wanted me to fight, but I don't want to. I don't like fighting."

"Did they want you fighting like Queen Cobra?" He asks.

Peter nods once.

"Why didn't you want to fight? Did you not want to protect Dr. Ortiz?"

"I don't like fighting. I don't want to hurt people. I won't hurt anyone."

Tony's learned, by this point, that wording is important.

"I won't ask you to hurt anyone, Peter. I don't want anything from you, I don't expect anything from
you. I also don't expect you to trust me, and that's fine, but I want you to know I only have your best interest at heart. It's fine if you don't believe that now, but maybe eventually you will."

Peter stares at him, brown eyes wide and steady.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about what they did to you. Do you have any idea what's going to happen to you going forward? What... what you want to happen to you?" Tony meets his gaze and waits for an answer.

"I don't know... am I staying here with you for research?"

"No, Peter, no research. We're going to find you a home, a proper one. With parents and maybe a dog or something. And the country's best therapist. That's... that'll be in a bit though. For now, you'll be staying with me. How do you feel about that?"

"I feel happy about that," the boy admits. "You're nice."

Tony chuckles, "That's some high praise. I'll add it to my resumé." His joke is lost in the kid's blank face and he moves on, "Do you want to talk about what happened over there? Anything at all; good or bad."

"... Your pasta is better."

When they return to the kitchen, Peter changed into a cotton t-shirt and sweatpants (Tony had given him choices, but he clearly preferred the comfortable clothing), the Avengers greet him kindly.

"I'm checking in with Shield, see if they found anything else on site or if any of the doctors are giving up any info," Natasha takes up their documents and heads out with Clint. Steve excuses himself for training shortly after.

Peter eats. A lot. Tony drinks his coffee and watches him.

"Good morning, Peter. How are you feeling today?" Bruce asks.

"I feel good," he responds in between bites of food.

"Anything to worry about? Dizziness, nausea, indigestion?"

"He's not a Pepto Bismol commercial," Tony says. "But answer the nice doctor, kiddo."

"I feel good," he repeats.

"Okay, let me know if there are any changes. I did bring these up for you though, just to help out." He pulls out two small bottles out of his hoodie pockets. "Iron and Vitamin D. These are some of the more common deficiencies and judging by your symptoms could lend a hand. One of each every morning."

The boy's eyeing him warily and he's obvious with his motions so he knows there's no ill intention. Bruce opens the two bottles and clearly pierces through the protective layer. He hands him one of each and Tony gets him a glass of water. He also places the two bottles down by his arm so he can read over their labels.

Peter stares at the two pills in his hands. His voice is hesitant as he asks, "What's a vitamin?"

"They're organic compounds that your body needs to function. Your body will absorb most of them
through food, and sometimes from outside sources such as sunlight in the case of Vitamin D. Once your diet is normalized, and you're getting regular doses of vegetables and meat and dairy, you won't need these."

He places the two pills on his tongue and swallows them down with water. A bit more confident with his first question being answered without rebuttal, he asks next, "What happens if you don't eat those things?"

"You'll experience a deficiency which can cause all sorts of health problems. Let's take Vitamin D, for example. It largely comes from sunlight, and I imagine growing where you did you're below where you should be. This can cause rickets, which is a softening of the bones. A CPC would help diagnose this, but you haven't mentioned any pain and you're still tall for your weight, which suggests it hasn't caused any stunted growth. Iron, on the other hand, is a mineral, not a vitamin. And it lives in your red blood cells..." He pauses to look around, uncertain if he should keep talking.

Peter's staring at him with curious eyes and he finishes.

"You get Iron mainly from red meat and shellfish. If you don't get enough in your diet, you risk becoming anemic. Which causes fatigue and drowsiness and weakness. If you've ever found that you're constantly tired and sluggish, this is likely the cause. I've got a great textbook I can give you if you're interested in learning more."

"Yes, please!"

"Alright, before you turn the kid into some sort of biology nerd, I've got homework for him."

"What's homework?"

"Let's head down to my lab and I'll show you."

"I'll clean up and get some work done. Might join you later," Rhodey chimes in. He takes Peter's empty plate and sets it in the sink with the numerous others from their group breakfast.

Tony and Bruce take Peter down to the lab. He's sure to explain, "It's not a lab-lab. I'm an engineer, I use my lab to build things. Nothing medical. It's kind of my home base, a lot more cozy than our floor. You'll love the robots."

Peter follows behind them through the elevator doors.

"Wow!"

"Welcome to my personal lab, home of genius. And Dum-E." The robot approaches and beeps as its name is called.

Peter looks around in wonder. His latest iteration of the Iron Man suit is hung in the center of the room for him to work on modifications, the walls are lined with older formats and important bits of weaponry he keeps on hand for the Avengers. There's a long desk to one side covered in blueprints and another with a built-in computer to display his holograms. There are tools of varying sizes spread around and the floor is perpetually stained with motor oil.

He slowly approaches Dum-E. He looks back at Tony for a reaction, but he only smiles in encouragement. His hand reaches out and he gently touches the robot's metal arm.

"Hello," he says.
The robot beeps in response.

"He can understand me?" Peter seems to think this is the coolest thing ever, judging by the wide smile on his lips.

"When he wants to," Tony says with a returning smile. He gestures for Peter to follow, "Come on, I've got some stuff for you."

He has him sit by the desk and grabs a stack of paper from his printer. He sets it across from him with a pencil.

"This is some homework for ya', kiddie. You're obviously pretty smart, not quite an eidetic memory but close to it, I think, but I need to test you on more... 'regular' knowledge. Stuff you'd learn in school. It's great you know all those constellations, but if we're gonna get you into school, we need to know what to work on. When did you learn how to read?"

"That's not something most people can recall, Tony," Bruce says. "He was likely pretty young."

Peter nods, "I don't remember. I always could read. No. I could always read."

"I see. Did you have any teachers at any point? Someone who sat you down and showed you different things, like grammar and math and history?"

"For some things. Not those things."

"Like what?"

"How to hit things. How to load a gun. Where to find the major ar... artill..."

"Arteries?" Bruce ventures a guess.

"Yes, those. Carotid," he points to his neck, "Aorta," the center of his chest, "Axillary," his left armpit, "Posterior tibial," his calf. He doesn't struggle with the pronunciations.

"Right. Nothing useful for a kid then. Let's see how much you've managed to put together on your own. Here are some first-grade level math problems, simple additions and subtractions, as well as some word association and spelling questions. I had Jarvis compile various grade level work to see where you fall and what you need to work on to be on the right path for school. We don't know your age yet, but we think you might be seven or eight years old. So fill this out and let me know how it goes. If you don't understand something, me and Brucie are around, and if you finish, let us know."

"Yes, sir." He catches Peter bite his lower lip in distress at the slip. The skin turns white from the pressure of it and he smiles to reassure him. His teeth drawback and he returns it slowly.

"Do you know what addition and subtraction are?" Bruce asks.

"I..." Peter hesitates and Bruce reaches out to the first page. There's a series of two-digit equations. He points to the 'plus' sign between the two numbers, "Take this first one. The plus between the two numbers means you add them together. So - addition. Two plus three means you're adding two and three together."

"Five?" Peter supplies.

"You got it, kiddo. And the one below that is a minus, so you remove the second number from the
first. For example, if you have seven apples and you take away three of them, you're left with..." Tony instructs next.

"Four?"

"Exactly. Go on and see how far you can get on your own."

Peter takes up the pencil in his right hand, grasped between his thumb and index and pressed against his palm. It's similar to how the murderer in a horror movie holds their butcher knife, except a lot less threatening. He stares at his own hand and carefully maneuvers the pen to his fingertips using his other hand. Next, he pulls the papers to himself and obediently starts with the first question.

Tony watches him for a minute and then heads to his desk with Bruce to work on their own projects. He keeps him in his sights out of the corner of his eye as he brings up some holograms.

He's used to multitasking and can work and watch Peter at the same time. He sees him finish the first couple of pages easily enough; those are the math ones. The language ones shouldn't cause him too many issues either. His vocabulary is surely better than a typical first grader with how much he reads. Jarvis has more set aside, things relating to history and geography. American schools tend to teach the basics like the names of the different states and who was the first president, and he has a feeling that's where Peter will struggle most.

A good twenty minutes later, Peter sets the pen down and watches the two men as they work.

Tony spots the wonder in his eyes and waits to see if Peter will say anything or if he'll simply sit there until addressed.

He doesn't say anything.

Bruce is only helping Tony on a defibrillator feature he wants to add into his suit and when he gets a call from a fellow doctor for a consultation on a difficult case, he's not tied down by this particular project.

"I'm going to head to my lab to go over these documents. You good with...?" He gestures vaguely to Peter, who's looking at the suit currently hanging in the center of the room.

"I think I've got this handled."

Bruce gathers his things and stops by Peter on his way out of the room, "I have to take care of some things. Don't worry if Tony sets something on fire, that's kind of normal around here."

Peter nods and smiles.

After Bruce is gone and the room has somehow grown quieter, Tony sets down his tools and walks up to Peter. He pulls the papers to himself to review them.

"How'd you find it? Easy, hard, a bit of both?"

He shrugs. It's not an answer.

The math is perfect, the numbers are oddly squiggled but are otherwise correct. There were some exercises to link words to their definitions and then writing out words based on brief definitions which are all correct too. His spelling is accurate, but the shapes are all weird.
"Has it been a while since you've last written?"

Peter stares at his own writing, and hesitantly responds, "I've never written before. Is it that bad?"

Tony's a little surprised by this. It's been a long (long) time since he'd learned to read and write, that he's not at all familiar with the process and how difficult it is. He smiles, "Not at all, kiddo. Great job on this, A+. What do you say to some more?"

"Whatever you want, Mr. Stark."

Tony decides that's baggage for later. At this point, there's a lot of baggage for later.

He goes to the printer to retrieve more homework. This time, he sits beside Peter as he goes over more additions and subtractions, double-digit numbers this time. He gets through those easily and Tony's unsurprised by his first question.

"What's the United States?"

"That's the country we live in."

"What's a country?" After he's asked the question, he bites down on his lower lip and Tony can tell there's regret.

Tony wonders how stifled he must have felt in that laboratory, rebuffed for asking questions and showing curiousity.

"Let me show you." Tony stands and gestures for Peter to follow. He activates a hologram of the earth on top of the next desk over. It hovers in front of them in vibrant blue and green. Peter's barely tall enough to see the top of the desk, but the spinning earth is high enough he can see it over its edge. Tony spreads his arms and it grows even bigger.

Much as he'd done to the hologram off his phone in the jet the day before, he uses his finger to move the image, this time rotating it. He pokes at a specific spot and says, "This is the United States of America. Jarvis, add country lines."

Red lines flare out over the image to show the various borders.

"The planet is separated into different countries - don't ask me why, that's shit you'll learn later. We're here right now," their location blips, "In New York. That's a state. There are fifty of them, and then Washington D.C and Puerto Rico are like honorary states. Our country's a little weird."

"Oh. Okay. Is the blue stuff water?"

"That it is."

He points out other countries, naming them and giving random facts gained from his lifetime of travel. He highlights the British Isles at one point and says, "This is where those Border Collies come from." Peter's familiar with the names of some of the countries, though is utterly fascinated by the visuals Tony gives him.

It's Jarvis that interrupts them, a couple of hours later to remind them to eat lunch.

Tony's genuinely bewildered by the loss of time. He's used to it, 7 pm often becomes 4 am in what feels like minutes, but it doesn't typically happen in the presence of others. It's always as he sits with his hands in metal and eyes fixed on his actions and music blaring around him.
All he's done is talk. His throat is a little sore, but he keeps on because Peter's looking at him like he has the answers to all of life's questions. And when he can't answer, Jarvis will. (Because why would Tony know anything about Silverback Gorillas? The kid has a lot of random trivia in that brain.)

He's not used to people having smart questions stemmed from genuine curiosity. He's even less used to people taking advantage of him having answers, or being able to get them: it's always, 'Tony do this' because they don't care enough to learn themselves. That's why he loves Pepper, who is 99 percent self-reliant but has never hesitated to ask a question that would better her in her responsibilities. Or Rhodey, of course, who's never once looked at him and seen Howard Stark.

"Looks like it's time for more food, kiddo. If you start getting me on that three meals a day bullshit, I'm making you work down here with me to recoup the hours I'm losing." He winks and smiles to soften the words, because the jokes are second nature to him and he can't stop them, but is also fully aware Peter's not used to that kind of sass.

Peter's head tilts a bit and he frowns, "Why am I eating again? Are we doing tests?"

"No, no tests," Tony reassures him, "This is the amount of food that you should have been eating. At least, that's what the internet says. I'm no expert when it comes to the proper way to take care of a human body. I know in comparison it probably seems like a lot, but you'll get used to it. But don't eat more than you need to, okay? I don't want you getting sick."

"It's okay, Mr. Stark. I know how much to eat to not throw up."

"Kind of wish I didn't know that," Tony mumbles to himself. He deactivates the hologram and heads to the elevator, gesturing for Peter to follow, "Come on, Pete. Lunch awaits."

Rhodey's made them a salad, as lame as that is. Tony pretends to enjoy it so that Peter will eat it. Though the way he digs in suggests he doesn't need to be persuaded to eat his fruits and veggies. There's chicken in it too, as they desperately need to get meat into this kid.

"Thanks, Sugar Bear." People don't normally cook for him and he knows it's only because he has a child in his care that Rhodey's being this kind (he stopped trying to get Tony to eat like a normal person about... 15 years ago?).

Once Peter's pulled himself up to the island to eat, nobody else has joined them so far, Tony takes his plate and goes to the other room to make a couple of quick calls.

"I'll be right back," he tells Peter who's watching him attentively.

He really needs to talk to Sam about what is normal dependence and what's co-dependency.

"Okay," because Peter never says anything that isn't affirmative.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello, you beautiful people!

I'm genuinely really surprised by the positive feedback this story has gotten so far! I hope it doesn't disappoint as we go on. It means a lot that everyone seems to understand where I'm going with this story, with the Tony-Peter dynamic slowly changing and progressing.

I am a lover of all things fluff, but it's always seemed a bit much for me that Tony sees this kid and instantly wants to keep him. From the movies, it's clear he has a good approach to kids (generally) and in my mind I can see him being good with Peter, but not necessarily believing that he's what's best for him right off the bat.

I hope that I can make the relationship develop believably as we go on, and that you all continue to read and let me know your thoughts!

Now, please enjoy the next part :)

PS: I added the Pepperony tag, because that hadn't been my intention but, well... they're too cute. This is pre-relationship though.

He calls Pepper first, of course.

"You're never going to believe what's happened," is probably not the best way to start.

"What did you do this time?"

"So there's this kid-"

"Tell me it's not yours. Dear god, tell me it's not yours."

"He's not mine, Pep, I promise. You remember the Fénix group? When we cleared out their base that's where we found him. He was some sort of experiment, I think? He hasn't told us a lot yet. He's going to be staying here for a little while. I wanted to give you the heads up before you got back."

"How old is he?"

"We don't know and he doesn't know either. He grew up in a lab and he knows nothing about who he is. We think he's seven or eight, going off his weight and height."

"How long do you plan to keep this kid around?"

"Shields working their way through their base, so when that's done and they've lost interest, then I'll send him off to CPS. The kid is... he's pretty smart. I don't want Shield getting to him."

"Is he like that woman? Because if he is, then maybe it's best for him to go to Shield. There's that
school, isn't there? For special people?"

She's talking about Xavier's school for the quote-unquote 'gifted'. He'd homeschool Peter for the next decade before letting him end up in that place. He doesn't say that, though.

"He's not enhanced in any way," he says, "Just a regular, traumatized kid. I just don't want Shield assuming he knows things he doesn't, he's gone through enough without them trying to get things out of him he can't give them."

"If you think it's what's best then I believe you, Tony. Did you get food and clothes and toys and all that?"

"Way ahead of you. I sent Happy out yesterday to get some stuff for him. Except for toys. I had him doing homework all morning and had Jarvis recite several documentaries and he seemed perfectly entertained, so I've got a bonafide nerd on my hands."

"Takes one to know one, I guess," Pepper teases. "Just..." She's hesitant and Tony knows in the pit of his stomach what she's going to say, "Don't grow attached, okay? I know that you know he isn't a pet; you can't keep him around because he's smart and likes homework. He needs a family, and family's a big role to fill for a child."

He understands, he does, he's not a father. Peter needs parents, needs a normal home with a white picket fence and only two floors and no need for bodyguards. The attachment part, well, that can't be helped.

"I know, Pep. I just want to make sure that whoever he ends up with is suitable. That's not unreasonable. Not everyone knows what to do with a genius kid. He taught himself to write, Pepper. Today."

"I don't want you making this harder on yourself, that's all. He sounds like a brilliant kid; I have no doubt you were the same way when you were his age, and we'll make sure he ends up in the best hands, okay?"

"Of course." Though she had turned his words back to him, he appreciates the reassurance. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. And I look forward to meeting him."

"I named him Peter, by the way. He, uh, he didn't have a name, so I gave him one. They called him Defect. I wasn't going to call him that."

"That's... horrible," she says it more to herself and Tony doesn't say anything. "I will see you and Peter tomorrow."

He doesn't tell her that he named the kid after her because he knows that she's figured it out. She's not a genius the way he is, but god damn is she smart when it comes to reading between the lines and understanding human beings and taking charge when everyone else is left speechless.

She fills the parts of him he didn't know were empty before she came along.

"See you," he ends the call and moves on to the next.

Which is Natasha.

"What's up?" He'd gotten a text from her earlier telling him to contact her, but it hadn't been
important enough for her to make her way to him and he hadn't responded until he had the time.

"The brat's killswitch was Fénix's death sentence. Shield can't find anything other than what we already got, which is basically nothing. They asked for some experts and Clint and I are on the way to see if we can find anything that might give us some info. Don't let the kid kill you in the meantime, I'd really hate having to tell Pepper and Rhodey that I told you so."

Tony rolls his eyes, "I assume you're taking my jet?"

"Yes."

"Alright, text me if you have any info."

"Sure."

She's upset, probably insulted even that he's willing to trust this child and not her, and he can't blame her. She knows the worst of human beings; the scum and garbage that makes up the human race. The ones she's shot in her pre-teen years without a second thought. He doesn't know her experiences, has never had to live them the way she has, but he's willing to take this risk.

He returns to the kitchen and finishes his food next to the kid's second helping of salad.

"The squirt says things are going well with the homework," Rhodey says.

"He'll be ready for school in no time. What do you think, Pete? Do you want to go to school?"

Tony sees that moment of hesitation, but ultimately he answers. It's easier to discover comfort when it's just the two of them, but Peter still hasn't spent a lot of time with Rhodey and he doesn't want to step out of place by asking questions.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stark, but what's school?"

"That's where people go to learn things," Tony explains, "Like the things I was showing you in the lab."

"Oh. Will I learn how to make IED's at school? Dr. Ortiz said I would learn, but then I made him mad and he never showed me. He said there's lots of parts that work together and I want to know how to do it. He said it would be fun. He also said learning how to shoot an M24 sniper rifle would be fun, but I didn't like that a lot."

"Are you... are you talking about explosives?" Rhodey asks. He and Tony share a look. At this point, neither of them are surprised by the things that come out of his mouth.

"Yes. IED... In-ing... Um... Im-... Something Explosive Device. I don't remember what the 'I' stands for. I'm sorry."

"It's okay not to remember everything, Peter," Tony reassures him. "But no, you won't be learning anything about explosives in school. It's more along the lines of math and chemistry and history. We can revisit the explosive thing when you're older. A lot older."

"Okay."

They spend the rest of lunch going over the concept of school and the different grades, from kindergarten to college. Peter's utterly fascinated by the concept of going somewhere to be taught things (although simply going places is foreign to him) and seems about ready to go right then and
"There will be other kids your age too, so you'll be able to make friends."

Peter's less excited about that.

Lots of people in the lab would use the word 'friend', but Peter was always fairly certain they were using the word wrong.

"We're going to be very good friends," a new doctor had said as he was placing electrode pads on his chest. Then the machine by the bed whirred to life and he started convulsing. He doesn't remember much after that, but he remembers that he didn't want to be friends.

He doesn't want any friends. He doesn't say that out loud.

Rhodey takes their plates and Tony doesn't hesitate before taking Peter back down to the lab. He doesn't know what he's meant to do with him, but so far he's been entertained and he plans to play on that until he can sense boredom.

They return to the previously forgotten homework and go over the questions one at a time. Tony sets his phone down on the desk and Jarvis will bring up corresponding images or videos to help them.

(What the fuck is a primary or secondary colour?)

He remembers getting drunk in college with Rhodey and watching 'Are you Smarter than a Fifth Grader' and feeling oddly discomfited that apparently, he wasn't smarter than a fifth grader because he didn't know where to find Plymouth Rock or who won the election in 1824.

He's created a miniature arc reactor and has dozens of world-renown revolutionary accomplishments and several doctorates under his belt, he doesn't need to know that red, blue, and yellow are primary colours. He is going to delete that search history from Jarvis' database later, just because.

"Why do people want to put all the colours together?"

"Well, we make all these different colours so that things look nice. It's more art related, but we do it with everything. Clothes and furniture and such. Humans are a very self-centered people and we love to look good."

"Oh. Like the funny picture on your shirt?"

Tony laughs and nods, "Exactly. Clothes will also often have logos on them, relating to different things. This is for a band I like."

That brings them into a conversation about music because apparently the boy's never heard a song in his life. Jarvis starts playing Pink Floyd and then they bypass the AC/DC (as that might not be the best musical introduction for a child) and go to Mozart. Then there's instruments and their functions and suddenly Tony's explaining the musical scale and the homework still isn't complete by the time Rhodey calls them in for dinner.

"Why is Mr. Rhodey giving us so much food? Are you sure there's no tests?"

Tony stands and sets aside their work, "I'm very sure there are no tests. What kind of tests are you even talking about?"
Peter's lips part and Tony thinks he might actually get an answer for once, but all that escapes is, "All sorts."

"Right."

Rhodey's made macaroni and incorporated some ground beef and chopped veggies.

"Haven't had this many home cooked meals in ages," Tony comments, taking his plate and sitting next to Peter. Rhodey sits on his other side.

"Don't get used to it. I'm leaving tomorrow and Pepper's taking my place and we both know how lousy she is in a kitchen. Don't tell her I said that."

"I'd never do that to you, Platypus."

Tony spots Peter's hand reaching out for him and then it falls back to his side. He looks at him and prompts, "What's up, kiddie?"

Peter shuffles and eventually asks what he wants to know, "Who's Pepper?"

"Oh, of course! I forgot I never told you about her. She was my assistant until she got too good for me and became CEO of Stark Industries."

"You promoted her," Rhodey points out.

"Because she was too good for me. She's doing some meetings, but she'll be back tomorrow and that's when you'll meet her."

Peter nods his understanding and returns to his food.

"Jarvis, can you see if Bruce wants to join us? He's been on that assignment for ages."

"Yes, sir." Shortly he returns with, "Doctor Banner says thank you for the invitation, but he is still needed for this case."

"Alright, thanks."

When they finish dinner, Rhodey's left with cleaning and this time Tony takes Peter to the living room. It's been a long day, he decides, and it's about time he shows Peter one of the best things about humanity; their creativity and imagination and technological advances. Also known as - tv shows and movies. Jarvis gives him some suggestions of the best child-friendly movies and he turns one on.

"Take a seat, Pete." He sits down himself and pats the spot beside him. "I'm going to show you what the good half of humanity has to show you."

Peter sits down and is staring at Tony expectantly.

In all honesty, it's weird. He's never had anyone look at him this way, like he has answers to everything and his word is law. Is this healthy? Probably not.

"We're going to watch a couple of movies."

He has to take a minute to explain movies, and then 'The Incredibles' is playing. He insisted that they choose a movie with minimal sadness (he isn't going to show this kid 'The Lion King', because he is definitely intelligent enough to understand everything that's going on.)
The boy doesn't stop talking.

It's not right off the bat, but eventually...

"Is this the art thing, because of all the colours?"

"Are you like them? Because you have the robot clothes."

"Do you have kids? Are they also robots?"

It's an experience.

It's as if he knows he shouldn't talk, but he can't help himself. Tony doesn't want him to be scared; his eyes will widen sometimes after a question as if he's stepped over some imagined boundary, and he'll answer as gently as he can. He normally gets annoyed when people talk over movies, but in this instance, he knows his priorities.

"That's exactly right. Making movies requires an artistic approach to make it more inviting and pleasing to the eye."

"The Avengers are all superheroes, some of us are like these guys who have super-human powers, but I don't, so I made my suit to help people."

"No, I don't have any kids, but if I did there's no way I'd be giving them an Iron Man suit."

They watch two movies before Tony decides it's time for Peter to get some sleep. He turns off the television and coaxes the wide-eyed child off the sofa.

"Alright, time for bed. The movies will wait until you've had some rest. Up and at 'em."

He'd started by sitting rigidly cross-legged in the furthest corner, but now he stretches himself out of the little ball he'd curled into, head resting on the armrest. Tony guides him to his bedroom but makes a stop in the rarely used dining room to grab a chair first.

Peter watches him curiously as he carries it to the bedroom. He sets it in the corner and climbs on it carefully.

"What are you doing, Mr. Stark?"

"Getting rid of this..." Tony reaches up to the camera that's set in the wall. He pulls a portable screwdriver out of his pocket and disconnects it. The camera itself is very small and it's surprising that Peter had been able to see it in the first place. "I got the impression you aren't really fond of it, which I understand. I don't usually keep these in occupied rooms anyway."

That's not footage he wants on hand.

He steps off the chair and walks over to Peter. He pats his shoulder, feeling a little bit awkward. He'd spent his day with this kid, but there's still a gap there he doesn't know how to cross.

That's not what he needs to be focused on, but for some reason, it feels important.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I honestly don't even know what to say except that the wonderful feedback I've received is seriously amazing and is pushing me to keep on with this story. I'm really enjoying writing this and knowing people are excited to read it is crazy to me.

I hope you enjoy this next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His bedroom is dark. He blinks and sees nothing; he's used to waking up at all hours for all sorts of reasons. Bathroom breaks, nightmares, water breaks, and...

"Sir?"

Jarvis.

"Wha-?" he mumbles into his pillow, closing his eyes and turning to his other side.

"There has been a recent update on Queen Cobra, sir. Agent Romanoff indicated it was highly important."

He huffs and gestures vaguely to prompt his AI to keep talking.

"As of 2:38 am Eastern Standard Time, Queen Cobra escaped the transport vehicle taking her to the Raft."

That got his attention. He rolls onto his back and frowns at the ceiling, "Wait, wait. She was supposed to be at the Raft two weeks ago."

"Agent Romanoff says that she was in a Shield holding cell for interrogation up until yesterday evening. After locating the Fénix base, they decided they no longer needed her and requested to have her moved."

"... Did they get any info off her?"

"No, sir."

He's known Peter less than two days, but if his behaviour so far is any indication to this woman's upbringing, this isn't surprising whatsoever.

"Do they want me doing anything about this, or is this just a heads up?"

"Shield has already sent operatives to capture her. They will ask for your assistance should they fail."

"Cool. I'm going back to bed. Wake me for seven."

"Yes, sir."
He closes his eyes, intending to go back to sleep, but... Queen Cobra was easily defeated when faced with the full front of the Avengers. She's going to put up quite a fight for Shield Agents, no matter how well trained. They're still working on an antidote to her poison; at this point, it has a one hundred percent mortality rate.

He slips out of bed knowing he isn't going to get any more sleep and heads down to his lab. He gets into their database to find information on who they're sending and how well prepared they are (or aren't, in truth). They lost her somewhere in Idaho and so far don't have any leads. He has Jarvis search surveillance cameras for any signs of her.

When they'd fought her, she'd been wearing sandy shorts and a black tank top, giving her easy movement and flexibility. There was no mask, no bother to hide an identity they couldn't trace back. For all they know, maybe she'd been grown in that lab too.

Knowing now what he knows, he looks back on old footage and wonders.

"The phoenix will set the world on fire as it rises from its ashes..."

"Come and get me, posh boy, show me what a man made of metal can do against the queen of the earth."

"Success comes from trying and failing, not from throwing money at your problems until they go away."

Queen Cobra was interesting, to say the least. There was something sinister and awful about the way she would attack regardless of injuries left behind and how she would set things on fire to catch attention. She was destructive in a way the world hadn't see before. Like someone from a movie come out to haunt their dreams.

She was a one-woman war. They'd fought that battle and won, but now there's the knowledge of where she'd come from.

Was she once like Peter, shy and afraid of what the world could throw at her? What if she only fought because that's what she'd been taught her whole life?

"Casualties are to be expected. The knights will always protect their king, but loyalty is overrated, don't you think?"

He doesn't see Peter in her, though. Her smiles are dark and humourless. Her eyes are narrowed. Her muscles are toned from years of exercise and good eating.

They aren't the same but they came from the same place. Where is the line? Where did that difference come from?

"Sir?" Jarvis breaks him out of his musings.

"Yeah?"

"Dr. Banner has asked if you would be joining them for breakfast."

"Breakfast?" He asks. He pauses the video clip he's watching and looks at the nearest clock. Fuck. It's past nine o'clock.

"Yes, sir. Dr. Banner has made some breakfast for himself and Peter."
"Shit. Okay. Tell him I'll be up in a minute." He sets aside some of his things and stops to ask, "Did Peter come out of his room on his own?"

"No, sir. Dr. Banner invited him out fifteen minutes ago. He has since changed and joined him in the kitchen."

This is why he doesn't have kids. This is why he doesn't have anyone. He's shit at making them priorities, shit at doing anything other than work.

He gets to the kitchen a couple of minutes later. Bruce has made more eggs and toast, a good source of protein that will fill him up. Peter's sitting on a stool eating away happily in a t-shirt with a cat on it and the same sweatpants as the day before. Bruce gives him a look and he knows what it means.

He clears his throat, "Sorry for being late. I was looking into something." He doesn't mention Queen Cobra. He's not sure how Peter will react to it.

Peter doesn't appear bothered by his absence, but glances at him with shining eyes once he steps into the room.

He doesn't deserve that look. Even less that admiration.

"Peter has a healthy appetite, which is very good." Bruce smiles at the boy, and his cheeks flush warmly in response and he doesn't meet his gaze.

Tony takes a seat next to him and Bruce hands him his own plate. Next to it is a cup of coffee, which is mostly what he's craving at this hour.

"Thanks, Brucie."

"Mhm." He's not quite forgiven for his absence, it seems.

As they're eating, his phone pings and he checks the recent text. There are only three people who trigger a sound; Rhodey, Pepper, and Happy. He's more than happy to ignore everyone else.

It's Pepper, advising she'll arrive shortly.

"The boss is going to be here soon, are you ready to meet her?"

Peter nods and continues on with his food.

The woman he'd been named after shows up twenty minutes later. They're still all in the kitchen. Bruce has cleared the dishes and they've all finished eating. Tony and Bruce are going over the things Tony wants to add to his suit for medical purposes when Jarvis notifies them that she's on her way up.

She's as beautiful as the last time he'd seen her. She's in a black blazer and pencil skirt, heels clicking against his tiled floors. She has a small purse slung over her shoulder to carry her phone and keys.

"Hi, Tony. Hi, Bruce. And you must be Peter, it's nice to meet you. I'm Pepper." She walks over to him and holds out her hand.

He doesn't respond, Tony guesses from not knowing what's expected of him, and her hand falls back to her side. She's still smiling and smoothly moves on as is her expertise.
"I've heard you'll be staying here for a few days. I'm looking forward to spending some time with you. What's the plan for today, Tony?"

"Would you be surprised if I said I didn't have one?"

"Not at all." She shakes her head, "Luckily for you, I spoke to Bruce this morning and we came up with some ideas. I'd like to steal you away from these two for a few hours so we can get to know each other. What do you think about that, Peter?"

Peter glances at Tony first, then meets her gaze and quietly says, "Yes, ma'am." That's not an answer to her question, but she accepts it.

"Perfect. I'll get into something a bit more casual and I'll meet you back here. You boys go do things." She shoots Peter a warm smile and leaves the room to get changed. Though she doesn't live at the Tower, she's learned to keep some clothes in all her work locations. Dum-E is a bit of a loose cannon with that fire extinguisher and she's been called into enough late-night last-minute press conferences for some reason or other and has no intention of being seen in the same outfit she'd been wearing that morning.

Tony looks at Bruce and raises a questioning brow. Bruce ignores the look and tells Peter, "We're going to go down to the lab to work on some things, we'll be leaving you in Pepper's capable hands. If you need anything, you can feel free to ask Pepper or Jarvis and they'll make it happen."

Peter nods once.

Bruce leads Tony away from the quiet boy sitting too-still on a stool. He brings him down to the lab and they settle in front of their work-in-progress. He starts pulling up their documents on a hologram next to the suit resting on the desk and Tony speaks into the silence because he isn't patient enough to wait for Bruce to get on with it.

"So I'm late for breakfast once and I get relieved from my babysitting duties? Harsh, doc." He's trying to make it sound like a joke, but Bruce knows enough about Tony's insecurities to know he believes those words.

"Of course not. It's clear that Peter's more comfortable with you than he is with me or Rhodey, but he hasn't opened up to you as much as we'd like. There's still so much we don't know about what happened to him. I was thinking that he might open up better to a woman instead. Dr. Ortiz seemed to be his primary... I don't like the word, but guardian fits. He was the only adult Peter appeared close to, based off what I've heard. So maybe being surrounded by more doctors or adult men is making it difficult for him to get comfortable. Pepper is different enough to what he's grown up with and maybe she'll get through to him."

Peter has referenced other people, but Dr. Ortiz is the only one he's named specifically.

"Suppose that makes sense. What's the plan?"

"Not sure. I know she wanted to arrange a picnic of sorts for lunch."

"She knows he hasn't been outside yet, right?"

"Yes, Tony. I gave her a good rundown of everything we know so far; she knows what to do."

Bruce convinces him to get to work, although it's clear his mind is elsewhere.

He trusts Pepper. Implicitly. He can't figure out why he's so concerned. Is Peter scared? What is he
thinking about being left with a woman he doesn't know? He doesn't really know any of them, but that's beside the point.

Rhodey pops in before he leaves for Washington.

"Keep me posted on what happens with the kid." They're all invested now.

"I will."

He's glad Rhodey had waited for Pepper to be back because, between him and Bruce, they need a neutral third party to keep an eye on things. He'll never admit that out loud, of course.

A few hours later, nearing 2 in the afternoon, Jarvis relays her message to have them join her in the kitchen.

She's left Peter in the living room with a movie, she's chosen one of her childhood favourites *The Aristocats*, and joins up with Bruce and Tony around the island in the center of the kitchen. She's changed into jogging pants and a plain t-shirt, matching up with everyone else's level of casualness.

"How'd it go?" Tony asks her before she can even fully sit down.

"It went... it went," she sighed softly, "Peter's great. He's a lovely boy, truly, but... he barely said a word to me the entire time. I made us some tea and we sat in the living room for a little while. I talked to him, told him about myself and tried to get him to talk back, but no luck. Then I had him help me make lunch, we made sandwiches and we put together some fruits and juice to take up to the roof. I thought he might like some fresh air. We put down a blanket and we sat down and ate and still nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

She shakes her head, "Nothing. He'd say please and thank you, I've never been called ma'am so many times in one day, but there wasn't anything concrete."

Tony crosses his arms on the counter and stares ahead lost in thought. He'd thought Bruce was onto something with his theory that Pepper could get through to Peter, but it seems he wouldn't lower his defenses for her either.

There's something in that brain of his he won't talk about; the things they've done to him, the trauma he's experienced at their hands. Memories a child shouldn't have. At this point, it's time. He knows this, but it's no easier seeing that boy and not knowing what to do for him.

"I know you're busy enough as it is, but I want you to keep trying. You met him today, maybe it'll take time. I know you have the rest of the day off, you're free to go home, but tomorrow I can cover your afternoon meetings for you to stay with him instead."

"I'll stay the rest of the day, Tony, that's no problem. We'll all have dinner and try to get him out of his shell together. And you're more than welcome to cover my meetings if you show up."

"I will, I will."

She hums softly and her smile is amused.

Tony excuses himself and steps out of the kitchen to check on Peter. He's sitting on the couch, legs crossed and eyes fixed on the television. He turns his head towards him as he enters the room.
"Hey, kiddo."

"Hi, Mr. Stark."

He approaches slowly and takes a seat on the far end of the couch. Peter still isn't wearing shoes or socks; he can see the soles are dirty from walking on the roof. He wonders if Pepper had bothered to ask him to put something on to protect his feet. He's not sure why he's fixated on this, but a part of him wants this kid to wear some fucking socks already.

It can't be healthy to go without this long, right? He should ask Bruce.

"How are you doing, Pete? How are you feeling?"

Peter frowns, appearing to be thinking over the question. Or maybe confused by it.

"I'm feeling good?"

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

"I... I don't know...?" That's definitely confusion.

"I... I don't know...?" That's definitely confusion.

"What I mean is, what's happened to make you feel good? Was it spending time with Pepper? She's a delight, I gotta say that so it's on record, but I want to know what things specifically that happened today made you feel good."

"I feel good because there's been no tests for a couple of days. Breaks are nice. When are we doing tests again?"

Tony can't fathom why he's asking. He's getting a good thing, why question it?

Peter wants to know how long until the bad things start again.

"We're not going to be doing any tests. Those people you were with were bad people; we're not going to put you through any of that ever again. You'll see that for yourself in no time. Did you enjoy your morning out with Pepper?"

"She's very nice."

"Would you like to spend more time with her?"

Peter doesn't respond. He does a half-shrug. Tony guesses he's scared to answer.

"Did something happen today to worry you? I know for a fact Pepper is nice and smart, I thought you two would get on really well. Did she say something to upset you? Sometimes she can be a bit blunt."

He shakes his head, "No, she's nice," he repeats, "but I..."

He continues after Tony nods to encourage him, "I don't understand." The admittance is soft.

"What do you mean?"

"I..." Peter looks down at his lap. His fingers play with the hem of his shirt. "I don't understand what's happening. What do you want from me?"

It hurts to hear these words. Tony slides over until he's next to Peter. He moves his arm
deliberately so that he can see him put it around his shoulders. He wants to press a kiss to his temple but refrains because he knows it'd be unwanted. Peter doesn't understand physical contact; he can't tell a pat on the shoulder from abuse.

"Peter, I know this is confusing for you. This is a huge change and you don't know who we are and we took you to this big place you don't know anything about. But that's why I want you asking questions - I don't know what you need. I know nothing about what you went through, I don't know what doesn't make sense to you. You have to talk to me, kid. What you just did, that's talking, and that's good."

He's hesitant to meet his gaze, but he does on his own.

"We don't want anything from you, Peter. I'll say that as often as you need for it to sink in. And it's okay that you don't understand. You've been sheltered your entire life, you don't know what's considered normal. But we'll get there."

"But what do you get out of me being here?"

Tony stares at the boy by his side. His hand reaches back and tucks into his soft curls. He smiles at the confused look on his face.

"I get nothing," he says honestly. "Or, you know what? I get an experience. I get to help a child who's been treated wrongly for years. I consider that a fair trade."

"That's not a lot."

"I think it is. Look. Do you think that the way you grew up is normal? Is that how Dr. Ortiz was raised? Or me?"

Peter stares at his lap, "No. I know it's not everyone. But Dr. Ortiz said I was special, that's why..."

"You're definitely a special kid, but not for the reasons he thought. He wanted something from you, but I don't. I want you to integrate into normal society, to be a normal boy. You've never had this, but I want you to."

"I don't know how to be normal," Peter admits quietly.

"To be fair, most of us don't."

This time, Peter laughs. It's soft and uncertain as if he hasn't had a lot of opportunities to laugh in his lifetime.

"Do you want to head down to the lab again? We can go over more school things. Or if you want, we can watch some more movies."

"Oh, um..." Peter glances at the television. The mother cat, Duchess, and her three kittens have just met the wild alley cat O'Malley after being abducted and then stranded. Tony's seen this movie once or twice; it's Pepper's go-to when she needs to decompress.

"We can finish this off first. I mean, we want to know if Duchess and the kittens make their way home, right?"

Peter nods and smiles, "Yes! It's really mean that Edgar took them away from the nice lady."

"People do terrible things for money," Tony says in agreement. He pulls back and adds, "I'll get us
something to drink and be back in a minute. Sit tight."

He returns to the kitchen and pours them both each a cup of orange juice. Bruce and Pepper are still there, sipping on freshly brewed coffee and talking about Peter. It seems he's all anyone has to talk about lately.

"We're going to watch some movies. Feel free to join us."

"Is he liking 'Aristocats'?" Pepper asks.

"Well, he's very emotionally invested in the safety of those cats, so I think he's into it."

"I'll meet you in a few minutes," she says.

"I think I'll leave this to you two and get some work done. What did you want to do for dinner, Tony? There are leftovers, but we might want to focus on getting him to eat some red meat. I think a beef patty with cooked vegetables is a good choice."

"I agree with whatever you say, Doc. Are you cooking?"

Bruce sighs but knows there's no better option, "Yeah, I'll be back up around five or six. See you guys later."

Tony returns to the living room with the juice. Peter's on one end of the sofa and he takes the other. He hands one cup to Peter and sets his own aside. As he'd done the evening before but without wasting time with worrying, Peter asks questions about what's happening on screen.

"Animals don't talk for real, right? My books never said, but..."

"No, they don't talk. They make different sounds. We can listen to some later."

"How are the baby cats all different colours when the mom cat is white? I read that gen... genetist give you certain traits from your mom and dad."

"Genetics is what you're going for, kiddo. And that's very true. But this is a cartoon, so they tend to take artistic freedom with their choices."

"Oh."

When Pepper joins them, she sits on the recliner next to the sofa to give Peter some space. He quiets down immediately.

Tony glances at him out of the corner of his eye and watches him watch the screen.

Well. That's a bit concerning.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed :)

I would love to know your thoughts!

PS: Aristocats is love.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter hardly speaks for the next few movies.

They go through 'Zootopia', 'Peter Pan', and 'Snow White' with hardly a few words between them. He drinks his juice and sits still while staring rigidly at the screen.

Later that night after he's sent him off to bed and Pepper's taken residence in one of the other guest rooms, Tony calls on Sam.

He hadn't been part of their initial mission, but he knows that either Steve or Clint has shared the details. He needs his unbiased expertize. Sam takes a seat in the living room and Tony seats himself next to him.

"What's up, Tony? I'm guessing this is about the kid?"

"Yeah. I'm concerned that he's getting dependent. Or co-dependent. However you say it." Tony goes on to explain how Peter will talk to him and ask him questions (there's still a layer of discomfort, but he still has the courage to do it), whereas, he'll hardly say a word to Pepper or Bruce or Rhodey. "I'm worried that since I was the first person to spend time with him, that he's latched on and he'll have trouble moving on when we send him off to CPS."

Sam takes in a deep breath and there's a pause as he thinks it over. Eventually, he says, "Yes and no. With a child this young, it's normal that they grow attached to one person. Young kids, realistically, tend to be very dependent on their primary guardian. It's not unusual for his age that he's found someone to latch onto, as you said. He hasn't been socialized or educated per normal standards; I'm hardly surprised he would grow close to the person who's most like him. And I know you don't believe this, but you aren't bad with kids.

"You're treating him better than everyone he's ever been around. You've spent the most time with him and you've been patient with him. The thing we should worry about is how he'll react when you need to separate. It's best if you make sure he understands that this isn't permanent as soon as possible."

"We've talked about it a bit, but we'll go over it some more. The thing is... I don't want to make this worse for him, you know? The kid knows how to use a sniper but doesn't know how to write; that's not normal."

"That's... yeah. That's not good. He's gone through a lot. I've seen that sort of thing in child soldiers and it's never easy, but they're not without hope. He'll get better, but we have to give him time. Peter needs to unlearn what he's been taught and know what it means to be part of society. Right now, as the person he's chosen to lean on, that's your responsibility until we can find him a family."

"Right. Thanks, Sam."
He gives Peter time. That's all he can do, at this point.

The next day, Tony knocks on Peter's door to ask him to join them for breakfast. Pepper makes them some food and then takes Peter on a tour of the building. Tony's still hopeful that she'll get through to him, but when she comes back the look on her face is enough to know she hadn't made any progress.

He may as well have kept Peter to himself and had her go to the horribly boring meetings instead.

He and Bruce continue to work on the best diet for him, mixing vegetables and meat to raise his vitamin levels. It won't be an instant change, but Bruce insists that it's making a difference and Tony's inclined to believe him.

Peter still won't wear shoes or socks. When Tony asks about it, he gets a simple, "I like it like this."

The day after this, Pepper returns to her meetings and Tony keeps an eye on surveillance cameras while Peter's doing more homework. Queen Cobra has yet to be found. While he's looking at video feeds, Peter asks him why someone would buy 40 watermelons. He can't answer that because math questions make no sense, ever.

"No idea kiddo."

He's always loved being in his lab, and that's where he brings Peter on any downtime. There's a lot of that. Shield hasn't asked for any help in capturing their escaped convict, and they aren't going to step in. Things are quiet; they aren't going to make a ruckus unnecessarily.

She's apparently much better in stealth than she is at fighting.

Tony can only reach out to child protective services once Shield is finished with the Fénix group. He needs to make sure this woman is caught and that the base is searched through.

That afternoon, he gets a call from Natasha.

"We found a laptop. It was behind a wall panel and really well hidden. Send me the footage of the kid entering the passcode; that should get me into it."

"Yeah, sure. You bringing it back here?"

"Yes. They want me to go over whatever's in here. I'm taking it with me back to the Tower. I'll be home by the end of the day."

"Alright, see you."

Tony sets aside his phone and turns to Peter. His writing's already improved and he's always hyper-focused on his work. When he's finished a few sheets, Tony corrects them and goes over the answers. They've been at it for a while, and he speaks into the silence with an offer.

"Hey, Pete. What do you think about heading out for a drive?"

"What's a drive?" Peter asks, looking up from his homework.

"Do you know what a car is?"

"Yes. I had a book about cars once."
"Good. When someone says they're going for a drive, it means they're going to drive a car somewhere. It's an expression."

"Ooh, okay."

"What do you say?"

"That sounds nice, Mr. Stark."

"Cool. Let's get out of here."

Tony heads to the elevator and Peter slips off his chair and follows after him, leaving his work behind.

"Goodbye, Dum-E!" Tony hasn't bothered discouraging Peter from talking to the robots.

Jarvis takes them down to the garage. Tony has several fancy and expensive cars lined up, most of which he'd taken apart and rebuilt himself out of boredom. On the adjacent wall, there's a row of keys. There's no actual order to them, but Tony knows which one belongs to which car.

"Which one do you like best? We can use any of them."

Peter wanders down the row, staring wide-eyed at all of the vehicles. There are all sorts of colours and makes. From what he's read, he can recognize the names of their parts, like windshield and tires and knows where to locate the engine. He's never seen any of these in person.

"Have you seen some of these in your books?"

Peter hums thoughtfully and then points to a deep red 1964 Ferrari. That had been an expensive find and Tony had to build some of the parts himself to get it running. Peter steps next to it and peers into the backseat window of the driver's side to look at the inside of the car. His hands are pressed to his sides to make sure he doesn't touch it on accident.

"The classics. A good place to start. Maybe sometime this week we can tear one of these apart together."

"Really?!" Peter's obviously startled by the easy offer.

Tony nods, "Of course. Now let's take her out for a spin." He takes the matching key off its hook and walks over to the driver's side. This is a car that'll turn a few heads, but he's used to that. "Hop in, kid," he says while pointing to the opposite side.

Peter walks around the car and carefully opens the passenger door. He watches Tony sit and follows suit. The doors shut close and Peter looks over to Tony for more guidance.

"Put on your seatbelt, it's to your right." Tony demonstrates by pulling his own and clipping it into place at his side. Peter copies his motions, slow as he tries not to get caught up in the material. He gets his arms in the right places and clicks it shut.

Tony slips on his sunglasses and starts the car. The garage door opens and then they're off.

With the windows rolled down and soft music coming from the radio, they make their way through the busy streets of Manhattan and head east down the Lincoln Tunnel.

He loves a good drive.
"Hey, kid? You remember the other day when I asked you what you wanted to happen from here on out?"

"I remember," Peter says. He's looking out of the window, awed by the sights of the city. Even stuck in traffic, Peter has plenty of things to catch his interest.

"I also said I want you to get integrated into society. I know you've never heard of Child Protective Services, but they're a group of people that help kids who have no parents find a family."

"Orphan," Peter adds, "That's what Dr. Ortiz said I am."

Tony's hand grips the wheel a little tighter, "Yeah. That's the word for it. You know, technically, I'm an orphan too. My parents died when I was twenty-one. I knew my parents, so sometimes it felt like the end of the world, but it isn't. Biological is just a word, right? You're a bright young boy, between me and CPS, we'll find you the most loving parents you can get. You're not going to be alone forever. You're not alone now; you've got me, but when we find you a family you'll have something more permanent."

It's a little strange to bear himself like this to a child who probably doesn't understand how difficult it is for him to say these things; Peter knows nothing of Tony Stark. Billionaire. Playboy. Philanthropist. To Peter, he's the man inside the robot suit.

"I like being alone," he admits softly. He still won't look at him. His eyes are following the people walking over the sidewalk.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Alone is safe."

Tony looks out of his own window, composing his thoughts. There's a father carrying his sleeping daughter. Two teenagers holding ice cream cones. A woman walking her dog. Storefront after storefront. It doesn't help.

"That's true. Being alone is safe. I've always thought that too, but I've never been very good at being alone. I wouldn't have the same best friend as I did twenty years ago if I was completely unwilling to get close to people. And you know, alone is also really lonely. When you meet people who like you for who you are, not what they can get from you, you'll come to see how special it is to have those people in your life."

"People don't like the defect."

"You're not the defect, Peter," Tony chides gently.

Finally, the boy turns to look at him, expression hard, "And why not? You know nothing about me. You don't know how useless I am!"

It's the most vulnerability Peter's shown him thus far, and it strikes him like he's been hit.

"There isn't a single human being on this planet that's useless, Peter. Those people - Dr. Ortiz - wanted you to think you were useless or that you're a defect because he wanted to hurt you. That doesn't make it true. But you are right about one thing. I don't know you and I'd like to change that."

Peter's hands clasp together in his lap and he returns to staring out of the window. He doesn't say anything in response.
"Look, I don't know what you're going through. I don't know what they did to you, or what they've been telling you your whole life. If there's anything you want to talk about or share..." he trails off in the hopes that Peter will say something.

"What do you want from me?"

He'd asked this question two days ago, Tony gives him the same answer, "Nothing."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, it won't make sense for a long time. But here's the plan. We work on getting you healthy, and when we can we'll set you up with CPS and you'll meet some parents and one day, hopefully soon, you'll be adopted into a loving family." Tony glances at him.

Peter mutters, Tony can hardly hear him between him facing away and the sounds of the city, but he catches, "If that's what you want, Mr. Stark."

"And what do you want?"

"Whatever you want, sir."

And they're back to 'sir'.

The rest of the ride is a one-sided conversation on Tony's part. He points out stores and what they sell, he then explains money because that's a concept Peter knows nothing about and he can tell that by the look in his eyes rather than the question he won't ask. He considers stopping and stepping out for a snack or to go into one of these stores, but Peter isn't wearing shoes and clearly isn't in the mood for more adventuring.

They return to the Tower and park the car back in its spot.

All he can think to do now is take Peter back to the lab, where they spend the rest of the evening working separately. Pepper's ordered in some Vietnamese, a couple of different dishes for the adults and she chose pho with beef for Peter.

He eats all of it quietly by their sides. She tries to incite conversation, but it falls flat.

"How was your day, Peter?"

"It was good, ma'am."

"How's the homework coming along? Are you learning a lot?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Pepper meets Tony's gaze. There's a question there - what happened? And the thing is, he doesn't know.

When he sends Peter to bed he still walks him and pulls back the blanket in an attempt at what's becoming their normal. He knows Peter won't get into bed right away. He'll change because Tony's told him he needs to do so after getting up and before going to bed. Then he'll read for about an hour (he's currently reading Bruce's book on vitamins) and eventually he'll tug the blanket and pillow off the bed and sleep on the floor.

"The bed's too soft," Sam had explained to him a couple of days back. "He's been sleeping on the floor his entire life."
Tony retreats to his lab again because he's not ready for bed and won't be for a few hours.

"Jarvis, can you go over the footage from the last 24 hours and let me know if there's anything that happened with Peter that stands out? Anything that might explain the weird mood."

"Yes, sir."

He can't make sense of the sudden shift. There had been steady progress and then suddenly Peter's completely shut down. He's not aggressive which would indicate some form of acting out and anger stemming from the trauma he's living with. Tony doesn't know enough about psychology to know if this is normal or not; he's always done the lashing out response and he'd be much more familiar with that.

What Jarvis finds is not the answer to the question he'd asked.

"Boss, I have found no verbal or physical event that could have caused Peter's recent behaviour based on my understanding of his personality, though triggers can vary from person to person. I have found something of interest, however, if you're interested in seeing it."

"Sure, show me what you go."

"Here's is a video from this afternoon."

Tony had been fiddling with a pen as he listened to Jarvis, and now he looks up to his computer screen to see what will play out.

The cameras in his lab are in colour and are of much higher quality than those he keeps anywhere else. He spots Peter walking back in and remembers this vaguely. The only times Peter leaves his chair is after asking to use the restroom in a voice that suggests he's heard a 'no' before.

He trusts Jarvis to let him know if Peter tries to touch anything he shouldn't and after telling Peter, "Of course you can go, kid. You know the way.", his focus fixes back on his work and the boy is out of his thoughts.

On-screen Peter walks close to his stool and suddenly stops and looks around. The camera catches sound, and he hears Dum-E's telltale beep. Tony's gotten good at being a selective listener and hardly hears it anymore; on-screen Tony doesn't look up from his work.

The screen flickers to a different camera angle, one that catches Dum-E trying to take a straight path to Peter (he's being conditioned to expect a hello pat whenever the boy walks into the room, he needs to fix this before it gets out of hand). The robot rolls forward into a large toolbox and Tony's familiar with what this means.

Those wheels need oiling.

Tony wonders briefly while watching how he hadn't caught this. Dum-E usually gets more and more distressed when it can't go where it wants.

Peter walks into the camera's view. He steps around the toolbox to the robot and gives it a gentle pat on its arm. He kneels next to the robot and possibly comes to the same conclusion as present-Tony has. Peter knows Dum-E's mobility at this point and must know he should normally be able to make his way around the obstacle.

And all of a sudden Tony's not quite sure what he's seeing.
The boy goes to the front of the toolbox, bends over, and lifts it. He shuffles to the right a couple of times and then gently deposits it back on the floor. With the space in front of it cleared up, Dum-E rolls on as if nothing's happened.

There was no noise as this happened, none unusual enough in his lab that would have made Tony turn around. Peter simply returns to his seat and his homework as if all is well.

Except Tony knows that that toolbox weighs over two hundred pounds.

What Jarvis has found is the answer to a question he'd asked on day one.

"We know she has certain special abilities, are there others here like her?"

"No, sir."

What else has been lies?

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun...

I'm sure this isn't a big surprise to anyone but I hope you enjoy the revelation :) 

Next chappie will be a Peter interlude!

Also, I've said it loads already but... I love every single one of you readers and the kuddos you leave me and the comments you write. It truly means the world to know there are people looking forward to each new chapter :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Thank you once more for all the lovely comments!

Please enjoy this Peter interlude!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter Interlude...

Four-seven... no. Peter. His name is Peter now.

As the days have passed, Peter continues to wait for the other shoe to drop. For things to go bad. For them to stop pretending to be nice. They give him food and clothing. He's allowed to use the hot water and is encouraged to shower whenever he wants. So far, no one has told him "no".

They've done no tests and Dr. Banner hasn't forced him to do anything. He seems very kind, much kinder than the doctors he's grown up with. He's also very smart; he's sure he knows a lot more than the Fénix doctors did. What more could he do to him that they didn't think to do?

Rhodey had been very nice to talk to and he always gave Peter more food even when he didn't ask for it. Then he wasn't around anymore, and he knew he was gone to do work somewhere called 'Washington'. He recalls seeing it on the map that Tony had shown him, but he doesn't understand why Rhodey would go so far to work.

Peter's growing used to the routine that's been set.

He wakes up, the robot (Jarvis), will invite him to breakfast. He eats three meals a day; it feels like a lot but he's not going to complain. He's always hungry. Dr. Ortiz would only let him eat as much as he wanted on days they wanted to run some tests on him.

Which was when he was Four-seven and not Defect. Back when he mattered.

He spends most of his time divided between the lab doing homework or in front of the television watching movies. He doesn't know which one he likes more. He's always loved learning, no matter the topic because there wasn't much else to do where he came from. There are only so many hours he can sit on the floor staring at the wall. But these 'movies' are extraordinary. They're colourful and entertaining and there's music and nice people and it's like a dream become reality right in front of his face.

When Tony introduces him to the woman, the 'boss', as he calls her, he's a little bit intimidated.

The last woman he'd met had wanted to leave him behind with Shield, and the last before that... Dr. Wallis. She had pressed needle after needle into his skin with no emotion on her face and she scared him. Dr. Ortiz scared him too, but he gave him food and clothes, and that was nice.

He doesn't think of Eight-five (or is she Queen Cobra now?) as a woman; she's another experiment just like he is. They're the same, except she's better. The upgraded version.
None of them are here now and there's this woman with a smile on her face and in an outfit he doesn't recognize. It's not a lab coat, and that's reassuring.

Tony and Bruce leave him and he wants to object but he won't voice his concerns.

She gives him a mug filled with something she calls 'tea'. It's flavoured water and he doesn't understand the purpose, but he drinks it obediently. He wants to think she's nice, but he's been let down before.

It's always pretend, isn't it?

"Hi, Peter. Bruce has told me a bit about you. I wanted us to spend some time together so we could get to know each other. Please let me know if anything I say or ask makes you uncomfortable, okay? I want us to have fun together, and I want you to be honest if you aren't enjoying yourself."

"Yes, ma'am."

There are lots of questions and he chooses often to answer simply.

"Have you enjoyed your time here so far?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I know Tony forgets to eat sometimes, so I hope you've been eating well enough?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've worked with Tony for a long time now, and I've gotten to know Bruce pretty well in the past few months, you're really in the best of hands. I know you've been through a lot, but I hope that you'll open up to them and let them help you. They're both very good men."

Silence.

"Would you like to help me prepare lunch?"

"If you like, ma'am."

He helps her make sandwiches and they put juice in portable bottles he doesn't know the proper name for. She takes him up to the roof where she spreads out a red and black blanket and has him sit by her side. From the bag she'd prepared she pulls out a yellow bottle she calls sunscreen.

She puts a dollop on her fingertips and he flinches when she reaches out for him. He hates his automatic reactions and he sees the hurt in her eyes. She quickly smiles and explains, "I'm going to put this on your face if that's alright? I'll protect you from the sun. Bruce told me you haven't been outside much in your life, and I don't want you getting sunburnt."

He wants to ask what that is but doesn't. He does, however, let her rub the lotion on his cheeks and nose and forehead. It feels weird, but her smile is bright and he feels like he's done a good thing.

The city is loud and full of unfamiliar sounds. He doesn't think he can ever get used to this.

"Do you want to talk about your time with Fénix? From what I understand they weren't very kind to you." Her eyes exude friendliness, but he's hesitant.

He doesn't say anything.
"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. It might take time before you're ready to talk about everything that's happened, and we're willing to wait as long as you need."

She talks into his silences. He learns more about Virginia Pepper Potts and he thinks he likes her quite a bit; she's smart and funny and doesn't force him to do anything. That only scares him more. The people he likes always turn out to be not so nice.

They eat their food and not long after she leaves him in front of a movie while she talks to Tony and Bruce in the kitchen. He can hear them. He has very good hearing.

They want him to talk. They want to know what Fénix knew. He won't tell them. He can't let anyone know the truth. Of course that's their objective, what else could they want from the Defect? Other than his knowledge, he is useless to them. And if that comes to light, then he'll be a new experiment to a new group of people and he doesn't want that.

Tony leaves Pepper and Bruce and joins him in front of the movie. He likes it so far and it keeps a portion of his attention.

He doesn't know what it is about Tony that makes him want to trust him. Or that makes him trust him and then his mind fights itself to convince him why that's a terrible decision.

There's something in his smile and his eyes that gives Peter the impression that he's as uncertain as Peter is, and that's reassuring. So far, Tony's been accommodating to his questions, giving him the confidence to ask more. When they sit there, it's nice.

When Pepper joins them he grows uncertain and stops his flow of questions. Her motives appear to be the same as Tony's, but she still feels like more of a stranger than Tony is. He doesn't want to be tricked again, he hates this game of pretend, but Tony... He doesn't know what it is.

It's in the lab two days later that he overhears Tony's conversation with Natasha, the scary woman that doesn't like him.

A laptop.

The password.

It terrifies him.

They'll know. They'll find out. And then what?

Then they'll bring him back to that room with the doctor tools and the pristine bed and its white sheets. They'll shackle him down and take his blood and start experimenting because why wouldn't they? These people are smart, they want to know these things. So far they've been kind out of ignorance. If they get that information... He becomes Defect again. Who is Peter, if he can be Four-seven or Defect instead? Peter is nothing; he's unimportant.

It's fear that makes his tongue loose.

"And why not? You know nothing about me. You don't know how useless I am!"

He doesn't mean to say it.

He wants to cry, but he knows that would be showing weakness. That's what he's been told, at least.

He gets into his bed that night as usual. Tony pulls back the blanket and pats his shoulder. It's
likely that won't happen tomorrow. Tomorrow night he'll be tied down and cut open. He doesn't scar like normal people do. They tear open his skin and then he heals and it's like it never happened.

The broken bones healed, but not as well as they should have if a new doctor could spot the breaks. They don't hurt, but he can see the sloppiness of the healing and he blames himself. He should have done better, been better.

Her words repeat in his head.

"We found a laptop."

"We'll be home by the end of the day."

And a conversation he overhears after Tony's put him to bed.

"We're here. I'm taking this to Bruce's lab. I'll connect it to Jarvis to download everything that's on here."

After Tony leaves his room, Peter grabs his book and reads on the floor as he does every night. He listens in on their conversation and waits. And waits.

Eventually, he hears Tony's gentle footsteps as he heads to bed. And he waits some more until he's sure he's fallen asleep. He places his book on the dresser and slips out of his room, bare feet quiet on the tiled floors.

The elevator has no buttons, he's noticed over the past few days. It's completely operated by the AI. Peter stops in front of the metal doors and shuffles from one foot to the other wondering how to get in. The AI answers his unasked question by simply opening the doors for him.

He steps inside and there are still no buttons to select a floor; not that he knows which floor he needs to get to.

"Mr. Jarvis?" He asks.

"Yes, Peter?"

"Can you take me to Dr. Banner's lab?"

"Of course, Peter."

He tugs at the bottom of his t-shirt anxiously as the elevator moves down. Jarvis has no reason to question him, he hasn't been programmed to do so, but Peter doesn't know that. As it stops moving, Peter slips into the corner of the elevator next to the doors to keep from being immediately noticeable.

The doors open quietly and he waits a couple of seconds to listen.

He can hear the telltale whirl of electricity he's learned to associate to different electronics. There are no other distinguishable sounds to indicate someone's presence and he cautiously steps out of the elevator. It opens to a floor-to-ceiling glass wall a few feet in front of him with a closed door to get inside.

He looks around and feels his heart begin to race.

It's like every other medical laboratory he's been in, and he's been in his fair share of them.
Sterilized environments, beakers and test tubes and petri dishes, high powered microscopes, various different analyzers, fridges and freezers with samples. There are several smaller desks to hold all this equipment, and a larger one in the center of the room, similar to Tony's, with four computer screens and folders on its surface. The cupboards and cabinets are all closed, but Peter knows what he'd find in them.

He hates being here. A part of him considers turning around and leaving, but he pushes himself forward. He takes a deep breath and tries to hold back the tears of fear pressing into the back of his eyes.

He can do this, he tells himself. He has to.

There's a keypad in the wall next to the door, but it has a green light and he takes his chances. His hand wraps around the handle on the glass door and it opens as he pushes it. He wanders through the open space. The glass wall is really just to keep the room sterilized from whatever germs get trapped in that elevator, and everything of importance is inside its confines.

There are other rooms outside of the glass box, some offices and a washroom and some storage for Bruce's things. Peter stays inside the box for now.

He walks between the desks, looking briefly at the equipment and eyes scanning some of the paperwork. He doesn't understand what's written for the most part, but at least he doesn't find his name anywhere.

It's on the large desk with the computer that he finds the laptop. It's plugged into the hard drive hidden beneath the desk's surface.

It's also open but locked. The screen is blue, prompting for a password.

He moves to his tiptoes to properly see the keyboard and slowly inputs the characters that would get him into the device. He doesn't know how to type and couldn't do it without seeing the keys themselves. His fingers press each key delicately, and then he presses the big one that means 'Enter'.

Password incorrect. Please try again.

What?

He tries again, more carefully this time.

Password incorrect. Please try again.

His hands were already shaking from the fear of being in this horrible room, but now it gets worse because what is he supposed to do? Why is it not working? He tucks his lower lip between his teeth and bites down until the burning in his eyes recedes again.

A third try. The same message.

His plan had been to get into the computer and delete everything pertaining to Four-seven and Defect. That's no longer an option.

He can destroy the computer.

Then Jarvis will tell Tony and that leaves him in a similar position.
"I changed the password."

He whirls around and in the glass doorway stands Natasha, leaning against the frame with her arms folded over her chest. She's impassive and it reminds him too much of Dr. Wallis. His body hurts remembering old memories. He buries his hands in the material of his shirt and stares down at his feet.

"What are you looking for?" She walks towards him, her shoes clicking against the clean linoleum floors.

He thinks about trying to outrun her, but this whole building is controlled by one AI and he wouldn't get far. What is she going to do to him? She's smart, she must know what he was trying to do. She must be angry. He doesn't like being hit, but it's better than the alternatives.

He realizes, suddenly, that maybe she already knows. Maybe she's seen the truth. She changed the password, she got into the laptop. It's been in her possession for hours.

Her head tilts, her expression stays neutral, "Go on upstairs to bed, Peter. Tomorrow's another day."

"Yes, ma'am," he says quietly.

He walks by her out of the glass box and the elevator doors open for him unprompted. He walks inside and doesn't turn around to see her expression.

"Where would you like to go next, Peter?" Jarvis asks kindly.

He thinks for a moment and makes a decision.

"Can you please take me to the roof?"

"Of course, Peter."

The elevator goes up and up and dings once it reaches its destination. The doors open and the night air fans his face. It smells nice. He steps out of the elevator and walks over to the edge of the building. He stands and stares out at the expanse of New York.

If he stays, they'll know the truth and he'll never be free of tests and labs.

But here is freedom and it scares him even more.

The city is so loud and he doesn't recognize any of the sounds. He can't name their sources, couldn't say it's a car horn or police sirens or a meowing cat. There's a lot of talking and shouting and he can hardly distinguish it from everything else. It's so very loud.

The lab is never this loud. Well. Unless they're testing his hearing, but they haven't done that in a long time. And they've only punished him with sound once, as it was far less effective than their other methods.

He likes the smell of the air; getting to see and experience nature the likes of which he's only ever read about before. He's never walked on grass in his life, but he wants to. He could, right now.

The buildings are tall and when he looks over the edge there are dozens and dozens of people walking the streets. There are lights in the buildings and he can see the silhouettes of people living their lives.

What are they doing? What is it like to have lived and grown 'normally'?
He can scale down this building and escape, but what is escape if there's nothing to go towards? He has no family. Fénix made sure of that.

"No mother, no father. Little orphan Defect is willing to say no to me? If you don't fight, what else is there for you?"

It's also cold. He doesn't know what time it is.

He shivers and wraps his arms around himself.

It's dark. The moon is bright above but the stars are hidden behind the city's bright lights. Where would he go? There's no one waiting for him. He would die in days. He doesn't know enough of these people and their ways to know how to survive. Or maybe he'd be found by worse people.

He wipes away a stray tear.

He's weak, he's always been weak. That's what they've always said about him. Freedom is in front of him and he's too riddled with fear and doubts to take advantage of it. He sits down and stares at the city.

The elevator dings and the doors part. Peter can hear this and doesn't move. He's been found, so what? Like he had other options? No, not really.

"Hey, kiddo. A bit late for sightseeing don't you think?" Tony walks over and stops a little behind him.

After a pause where he says nothing, Tony kneels beside him, "Are you okay, Peter? Did something happen?"

"No, Mr. Stark."

"It's cold, put this on." Tony gently slips a sweater over his arms and wraps it around him. It helps. "Why are you up here at this hour? It's really late, you should be sleeping."

"Did Mr. Jarvis tell you I was here? I'm sorry for waking you."

"Don't worry about it, Pete. I want to know if you can't sleep. Next time, feel free to come to see me directly, okay? If there's ever something on your mind I don't want you suffering alone."

Peter nods. He's both cold and warm at once and his adrenaline and anxieties are waning. He's tired.

"Come on, let's get you back to bed."

Tony stands and Peter moves to follow. He manages to get to his feet but sways. Tony sighs softly, but when Peter looks up he's smiling.

He kneels again and says, "Guess you're pretty beat, huh? I'll carry you down."

Peter stands still, not sure what's expected of him. His eyes droop and his body grows lax. Tony's gentle attitude is calming. He's not mad or asking hard questions. Maybe right now he doesn't know what Natasha knows.

Tony chuckles softly, "Gotta work with me here, kid. Put your arms here," he guides Peter's arms around his neck, "and your head here," he moves his face into the crook of his neck, and then he gently tucks him against his hip and stands. "There we go, proper carrying manoeuver."
Peter intends to say something, but he can only hum.

Tony's the enemy, he tries to remind himself.

He's not used to touch.

It's not that he's never been touched before, of course, but rarely so affectionately. Eight-five was the outlier as she would press a kiss to his forehead, but then sometimes she wasn't so nice and it was confusing. Other than her, hands have held him down as he thrashed in pain. He's been slapped for his disobedience. He's been pulled along with a tight hand wrapped around his wrist. Those touches were always hot; like the feel of searing pain even if the touch itself didn't hurt.

Being held in Tony's arms is warm. He never knew the difference before, but now he does.

Tony walks into the elevator that takes them down to his floor.

He falls asleep with his cheek pressed against Tony's shoulder and then he wakes in the too-soft bed not able to remember how he'd gotten there but feeling somehow contented.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed!

I've been doing my motorcycle riding course over the weekend, so I'm a little behind on my writing, but hopefully the next chapter should be out in no time :) Also, my entire face is burnt and aching and uuuuuuuugh. I didn't know lips could get sunburnt!

I'm off to find something to soothe my pain lol see you next chappie!
Tony makes breakfast and steps into Peter's room to invite him to join him. Bruce is in a video chat with some other doctors and Pepper's off to attend a couple of meetings in D.C leaving Tony to take care of his young ward.

He's surprised to see that Peter's still in bed. He takes a seat next to him and runs his fingers through his hair, speaking softly, "Hey, kiddo, time for breakfast."

Peter's eyes blink open slowly. He rubs at his tired eyes and says, "Hi, Mr. Stark. I'm sorry I didn't wake up in time."

"Don't worry about it, kiddo. Sleeping is healthy and all that nonsense. I'll meet you in the kitchen, okay? Feel free to shower if you want to."

Tony runs his fingers through his hair once more before standing up and leaving the room. Peter had a long night, he assumes he needs some time to gather his thoughts.

Jarvis had given him a rundown of Peter's 3 am adventures, and Tony isn't sure what to make of it. He still isn't sure what to make of anything going on honestly. Peter has superstrength. That's a thing. He'd been keeping it a secret, and why wouldn't he? He doesn't know the Avengers or Tony, there's no reason to trust them. It doesn't make him any less ill at ease. Then he'd gone after the laptop and he thinks he understands but what if he doesn't?

Right now, he needs things to stay normal until he can figure out what he wants to do with this knowledge and treats Peter as he always has.

Tony doesn't like being lied to, but Peter's a child and he can't help but feel mostly affectionate towards him; especially as he'd huddled in his arms, asleep in seconds. He hadn't even stirred as he'd put him in bed and tucked the blankets around him.

Natasha can't have been right about him. He's not willing to believe that, not yet.

"Hop on up, kiddo. Food's nice and warm," he tells Peter as he walks into the room.

He puts a plate of eggs and bacon in front of Peter and also puts down a high protein smoothie for him to drink. The boy's slowly gaining weight, though he still felt too light when Tony had carried him last night. There's actual colour in his cheeks now and it's progress.

"Thank you, Mr. Stark."

Peter eats, but Tony catches his gaze every so often. He's clearly uncertain how much Tony knows and he doesn't bring up the topic.

It's a little awkward.
Tony takes his spot beside him to eat his own breakfast and drink his coffee.

He hadn't slept much last night. These few days with Peter have put him on a more regular eating schedule and he's barely thought about having a sip of alcohol, but the insomnia is one bad habit that's here to stay. His mind is always running wild, and with this sudden revelation, he'd spent the hours going over every conversation, every action, to see if there had been hints he'd missed before.

"Did you sleep well? I know you haven't been sleeping in the bed, but I hope you found it comfortable."

Peter nods, "Yes, Mr. Stark. The bed is very... squishy."

Tony laughs softly, "That's one word for it. I was thinking we could go to the park today, what do you think about that?"

"What's a park?"

The question is expected and Tony explains as best as he can. The boy's eyes sparkle and he thinks he's doing this right, no matter how he feels like he's drowning sometimes.

Peter is resigned to the sunblock, however...

The difficult part, that takes nearly thirty minutes, is convincing Peter to wear some *fucking* shoes. This isn't a debate he ever thought he'd have; he's Tony Stark. He can out-debate people in his sleep. He's confident in his ability to convince at least half the Avengers that the world is flat if he tries hard enough. But the boy is stubborn in this one thing. He won't speak if he's hungry or thirsty or until he really, really, has to go to the bathroom, but in this, he fights.

"But Mr. Stark, I don't understand why I need them."

Peter's only convinced when he says, "Kids who go to school have to wear shoes. It's what's considered proper. Whether you like it or not, it's going to be expected of you here on out. It's fine in the Tower, but outside you have to wear them. But when we get to the park, you can take them off for a bit, okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Stark." Peter sounds defeated. He gets him into some white and blue sneakers and they meet up with Happy at the side of the building.

Peter hasn't met Happy yet, and he introduces them quickly.

"Hey, kid," Happy greets, but that's as much conversation as he's willing to make.

"Hello, Mr. Happy."

They're in a sleek black car and Tony's wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses to try and be discreet. Happy stops a block away from the nearest park and the two of them step out together, leaving the bodyguard to wander off probably to get himself some coffee.

This is the first time Peter's been out in the city and Tony can instantly tell it's overwhelming. The truth is, they're in New York City, there aren't many options and there's no better way to do this. He's a brave boy, Tony has to trust that he'll get through this alright.

"Pete, I want you to stay by my side, okay? I don't want you wandering off and getting lost."
"Yes, Mr. Stark."

Tony wonders if Peter has thought about running off. There's an open street. Peter doesn't know he has the suit at the ready. He could run and this old man couldn't follow. But as he steps through the gate surrounding the trees and playground, Peter stays obediently by his side.

There are children playing on swing sets and on a couple of tall shiny slides, but Peter seems completely uninterested in the other children or their games.

Parents and guardians are seated on benches and Tony finds one for him and Peter. The boy takes the seat next to him and kicks his feet.

Tony chuckles and pats his thigh, "Alright, foot up here. Let's get these shoes off."

Peter hesitantly places his left foot in Tony's lap, a little taken aback by the casualness of the request. Tony unties the laces and takes off the shoe and sets it down by his hip. He pushes the foot away and gestures for the other one, and Peter complies. That shoe is gently removed and Peter carefully sets his bare feet on the ground. (Shoes were one thing, socks was another battle Tony hadn't bothered with.)

It tickles. The grass is warm from sunlight.

Being outside is warm. Like being in Tony's arms but different all the same.

His stretches his toes and moves his feet over the soft texture.

Tony smiles as he watches him. He laughs when Peter simply stands off the bench then lays down, arms splayed by his sides. Peter takes a deep breath and rolls onto his back. He meets Tony's gaze and smiles back.

"You can go play if you want. Or you can lay there. Whatever you want, kiddo. This is for you after all. I'm going to sit here like an old man and think about my life choices."

Peter giggles, not completely understanding the words but he's gotten used to the tone Tony uses when he's joking.

This is weird; he's not oblivious to that.

There's a child in front of him and little shoes by his side, he's in the middle of a playground with other children and he's content. This is insanely parental and he doesn't mind because he can look down at Peter and see the pure joy in his expression and he knows he's doing the right thing.

No one approaches them and he appreciates the quiet. People don't easily spot Tony Stark when there's a child in the midst, it seems.

While Peter basks in the midday sun, he gets a call from Steve.

"We got a call about a series of bomb threats in Colorado and we've been called in. You're with the kid right?"

"Yeah. We're at the park. I'd rather stay if I'm not needed," Tony says honestly.

"That's fine. Nat says she wants to stay too, so me and Clint are going to head out. I don't see us needing any backup, but we'll call if there are any issues."

"Alright, thanks, Cap."
He leans back into the wooden bench and stares up at the clear blue sky. He doesn't want to be anywhere else right now.

"So what do you think of the outside world?" Tony asks after some time has passed.

"It's warm," Peter responds. His eyes are closed and Tony had wondered if he might be sleeping. "I like it outside."

"I thought you might."

Tony doesn't say anything else for a long while. It's clear that Peter's more than happy to sit in silence. Maybe he should take the boy fishing, he's never done it himself but he knows it generally entails hours of sitting around which might be Peter's interest at this time. He can't put himself in his shoes no matter how hard he tries; his childhood is a unique experience and Tony has to figure this out day by day.

He hopes that in time, Peter will be willing to open up on his own. He intends to make sure that Peter will get the best parents and a therapist and maybe someday he'll talk through what he's lived. How civilian parents will handle a boy with super strength is another matter, plus whatever other skills he might still be hiding.

Instead of interrupting the easy mood by mentioning lunch, he asks Happy to pick them up some sandwiches and he walks over to drop them off with an annoyed expression on his face. Tony only smiles and thanks him, ignoring his frustration and reminder that he's a bodyguard, not a delivery boy.

"Thank you, Mr. Happy!" Peter says happily as he sits up to eat his food.

Happy sighs, "No problem kid. See you in a bit."

The bodyguard returns to his car while Tony and Peter eat their lunch in peaceful silence. After they've finished, Tony gathers their garbage and sets it in a bag by Peter's shoes. The boy instantly lays back in the grass and Tony decides to busy himself with answering emails.

The gentle atmosphere is broken when his phone rings with a second call from Steve an hour or so later. Tony looks away from Peter, who's staring at the ladybug that's landed on his hand in complete fascination, and he pulls out his phone.

"What's up?"

"We found our missing convict's tagline at the apartment in Colorado we barely managed to keep from blowing up."

Tony can hear the anger in the tone and has a feeling that 'barely' might be a generous term.

"She's been hiding for a couple of days then pulls this? I don't get it. Why would she do that?"

"My theory is she found out Fénix is down and she's not happy about it. She tagged the wall but it doesn't make sense."

"What does it say?"

"It says, 'The Queen has found her Itsy Bitsy'."

It's the way Peter's eyes fly open that cement his decision. The words are nonsense to him and
Steve, but not to the boy with superior hearing. That one's new.

"We're heading back to the Tower. I'll leave Peter with Nat and make my way down to meet you guys. If she's attacking again, we need to find her before she strikes somewhere else and this time we don't make it in time."

"Alright, we'll be waiting here. We've got bomb squads going through nearby areas and Clint's searching through surveillance footage. We've got a good angle on the building and we're hoping to find something."

Tony ends the call and stands, taking up Peter's shoes and their garbage. Peter's watching him and stands to follow him without needing to be told.

He wants to focus on Peter's reaction, but he has to prioritize the lives that are being threatened by her manic and senseless bombings. Happy's waiting for him and he drives as fast as he can back to the Tower, where he's asked Natasha to meet him on the landing pad with the jet.

Tony's fully convinced about the superhearing when Peter doesn't ask a single question about what's going on.

Happy skids to a stop in front of the side door, Tony leaves what he's carrying in the car and he and Peter hop out. He plans to head straight to the landing pad to pass Peter on to Natasha and then take the jet to Colorado. The suit would be faster but he wants the equipment on hand.

"Outside was nice. Thank you, Mr. Stark."

There's something about the tone that makes him uncomfortable.

"No worries, kid. I promise to take you out a lot more from here on out, okay?"

He doesn't have time to think about the tone or his plans, because as the elevator rides up, Jarvis speaks around them, "Welcome back, sir. Agent Romanoff would like me to inform you that there is a visitor on the roof."

"A certain missing supervillain?" Tony looks down at Peter who's staring at his feet.

"Yes, sir."

"Goddamnit."

Chapter End Notes

Things are picking up speed a lil' bit for our boys.

I hope you're excited to see what's coming up!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Words can't express how happy seeing the positive feedback on the last chapter has made me!

I hope you enjoy this chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He can't immediately think of a reason she would have made her way to the Avengers Tower. By sending them to Colorado, she likely had expected the Tower to be defenseless; if it weren't for Peter or that laptop, Tony and Nat would both be absent too. Though Bruce still remains in his quarters, though they definitely don't need the Big Guy for this one. Not that the Tower is ever defenseless, after all, Jarvis is always active.

"Goddamnit. Alright, keep on going up. Have a suit ready to meet me. Peter, I want you to stay in the elevator, okay? Jarvis, take him back downstairs and have Happy meet him. Get them into my lab and initiate lockdown. Tell Bruce to stay wherever he is, we'll call on him if we need him."

"Yes, sir."

Elevators are entirely familiar to him, he knows the length of time it takes to get from floor 1 to 90. In this instant, it feels long and stressful, and he wishes Peter weren't with him. It's also awkward, as Peter stays quiet.

The doors part and immediately Tony can spot Natasha in a fighting position with her gun trained on Queen Cobra.

The jet pad is large enough for the jet itself and gives enough space for the fight that's bound to come of this.

Natasha's in sweatpants and a tank top, coming from the gym or shooting range most likely, and Queen Cobra is in the same shorts and shirt they'd captured her in. She has a scabbard strapped to each thigh with poisoned daggers.

They may have been talking, but they quiet down at the sound of the elevator doors opening. He sees the woman's eyes lower to his side where Peter is standing, and he puts a hand on his shoulder and moves him behind him.

"Stay here. Do whatever Happy and Jarvis say." Tony steps out, leaving Peter behind. He walks up to stand next to Natasha, "I'm fairly certain you weren't invited to my birthday party."

"Don't worry Stark, I won't be long. I'm here for my Itsy Bitsy." Her eyes rest over his shoulder at the elevator.

That's what that meant.

The look in her eyes is intense and Tony can't help glancing backward to know what she's seeing.
Peter's holding open the elevator doors with his hands, a formidable show of that superstrength. He steps through and they close behind him. He meets Tony's eye quickly but moves on to Queen Cobra.

"Eight-five!"

Tony doesn't know enough about their relationship to have known if Peter would be happy or upset or angry to see her, but that definitely sounded like a happy shout. He runs by him and Natasha and into her waiting arms.

She kneels and wraps her arms around his thin frame. She presses a kiss to his forehead. Tony stands dumbly, confused, as his suit builds around him as he'd ordered Jarvis to do. Natasha wasn't right. He won't accept that.

"If you hurt the boy, I won't hesitate to shoot," Natasha warns. The safety's clicked off already.

"Oh my sweet boy, I've missed you so much," Queen Cobra says, not paying Natasha any mind. She pulls away from Peter, who's arms fall to his sides. "I'm going to get you away from these horrible people, and I'll take good care of you. Fénix is done, it's over. We're free now, sweetpea. It's just you and me." Tony detects the hint of a Spanish accent, and he wonders how long she'd been with Fénix for her accent to still be distinguishable.

"Peter, get away from her," Tony says. He means to make it an order, but it comes out too hesitant. He glances back at him and smiles, "It's okay Mr. Stark! She's nice."

"That I am," her grin is dark. Tony knows there's no feeling in that expression. He can't tell if she actually cares for Peter, and that scares him. "Ta ta for now, Avengers. Me and Itsy Bitsy are going on our merry way. If you're fast enough, you can make it to Kansas in time."

She picks up Peter in her arms and turns from them, eyes glinting with mischief.

With the suit around him, he can say, "Jarvis, tell Rogers to get his ass to Kansas A.S.A.P," without her hearing it. He lifts the panel so that he can meet Peter's eyes with his own.

"I don't think so," he blasts the ground in front of her foot, "The kid's not going anywhere, and neither are you."

She turns and glares at him, seemingly unbothered by the threat, "Come now, Mr. Stark. You wouldn't want to hurt little Peter, would you?"

Peter meets Tony's gaze again. There must be something in his expression because he turns to her and says, "Eight-five? I-"

"It's Queen Cobra now, sweetpea."

"Um, Queen Cobra... Where are we going? Mr. Stark said if I stay we'll find me a family, and I think that would be nice..."

She clicks her tongue, "I'm sorry, hon, but the Avengers are liars. They're never going to give you to a family, that's just silly talk. I'm your family, Itsy Bitsy. And me and you together? We're unstoppable."

"Oh... but I like it here... He's been very nice and gave me clothes and food. He hasn't hurt me or anything..."
"Put down the boy, Eight-five," Natasha orders, cutting into their conversation. "Or I'm going to shoot. You won't get another warning."

"I... I don't wanna go, Eight- um, Queen Cobra."

"That's all tricks. They want you to think it's nice here so you'll never run away. That's how it works," she tells Peter.

He looks to Tony then back to her. There's hesitancy there, and her eyes harden.

"You've always been too nice, Four-seven. That's why they called you Defect. Don't you want to be better than that? Stronger? I can give you everything, but you have to be on my side. Not theirs. They're not your friends, sweetpea. They're no better than Ortiz or Wallis or Harrington; it's pretend. You told me that, remember? That when they say nice things it's pretend. You're too smart to fall for their tricks."

Natasha turns her arm over and shoots a Widow's bite. Queen Cobra dodges expertly, keeping Peter close to her chest. She crouches, holding him tight.

"Leave him be, Luella!" Natasha speaks sternly.

The use of a long-dead name brings her to silence, her eyes widen with shock. After a pause, her expression grows dark, "Where did you get that name?"

"I've done my research. You're only nineteen. Fénix got you when you were fourteen, an orphan girl in Mexico with nothing to depend on other than your pickpocketing skills. They built on that hatred, it doesn't mean you have to act on it."

"Shut up, Natalia. Yeah, I can do research too. Four-seven, you hang tight while I kill the Avengers, okay?" Her words are venomous.

Peter's visibly distressed by her words, but he doesn't get a chance to speak. She stands straight and her right hand wraps around his shirt collar while the other falls to her side. His hands grip her wrists to keep from being choked.

"Four-seven is mine. You'll have to kill me before I let you get your dirty paws on him!"

"Peter!"

Her hand draws down to gather momentum and then her arm juts out to the right and she lets go of Peter. His hands let go of her wrist by the strength of her throw, and he's launched over the side of the building. The 93 story building. There's shock in his expression before he falls below the edge and Tony loses sight of him.

Natasha runs towards her and Tony rushes to the edge of the building, weighed down by the suit but already preparing orders to fly off.

His mind is whirling between 'save Peter', and 'what the actual fuck'.

He doesn't make it to the edge of the building before Peter is flying back over, somehow. Tony catches the thin strand between his hand and the edge of the building but doesn't know what it is. Jarvis zooms into it, but the material is indistinguishable without getting a closer look. Peter uses the momentum to throw himself over and around to land on the roof in a crouch. The string falls to the ground as Peter straightens himself.
Tony still doesn't know how old this boy is, but he appears older than he must be as his wise eyes glance between his friend, the only thing left of his previous life, and the man who's taken him in.

Tony has some ideas about what's going on in Peter's mind, but there are still some doubts.

He's only known Peter so long, his loyalties might lie with Queen Cobra. He cares about this kid. It's a fact at this point. He has to try.

"Pete, are you alright?" The boy nods. "Step back, okay? We'll take care of this."

His heart is lighter simply by seeing him back on solid ground. He doesn't know what to make of the determination in his eyes.

Natasha had immediately shot at Queen Cobra, who dodged once more with lightning quick reflexes, and when Tony looks back at them they're fighting hand to hand. The way she fights is almost too flexible, like there's something off about her bones. Or she's an amazing contortionist. She moves and weaves quicker than Natasha can follow. However it's clear that Natasha has experience on her when it comes to simple combat as she lands a few quick blows and then a solid kick to her chest that sends her to the ground.

Once the two women have separated, Peter rushes in between them. He stops, arms spread out and eyes steady. There's a spark of shock that goes through the three adults as he's decided to stare down Queen Cobra, rather than the Avenger.

"Eight-five, please! Please don't hurt them, they're nice and they haven't done anything wrong. Maybe... maybe you can stay? With me? We don't have to fight. I don't want to fight."

"Don't waste your breath, Itsy Bitsy. The Avengers aren't your friends, and if you can't see that, then I don't know what's happened to that big brain of yours. I'm not going to leave you here; you can make this easy or hard, your choice." She takes the daggers out of their scabbards.

Peter is the one to act first. He lunges forward and tackles her to the ground. They're evenly matched in speed and strength, but Peter has to be careful of her weapons.

Tony hates watching this young child fight this adolescent. He clearly knows what he's doing, but it's not right.

He tackles her to the ground and they grapple for her daggers. Tony takes aim with his blaster but he's too scared of hitting Peter to actually fire. Natasha steps back and pulls out her gun again, but she's as hesitant as Tony to do anything further.

"Come on, Itsy Bitsy, I know you can do better than that!" Her knee bends and she kicks him in the stomach to throw him off her. She springs to her feet and throws herself at him blades first. He steps out of the way, faster than Tony expected.

He must have the same concoction running in his blood as Queen Cobra, it's the only way to make sense of the speed and grace of his movements and the way he twists her wrist until her fingers uncurl around the dagger. He kicks it away out of her reach.

It's obvious in his movements that he doesn't want to hurt her. He hasn't punched or kicked; he's only dodged and done his best to protect himself, and Tony and Natasha.

"Please, Eight-five, I don't want to do this! You're my friend, I-"

"If I was your friend you'd help me rid the world of these monsters," she snarls in response.
Tony's decided that she does not, in fact, care about this boy. Because if she did, she wouldn't be breaking his heart like this. She wouldn't be asking him to split his loyalties or take him away from the hope of family.

If she was taken into Fénix at fourteen after losing her family, she must understand the importance of it. Of having people care for you. There's no reason she would want to deprive Peter of this unless she didn't care. He doesn't understand her motive for wanting to take Peter with her to wherever the fuck she plans to go. Whatever her plans are, he's not going to let them happen.

"Fénix has fallen, we can be strong together."

She's landed a couple of hits, some that will certainly bruise, and he hasn't laid a hand on her. Natasha circles them to try and get the best shot, but they're both moving too quickly for her to take any risks. Queen Cobra grabs his wrist and he breaks out of her hold, she swings and he dodges to the side, he reaches for her dagger and she jumps back out of reach. They're evenly matched; a mix of inexperience and enhancements that make their fight a disaster.

Tony thinks he's gotten an opening just as Peter ducks down, leg out to trip her. His breath catches in his throat, the next few seconds feeling like they're in slow motion though he knows that's ridiculous. The adrenaline is making his heart race and his stomach turn. Her dagger slices through his abdomen on her way down and they both fall together.

He doesn't stand and Tony takes his chance to blast her, throwing her further back. Natasha is on her instantly, knocking away her other dagger and pressing her hands behind her back. Tony runs to Peter's side. He presses an armored hand to the cut along his waist. When he's certain that Queen Cobra is contained, he lets the armor draw back so his hand becomes soaked in the young boy's blood.

Due to her inexperience, Natasha is able to keep her still with minimal effort and uses wiring to tie her wrists together. Her knee presses into her back to keep her down. In her other hand, she pulls out her phone to communicate with Shield and to ask them to pick up their convict.

"Pete? Kiddo?" The anxiety rushes through him, like an injection in his blood.

He doesn't know if Peter knows that the dagger is coated in a venom they don't have an antidote for yet. He tries to stay calm though his body is betraying him.

"M-Mr.Stark?"

Tony gently rolls him on his back. Peter sits up despite the pressure from Tony's hands to keep him down. He stares at Queen Cobra with sad eyes, his hands trembling as they settle in his lap.

"Please, Eight-five... please..." Peter tries to stand, but Tony keeps the pressure and he's too weakened to fight against him any further.

He has a dying kid on his hands and all he wants is to make peace with the woman who wants to use him.

"You're a traitor, Itsy Bitsy. I can't believe you would choose these people over me. I've cared for you, more than anyone else ever has. We could have been a family. I would have given you everything."

"I don't want everything," Peter says as a tear slips down his cheek. He wipes it away with weakened hands, "I just want something."
This chapter is another shorter one, I've never been very good at fight scenes, so I hope you all think it's okay. The next one is quite a bit longer, dealing with the aftermath.

For those who want to know why my upload schedule is so wonky, well, I upload a chapter once I've completed the one after it (I already have the next chapter written and am working on the one after that). This is to make sure if I have any delays IRL I have something to post, but I also don't wait because I once lost a lot of work because my computer crashed and it was never saved anywhere and it was devastating (before the days of OneDrive, praise whoever invented that). I'm still not over it lol - I consider it my best work and it is gone into the void of nothingness and I am still sad.

Anyways, to be continued with our favourite boys.
Ahhh I can't believe this story has hit over 100 comments! That is amazing! Thank you all so much!

I hope you enjoy this chapter :)

F.Y.I - I am obviously not a medical professional and a lot of my information came from deep Google searches, I apologize in advance for any inconsistencies.

Things are no longer moving slowly around him, and Tony throws himself into action.

"Jarvis, tell Bruce to meet us in the medbay, I'm taking Peter down. Nat, you deal with this one. Call Rogers too if you get a chance."

"Yes, sir."

"Will do."

The suit wraps around him and he takes the shaking boy into his arms. He doesn't make a sound. There's no indication that he's in any pain and the realization of why makes him feel sick. A child shouldn't be 'used' to pain.

His face is getting red; the venom always causes fever and swelling in the wounded location first. Then it's full body paralysis and spasms and seizures. They've narrowed her venom down to a neurotoxin, but it's been concocted to be different enough to all those that exist that they have to start from scratch to create an antivenom.

It also hasn't been a top priority since she'd been caught.

He focuses on Peter to keep his anger for his laziness from coming through.

The suit flies down to the correct floor and a window opens for them. It retracts, leaving Peter in his real arms. He hopes that's more comfortable for him as he makes the trek to a room with a bed and a hovering Bruce Banner.

"Put him on the bed, hurry!"

Tony doesn't waste a second. He sets Peter on the bed and Bruce moves to the opposite side. He pulls up his shirt to look at the wound. It's not deep; it doesn't need to be. It's swollen and red and it's already starting to pus. Bruce goes to a nearby drawer to pull out some antibiotics to clean up the area, wiping away the blood to get a better view of the damage.

"If we're quick, maybe we can extract the venom. There's not enough time to finish the antivenom... Maybe Cho's made some headway, but we'd still have to make it and..." Bruce is mumbling to himself.
Tony is trying to pay him some attention, but his eyes are on Peter's.

He feels his heart breaking. They have nothing. They have no way to fix this. All the others... the longest anyone lived was for two hours. And it had not been a pleasant two hours.

And Peter is smiling. Or trying to. His lips are shaking from the exertion. The paralysis is sneaking through him, at this point he can't move his limbs. It must be the hardest thing, smiling, yet he's doing it. For him.

"Oh, Pete, I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry." His hand slips into the boy's hair, brushing it back off his sweaty forehead. He's warm to the touch. "God, Bruce, what do we do?" His voice cracks. There are tears forming at the back of his eyes as he looks into Peter's warm gaze.

The fight had only lasted a minute or two, Tony and Natasha had been actively looking for ways to step in, but that was all the time it took for everything to crash into flames.

"I... I don't know, Tony. I could sedate him, that would help with the muscle pains."

Tony shakes his head stubbornly, "This isn't his death bed, Bruce. We have an hour, we can figure this out. We're not losing him."

His fierce tone startles even himself. Bruce takes a deep breath, but an hour is a long time for two genius' to put their heads together. The least they can do is try.

Peter's gone through enough.

"Grab a tablet, grab all your research. We can use some of his blood to work with."

Bruce makes to follow the instructions, but the sight of Peter's twitching index stops him. He looks up into his eyes and Tony follows his gaze. Peter's lips part and breath comes out with the hint of sound, like he's trying to speak. He should be completely paralyzed, Tony doesn't know if it's the enhancements or his stubbornness that's letting him move at this point.

"What is it, Pete?" He leans in close, his ear next to the boy's lips to hear him if he manages to say anything.

"S'kay."

Tony nods and lets out a soft watery laugh, "Yeah, it's going to be okay. I'll make sure of it, you have my word."

He draws back only far enough to see his lips move again and quickly returns to listen. His lips shake and Tony gentle rakes his fingers through his hair in comfort. The sound comes out raspy and he's not certain what he's trying to say, "'mune."

"Mune?" He whispers to himself, catching Bruce's gaze. "Can you try again, Pete?"

"M'mune."

Bruce's eyes widen. His hand reaches out and he gently moves Tony aside so he can look Peter in the eyes. His voice is hopeful, "Are you trying to say 'immune'?"

There's a barely-there smile, but it's answer enough.

"Holy shit. You're immune?" Tony repeats, more for himself because it's clear that Peter believes this. His hands fall on either side of Peter's face and he tilts his face to meet his gaze. He says
softly, "That's why you're not afraid." That's why his eyes are calm and bright. Why he's smiling despite how much pain he must be feeling. "You are the single most bravest boy in the entire world, do you know that? We're going to get you through this together, okay?"

He drops his forehead to Peter's, inhaling sharply. The rush of adrenaline and anxiety is still humming through him, but now it's not that Peter is dying. Now he's suffering. He moves up and kisses his forehead once, unable to help himself from the simple show of affection. Right now, Peter is living a pain that should kill him, but somehow won't, and he wants him to feel reassured and cared for.

"I'm going to take a blood sample, okay, Peter?" Bruce says, "We don't know what Fénix did, and I don't want to know how you know you're immune to this venom, but I need to see how it's interacting with your blood cells and make sure you're fighting this off. If you aren't we need to start working. Fast."

His lips move, but there are no sounds.

Bruce has no choice but to take that as consent. He grabs a syringe and draws some blood. Peter doesn't seem to feel it. His eyes don't leave Tony's. If he wants comfort, he'll get it; Tony has no plans to go anywhere else.

Tony draws his hands back and leaves Peter's side to bring a chair next to the bed where he sits. He takes one of Peter's hands in his and the boy probably can't feel it through the paralysis, but he accepts that he wants that comfort for himself. While his hand is warm, he's alive.

"I'm going to look at this and send you feedback ASAP. I'll ask a nurse to get this patched up and set him up with an IV with saline to keep him hydrated. We'll give him some muscle relaxants as well which should help with the current symptoms and hopefully mitigate some of the later ones." Bruce doesn't wait for a response and leaves the room.

There's no time to waste.

A couple of minutes later the nurse comes in. Tony hasn't taken his eyes off Peter, who blinks slowly at him, lips no longer smiling because he can't manage it.

He doesn't know her name, but he's seen her face around. All of the medical staff that works at the tower has seen and dealt with enough strange injuries that she doesn't think twice about the child resting on the bed.

The wound is already clotting and she wipes away the blood that's gathered. She stitches it closed and sets a bandage over it. She stays to his other side while she puts in the IV and sets up the bag of clear liquid, not bothering to try and get Tony to move.

He's grateful that she's still in the room when he starts convulsing in the throes of a seizure because he freezes up. He's taken all sorts of first aid courses, but when Peter starts to spasm and his fist clenches into his shirt (thankfully Tony's hand had been resting over his and not clasped in his grip as he'd definitely have a very broken hand). Doing nothing is the appropriate response, but it scares him that for a second his mind blanks.

Nurse Jaz, he reads off her nametag, stands by his side and keeps glancing down at her watch to time the length of the seizure. The bed shakes and creaks, but he's as safe as he can be already laying in the hospital bed, a pillow under his head and nothing around him he could injure himself with.
Once he gathers his wits, he stands, though he keeps his hands to himself.

It takes ninety-seven seconds for Peter to still. His breathing is heavy and his eyes search the room wildly until he finally lands on Tony. He reaches up and runs his fingers through Peter's sweaty hair, smiling to reassure him.

"It's okay, Peter. I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

He's disoriented but seems to be latching onto Tony's familiarity.

Nurse Jaz double checks the IV before leaving the room, telling Tony, "I'll let Dr. Banner know of his condition. I've put some relaxants in the IV and that should hit him soon. If he has another seizure, please time it for the records. If it lasts more than five minutes notify Dr. Banner."

"I will, thank you."

Once she's gone, he places his hand on Peter's in comfort. His fingers are cold; the neurotoxin causes issues with blood flow and it's normal for the extremities to get cold quickly. He doesn't like it, but he can look up and see Peter's eyes and know he's alive.

For now.

"Can you hear me, kiddo?"

"Yes," is the returning whisper.

His muscles are seizing and locked, paralyzed more accurately, but it's not as bad as he's seen in previous victims. He can still talk and breathe. The last person had needed a ventilator minutes after being hit by Queen Cobra's dagger because their lungs had ceased to function.

"I have a couple of quick questions for you, alright? Simple things. Can you tell me your name?"

Peter blinks a couple of times to orient himself.

"M Defect," he says. His voice comes out rough but clear. His mind is coherent, it's his body that's not cooperating.

Tony takes in a deep breath to calm his nerves. He shakes his head, "Not that one. What's your new name?"

"Peter," he answers.

"Good job, kiddo. Do you know where you are?" He remembers what he needs to do from that first aid training. Similar to a possible concussion, he needs to know that Peter's mind is aware.

"At the... Tower?" Peter ventures a guess. His mind is hazy from the moment he got hurt to now, the in-between being flashes of images but mostly forgotten.

"Exactly. We're in the medbay. Bruce is going to take care of you and I'm going to stay right here. Do you know why you're here?"

"She... Eight-five... is she okay?"

He doesn't know how hard it must be for him to speak, and his heart swells with admiration for this child that simply wants to please.
"She's fine," Tony soothes. And lies. That's a conversation for when he's better. "I know this hurts a lot right now, but can you try to stay awake for me? You're fighting off the venom beautifully, but I don't want to risk it taking hold. I'm going to talk and I want you to focus on my voice, alright?"

Peter mouths, "Okay."

He talks about his mother. A lot of his life has been dark and dreary, mostly destructive. But his mother had always been a constant source of love and understanding and that's what he needs Peter to feel right now. He keeps their eyes locked to ensure that Peter's focused on him. The attentiveness he finds is warming because it's as if he actually cares to know about his mother when few others have.

"She was kind in a way my father never was. It's hard not to wonder what she'd think of me now; if she'd be proud. She would have spoiled you silly. She was the kind of mom who would have been begging me for grandkids two decades ago." He laughs softly.

When the second seizure hits, he's better prepared.

He stands and watches him carefully. He knows Jarvis is counting the seconds for him and all he can do is keep his eyes on Peter until it passes. When it does, he takes his seat again and grips his hand a little bit tighter.

"You're doing great, baby, this'll be over in no time." He knows Peter's too disoriented to understand him, but it helps to say the words out loud.

"Sir? Dr. Banner has confirmed that Peter is immune to the venom based on the blood sample. Consistent monitoring and handling are required to ensure there are no longterm effects."

"Alright, thanks. Ask Nat how things are going on her end."

There's silence as Jarvis inquires on the other end and Tony whispers softly to Peter as he slowly comes back to himself.

"Agent Romanoff informs that the subject is in Shield custody. Captain Rogers and Agent Barton are returning to the Tower as no further explosives have been located."

"She's nice... sometimes..." Peter whispers. Tony doesn't know if he can still remember his name or location, but his thoughts are still with Queen Cobra.

"I believe you, Peter. I'm going to tell you a story, alright? Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," his voice comes out softly.

He tells Peter about meeting Rhodey for the first time, and then Pepper.

Bruce pops in midway to check in on his patient. Peter's eyes are unfocused and wandering, Tony's sure his words are pointless, and he hasn't spoken in several minutes. The relaxants have run their course and he's stiff again. The muscles beneath his arms twitch every so often in spasms that must be painful. Peter can't speak when Bruce asks him a question.

"After the first seizure, he was able to tell me his name and he remembered where he was, but he's been pretty disoriented since the second one."

"Our first hour is almost up and he's holding strong. If he keeps this up we're looking good."
"You hear that, Pete? You're doing great."

There's no response.

"There are a couple of nurses close by, I called in some extra hands, and I'm going to leave Peter with them for now while I keep working on that antivenom. If I make any progress, it might make this easier on him."

"Alright," Tony agrees.

After Bruce leaves, he continues with his story. He's briefly interrupted by Natasha and then by Steve to be updated on the ongoing events happening outside of this hospital room. There's a terrible woman who'd planted bombs to deal with, but Tony hasn't thought about her once.

"They're here to pick her up; I'm going with to make sure she gets there this time. I'll be back in a few hours."

"Okay," he answers because she can't see him nod his head. He doesn't care about her right now. She threw this boy off a roof, she fought him and hurt him. Even if she had known he was immune, which was the likely case, she chose to put him through this. Any sympathy he'd had, wondering if maybe she had suffered as Peter had, is now gone.

"We're back, did you need anything? Nat told us what happened."

"No, we're good. We just have to wait this out."

Steve hesitantly accepts that response.

Tony's story continues, in between these interruptions.

"-and I swear he wanted to end me right then and there. He's had enough of my bull-um, my nonsense to last him a lifetime, but showing up to meet the Queen with my shirt inside-out was it. I never heard the end of it. He'll still bring it up. I hope when you go to school, you'll make yourself a best friend like Rhodey. You don't need the whole world to love you, all you need is someone who understands you despite the rough edges. Although, you're already a better person than I will ever be."

His eyes droop, and Tony slightly changes his tone to get his attention again. He wants him to stay awake; what if he falls asleep and doesn't wake again? They don't know enough about Peter's powers to risk it. Her venom is a neurotoxin, which paralyzes the muscles, and after all, the heart and lungs are a muscle and he doesn't want to risk their impact, not when Peter is doing so well.

"Before Pepper, no one had really put me in my place and it was a reawakening. Don't tell her that. I was never meant to be in charge of this business. I create, I don't lead, that's not... I don't want to lead. She's better at it anyway. When you're better, I'll ask her to give you a full tour of the building. Maybe one day you'll work for me. Or her, I guess. I think you'd fit right in."

Two nurses come in and kick him out for a few minutes while they change Peter and give him a quick sponge bath. The paralysis had taken its toll on all muscles, including his bladder. Tony steps out to give him his privacy and per their instructions. He leans against the wall and takes in a deep breath, smile fading as he no longer needs to pretend.

He rests his head back and he takes a few steadying breaths.

As someone who's never held much sense of preservation, Tony's overwhelmed. This feeling is
wholly unfamiliar. He has loved, of course, his parents and Jarvis and Rhodey and Pepper, but this is new. Odd. If he could switch places, so that he could be the one hurting instead, he would. Instantly and without hesitation.

The two nurses step out, after a few minutes have passed, and he steps back inside. He goes to Peter's side and takes his hand in his again. His eyes are closed but he blinks them open when Tony approaches.

"Hey, kiddo. How are you feeling? They gave you more drugs, right? You should start feeling a little better soon."

Peter's response is a gentle hum.

There's a third seizure, not long later.

Tony stands and waits for it to pass. It lasts for three minutes. He brushes his fingers through his hair again, trying to comfort him while his eyes flicker through the room.

"Hey, kiddo, I'm right here. Can you look at me?"

It takes a few seconds longer than it should, but Peter's eyes lock onto his.

"What's your name?" He asks.

"Four... Four-seven...?"

"Mm. Not quite. Not anymore. Do you know my name?"

Peter's gaze is searching as it looks him over, trying to identify him. The spark comes back, as things click back into place, "T-Tony Stark? And I'm... I'm Peter."

"That's right." He smiles, glad to have him back.

Then suddenly there are tears and his stomach drops. Peter's crying, completely noiseless. As if it's somehow wrong for him to be crying in this situation, where his body is fighting against him at every turn.

Tony shushes him softly, reaching up to kiss his forehead and then his cheek, giving him as much affection as he needs.

"It's okay, baby. I know it hurts, I know this is awful, but you'll get through this, I know you will. You're so brave and strong, you're the best superhero in the world. Better than Iron Man and Captain America. I believe in you, Peter." He squeezes his hand and the other pets his hair.

Peter cries, the pain too overwhelming no matter how 'used' to the pain he might be.

Tony had lost his parents young, he's had metal embedded in his chest, he flew a bomb into a wormhole, and yet this is the worst pain he's ever felt.

His thumb brushes away the tears and he whispers more reassurances. He stops silently crying once the relaxants have run their course and he's paralyzed once again.

The minutes roll on. Tony talks to fill the silences, and Peter tries to stay awake through the pain. He's surprised when Clint walks in with a mug in his hands.
"Hey, Tony. Thought you might be in need of some caffeine." He hands him the mug full of warm coffee, "How's the kid?"

"He's managing. He's outlived everyone else, but..." He shrugs.

"He'll be okay. He's a strong kid, he's going to get through this." Clint gently pats Peter's arm and smiles at him. "You've got the best people looking after you, you'll be okay."

Tony takes a deep sip of coffee.

"There's no harm in stepping back for a bit, you know? Take a bubble bath, eat dinner. Hovering won't do you any good." Clint knows he couldn't do this if this were his own child, but he hasn't quite figured out Tony's stance yet in regards to his young ward.

"I'm okay," Tony says. "Thanks for the coffee."

"No worries. Let me know if you or the kid need some food. I'm not far."

Clint understands this feeling, though he's never had to feel it himself. As a father, and then as an Avenger, he's had nightmares about the sort of horrible things that could befall his children. There's not a single thing in the universe he would not do to ensure their safety, and he knows Tony's not quite there, but he also knows he's on his way. Once you fall in love with a child, there's no going back. That child is yours, shared blood or not.

"Thanks, Clint," Tony says. He briefly takes his gaze off Peter to lock eyes with Clint, "I'll let you know if we need anything."

He nods and leaves the room, leaving behind silence. Tony leans back in his chair and prepares to wait.

Chapter End Notes

I have a thing for Tony calling Peter "baby".

As someone who doesn't care for romantic relationships, I've always associated it more to a parental term of endearment rather than a romantic one and I think it's cute, so here it is :)  

Also, I will be away for four days, so I may put the next chapter out tomorrow night and then I won't upload until the middle of next week. If I don't put it out tomorrow it'll be up next week!
Nurses come and go, Bruce pops in to check on his patient, but otherwise, the room stays empty for the next few hours.

Peter's fever rises, effects of his body fighting off the venom, and they give him different medication. He squirms in pain but there isn't another seizure and Tony tries to consider that a victory. He throws up a couple of times, his stomach quickly empties of its earlier lunch and only comes up with stomach acid during the last bout. Tony holds the trash to his lips and helps move him to his side to make it easier on him.

Bruce gives the okay for him to sleep, what was likely the worst has passed, and he gives him some morphine to ease his pain.

Peter's eyes slip closed as he stares at Tony. He squeezes his hand once in comfort, hopeful that when Peter wakes again he'll be feeling better.

It's Pepper's presence that finally pulls him out of the room. She steps into the doorway, fresh off a flight from Washington, and greets him gently, conscientious of the sleeping child. Tony stands from his seat, body sore from being still for so long, and meets her in the doorway.

"Hey, Pep."

"Can we chat?" She gestures to the hallway and he hesitates.

"I don't want to leave him alone in case he wakes up."

"Jarvis, call someone in to keep an eye on him, please," she says and the AI answers immediately.

"Yes, ma'am."

She takes a step back. Tony glances quickly at Peter, sighs softly, and follows her. Peter's sleeping soundly and Jarvis is always alert. There's no need for him to hover.

He follows her to the room over, empty and sterile. She takes a seat on the bed and pats the spot beside her, and he obeys her wordless request.

"How's Peter?" She asks kindly.

"Well, he should be dead but he isn't, so that's a thing that's happening."

"Living despite the odds; sounds like someone else I know," she teases gently.

"He also has superpowers, apparently. Mostly the same ones as Queen Cobra, minus the venom, I
think. Although with him being immune maybe I'm wrong." He rubs his hands together anxiously and stares down at the ground. If he meets her gaze, she'll see things he's not ready to discuss yet.

"And how are you doing?"

"I don't know," he admits honestly, and repeats a little more softly, "I don't know."

"It's hitting you pretty hard, isn't it?"

Suppose she's never needed to look him in the eyes to know his thoughts. He nods and looks at her, pushing through a shaky grin, "Apparently. He's a good kid," he says as an explanation, a poor one and they both know it, "She wanted to take him away. I don't know where, and I don't know why, but he decided to fight with us instead of going with her, and that's... I don't know."

"I said not to get attached," she reminds him. She smiles and he only hums in response. "But I think you're both attached, and maybe that's not so bad. Despite everything he's gone through, he can see that you're a good man and that you're looking out for him. He believes you and that doesn't come from nowhere. There's a lot to figure out with these powers and his relationship with this woman and what's going to happen from here on out, but we're on the right path. I know it."

"You really think so?" He has to ask because he doesn't feel nearly as confident as she's sounding.

It feels like he's walking face-first into a wall at every turn, every choice he makes a mistake he can't take back. He shouldn't have let Peter off that elevator, he should have fought harder on that roof.

Maybe he should have left Peter with Shield. Maybe he should have pushed for information. Maybe he should have left him in Bruce's hands, or under Natasha's watchful gaze. Maybe he shouldn't have grown attached. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

Because there's nowhere good to go from here.

"Mhm. I really think so. I know you're being hard on yourself like you always are, but you're doing good, Tony. That boy is kind and intelligent and gentle and he chose you. That doesn't seem like much, but it's enormous! He's known this woman for years, he considers her a friend, and he fought to protect you and Natasha."

"And if he wasn't immune to her venom he'd be dead right now."

"But he isn't, he's alive, Tony."

Jarvis interrupts before he can retaliate in what would undoubtedly become a pointless argument.

"Sir, Peter has woken and is in distress, Dr. Banner requests your assistance."

"Shit." Tony rushes out of the room with the familiar click of Pepper's heels right after him. They didn't go far and they're there in seconds. He throws open the door and surveys the room.

Bruce is standing next to the bed, the person Jarvis had called upon to watch over the patient in Tony's absence, and Peter is sitting up in the bed, face red and blotchy with tears. He's rocking back and forth, one hand holding the blanket close to his chest and the other pressed against his mouth to hold back sobs.

Tony takes the side of the bed opposite Bruce and tries to meet Peter's gaze, but he's staring down at his lap.
"What happened?" He asks Bruce.

"He woke up way earlier than he should've and thought... I think he thought, well..."

"Well?" Tony pushes.

"He thought you were gone and I was here to..." He gestures vaguely, "Test on him, I suppose."

Tony nods in understanding. He looks back at Peter and places his hand gently on his shoulder to avoid startling him. "Pete, kiddo, can you look at me?"

He does as asked. His hand falls away from his mouth and he sniffs, "I-I didn't think you were coming back." His voice is shaky and there's a stray tear running down his chin.

"Of course I was gonna come back. Why wouldn't I come back?"

He sniffs again and his eyes shift to the side, "I thought... Are you mad at me?"

"I'm not mad, Peter. There's no reason for me to be mad at you. Why would you think that?"

"I lied and lying is bad."

Tony sighs gently. He takes a seat on the bed, sitting sideways to look at Peter. He moves his hands to his cheeks, thumb brushing away the old and new tears. He guides his face until their eyes meet, and he smiles softly.

"That's true, lying isn't good, but I understand why you did it. And it's okay, Peter. I'm not mad. Not at you. I promise. You did so well, and I'm so proud of you. And I'm sorry I lied too. I said I wasn't going to go, and I did. Can you forgive me?"

Peter nods and wipes at his own tears aggressively, "I'm sorry for crying."

"You never have to be sorry for crying. I know this is scary and overwhelming and you're still in a lot of pain, but we're in this with you, alright?" He waits for Peter to nod again, and then he turns to Pepper, "Can you get some tissues, Pep?"

"Of course."

He turns to Bruce next, "Is it the immune thing that made the morphine pass that quickly? Can we give him more to help him sleep?"

He takes the tissues Pepper gives him and uses them to wipe the boy's face and nose clear, giving him some to blow his nose properly. He's focused on him while Bruce responds.

"I'm sorry, Tony, but I've given him the max for now, I can't give him anything else for at least another five hours. It's possible his metabolism functions like Steve's and burnt through the meds, but I don't know enough about his biology to make that decision. I'm not risking an overdose after everything he's gone through."

His lips purse in displeasure, but he has to agree. He takes the used tissues and throws them out.

"Alright, I'll keep our patient company. You can head back to the lab, see if you can make any progress. Maybe see if you can get a reading on his metabolism through the blood sample? We don't know how long this is going to last, and if the meds we have don't work that's not really efficient."
"I'm on it. I'll come to check up on you in a couple of hours, Peter. I know you've had an upset stomach, but we can try to give you a bit of soup soon if you're up for it. If you can't eat by the end of the day, we might set you up with intravenous feeding, but I'd rather avoid it if we can. Take care, Peter, I'll see you soon." He pats his hand kindly and exits the room.

Pepper approaches the bed where Bruce had stood. She brushes back Peter's sweaty hair and smiles at him, "Hi, Peter. I'm sorry I stole Tony away from you, but he's all yours now. I'm going to go take care of some paperwork. Try to get some rest, okay?"

Peter nods and tries to smile.

"I'll come by later with some food. Let me know if you need anything," this she directs to Tony.

"I will, thanks."

She steps out, and Tony is left alone with Peter.

"What now, Mr. Stark?" Peter asks softly.

"Now you lay back and try and get some rest," Tony replies. He gets Peter to lay back down in the bed, head hitting the pillow with a gentle sigh. He has no idea how hard it must be for him to even move right now, which is telling enough for how distressed he'd felt at his absence.

"I'm not very tired, Mr. Stark..."

"What did I say about the 'mister' nonsense? And don't worry, I have a plan for that. What book are you reading right now?"

"The, um..." He has to pause and think, the last few hours taking its toll on his memory and mental state, "The Encyclopedia of Dog Breeds," he answers eventually.

"Perfect. Jarvis? Send someone up to get that book. Thanks." He slips off the bed and takes the seat he'd previously been occupying. "How are you holding up, kiddo? Hungry, thirsty, sleepy?"

Peter shrugs. "I'm okay, Mr. Stark. Um. Mr. Tony."

"Points for trying," Tony teases, "But let me know if you change your mind. I'm no mind reader, I need you to tell me if you need something, alright?"

"Alright," Peter agrees.

He draws the blankets up to his chin, fingers curling into the material, and he simply stares at Tony as if he could answer the question of life itself. It's odd, to have someone look at him with this level of trust.

In a couple of minutes, Steve steps into the room with the requested book. He hands it to Tony and smiles at their patient, "Hello, Peter. I hope you're doing well."

Peter's quiet, though he tries to smile politely.

"Thanks, Steve," Tony says.

Steve nods, "I hope you feel better soon."

"Thank you," he says quietly as he leaves the room.
Tony flips through the book in search of a bookmark, but there is none. "Where you at, kiddo?"

"Page 57," Peter answers.

"Perfect. Alright, scoot over. We're going to read together, how does that sound?"

"That sounds nice," he says with a bright smile. His right side is wounded and Tony takes a seat on the bed to his left, avoiding the injury. He kicks off his shoes, pulls up the blanket, and slides beneath it. Peter moves to the other side of the bed giving Tony enough room to lay back beside him. He reaches over and reclines the bed using a small remote, so that he can lay back and hold the book comfortably, rather than laying down completely.

He bends his legs and rests the book against his knees. He flips to the correct page and starts reading from the top-left of the page. This is a chapter on beagles; none of it is interesting enough for him to care and he hopes it'll help put the child to sleep.

The bed is small, but so is Peter. They fit comfortably enough but he can feel his warmth against him from proximity.

Peter's looking over, eyes flickering over the words as he reads them out loud.

Tony ignores what this might look like from the outside. All he cares is that Peter is in pain and he needs to do what he can to help. If reading to him is the best he can come up with, well, he hasn't exactly had all the practice in the world for this.

"-they are generally 13 to 16 inches high and weigh between 18 and 35 pounds, with females being slightly smaller than males on average. They have a smooth, somewhat domed skull with a medium-length, square-cut muzzle, and a gumdrop nose. The jaw is-"

Peter's eyes blink repeatedly as if fighting the fatigue, but eventually he succumbs to it. He slides down, head resting on his shoulder and body inclined slightly towards him. He can't help but smile at the pain-free expression on his face. Tony closes the book quietly and places it on the bedside table. His leans over, his cheek pressing into the top of his head, and he doesn't notice as his own eyes slide closed.

His nap doesn't last long. He's up twenty-something minutes later and he's warm.

Peter's shifted completely to his uninjured side and is curled against Tony. His face is pressed into his shoulder, and Tony leans down to kiss the top of his hair.

He hadn't thought this through, obviously. He stays in the bed to keep from waking up Peter, no matter how uncomfortable it's getting laying huddled in a small bed still wearing jeans. He slips his phone out of his pocket to play some horrible mobile games while avoiding the unread texts.

"We have some homemade chicken noodle soup for Peter when he's ready for it."

Pepper's text obstructs his view of Candy Crush and he responds mostly to get it out of the way, "Who cooked? We shouldn't follow this up with food poisoning. Also, he's asleep right now."

"Don't worry, Natasha cooked. He'll be safe. Do you want something to eat now, or wait for Peter?"

He's not inclined to explain his situation, and answers simply, "I'll wait it out. I'll let you know when he's awake and ready to eat."
He swipes away her response and continues with his game. Nearly an hour later he feels Peter stir by his side. They're still a couple of hours from his next morphine injection and the pain can't make it easy to sleep. The wound itself is healing nicely, at least, per Bruce's last checkup.

"Hey, kiddie," he greets. "What's your name?"

"M'Peter," he says.

"Remember where you are?"

"Mhm. At the Tower." Peter doesn't move, only tilts his head enough to stare at the phone in Tony's hands.

"How are you feeling?" Tony can feel him shrug against him, "Still sleepy? Do you think you could hold down some food? How's your stomach?"

"I'm okay," Peter says.

"That's not even remotely convincing. Wanna try again?"

"No."

Tony chuckles. He wonders what kind of personality Peter could have developed, had he grown up in a loving home. How he could have taken the world by storm with his brains and his charm. He'd have been a nerd; Tony can tell. Playing DnD on the weekends and nose buried in thick textbooks. He wonders if he'd have found him. Or if this was fate's way of introducing them (if that's the case he wants some words with this so-called fate).

He likes the boy that Peter is, but... he wonders. He can't help it. He's had these thoughts about himself; what kind of man could he have been if his father had loved him? If his mother hadn't left him too early?

"Think you can eat? Nat's made some soup, just for you."

"I think so."

He texts Pepper, and she and Bruce come down with their dinner. He slips out of the bed and gently repositions Peter into a seated position. He takes his previous seat as if he hadn't moved at all. They come in with a warm bowl of soup for Peter and a plate of grilled cheese for Tony.

They set up the bed tray in front of Peter and put down his bowl. Tony puts his own plate in his lap, munching on his sandwich. He's not really hungry, but if he doesn't eat he's sure Peter won't either.

Peter takes up the spoon and sips slowly at his soup. Bruce looks him over, pulling back the bandages to check on his injury and nods appreciatively.

"We'll be taking out those stitches in no time."

"Made any headway on your end?" Tony asks him.

Bruce shakes his head, "Some but not enough. Sorry, Tony. His DNA is very unique, I've never seen anything like it. I've sent some data off to Cho, but we'll need more samples."

Peter shifts nervously and Tony quickly adds, "Which we'll discuss later. For now, do what you can with what you have. How's the soup, Pete?"
"It's very good, Mr. Tony. Thank you."

"We'll bring in a cot, so you can spend the night," Pepper says next. "Bruce said a nurse will come by to administer the morphine as soon as possible, and they'll put him on some monitors, so if he wakes up or if there are concerns they'll check up on him."

They hadn't connected him to anything other than the IV because of the seizure concerns. Having wires all over him would be more of a risk than a help, especially with Tony and Jarvis monitoring him so consistently.

They stay to chat for a little while, Peter's eyes half-lidded but determined not to fall asleep. When it starts to get late, they prepare the room for the night. They get rid of the dirty dishes and a couple of nurses come in to do a second sponge bath for Peter to get rid of the fever sweats before helping him into pajamas. A cot is brought in and placed next to the bed.

Bruce attaches Peter to a couple of monitors, the beep of his heart rate an echo in the room once everyone leaves them alone.

"You feeling sleepy yet, kiddo?"

"A little bit."

"Mhm. Just a little bit." Tony shuts the door and takes the seat next to the bed, which has now become his seat. "Why don't you lay back and rest your eyes for a bit, hm?" He presses the button to lower the bed into a laying position. Peter stares at him with wide eyes. He knows that look.

"That's a question face. What's up?"

He thinks the kid might actually flush with embarrassment, and that's very new.

"Can you... I mean, do you think... Will you read more? Please?" Peter asks hesitantly, eyes averted as if he'd asked for the biggest inconvenience.

Tony smiles and takes up the book on dog breeds, "Of course I can do that, Pete."

He intends to put the book in his lap and start reading, but he sees Peter shuffle and knows what he truly wants.

The boy's touch-starved; he's never known affection other than from a woman who wanted to use him, somehow. Tony considers himself the worst person to help him in this, but there's no one around to see and Peter needs it. No child should go without a comforting touch and a hug. He ignores that little thought, that little dream, of pulling Peter into his arms and never letting him go.

He'd put on his shoes earlier, but he kicks them off again. He doesn't bother changing into something more comfortable because he doesn't want to leave Peter all on his own. He won't risk a repeat of earlier. He lifts the blanket and slides under as he'd done that evening. This time, Peter doesn't hesitate to curl around him.

The light in the room dims, but there's a light over his head that gives him enough to read the words. He talks and talks. His voice is sore and Peter's eyes are closed, but he keeps on. It's only when his own eyes can hardly stay open that he sets the book down. His hands settle in his lap and his head slips to the side, cheek pressed against Peter's hair.

As often as he'd dreamt of falling asleep next to Pepper, one of the few constants in his life, he thinks he'd be okay if this could be his every day too. Knowing that this boy is safe and
comfortable by his side would only be the greatest comfort.

Except, he's going to break both their hearts because he knows what the future has to hold for Peter. He has to go to Shield.

Chapter End Notes

Saw Dear Evan Hansen this weekend. I baaawled.

I hope you enjoyed the cuteness. And the ending...

Don't hate me...?
I bask in all your frustrations... :)  
Also THANK YOU! Your comments give me life, I swear. You're all amazing.
Now for what loads of folks have been asking for... Natasha and Peter have a chat!

There are no interruptions for the entire night. Peter sleeps soundly by his side, resting and healing, the worst of the venom passed and his body trying to recoup.

Tony wakes up and plays with his phone. He answers texts from the other Avengers, inquiring on Peter's health. He's happy to share good news. The fever is there, but low, hardly any sweat on his brow to see. And he's slept the night, he knows he would have woken if Peter had. He's certain of it.

"Kid's good. You making breakfast, Capsicle?"

Steve takes it literally, "Are eggs okay? Jarvis tells me that's what he's been eating for breakfast lately and says it should be okay."

"That's fine."

He sends Clint a quick, "Kid's good. Tips for getting drool off clothes?". He won't say anything to anyone or read it to be anything other than what it is. There had been understanding in his expression when he'd told Tony to ask if he needed something because he understands Tony's position better than anyone else.

"lol nope" is his useless response.

And no one can understand Peter better than Natasha.

"Tell me when he's awake, I want to chat."

They text until Peter wakes up. He gets the boy his food. The soup had stuck, and Bruce had no concerns with giving him some eggs. Steve walks in with two plates, one for Peter and one for Tony. He hasn't been this well fed in years.

"How are you, son?" Steve asks.

Tony's sat up the bed again and Peter digs into his plate with vigor, "I'm good," he manages between bites.

"Don't worry, he hasn't been honest since he got here," Tony says with a pointed look in Peter's direction that's ignored. "Kid's got that suffer-quietly shit going on. I mean stuff. Don't say bad words, Peter."
"Yes, sir," he mumbles as he's eating.

"Good boy."

Bruce pops in to change his bandages. Steve's standing in front of the bed and he takes the side Tony isn't sitting, "Everything's looking good here. We'll probably be taking those stitches out tomorrow. Do you know if you have some sort of healing factor? You're healing really nicely."

Peter nods, "Yes, Dr. Banner. It's not very good, but it works."

"Never been in a cast in your life, have you?"

Peter's head tilts in confusion, and that's answer enough.

"I think it works better than you think," Bruce pats his hand, the one with the slightly crooked bone from a bad healing, "Those broken bones healed pretty well on their own."

"Oh."

"Peter, how do you feel about me taking more blood from you? It's a small needle, and I don't need a lot. This isn't for some sort of testing or experimentation; I'd like to get a better understanding of your DNA to create some painkillers for you, just like I did for Steve." Bruce looks to him for backup.

"That's right, Peter. I have a feeling you're a lot like me, from what I understand. I also have enhanced strength and healing. I was given a serum a long time ago to make me stronger. But that also meant I couldn't take normal medicine. It's been hard when I'm hurt or sick to have any relief, but Bruce here has made some great medicines just for me and it's really helped. That's all he wants to do for you, too."

Peter wraps his arms around himself, eyes falling on Tony.

"We don't have to do this right now. He's doing alright; I think the pain is fading. We can work on that stuff later when he's completely better," Tony says for him, knowing what he wants to say without needing a word.

"That's okay. I have no problems with that. We're not going to do anything you don't want, Peter, you have all our word on that," Bruce says kindly.

Peter smiles, perhaps feeling the genuity of his words. "Thank you, Dr. Banner."

"I'm going back to work, I'll come back in a couple of hours to see how things are going."

Steve leaves not long later, taking the dishes with him. Tony wants to shower, but he doesn't leave Peter.

Pepper texts that she's taking care of Tony's things for the day (not that he was going to do half of them), but he appreciates her wholeheartedly.

"Thanks, Pep. I owe you twelve-thousand or something."

"You do."

He does.

Peter, however, is well enough to go to the bathroom and take a quick shower on his own. He
insists he is, anyway. While he's out of the room, Natasha makes her way down with that laptop in her hand.

"Hey, Tony."

"Kid's washing up."

All of the rooms in his med center have attached bathrooms for efficiency, and the door is currently closed to them. She pulls up a second seat and sets the laptop on her thighs.

"He's doing alright?"

"Yeah, he's okay. He ate breakfast and he's up and about. He's a tough kid."

"I see."

Peter comes back into the room still dressed in his pajamas. He stares at Natasha and carefully climbs back into the bed. There's been a tension there from the start, and none of them are quite sure how to fix it; if they even want to fix it.

Natasha opens the laptop and clicks around in silence.

"So we're going to talk about the elephant in the room." Peter's obviously confused by the unfamiliar metaphor, and Tony presses on, "You have powers like Queen Cobra. That's what you've been hiding from us, right?"

Peter freezes and stays quiet.

"It's okay, Peter. I'm not mad." Tony takes the laptop from Natasha. He sets it down in Peter's lap, "There's more to you than I know right now, more than any of us know. Except for you and Natasha. That can't be helped, unfortunately, but it doesn't have to be any more than that. She says there's nothing that's need to know, so... if you right-click right here, and hit delete," he clicks for him and the option presents itself.

"If you click that button, everything that has to do with you, Peter, Four-seven, Defect, it'll all go away. Only you and Natasha will know the truth." Tony takes his hand in his and squeezes, "I don't need to know anything about you that you aren't ready to share."

Peter's hand squeezes around his.

"Why?"

Tony frowns, "Why what?"

"Why don't you want to know?"

"Because it doesn't matter. You're alive and healthy; the rest is information that doesn't matter."

"I don't understand."

"You were born August 10th, 2001," Natasha says, cutting in. They both look to her, and her lips quirk into a gentle smile, "That means you'll be nine in a month. Your mother was Mary Fitzpatrick, a biochemist that worked with Fénix. From what I understand, a lot of their people weren't completely aware what was happening in those labs, and when she found out they wanted to use her newborn son for experiments she tried to run away with you. She... didn't survive, I'm afraid. As you know. There's no mention of a father anywhere and there's no extended family, so I
can't give that to you. Anything else there is to know about you, you know too, and that's for you to share."

"Mary... Fitzpatrick...?" Peter repeats, working the name on his tongue. That was his mother. He'd known, of course, that he'd had a mother and father (he knows biology), but to have a name makes her real, somehow.

"Yes. Mary." Natasha takes the laptop for a second, skimming through other documents. She brings up the scan of an I.D and shows it to Peter; framed in the square is a woman with her brown hair drawn back in a ponytail, eyes brown and friendly, freckles across her nose and cheeks. A lab coat peaks out from the bottom of the image. To the right of her face is her description.

'Mary Fitzpatrick, Biochemist, Floor 4, Access 6.'

"That's my... mother?" Peter's eyes have widened in wonder.

"She was a brilliant scientist and she would have been very proud of you, Peter." Tony watches Natasha as she speaks, confused by her sudden change of heart. He wants to know what she knows, but he won't. Not until Peter's ready to tell him himself.

"Proud of what?" The bitterness in his words startles them both, "I've never done anything. I don't know anything, I can't fight, or-or I won't fight and that makes me useless. I was made to fight and I won't because I'm not brave enough! Because hurting people makes me sad and that means I'm weak. No one can be proud of that."

"I'm proud of you, Peter," Tony says. "I-"

"Until it stops being pretend. Then you won't be proud anymore." Peter brings his knees up to his chin, setting the laptop down in front of him, and wraps his arms around them. He stares at the picture of his mother and asks, "So what now?"

"What now?" Tony repeats incredulously. "For now, nothing. You're still sick, you still have a fever and you're still in pain. You're staying in this bed until Bruce says you can get out of it. And then we'll talk more."

"Okay," is all Peter says.

Natasha leans forward to take the laptop, she closes it and sets it aside for now; his file still open and waiting to be deleted. "Tony, can you make us some lunch? Maybe stop in for a shower while you're at it." She teases with a grin.

The message is loud and clear. He nods, "Sure. I'll see you guys in a bit." He runs his hand through Peter's hair affectionately, but the boy doesn't acknowledge him. He could stick around and try to convince him that he has no intention of using him, but he thinks this conversation might be better suited for Natasha. He's okay with tapping out for now.

Once he's out of the room, Natasha leans back in her chair and kicks her feet up on the side of the bed. She crosses her arms over her chest and sighs softly, resigned to her choice. She parts her lips and tells her story.

"I've never found a name. I don't know who my mother or father are. Or were, I suppose. You had your Doctor, and I had my Madame. I was taken as a baby to a place called the Red Room to train in the arts of combat and espionage and she was there every step of the way to make sure I never failed her. And when I failed," she holds up her hand and stretches out her fingers. There's a break in the bone, healed as poorly as Peter's. "I was locked in those rooms for years, asked to do things
that... You're not alone in this, Peter. The way you grew up is not normal, but it's not unheard of."

"Where is your Madame?" Peter asks.

"Same place as your Doctor," she responds simply. "I wanted to speak to you mainly to apologize for the way I've been treating you. With your hearing, I imagine you've heard a lot of the things I've said. When we found you, I thought we were too much alike, and that scared me. The Red Room was efficient, and I didn't know how Fénix might be in comparison. If they had turned you into something like me."

"Are you... do you also...?"

She shakes her head. "No, my little spider friend, but the world knows me as the Black Widow for a reason. There's no need for a serum when there's the Red Room. They made me a monster, just what they wanted. I killed a man before I learned to braid my hair. They taught me how to hack a high tech facility before teaching me how to wash my own clothes. So when I saw you, I thought you'd be a monster too. But you aren't."

"I'm too weak."

Her movements are quick and precise; her feet fall back to the floor, she leans towards him, and stares at him with a piercing gaze, "You couldn't be more wrong, Peter. You are too strong. Fénix never had a shot of breaking you down." Her words are said with such vehemence that it startles him.

His eyes widen and his lips part, ready to counter her, but she shakes her head and he stops.

"They tried to brainwash you, Peter. And they failed. They strapped you to a chair and used videos to instill thoughts of violence into your subconscious and it didn't work because your heart is so full of kindness and compassion. Because your willpower is strong. They beat you and hurt you and did all sorts of horrible things to you, and yet here you are - the last of Fénix alive and free. Is that not something to be proud of?"

His fingers wrap tightly into the fabric of the blanket laying in his lap. She continues.

"They wanted me to be nothing; to feel nothing. And for a long time, I let that happen. But I've been allowed to see the world and know how much beauty there is in it. There isn't a monster around every corner, not everyone is out to get you. There is love in the world. It's out there, you just have to be willing to let it in. And trust me when I say I know how difficult that seems right now."

"But what happens now?"

He's fixated on that, and she's not sure what's going on in his head, "The plan doesn't change. You stay here until you're better and then we'll find you somewhere to live that's safe and happy and where an eight-year-old should be."

"But... but I'm a freak. I exist to fight and I can't do that!" He wipes away a falling tear. His eyes are watery and his bottom lip is trembling slightly. She doesn't want to push him further, but this conversation isn't over yet.

"Where did you hear that word?" She slides off her chair and sits on the bed, taking the spot Tony had once sat to comfort him. Her knee is propped up on the bed so she can turn her body towards him. She sets her hands in her lap and watches his expression carefully.
"That's what they called me. I mean, that's what they called me to each other, they always called me Defect when they talked to me. They'd say, 'get the freak back to its room', and it... it's true. I'm not normal, so I'm a freak." His right hand is rubbing his left wrist.

Natasha takes his hand and turns it over, staring at his wrist's soft skin. She's unsurprised that Bruce had overlooked the small opening; it was nearly impossible to see if you weren't expressly searching for it.

"This is where the web comes from, right?"

He nods. "Normal people don't have that."

She hums softly, "I've never seen anyone else with this before, but that doesn't make you a freak. There's no such thing as 'normal' in reference to humanity; we're all different from each other in our own ways and that's what makes us interesting. You happen to have these amazing powers they forced on you. That doesn't mean you can't have a life. That you can't have a family and friends and an education. If you never use your powers ever again, that's your decision. There is not a single person who will tell you that you must go out to fight for us. Anyone that tries will have to go through me and Tony, and not a lot of people are dumb enough to try."

She squeezes his hand. He wipes away another tear, feeling overwhelmed by her words.

"Can... can we make the information go away?" His eyes slide over to the laptop.

"Of course." She opens the lid and hands it to him. All he needs to do is choose to delete the file. "How did you know about the killswitch?"

Peter shrugs, "I heard Dr. Ortiz tell Dr. Wallis when we got to our new home after we got found by some bad people. They made it to protect the information."

"I see. And you didn't want anyone knowing about you or your powers? That's why you used it?"

His fingers press carefully, and he presses down on the mouse. A loading bar appears as the computer deletes document after document, report after report.

He'd started as Four-seven, the foury-seventh experiment and the first to succeed.

Then, when they couldn't turn him into a weapon, they named him Defect. Only he and Natasha know that they had only kept him alive as a tool from that point onward. They wanted his blood, they wanted tests and experiments. He wouldn't fight, but he was still theirs. They refused to kill their only success. Especially since, after fourty-seven, it took the eighty-fifth try for it to work again.

Now he's Peter. The loading bar completes, and Four-seven and Defect are gone for good.

He looks at her and answers her question, "Yes. I don't want anyone trying to make more like me. It... it doesn't work. I saw some of the other kids... I remember this one girl. She didn't speak English and she was scared and they didn't want me to know there were other kids but I could hear them. My hearing's very good. They took her passed my room and she was crying and talking in this other language and I couldn't do anything. I... she died, I know she did. They all do."

Natasha takes the laptop and puts it on the bedside table.

"If the information is gone, then no one else gets hurt."
The killswitch. Rhodey finding him destroying a lab. His silences and secrecy. Peter sneaking into Bruce's lab for the laptop.

All he'd wanted was to protect those that could get hurt because of that data with no sense of self-preservation. Natasha sees a lot of Tony in him, and she knows he's going to be just fine.

They'll find him the most loving family and he'll be the safest child with the Avengers watching over him from a distance.

She's excited for him to discover everything the world can be.

Chapter End Notes

BTW I want to clarify - I'm equating brainwashing to hypnotism, as in some people are more susceptible to it than others. It's not so much a show of strength or willpower as it is the way your mind works. So I'm not saying people who fall prey to brainwashing are weak (I.e Bucky). I just don't want anyone to take this the wrong way.

Also - Tony's decision to leave Peter with Shield will be explored in the next chapter! This chapter was about growing the relationship between Nat and Peter, two people who've experienced very similar things. And the reason she was doubtful of him in the first place.

Cheers :)

Chapter Notes

Ahh... your comments give me life honestly. Thank you all so much!

I hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The hell, Tones?!"

Right. Rhodey. As much as he'd spoken of him to Peter, he hadn't actually spoken to him.

"The kid almost dies and I have to find out through Pepper? Really, Tony?"

"I was a little distracted, sue me."

"That got old twenty years ago. Alright, so? How is he?"

"He's getting better. It was rough going there, at first. For a bit, I thought... It doesn't matter. He's a really tough kid. He had a good talk with Nat earlier, I think that's helped a lot. He still has some doubts about our intentions, and I can't blame him after all he's gone through."

"If anyone could get through to him it'd be Nat. Suppose she's warmed up to him, then?"

"I guess so." Whatever had been in Peter's file, it had been enough for Natasha to change her mind about him. "You should drop in when you can, kid's not gonna be here forever."

"Calling up CPS once he's better?"

"I think it's about time." He doesn't want to tell Rhodey about Shield just yet.

"You gonna be able to let him go?" His tone is teasing.

Tony bristles, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Um, nothing? I was just joking. Although now I think I want to ask it seriously."

"Sorry, it's... Pepper said I was attached. And sure, I like the kid, but I'm not attached."

"Whatever you say; I didn't mean anything by it. I've got a meeting to head to, but I'll try to come by next weekend if I can. Keep me posted on how he's doing, I want to know."

"Sure."

Rhodey knows enough about Tony's commitment issues to know he is definitely attached.

Tony, on his end, has a lot on his mind.

Peter stays in his room in the medlab for the next three days. On the first, Bruce takes out his stitches and considers the wound mostly healed. On the second, Peter's fever breaks and he's
starved, eating to refill the energy spent on his healing. On the third, he's sore but better and sits
cross-legged on the bed with his book in his lap. It's clear he's growing restless, however, he's too
polite to say anything.

Tony stays the nights with him, making use of the cot. Likely because he's no longer delirious,
Peter doesn't ask for his comfort again. He'll slide into the bed to read with him, and then returns to
the cot. He knows it's a good thing; it means Peter is healing.

He still wakes up multiple times and sits up, glancing over to the bed and the monitors to make
sure Peter's okay.

He is; his chest rising and falling gently with each breath. Tony lays back down, heart a little less
heavy by the reassurance.

When it's finally time for him to leave the room and return to their shared floor, Peter's smile is
wide and he's clutching his book tightly. He'd be pretty ecstatic too; Tony's never been a good
patient and hates being trapped in a room.

The other Avengers have prepared a sort of picnic, if takeout counts (there are juice boxes, so that's
something), and they all settle up on the roof for lunch. They have all sorts of training areas and
living spaces in this building, but outside of it there isn't much privacy and Tony insists this boy
gets some sunlight. He'd promised, after all.

Peter sits by his side the entire time, watching the adults talk with curious eyes. He digs into
everything, a little more at ease with eating his fill perhaps now that the 'why' he needs so much
food has been addressed. Everyone's relaxed, seated and chatting and eating away.

Steve and Natasha are talking strategy, although it's more that Natasha is trying to get him to ask
out the receptionist from the dental office he'd gone to a couple of weeks ago while he tries to
change the subject uselessly. Clint is pestering Bruce with Hulk puns and jokes, which leads Tony
to explain to Peter what a 'Hulk' is. He tells him about Thor next, the Avenger he hasn't yet met.

"Next time he's on Earth, I'll ask him to pay you a visit. But you have to promise that I'll still be
your favourite Avenger."

"I promise," Peter agrees with a smile.

"Atta boy. Here's a cookie."

There's no rest for heroes, however, and there's a call for backup in California, where some plant-
monster thing has taken root. Tony stays; the other's go. He's surprised that it doesn't ruin Peter's
good mood. They stay there on the roof for a few more hours, munching on the leftovers and
talking about the sounds they hear and the things Peter points out in the distance.

That's how things settle over the next few days.

Peter sticks by him almost every minute of the day. They're both eating at least three meals a day,
though he's sure to give him snacks as often as possible. The soreness leaves him within two days
and Peter doesn't ask, "what now?" again.

That question sits heavy on Tony's shoulders.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, Peter," Bruce says, doing a final checkup later that week in the
medical center and the room Peter had been staying in.
The wound is healed, the thinnest hint of a scar. He checks his blood pressure and reflexes and flexibility, making sure there's no damage to his muscles or nerves. There doesn't appear to be any long-lasting effect from her venom, once someone's outlived it, and Bruce confirms he's in good health.

"You've put on some weight since you got here, and with the tablets you've been taking every day, I'm certain your vitamin levels have evened out. You're looking good."

"Thank you, Dr. Banner."

“I wanted to come back to what we were talking about the other day, now that you're doing better. How do you feel about me taking a blood sample from you? This would be for medical purposes only,” Bruce asks.

Peter shrugs and stares down at his feet.

Tony presses his hip against the side of the bed beside him and crosses his arms over his chest. He stares at Peter curiously and asks, “You don’t have to answer this, Peter, but what is it about us taking a blood sample that worries you so much? Is it the needle that you don’t like?”

Peter shrugs a second time, “I don’t like them.”

“Me neither,” Tony says, “but if the issue isn’t the needle itself, can you tell me what is? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want you taking my blood.”

“Why’s that?” He presses gently.

Peter cautiously meets his gaze and admits, “I don’t want more of me.”

Tony frowns, “I’m not sure what you mean by that. We’ve still got a ways before cloning is a thing.” The joke falls flat.

“No, not that… I don’t want more like me. It… it hurts people. My blood. My data.” He runs his finger up and down his forearm as if staring at the blood and DNA beneath the skin.

“I promise, Peter, that we’re not using your blood for anything that isn’t medical. I want to make some medicine for you; I have no intention of trying to recreate what they did to you, to someone else.”

It’s obvious Peter remains uncertain, whether the doubt lies in their honesty or in their ability to keep his DNA secret, Tony’s not entirely sure. He pauses to think for a moment, and smiles triumphantly when he thinks of something.

“I got it, kiddo,” he pats his shoulder, “How about this. You let Brucie here take your blood and you stay with him every step of the way. Nothing happens with it without you knowing exactly where it is and why he’s doing it. That way, you can be sure the information isn’t going anywhere.”

“Oh.” Peter smiles hesitantly and glances at Bruce.

“That’s a great idea, Tony! I’d love to have you in the lab with me, Peter. I could definitely use an assistant.”
It isn’t a quick process.

Tony holds Peter’s hand while Bruce takes the blood sample and he stays with them for several hours across different days.

Peter hovers beside Bruce, looking into the microscopes and the data pulled onto a tablet and goes over everything Bruce writes down more out of curiosity than concern. At the end of each day, Bruce packs everything up; the samples go into the fridge with labels and the equipment goes into a lockbox. He gives Peter the code and reassures him that no one can get into any of it without either of them knowing about it.

He has no problem giving a second sample when asked for it, having used up the first one on tests, and both Bruce and Tony are relieved that they’ve managed to soothe his worries. Being able to follow his blood from start to finish has eased his fears.

They still have their three meals a day together, and Tony tucks him into bed every night.

Some nights, he wakes up every few hours with his heart racing. He sits up and asks Jarvis to tell him if Peter’s alright. There’s no camera in the room, but there’s one in the hall and Jarvis has heard nothing and Peter hasn’t left the room. He lays back down and tries to fall asleep. That first night, he leaves his room and peers inside Peter’s room, just in case. The boy’s in the bed, sleeping soundly.

Tony takes advantage of having a full-time babysitter to sit down with some of the other Avengers where Peter can’t overhear him nearly a week after his recovery. Steve, Clint, and Natasha were able to gather around him in a random office.

“Peter’s doing well.” They all try to pop in on him when they can, but Bruce is picky about who he lets near his work. He goes on to what needs to be discussed, “I’ve been thinking about nothing else for the past few days, and I’ve decided that Peter needs to go to Xavier’s School and be in Shield’s care.”

The room falls silent.

Natasha speaks, frowning and eyes hard, “What are you talking about? You were the one most against it!”

They’re seated around a table and he sags back with a sigh, “I know.”

“What’s changed your mind?” Steve asks.

“The other option is CPS, right? But Peter can’t go to some civilian family. With the powers that he has… He’s so young and we can’t know that he knows how to control them and obviously he’s not great at hiding them. A civilian family can’t deal with that. If they find out they might get scared and throw him out or they might see it as an opportunity.” Clint looks away first.

“And even if we were to screen these people and tell them ahead of time and they decide they’re willing to do this, they won’t know how to help him if something goes wrong and they won’t be able to teach him how to use his powers properly.” Steve looks away second.

Natasha is stubborn, “We’ll still be around. If something goes wrong, we’re here. Xavier’s is far. And that’s not a family. He needs a family, Tony.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t. Fuck, Nat, this isn’t easy for me, okay? But there’s too much that could go wrong. He lashes out once in the classroom and he could seriously injure another kid. Or the
family up and takes him away and we’ll have no right to tell them not to. They might not even want us to see him, and anyone that adopts him will have the right to make that choice.”

“Instead he grows up in some boarding school with nobody? We can find him a family here in New York. We can insist on fostering, then they can’t do anything without CPS approval. Or we do this under the radar and we screen whoever the fuck we want and get him where we want him.”

“I’m the first person to say that boarding schools are the absolute worst, but even worse for Peter would be ending up in a family that pretends to love him and then calls him a freak or tries to get him to do things for them because he has these amazing powers. We can’t screen every family in the city, and even if we do, what if we find nothing? Everyone’s money hungry or power hungry.

Or they’re kind but the second he gets into that teenage angst phase he slams a door and it breaks and then what? Or Queen Cobra gets out of jail again and goes after him. Or Fénix has enemies we don't know about and these people are put in danger. Civilians aren’t prepared to raise this kind of child. At least if he goes to Xavier’s, we can visit and we’ll know he’ll be taken care of. He can make friends with people that are like him. Then when he’s old enough and they say he has enough control or he can hide his powers better, we reconsider the adoption thing.”

"Why involve Shield? If they know about him, they'll want to recruit him when he's out of school. We can get the faculty to keep him secret, they don't have to know he exists."

"Xavier's isn't an orphanage, Nat. Someone has to be responsible for him and it has to be Shield."

"Why?" She presses.

"Because there's no one else. Unless you're up for being the boy's mom, it's either Shield or an actual orphanage and I'd rather take my chances with the people who know what they're doing when it comes to enhanced individuals."

She's too invested in fighting people all across the globe to be a mother. She's a spy and a warrior and an agent; there's no place for motherhood there. Not yet, at least.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You could be responsible for him."

Steve and Clint glance between them, choosing to keep quiet.

Tony lets out a sharp laugh, his expression darkens. She refuses to be daunted and keeps their gazes locked stubbornly.

"Do you see me as a father?" His eyes glance over each of them. They look between themselves and Tony interprets it as agreement, though in truth it's the opposite. "Thought so."

Natasha crumbles and is the last to look away.

“He wants a family,” I promised him a family, she doesn’t say. Tony thinks the same thing.

“I know. But he’s a smart kid, he’ll understand why this is the best choice for him.”

No one adds to the conversation; not much to say in the face of honesty.

Tony doesn’t break the news to him right away. He lets Peter enjoy his time in the lab with Bruce.
He talks to Shield on the side, making arrangements. He’s set up a bank account for him, with enough funds to get him a doctorate if he so chooses and everything in the years in-between. Xavier’s is happy to welcome a new student, and promise visitation allowances and will keep Tony in touch with Peter’s progress.

Natasha heads to the training room to vent her frustration and that’s where Clint finds her several hours later sweaty and fatigued.

“Hey,” he greets. He takes a seat on the bench against the wall and watches her pummel the boxing bag.

“Hey,” she returns. She punches, kicks, punches, and stops. She turns to him and starts taking off the tape around her wrists, “Did you consider it?”

He nods, “I did. We did. I talked to Laura, but… we have two, going on three. Peter’s a good kid, he’s brilliant and I’m sure he wouldn’t be a handful, but we can’t, Nat. Even the best kids have their moments and Tony’s right. I don’t think he’d be violent, but if he gets into a tussle with one of my kids he could hurt them. He could kill them without meaning too. Laura has her plate full with two and her pregnancy and with me not being around so much without adding a kid with superpowers to the mix. We feel for him, we do, and we’d be happy to have him down on holidays or during summer vacation, but we can’t have him fulltime.”

She sighs. She throws the tape into the trash and sits heavily by her friend’s side.

“Thanks for trying.”

“Xavier’s isn’t so bad. They’ll let us visit. We’ll take him for a couple of weeks for the summer, and you can stay with us. I’m sure Tony will bring him here for Christmas. It’s… It’s almost better, isn’t it? A kid with that kind of power is better around people who can protect him.”

“Or detain him,” she says spitefully.

“…Yeah,” he quietly agrees. After a pause, he adds, “I thought Tony might…”

“Me too. He still has this fear of turning out like his father and by the time he realizes what he wants it’ll be too late.”

The two sit there in silence, thinking over the ‘what could be's.

A few floors above, Bruce figures out the antivenom and makes some painkillers that will work for Peter’s metabolism and all the while getting a deeper understanding of how his powers function. His bones are dense, explaining the discrepancy with his weight, and aside from his strength, speed, and agility, he also produces a webbing he can eject from his wrists. It’s fascinating how Fenix managed to incorporate spider characteristics into a human body. However, he tones down his enthusiasm to keep Peter from feeling like another experiment.

As interesting as it all is, at the end of his research, he puts everything into a box. Notebooks, loose papers, the syringes and petri dishes and containers that touched his blood. Together, they take the box to the incinerator and they burn it all away.

The only thing they keep is the formula for his medication and the antivenom.

There’s no longer a trace in the world of the data flowing in Peter’s veins and that night he sleeps well.
I would love to hear your thoughts! :)

I only have a general understanding of Xavier's, but I essentially made it fit into the story; an 8-year-old would not necessarily be left at some boarding school without a guardian, and Shield is an organization that could take on that responsibility (same as how an orphanage is an organization, not one person). Not sure it makes sense outside my brain, but suspend your disbelief?

Next update won't be at least until next Wednesday or Thursday as I will be away for a few days, so I hope this tides you all over until then :)

Take care!
Tony has never once bitten back his words; he'd stood in front of the world and told it he was Iron Man rather than read a script. He has been callous and rude and hurtful. Sometimes on purpose, sometimes not. He can count the number of times he's said 'I love you' on one hand because he only says it if he means it. Pepper has spent half her time under his employment trying to fix the damage his words have caused.

Yet, he sits down Peter and the words don't come.

The first time, he deflects.

"Take a seat, kiddo." He pats the spot beside him on the couch. Peter gently sits.

His eyes are wide and bright and full of joy and he cracks.

"You know, you've been in New York for a while and you haven't seen the Statue of Liberty yet and that's just plain wrong. What do you think about playing tourists for a day?"

Peter's head tilts and he asks in that curious tone Tony's grown to adore, "What's the Statue of Liberty? And what's a... tourist?" He hesitates on the word but gets it out correctly.

"Let me show you."

They spend a day as typical tourists; Tony wears his incognito outfit and wrestles Peter into some shoes. That's nearly literal. Peter's getting a little mouthy in his familiarity and Tony is here for it. He buys them lame 'I <3 NY' t-shirts and they walk the streets and see the sights. They stop at some vegan place for fake burgers because he's guessing they'll be gentle on Peter's stomach.

Not quite, but Peter insists it was the most amazing day and Tony can't help but agree with that.

The second time he tries, Peter is eating strawberries out of a bowl while doing homework in the living room. Xavier's is still a regular school beneath all those superpowers, and Peter has a lot of work to do to get where he needs to be. He's also really into fruits right now. He's never had sugar growing up, and the natural sugars in fruit are definitely hitting a craving he hadn't known existed.

He's excited to introduce him to candy and chocolate just to see the look on his face.

"Hey, squirt."

"Hi!" Peter looks up with a smile. His lips are stained red from the strawberries and there's a juice stain on his cheek.

"How's your reading?" He asks over his shoulder as he heads to the kitchen for a dishtowel.
"It's good," he faintly hears Peter through the doorway. They're going over grammar; Peter can easily make sentences, but school requires that he knows the parts of sentences and that's a concept Peter's never been introduced to.

He wets the dishtowel and returns to the living room and slides in next to Peter. He wipes the cloth across his hands and face to clean them. "You're getting strawberry juice all over," Tony chides gently.

"I'm sorry," it's muffled as the cloth wipes over his lips.

It doesn't really seem like the time. Instead, he sets aside the dishtowel and takes up his homework, going over it with him patiently.

The third attempt doesn't even get started as Peter starts in on his own difficult topic.

"Mr. Stark?" He asks as Tony sits on his bed, body angled towards him and tucking the blankets around his small frame. He has some colour in his cheeks now, not looking like he's never seen the sun in his life anymore, and he's put on weight, however he still feels too thin as he pats down the blanket.

"What's up?"

Peter's fingers fiddle with the top of the blanket, tucked under his chin and he looks away and asks quietly, "Where is she now?"

"I'm guessing you're not talking about Pep or Nat, huh?" This wasn't the conversation he'd wanted, but he's surprised it's taken him this long to ask about it. Peter shakes his head in response. He sighs and explains, as gently as he can.

"Do you know what the Raft is?" Another shake, "What about prison, or jail?" Another shake. This couldn't be easy, of course. "Okay, so... there are these places where we send people after they've done bad things. Like break the law. The Raft is a place we send people with powers, because it's better equipped to keep them contained. Prison is for civilians. They stay there for a set amount of time and then they're allowed back into society."

"It's a punishment?"

"Something like that. But for really bad things. I'm not going to send you there if you say a bad word, I promise."

"Eight-five is at the Raft now?"

"Yes."

"Why? When does she come out?"

Tony takes in a deep breath.

"Do you remember what she did in Colorado? She put bombs in buildings and if we hadn't stopped it, she could have killed a lot of people. That's... that's a really bad thing to do, Peter. And she's going to be at the Raft for a very long time because of it."

"But she didn't mean to... They made her and..." Tony can see that he knows he's wrong, and it hurts to see him hurt like this.
"I think she meant to, Peter. She made it quite clear that she's not happy right now and she's doing things she shouldn't be doing. I know you like her, and that's not wrong, but people have to be held responsible for their actions."

"But she's like me. Will I go to the Raft next?"

"Of course not. You haven't done anything wrong." He reaches out and takes one of Peter's hands in his, "Look, Fénix tried to turn you both into weapons. You refused and they hurt you for it, but you stayed true to yourself. And who you are is a good person. Eight-five, or Luella I believe was her name before they got to her, well, it seems they chose her because she wouldn't fight back the way you did. She's angry and vengeful and she wanted to be a soldier. You couldn't have taken that out of her."

"But she was nice to me..."

"Oh, baby, I know she was," he brushes his hair back, heart aching for his naivety. Or maybe it's kindness. "That doesn't mean she was nice to everyone. There's one thing I don't understand though. Do you know why she wanted to take you from here?"

Peter pauses. It stretches on until Tony wants to speak, but as he's about to he finally formulates his thoughts.

"She... she's nice to me. But she also hates me."

Tony does a double take.

"What do you mean?"

"They always told her that I was the person she needed to beat in a fight to prove herself; that even as the Defect I was stronger than her. I wanted her to be happy, but I didn't want to hurt her. It always made her so mad," Peter rubs his palm over his eyes. He sits up and stares at their clasped hands. "She hated me for it. Hated that I was weak and that I didn't use my powers to help her."

"Then why would she want you with her? I think that's more reason for her to leave you behind."

"If I'm with her, then I can't fight against her," he explains simply. "She's so strong, I don't understand why they think I could beat her, but she believes it. But when she isn't mad, she's nice to me. She always said she would protect me."

"Maybe she thought taking you away would protect you."

"That's nicer to think about."

"You're safe here." Tony's words are a promise. "You won't need her to protect you."

"And when you send me away? Will I still be safe?" It's an innocent question.

One of his hands let's go of Peter's and he curls it behind his neck, he brings him forward and gently presses a kiss to his forehead, in the same manner Queen Cobra had done, but this kiss holds genuine affection.

"Just because someone else will be taking care of you, doesn't mean I won't still be looking out for you. We're a team now, Pete, you're not getting rid of me." Peter laughs at a joke he can understand, "And maybe when you're older you can be my sidekick. Ironboy."
They laugh, and the mood lightens.

"I know this is hard on you. So much has changed and she meant a lot to you, but maybe when you're older I can take you to see her. For now, she needs to unlearn some of the things Fénix put into her head. And you need to focus on yourself. Okay?"

"Okay."

Tony almost stands, but before he leaves he has to make one thing clear.

"She's not the only person who likes you, you know? I think you're a wonderful boy and you're going to be a great man someday and I wouldn't want you to be any different than you are right now. The other Avengers feel that way too. You're not alone, Peter. We're with you."

He doesn't give Peter a chance to respond. He pulls him into a hug and kisses his temple. Peter's hands hover over his sides, uncertain.

"What, um... what's this?" Peter asks, words muffled where his face is pressed into his shoulder.

"This is what people call a hug."

"Oh. It's nice."

It takes a while before he gathers the courage to try and tell Peter about Shield again.

He's doing well with his homework and they go out as much as possible. Pepper has been amazing in taking as much on as she can and then spending time with Peter when she has any free time. Though Sam had told him previously that it was normal for Peter to be a bit dependent, he still tries to get him to spend time with other people.

While he's watching television, Steve will work on sketches beside him and they'll talk about whatever's playing in front of them. Clint has brought in some legos and colouring books and puzzles, playing with Peter until the next emergency arises. Bruce is a busy doctor, but he checks up on Peter as often as he can and will sit and talk about the books he's lent him. Sam's brought in a game console that he connects to the television, he and Clint teach Peter the brilliance of *Super Mario*.

It only enforces his point when Peter presses too hard trying to pull off a jump and the controller snaps in half in his hands. The devastated and alarmed look on his face is enough to know it was an accident, but one that could happen far too easily.

Aside from Tony, and maybe Pepper, Natasha spends the most time with him.

Tony isn't certain if it's some form of apology, or it's an odd sense of camaraderie from shared horrible childhoods.

She's a relatively good cook and prepares some meals and snacks for him. She'll sit with him in silence while he does his homework and will help him when he needs it. It gives Tony the time to get some of his own work done.

Either way, he has to take him away from this. Whether it be CPS or a Shield, this isn't permanent. The next attempt has to stick.

It's been over a month since Peter first came to the Avengers Tower, and it's time for things to get
going.

Every night he tucks him into bed. He doesn't fully understand what this means.

"Had a good day with Pep? She showed you the new Starkphone, right?" Peter has the blanket up to his chin and is staring up at him with that expression of admiration he doesn't deserve. (He doesn't realize it's not admiration, it's something else altogether). Tony sits beside him, as he does every night, this time with the words on his tongue he will make himself say no matter what.

"Yes. It looks really fun."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is."

Peter hasn't asked him to read to him since he'd left the medlab. He misses it, but won't offer it himself. They're both in the same standstill of stubbornness.

"So, kiddo, I wanted to talk to you about something. You know how you always ask about the 'what now'? Now I have an answer for you." Peter meets his gaze, listening intently. "I've thought about it a lot, and the best place for you is with Shield. I want you to go to Xavier's school for the gifted; it's a boarding school which means you'll be living there full time."

"Oh. Okay."

"It's still in the US, in Wisconsin, so you won't be very far. Anything you need like clothes and food will be taken care of and you'll only have to think about going to class. I'll visit you, and you'll be allowed to come here on holidays and such. Xavier's school is for..." he won't say the word 'mutant', "it's for people like you. With unique powers. You'll be with other kids that you can relate to and they'll be able to teach you how to control your powers."

"That's... nice," Peter says, "What's a holiday? Is that often?"

"Often enough. You'll be sick of me in no time."

"I don't think so."

Fuck, he loves this kid.

"I know this isn't what I promised. But finding a civilian family for you is harder than I thought. The people at Xavier's will take good care of you, I swear it. And we'll be in touch."

"If you think it's what's best."

It doesn't feel like it, but the logic is there and he can't fight that.

He hates that Peter is so agreeable; he's breaking his promise, he should be angry. He's grown up in an environment that forced obedience, it's not in him to demand answers or push back against the choices made for him. He'd like to know exactly what Peter's thinking, but he knows he won't get that. They're a long way from full honesty.

"I do. I wouldn't say that if I didn't think so. I'm going to make arrangements for you to be picked up in a couple of days. You're doing so well in your schoolwork, you'll catch up in no time when you get there."

"Thank you. I hope I can do good."
"I'm sure you will. Let me know if you have any questions about all this, okay? I'm never far. I'll give you a phone to take with you; that way you can call me for anything. Even if you just want to complain, I'm here to listen." He runs his fingers through Peter's hair, brushing it off his face.

"Thank you."

"I love you, Peter," he says in the softest tone. He doesn't know if he's ever meant it this much. He needs him to hear this before he leaves them; he needs him to know he's loved. Being sent off to Shield and the school for the gifted will feel like abandonment, it must after what he's gone through, but he needs to know that there are people in his corner. He's not doing this because he wants to.

"What does that mean?"

Tony's not even sure how to answer this question. That's the age-old question, isn't it? What is love? How to explain it, how to express it properly?

"It means you're important to me. It also means I'm going to be looking out for you."

"Oh," Peter says. He smiles brightly and his response is as easy as one that comes from a child. "I love you, too."

Tony leaves him with a kiss to the cheek.

He calls up Fury and arrangements are made for Peter to be picked up in a few days. He hates this as much as it is necessary.

A part of him feels like he's playing at divorced parents. He's sharing custody with these other people and he's fighting just to be allowed a part of his life. What has he become in the span of several weeks? He hardly knows this child and his main interest is his well-being. What is his life, all of a sudden?

Chapter End Notes

So, Xavier's is canonically in New York, but as it hasn't been introduced in the MCU, I've moved it to Wisconsin for this story. The main reason for this is that it just seems odd to me to have the mutant school be in New York when some of the events of the MCU were there as well (when the chitauri attacked, it doesn't make sense they wouldn't have been involved if they were right there), so I moved it for logic sake and it benefits the story by creating that distance.

On another note; thank you!!! The comments I've received for this story are insane and lovely and I love all of you. I would love to hear your thoughts on this chapter :)
He gives Peter a suitcase.

It's black leather and won't be big enough to carry everything he's accumulated over the past few weeks. Tony intends to pack up and send over the rest later, but he wants Peter to have his favourite things with him.

He helps him fold up his clothes and decide what books to pack. When the suitcase is as full as it can be, Tony zips it up and sets it down at the foot of the bed. Fury will come by tomorrow to pick up Peter. Shield will set him up with fake documents and a legal identity; he'll become Peter Fitzpatrick. Xavier will only be told so much about him, just enough for Peter to be treated well.

His well-being, in general, will no longer be Tony's responsibility. It will become Shield's. Like co-parenting. Tony's paying child support and they take care of the rest.

The one thing he hadn't told the other Avengers is he needs this separation, as much as Peter needs stability. He's attached, and so is Peter. That's a recipe for disaster and he needs to pull back from this relationship.

He won't abandon him, he couldn't. But he can't be his primary caretaker anymore. Shield isn't a family, far from it, but they'll see him well. The other Avengers like him well enough, they'll look out for him from a distance. Tony isn't needed; Peter can grow and be happy without him.

But fuck. It's hard.

Rhodey comes by to see him off.

Peter's smile is wide and genuine, toothy and bright. The difference is astounding since he'd last seen him. Rhodey smiles in return and pats his shoulder. Not a flinch in sight.

"How's it going, Peter?"

"It's going good, Mr. Rhodey! I got to eat some pineapple today, it tasted nice. Dr. Banner said that the enzymes in the pineapple eat protein, so it's like it eats your tongue. Did you know that? I think that's really cool."

'Cool' is a thing Clint's recently taught him. It's like when toddlers first learn the word 'no' - it appears in every conversation and is starting to drive them all a little bit insane.

"That's super cool," Rhodey agrees.

"We're heading out to the park, wanna join?" Tony asks.

"Sure."
They've gone to different parks across the city over the past few weeks, aiming for the ones that are quieter and allow them some privacy. Peter still won't go off to play with the other kids, rather he prefers to lay in the grass and stare at bugs.

The two adults find a bench to lounge on and keep an eye on Peter who doesn't seem inclined to wander off. Tony puts Peter's discarded shoes by his side, like every other time.

His friend stares and he shrugs, "Kid has this thing against shoes."

Rhodey talks about his recent missions, choosing not to bring up the elephant in the room yet. He'd spoken to Pepper to try and get a read on how Tony's feeling about Peter's departure the following day, but he's been all business about it and she had nothing to share.

"I don't know, Rhodey. I know he cares about Peter and this must be hard for him, but he hasn't said anything about it to me. Maybe he'll talk to you?"

He hasn't; he's kept this tight to his chest, hidden from even his best friend.

Tony hasn't spoken to anyone about it. Bruce has asked, kindly, how he's handling it and was turned away with a rebuff. Natasha's gaze is poignant and it makes him feel judged; he glances away.

Clint opens up to him about his family, trying to get across a point he's purposely ignoring.

"I'm not there as much as I want to be, but I love my kids and I know I'm a good dad. Took a while for that to sink in, though. Being in this kind of position, makes you think it's impossible to be good for them, to give them a good life and raise them right; didn't realize kids just need support. They don't need that T.V lifestyle, with the dog and white picket fence; they just gotta know they're loved and that they aren't alone. I think anyone can do that for their kids, if they try hard enough."

It's not so simple. Why can't any of them see that this isn't simple?

How can he give something to this child who's had nothing his entire life? Tony isn't a parent; he's hardly an adult. He can't reinforce bedtimes and healthy eating when he doesn't do that himself. He can't teach this child who grew up surrounded by horrible and cruel people that there is such a thing as love when Tony can't look in the mirror and be happy with what's there.

His mouth is dry and all he wants is a fucking drink.

(He won't while Peter is still his responsibility, and doesn't that mean something?)

"How's the kid feeling about tomorrow? Has he said anything?" Rhodey asks, venturing into the restricted territory because he wants to know. He glances over to Peter; he's sitting in the grass and staring down at what's probably some ants or another sort of bug. He could hear them, but Rhodey wants to believe he's too invested in the bugs to listen.

In Tony's defense, as much as he hates the idea of the kid living in a boarding school, he's not sure what he'd do with a kid with superpowers either. Unable to have a private conversation, tantrums that could go south real quick, and a kid that heals quickly might not be as conscious of danger as one that doesn't. Add the trauma on top of that... He won't deny that Peter's a wonderful kid, but the baggage just stacks and stacks.

"Nope. Nothing. You know how he is."

The boy smiles when he's in pain, will greet a robot and say please and thank you to an AI, and
will forgive those who've hurt him the most. There isn't an ounce of selfishness in Peter's eight-year-old body. He will never admit to being unhappy.

"Guess so. Has he seemed okay, though?"

Tony shrugs, "I think so. I assume it's not going to be easy on him, a bunch of new people and a new routine, but everything is new to him and he has to start somewhere."

"What if he doesn't want to go?" Rhodey asks.

"I wouldn't know. He'll never say so."

"But if he did?" He presses. "What if he told you he didn't want to go? What would you do?"

"No clue," Tony shrugs, "But it's not like there are other options."

Rhodey ventures deeper, because he wants to try.

"You know, Steve and Nat would probably be pretty good at helping him control his powers. And even Bruce could help, I think anger management is an important part of making sure he doesn't hurt anyone on accident."

"I don't want to hear it from you too, okay? You've known me long enough to know this is a horrible idea."

"Why do you think it'd be such a bad idea to adopt him?" Rhodey says the word they've so far all avoided. Because if Peter stays, the only option is to adopt him. As he'd told Tony on day one, he isn't a pet. He can't just keep him around because he wants to. And Peter deserves better than that.

Tony stares at him, face impassive.

"Why don't you?"

"Look. I know you don't want to talk about this, and I'm not going to make you. If you don't think you're up for it, then it's for the best that you don't adopt him. It'd only make you both miserable. But for what it's worth, I think you'd be a great dad. You're already great with him."

"I really, really, want a drink right now," Tony says, gaze steady. "That's all I can think about. He doesn't need to grow up in a home with an alcoholic father too focused on his work to pay him any attention. Peter has options and I'm giving him the lesser of two evils. Even if he doesn't understand that yet."

"You're being too hard on yourself."

"And you're biased. What's new?"

The thing is? There's not a lot of time. At nine tomorrow morning, a helicopter is scheduled to pick up Peter and take him to Wisconsin. Then there will be nothing left to say - unless Peter says it himself and Tony's made it clear he won't.

Rhodey knows that convincing Tony Stark that he is worthy of being a father is something that would require more time than they have. He can't force this on him; can't try to push his opinions on him in the chance that he agrees without properly thinking it over. Because that wouldn't be fair to either of them.

No matter how blind he's being about it all. There is no other adult in the world as ready to raise
this child as Tony is, but he's willfully seeing it as responsibility rather than love and paternal affection. It's not even so much that Peter is clearly brilliant, his mind a treasure trove of brain power that's fit for molding and learning. He'd be the perfect assistant in Tony's lab; respectful, and patient, and curious, and intelligent.

It's not that; the kid could be as dim as a brick (and with his upbringing that would have been a perfectly reasonable result) and Rhodey knows Tony would sit there and teach Peter shapes and colours perfectly content. And that's why he'd make a good father. Because there is that layer of unconditional love that comes from claiming a child as yours.

Rhodey's never felt that himself, but he's seen it on the faces of new mothers or fathers, holding their newborn for the first time. Or the way Clint's whole face glows when he talks about his daughter wanting to learn archery or his son saying his first word. Tony's already called him up randomly to tell him about Peter's reaction to a certain movie scene, or the face he'd pulled after eating a food he didn't like but pretended he did.

"Doesn't make me wrong." Rhodey isn't wrong, but what matters is whether or not Tony will see that himself in the next few hours.

"Let's agree to disagree."

He's not willing to agree, but he nods anyway.

"You've never listened to me before, why start now?"

"Exactly."

Tony looks over to Peter.

His eyes flicker around, but he can't find him.

He's gone. No trace of him where he had been sitting quietly only minutes earlier. He stands and his head moves frantically, searching for the child that's no longer where he'd once been. His throat goes dry and his stomach drops.

What? Where is he? What's happened?

He and Rhodey were talking and he'd taken his eyes off him and now he's gone. This is why no human being's safety should be his responsibility; he's shit at this. An eight-year-old has disappeared and it's his fault. His heart is racing; he feels his stomach turn uncomfortably. He wants to vomit and shout all at once. He shoves his hands in his pockets and turns in a full circle, Rhodey also looking around anxiously in his seat.

They know so little of Fénix. They don't know how many enemies they might have, how many of them know that Peter exists. His life could be in danger every minute and Tony had foolishly taken him out in public because he couldn't stand being in his own home. It was suffocating and too full of memories he wants to forget. Now his boy is missing.

"Peter?!" Tony calls out. His pitch is high with worry, the one word full of stress. "Peter? Where are you?"

He could have run off, scared of Shield and unable to say so. Maybe someone snatched him. Maybe he's hurt. Maybe he's simply wandered off and he's been hit by a car or there are more aliens or-
His chest is tight with worry. He remembers Queen Cobra falling, her blade out and catching Peter in the hip. Those seconds had passed slowly; this feels the same. Like watching a car crash and not being able to stop it. Then it was as if his throat had closed knowing (or believing) that Peter was going to die because of her venom.

"I'm right here, Mr. Stark."

The voice comes from above and he spins around. His eyes flicker up and there's a tree behind their bench. Peter's sitting on a branch, several feet above ground and legs swinging without a care in the world. His stomach settles, his lungs can fill with oxygen once again. He hadn't realized he hadn't been breathing.

"What are you doing up there?" His voice is rough, distressed; he can't manage indifference. Not when his heart is still beating wildly in his chest.

Peter points to the corner of the branch that meets the trunk above him, where rests a pile of twigs, "There's a bird's nest. I wanted to see it."

Tony wants to scream, wants to shout at him until he understands why he shouldn't get out of his sight without letting him know and he takes in a deep breath to calm his thoughts and his nerves.

His fingers curl into his palms to stop the trembling. His mind is spinning and all he wants is to focus, for just a second.

The branch he's sitting on is high above the ground, with no clear ways to climb there. He asks, his voice still strained, "How'd you get up there?"

"Oh. I can stick to things," Peter explains. Probably sensing the mood, he inches to the edge of the branch and presses his hands to the bark. Tony's not quite sure what he's seeing as he... climbs? Crawls? down the side of the tree. "Are you mad? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"What... what are you...?" Tony glances around, relieved that no one had seen that.

"I can stick to things," Peter repeats, "Like spiders. It's my skin, I think." He stares down at his hands curiously.

Another superpower to add to the mix. Great.

"You can't just... don't wander off, okay?" Tony walks up to him and wraps his arms around his shoulders, bringing him in for a hug. Peter's face presses into his stomach and his arms wrap around his waist. His fingers grip his shirt and Tony might not ever let him go.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"I'm not mad. I was just worried," Tony whispers.

"Worried about what?"

"Something could have happened to you. Be more careful, alright?"

"Oh. Yes, sir."

Peter doesn't understand where this is coming from, Tony can tell, and it makes him need another deep breath to steady himself. He wants to raise his voice and knows it won't help.

He glances back at Rhodey.
He doesn't like the look on his face and is quick to look away.  

"Were there any eggs in the nest?" Tony asks, stepping back from Peter and letting his hands rest on his shoulders.  

The boy smiles, innocent to the anxiety he'd caused him. The whole moment becomes unimportant because he isn't in trouble and it's done him no harm. Peter talks about the bird's nest; still being built with no eggs to be found. Tony guides him back to the bench and plops down beside his best friend. He tugs him in beside him and watches fondly as his toes curl into the grass and he talks and talks completely freely.  

His heart rate is slowing to a more normal pace and the world has righted itself.  

They don't stick around much longer since Tony currently can't stand the thought of Peter being more than two inches from him despite knowing everything's fine. Rhodey stays quiet and that's more judgment than if he were to say his thoughts aloud.  

Peter happily follows them back into the car and stares out of the window in wonder. The sights are still utterly fascinating to him; Tony has found it endearing but now he can only think about how naive this child is. Are all kids like this? Has Clint ever felt this way? This can't be normal, can it?  

They're met with an unofficial going away party back at the Tower. It's not an actual party because that would be far too overwhelming for Peter, but Pepper has ordered in some catering, little sandwiches and salad, and they gather on the roof for some fresh air. Sam's brought up a speaker that's playing some soft rock and they've laid down some blankets for seating.  

It's a little odd to see a group of adults, and the Avengers no less, sitting on the ground like children.  

Peter sits next to Tony, and Natasha takes his other side. She's stolen Clint's GameBoy and is introducing him to Pokemon.  

"Do these exist for real?" He asks her.  

"No, they're all pretend."  

"Oh. It doesn't seem very nice to fight the other animals..."  

Her lips quirk into a smile she tries to suppress. "They only faint, see?" She defeats the Ratata and he reads the comment at the bottom stating that the enemy has fainted. "It's like play-fighting. No one really gets hurt."  

"That's good."  

They still haven't seen Thor, which is unfortunate (yet good because that means no godly threats), but Tony still fully intends to drag him down to Xavier's to introduce him to Peter when he next shows up. The others are scattered around them, the whole team chatting and mingling and telling jokes.  

It's nice and relaxing.  

"-we've been together as the Avengers ever since. There's still a lot of things in New York we're working on repairing, but so far we've been able to protect a lot of people and that makes it all worth it."
"So you're like... an army?"

"More like a team," Natasha explains. Peter has asked about the Avengers and she's told him their story. A little censored, but accurate. "We're here to stop the things normal people can't. Like aliens and superpowered people."

"Like me." The tone isn't as self-deprecating as it's been in the past, but it's too impassive for the weight of the words.

"No, not like you. We fight bad people. Those who are willing to hurt others to get what they want, because our main priority is protecting the innocent."

"Oh, I see. It must be nice, stopping the bad people and helping the good ones. I'd like to do that too."

Tony, deep in conversation with Pepper sitting beside him, turns and pats his thigh once, "Not until you're at least twenty-five." His focus returns to his CEO and Peter shrugs.

"Guess I need to wait."

"I think that's for the best." She agrees with a smile. "Another sandwich?" She hands him one no matter what his answer was going to be and goes on to tell him more stories.

They stay there for hours.

None of them bring up Peter's departure since there isn't much to say about it. Natasha mentions Shield in her stories, trying to give Peter a positive impression of the organization to ease any worries he might have. There's no indication whether her words are helping or not, Peter's trying as hard as they are not to talk about his future.

As the sun slips beneath the horizon, a string of tall buildings in the distance, Peter blinks more and more as he fights back his fatigue. The city brightens with its own lights and the boy eventually slips to the side, head resting on Tony's shoulder. That he can feel comfortable enough to do so warms his heart, and he brings an arm around his shoulders to keep him in place.

The 'festivities' end not much later. The others take care of the food and other items around them, and Tony focuses on Peter.

He guides him off his shoulder, his eyes searching sleepily for something to land on. Peter sits up, but he's still tired and sluggish. Tony kneels and gently takes him into his arms. Peter knows the drill and wraps around him as he'd been taught.

"Alright guys, we're off. Spiderboy here needs to get to bed. See you tomorrow."

Everyone bids them goodnight in hushed voices.

"Can I be Spider-man? Like you. When I'm twenty-five." Peter whispers against his neck while he carries him to the elevator.

"Sure, Pete." His hand rubs his back in a motion he doesn't realize he's doing instinctively.

"Cool."

He laughs at the overused term and slowly takes him to bed, where he tucks him in as he has every other night.
Thank you, once again, for the lovely comments! You're all wonderful people :) I'd love to hear your thoughts on this fluff-filled chapter!

Peter Interlude next... Let's see what's going on in his mind!

I hope you enjoyed this chappie! I've never had that panic of losing a child myself, but I have caused this to plenty of adults in my life (woops) and hope it came across right.

Domestic!Tony is my kink lbr. I need to add that as a tag, don't I?
Here is our Peter interlude... :)  

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Peter interlude...**

He's not quite sure how he would explain the sensation out loud if he was asked to describe it.

It burns, but he's cold. His stomach is empty and cramped but he feels like he would throw up anything he could manage to eat. There are tears across his cheeks and rolling down the side of his face. He wants to claw off his skin to make the pain go away.

Another needle pierces the thin skin of his inner elbow.

Above him is one singular lightbulb, so bright that he's nearly blinded by it, save for the faces of the doctors he knows far too well hovering in his vision. They're stern, expressionless. They don't have a care in the world for what they're doing to him, they only want to know if this concoction will render him immune to Eight-five's venom.

His hands tug at the bindings wrapped around his wrists, but they know his strength better than he does and they hold strong.

His blood hurts. His skin is growing warm and itchy and he tugs and tugs in search of freedom. It doesn't come.

"... so weak, Defect..."

"Stop crying. It's annoying."

"Do you think they'll treat you any better? You'll always be the defect. Always."

He's choking; he can't breathe. The oxygen disappears.

He's in a box.

"Without us, you would be dead... maybe some time in here will help you understand why you need us."

It's made of metal and he can't break free. His powers are useless against the people who gave them to him. He knows he can't breathe so deeply, but he can't help it. He just wants to breathe. And he can't. His shoulders are pressed into the sides of his small prison and his heart races in fear. Will they let him out before he dies?

He blinks, and he sees his hands stained with blood. His own, of course, as he won't fight anyone else.

He blinks, and he's cradling his wounded ankle. His trainer was upset by his weakness and kicked
his shin hard enough for him to hear the snap.

He blinks, and the world spins nauseatingly from a new injection of brightly coloured liquids they won't explain to him.

He blinks, and he's peering through a scope. They want him to shoot the body at the end, but he can't. He's struck and brought to the quiet room, where he is strapped down in darkness for hours on end.

He blinks, and there's Tony.

"Hey, kiddo. Come here." His arms spread out for what he's recently learned to be a hug.

"Kill him, boy. Kill him and you will be free."

He can't.

His eyes fly open and the room is dark. He sits up in panic, heart racing and his body coated in sweat. He breathes in large gulps of air, feeling as though he hasn't been allowed to breathe for ages. His hand goes to his cheek and it comes away wet from tears.

He sniffs and wipes at his face.

The bed is big and warm and he feels like he's being suffocated. He throws off the blanket and sets his feet on the carpet. His nerves are on fire and he's still not certain this is real life.

He looks around; there are his books, there's the window to the New York sky. He's wearing pants with funny cartoons on them he doesn't recognize. He looks at his hands and they're unusually clean. This is real. He wants to believe that it's real.

He pushes himself off the bed and stands on wobbly legs.

Just a nightmare, he tells himself.

The window gives him a good view of the bright New York City buildings around them. It's the middle of the night; there are no stars when he looks up but lots of people are walking around when he looks down. The city that never sleeps is still awake before him and it's oddly growing familiar.

So many years in silence made it easy to accept all this noise because it means he isn't back there. He isn't trapped. Fénix is over. That's what they say.

The nightmares don't happen often. They used to be more prevalent, especially once they renamed him Defect and were no longer kind to him. He hasn't had one since being brought to the Avengers Tower.

It's the fear.

He's going to Shield tomorrow, and then he's going to this school for enhanced kids. He's uncertain what any of that means for him. Will they be kind, like Tony and Pepper and Dr. Banner? He's never been around other kids his age before, and he doesn't know if he should expect them to behave like Eight-five, or will they be entirely different? In the movies Tony shows him, sometimes the other kids are mean. He doesn't know what to do if that's the case, or what to say or how to behave. Is he meant to obey, is he allowed to ask questions? Will they test him and hurt him?
All he knows for certain is that he will never have a 'mom' or 'dad' like other kids, like the kids in
the movies. No aunts or uncles, no grandparents, siblings, or cousins. A part of him does want to
consider Eight-five as something akin to a sister, but he can't figure out if that's a sentiment she
returns, or if he was ever only a tool for her. Tony and Natasha both said they were sending him to
a family, it had been a promise. He's not upset that they're breaking their promise; it must be
difficult finding a family that would want him as a son. He wants to believe they tried, at least.

That's the point of being the defect, after all; a broken and unwanted tool.

There are still tears on his face and he wipes at them. Right now what he wants most is a hug. He
doesn't understand why they make him feel so good, but being held makes everything scary seem a
lot less imposing. Tony's in bed, not that he'd go to him anyway, but he can't stand staying in the
room right now either.

He opens the door slowly, wondering if the AI will reprimand him for leaving. He hasn't done that
so far, not even that last time when he'd wandered into Dr. Banner's lab, but maybe now he will. It
stays quiet.

There's no desire to wander and he makes his way to the empty living room and curls up on the
sofa. It's always the perfect temperature in the building, however, he still pulls the blanket off the
back over himself. He wraps himself up comfortably and rests with his eyes on the slightly parted
curtains. There's a strand of light peeking through.

He doesn't want to fall asleep again.

He curls his fingers into the blanket to hide the pale skin, still catching glimpses of blood that isn't
actually there.

The Tower sounds much like the Fénix base; in the distance, there are heartbeats, footsteps,
electricity whirring in the walls and over his head and below his feet, clicks and clangs he doesn't
know the sources of. There are newer sounds. A TV a few floors beneath him, probably one of the
Avengers who hadn't yet gone to bed or who had woken just as Peter had. There's music playing
somewhere. A door opens.

It's Tony; there's no one else on their floor and that sound was too close to be on a different level.

He waits silently as the steps approach.

"Hey, squirt."

Peter glances up to watch him walk into the room. He's in cozy looking pajamas and Peter wants to
run into his arms to steal some of that coziness.

"Hello," Peter returns.

Tony stops in front of the couch and runs his hand through his hair affectionately, before taking a
seat at his feet. His hand lands on his blanket-covered ankle and squeezes gently.

"I'm sorry for waking you, Mr. Stark."

"No worries, kiddo, I was still awake. And even if I wasn't I'd want you waking me up if you
needed too."

"Won't matter anymore, right?"
Tony's thumb rubs up and down against his ankle bone, a warmth flowing from the gentle touch. "What do you mean?" He asks.

"I won't be here anymore, so I can't wake you up."

"Oh. Right. But you'll still be over on holidays, and we're going to figure something out for next summer. And I told you I'll be giving you a phone; you can call me at any time. Even two in the morning."

Peter nods but doesn't say anything to that.

"Want to tell me why you're out here?"

He shuffles and shakes his head.

"You sure? I see you've got a sad face going on there." Tony reaches over and pokes at his cheek, red and tearstained.

"I had a bad dream," he admits quietly.

Tony sighs softly, "Alright, come here." He reaches out for Peter who pushes himself into a seated position. He wraps an arm around his shoulders and tugs him close until Peter's head is resting on his chest. One hand curls into his hair and he kisses his forehead. He starts shaking as more tears force their way through.

Tears are weakness; that's what he's been taught. But he's never felt safer than pressed against Tony. The world can't get to him when he's being held like this, the bad dreams can't reach him. It's the relief that makes him cry; he's getting the hug he's been craving and wouldn't have had the courage to ask for.

Tony whispers and the hand that isn't in his hair is rubbing his back, "Sh, baby, it's okay. I'm right here."

"B-but not tomorrow. I'll be-I'll be all alone again and-and..." He chokes on a sob.

"It's going to be okay, I promise. You're not going to be alone." Tony wipes a hand across his cheeks, brushing away the tears.

"I don't wanna hurt anymore, Mr. Stark."

"You won't, Peter. No one's going to hurt you again. Is that what your nightmare was about?"

Peter nods, "I-I just, I don't wanna hurt anymore and I'm really scared, Mr. Stark. I know that's not brave, but..."

"Being able to admit you're scared is very, very brave, kiddo. God knows I still struggle with that. And you're going to take that school by storm and have them all wrapped around your finger in no time. If anything happens while you're there that makes you unhappy, you call me, okay? The point is for you to be happy there."

"Is there no one in New York that wants me?" Peter asks, "Is that why I have to go so far?"

Tony's grip tightens around him and his words come out rough, "No, baby, that's not it at all. It's not about people wanting you, it's about doing what's best for you. A civilian family wouldn't be able to take good care of you and you wouldn't be happy. I know it hurts right now, but it's going to
"get easier."

"Do you promise?"

"Yeah. I promise."

"Okay."

He trusts him.

If Tony thinks he'll be happy at this place, he believes him. Even though he doesn't feel like it's true.

"Now, how about we try to get some sleep, huh? We have to be up bright and early. Come on, I'll read to you for a bit."

Peter nods, body heavy with fatigue and eyes burning from all the crying. Tony takes him into his arms again and carries him back to his bedroom. The blanket is wrapped tight around him and his grip is strong. He wonders if he'll ever have this sense of safety ever again.

Tony pulls back the comforter and sets him down. He moves it back over him and presses a brief kiss to his hair. He walks over to the dresser and grabs a random book. His current one is packed away, and he glances briefly at the leather suitcase on the floor before making his way to the other side of the bed. He slips in until he's right next to Peter and settles back against the headboard.

The book sits in his lap and the room is lit up just enough for him to see the words. He reads from the beginning.

Peter curls up on his side, facing Tony's hip. A reminder that he's right here.

He doesn't want to fall asleep, though he's exhausted. He doesn't want to dream again. But Tony's here, Tony will keep him safe.

There's no fighting it off, and with the soothing drone of Tony's reading and the reassurance of his presence and the comfort of the bed, he drifts off into a restful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So's I got very minor surgery on my lower back and sitting is hard lmao but hopefully should heal up in the next few days. I had this written up and figure I'd put it out while I had the energy.

(Although praying that this will heal up quickly enough that I can take advantage of the time off work to write sooo pros and cons folks, all about dem pros and cons).

Let me know your thoughts! Not too much left from this point onward, can only torture these boys so much! (Or can I?)
Tony wakes surrounded by warmth. His eyes blink open and he remembers where he is. Peter's snoring softly in his ear and the book lies discarded on his other side. After Peter had fallen asleep, face pressed into his hip, he hadn't had the heart to leave. It takes a moment for him to realize what had even woken him.

"Sir, it's time to wake up."

"Right," he says to get the AI to stop whispering.

This room has no camera, but every room is equipped with an audio connection to Jarvis. His AI has probably spent the last few minutes trying to wake him up without disturbing Peter; luckily the boy's still sleeping soundly by his side. His face is calm, no trace of last night's tears.

He hadn't known until last night that there are different kinds of heartbreak. When he'd found out his parents had died, all those years ago, he remembers feeling like his heart was tearing itself apart in his chest. The world had turned upside-down in the matter of words, "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Stark."

After so many weeks in his care, Peter had yet to break down though Tony had been waiting for it. And then it happened. Holding him as he sobbed into his chest wasn't the same sort of heartbreak as he'd felt at nineteen, but he wouldn't say it wasn't as terrible. He was grieving for his sorrow, for the fact that this child was sad and he couldn't make that feeling go away. For the fact that this child was sad in the first place.

Tony Stark had been called heartless more than once in his lifetime in the media, and last night he'd wished it were true.

One arm is pinned beneath Peter, who's head is resting on his shoulder, and with his free hand he brushes back his bangs. He leans forward as much as he can and manages to press a kiss to his forehead.

The kid's alright. He's breathing mere inches from him.

There's a part of him that isn't accepting of the truth right in front of him. After everything, the idea of being sent off with Shield is what makes this brave boy cry?

He'll be okay, he tells himself. It's hard right now, but it will be easier. He'd promised; that's one promise he won't be breaking.
"Wakey, wakey, Spider-baby." He pokes Peter's cheek and smiles as his nose scrunches.

He hums and his brown eyes meet his.

"Wuh?" Is the hardly coherent word that makes its way out of his throat.

"Mornin'. If you want to be ready for your ride, you gotta get up and get dressed and meet me out for breakfast five minutes ago."

"I can do that," he mumbles sleepily. He rolls over to his other side, freeing Tony's arm. He's completely unbothered by their sleeping arrangements, and Tony appreciates the lack of awkwardness.

Tony gets out of the bed and sets the forgotten book on the dresser. He leaves the room with a parting, "Meet me in the kitchen when you're ready. Feel free to shower if you want to."

"Yes'sir."

The other Avengers join him in his kitchen while he's preparing breakfast. Peter has wormed his way into all their hearts, in different ways, and they all want to be there as he gets his send-off.

It's not permanent - Peter will be back for Labour Day weekend. It's the beginning of July and September isn't that far away. There's no reason for them to treat this as some sort of death sentence. It's school. It's normal.

"I'm not making coffee for all you freeloaders, one of you get on it."

Clint goes to the coffeemaker and Rhodey pushes Tony away from the stove since he can't seem to focus on what he's actually meant to be doing.

He has a proper dining table, fit for twelve people, however, they all smush themselves around the kitchen island. There are four stools and the others stand around.

It's not that he hasn't considered raising a child in this environment, but... as much as the quiet times are nice, there are aliens and criminals at every corner and that's something to think about too.

Pepper's also joining them; she worked through the weekend to be able to spend the morning with them. She stands beside him and smiles and he wonders if she's disappointed, as they all seem to be, or if she understands his position.

"How is he?" She asks him, quiet and out of hearing of the others. Except for Steve, who is politely ignoring them.

He shrugs. Why can't he lie to her? He needs to learn this skill.

She sighs and her hand wraps around his wrist, down by his side. He's not the one that needs to be comforted. He accepts it anyway.

Peter joins them not too much later. He hasn't showered since he's yet to understand that it's not a privilege, of sorts, and that it's for personal enjoyment instead. Tony loves to shower, since he spends most of his time in a lab and getting down and dirty (not in a fun way). He hopes Peter will figure that out eventually.

Rhodey passes around breakfast, eggs and bacon and toast and lots of coffee. Peter takes his plate
with a *thank you* and slides in next to Tony.

He knows all these people by now, but he still chooses Tony.

Steve is an example of unselfishness that Tony would have bet Peter had learned from him. Kindness and gentleness, moments of sitting together and talking about nothing of relevance for hours on end. Sam and Clint have worked with him on how to be a child, how to enjoy the things modern-day America has to offer him. They've brought out the laughter and smiles that had never been there before. Bruce is the doctor that destroyed all his misconceptions of what a Doctor is meant to be.

Peter has worked with him for days on end, learning and understanding the things that Fénix had done to him and beginning to make more sense of the word *normal*.

And there's Natasha and Pepper. Both caring for him in their own right; Natasha with her silent approval, by his side and helping when needed, and Pepper by trying to inspire him with his own interests. She's brought him all over this building to try and build a relationship between them on the things they both care about. Pepper is a leader, she can make something of the things Tony creates, and Peter is unknowingly filling those amazing shoes himself.

She can see an inventor in that gaze, in the way he looks between numbers and metal to see something she can't begin to imagine. She hopes that after he's done his schooling, he will return to Stark Industries to bring them to a new age. After all, Tony needs an heir.

Tony pats his back once and returns to his food.

Everyone is chatting between themselves. They try to make light of the situation.

"You ready to show up all those superkids?" Clint teases.

Peter's returning smile is forced, and he leaves it at that.

They don't know that Peter had woken from a nightmare last night, that he'd wondered if anyone wanted him.

Peter sets his empty plate on the counter while the others are still eating. He stays next to Tony and watches them. While Tony watches him.

Fuck this is *hard*.

He doesn't know what he'd do without Clint. At least one of them has some idea what to do with an eight-year-old. It's jokes and random comments until they all finish their food and hand their dishes to Rhodey who sighs.

"Remind me why I came all this way again?"

"Because you love me. Obviously," Tony responds.

"Sure."

"We'll meet you up when it's time," Steve says kindly.

The Avengers disperse.

Pepper pulls Peter into a hug, Tony's not sure what she tells him.
"You're such a wonderful boy, Peter. I can't wait to have you back. Make sure to jot down all those ideas you have, alright? Show them to Tony when you come down for labour day weekend."

"Okay," is Peter's response.

"I'll grab your suitcase and meet you upstairs when you boys are ready," she says, loud enough for all of them to hear. She slips out of the room next, and then it's time for Rhodey to make himself scarce.

The tension is growing thicker as the minutes pass, and none of them want to stick around to choke in it if they don't have to.

"Alright, pipsqueak, I'll catch you upstairs. Make sure you didn't forget anything important."
Rhodey pats his head gently and passes by Tony next. His hand wraps around his bicep and squeezes once. There's no need to say anything; he's said all he could.

The kitchen is suddenly very quiet. Peter looks up at him expectantly. There's no sign of last night's tears on his face, but his eyes seem sad and Tony kneels down to his height. Peter takes a hesitant step forward and links his hands in front of him.

"How are you feeling?"

Peter shrugs.

Tony forces a breathy chuckle and his head dips down, "Yeah, I guess that's about what I expected."

He reaches out and takes his face in his hands. He feels him smile beneath his palms as he brings him forward to kiss his cheek. When he draws back, he smiles in return and pats his cheeks affectionately, "Let's do one final sweep and then we're off. Gotta make Fury wait at least a few more minutes."

"Okay."

"Jarvis? Take a look, let me know if you see something we miss."

"Yes, sir."

Tony takes him to his bedroom first and glances around for anything that's been forgotten. The dresser is lined with books that he'll be packing up later and in the drawers are enough clothes to be a complete wardrobe. He's bought anything he sees online that Peter might like, in those early dawn hours when insomnia kicks his ass. The bed is made, as the eight-year-old always makes it despite never actually being told to do so, and the room itself is spick and span. It's not very personable, but it wasn't meant to be.

It's just a guest room, after all.

Pepper's already come and gone, taken the leather suitcase with her.

"Peter's phone is in your room, sir, and everything else appears to be in order."

"Right, don't want to forget that.‖ He'd intended to keep working on it last night but had luckily done everything he needed to the night before. And the four nights before that one. He wanted it to be perfect.
He leads them to his own bedroom next, Peter following quietly. The phone is on his nightstand. It's thin and sleek, black and a newer version to the Starkphone that even he isn't using yet. He hands it over to Peter and gives him a rundown of it. He'd known exactly when Fury was arriving for days now, yet he'd thought he'd have more time.

"Jarvis is installed on the phone, so you have the smartest AI in the world at your fingertips at all times. Jarvis, let's register Pete's prints."

The phone's screen goes dark with white text for instructions. Tony shows Peter where to place his thumb to be able to open the phone with his fingerprint. Once the device is unlocked, he guides him on how to find the text and phone apps. His contact list is short but filled with those who've come to care for him.

"If ever you want to talk, give me a call. If for whatever reason I don't answer, I've put Pepper and Rhodey in here and they're more than happy to chat. Even if you don't think it's important, they want to hear it. If you need medical advice, Bruce is in here too. And Nat's also here, she said to call if you ever find yourself in trouble. Honestly, if you're in trouble you probably want to call her first, don't tell her I said this but she's basically a one-woman army and can pretty much solve all your problems."

Peter laughs softly. He's fiddling with the apps, and though he hasn't had the time to teach him properly, he knows this boy will figure it out.

"Feel free to play around as much as you like, if you manage to break it I will congratulate you. You can get to Jarvis by either double tapping this button," he shows the home button, "or by simply saying his name. He's smart, he knows when you want to talk to him."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark," Peter says. He's bright-eyed, the first time that day.

"No problem, kiddo. Just... call, okay? No matter the time. If you want to talk about a test or if you have a nightmare, I'm here."

There's another gentle 'thank you'.

"Put that in your pocket, there you go, now let's head on up. I have this special sense, did you know that?" Peter stares at him with wonder. He'll miss that look. "I always know when Jarvis is ignoring calls for me, and right now, there is a call being happily ignored."

"Is it from Mr. Fury?" Peter asks.

"It's either him or Pepper," Tony says, "And I'm betting on Fury. You ready to head on up?"

Peter nods. There's no excuse to keep procrastinating. The roof, and Shield, are waiting.

The elevator ride is quiet. Peter wraps his arms around himself, eyes focused on the ground. Tony holds out his hand to him, palm up. Peter stares in confusion. "You can hold my hand if you want."

Peter hesitantly places his hand in Tony's, uncertain what this touch means but wanting it anyway. Their fingers curl together and he doesn't understand why it soothes his nerves, but it does.

When the doors part, everyone is there. The Avengers, Pepper, Fury. There's a helicopter ready to take Peter from New York to Wisconsin. Tony leads them out, their hands clasped together.

He zeroes in on Pepper because there are too many people and he can't handle this right now. She smiles, Peter's suitcase clasped in her hands. They approach her first, Fury standing nearby with a
frown as is his usual. Tony doesn't want to talk to him yet.

She leans down and hands Peter the suitcase, "Here you go, sweetie. Take care, alright? We'll be seeing you soon."

Peter takes it with his free hand, silently refusing to let go of Tony. "Thank you, ma'am."

They walk past her and move on to Fury, watching with an unreadable expression on his face. Everyone is now behind him and he's grateful that he can't see them anymore.

"Are you ready to go? Or are you going to keep me waiting, Stark?"

"Yeah, yeah, don't get your eyepatch in a twist." Tony turns from a scowling Fury to Peter. His hand is warm in his.

He lets his hand go and it feels awful.

He runs his hand through his hair. Peter wraps his arms around the suitcase, holding it to his chest. It's a bit big and he shouldn't be able to hold it this way, but his sticky hands are holding it in place. His face is barely visible above it, but Tony can see his somber expression.

"This is Nick Fury, Pete. He's going to take you to Xavier's."

"Okay."

He crosses his arms over his chest and wishes he'd thought to grab his sunglasses. Fury has a look on his face he's trying to ignore.

Peter stays still. His eyes are glued on Tony and he doesn't appear inclined to move.

"Let's go, kid. I have other things to do with my day," Fury says, breaking the silence. His voice is stern, and Peter visibly flinches.

Tony's fingers clench tight, hidden where they're tucked against his chest. He takes in a deep breath to steady his thoughts. Peter's gaze is still fixed on him, and he forces himself to nod and smile to encourage him to do as he's told.

Peter finally looks away and takes a step towards Fury.

When he'd first met Peter, he'd been staring into a room with a single chair. He'd told him, "That's where they put you when you're bad." as if that was something that was normal. He'd insisted on calling Tony 'sir' and could hardly meet his gaze. Peter had carried around his book on stars like it was a lifeline that could separate him from these newcomers. Tony remembers the absolute wonder in his eyes as he'd shown him projected constellations in a crowded jet on its way to New York City.

There's another step. His chest feels tight.

This kid hadn't been allowed warm water, hadn't eaten anything more substantial than noodles and rice his entire life, and had noticed the camera hidden in his room and had felt safest sleeping in the corner where he wouldn't be seen. This boy had fought for them against someone he'd once cared for, despite everything Fénix had done to him to make all people unworthy of his trust. This child is as selfless as they come though he'd have the best reason not to be.

Time feels slow, his foot lifts for another step.
Peter looks at him sometimes, like Iron Man is nothing, like Stark is a name he's never heard (and he hasn't), and like Tony could wield Mjolnir just by the power of that love. No one's ever looked at him that way before, not even young fans because they see him as a superhero and he's always been content with that. He's heard of parents playing at knights and dragons and tea party goers and feeling like heroes because they could stitch the button back on the teddy bear's face after its eye has fallen off. Tony's beginning to understand that feeling.

The foot lands again and he takes in one slow breath.

This kid, this boy, this child; Pete, kiddo, squirt, Spider-baby. It all means the same. A little over four feet, barely over fifty pounds after getting three to four meals a day to sustain his metabolism, curly brown hair and freckles across his nose and cheeks like his mother; this is his son.

"Wait!"

Fury rolls his eyes, but Peter turns to him obediently. The big suitcase looks comical pressed against his small body so tightly.

Tony's steps are longer than Peter's and he gets to him in two strides. He kneels down in front of him and takes the suitcase out of his hands and places it down beside them.

"Hey, Pete. I just, before you go... I need to know for sure, and I need to hear you say it or this will sit on my conscience. Do you want to go, Peter? I can go on and on about how I think this will make you happy, but you haven't actually said anything about it."

Peter's hands interlace in front of his stomach. Knelt down, Peter is a little bit taller than he is, and he reaches up to take his face in his hands and gently guides him to meet his gaze.

He hesitates and Tony waits it out.

He can't see the people behind him and get a feel for their thoughts, but everyone stays quiet. Even Fury, standing impatient in the corner of his field of vision.

"I... I don't wanna go, Mr. Stark," Peter admits, eyes misty.

Finally.

"And I don't want you to go," Tony says with what also feels like 'finally', "What do you suppose that means, then?"

"That we don't always get what we want?" Peter ventures a guess.

There's a pang in his heart at those words, but Tony presses on because he can make this better. Maybe. If Peter wants it.

"I won't lie and say that that's not true, but this time I say fuck it. You deserve whatever it is you want, Peter. And if you want to stay, we can make that happen." His eyes start to widen as if starting to understand what Tony is offering but not yet willing to believe it, "But it won't be easy," he makes sure to stress out.

"If you stay, there's no school for young supers around these parts so you'd have to go to a civilian school; you'll have to hide your powers and be really, really careful not let anyone know about them and that won't be easy. Also, if you decide to stay, I'm going to be adopting you because someone has to take care of you and I want it to be me. But I'm not going to be a good dad, especially not right off the bat. I've never been a dad, obviously, and I haven't had the best
influences in that area, and I'm going to try but I will make a lot of mistakes, that's inevitable.

That'll also make you a Stark, which is another chore all on its own. I know this might not sound like a lot, but staying is going to be hard, Peter. You can be happy at Xavier's, and we can keep in touch and you'll still be cared for. Things will be easier for you there. But if you decide you want to stay, then you can stay. I'll do everything I can to make you happy here."

No one around them speaks, he's grateful for the privacy they're giving them in what is actually a more public scene than he'd have liked.

"I don't have a way to compare, anyway," Peter's words come out soft, but Tony catches them. They both have tears they aren't shedding yet, and Peter still has a glint of disbelief in his eyes. Tony wants to pull him into his arms and squeeze away the doubt.

"Hm?"

"I've never had a dad," he says matter-of-factly. "I wouldn't know if you were a good dad or not."

Tony chuckles, "Makes us quite the pair, huh? So what do you say? You don't have to make a decision now. You can go and if you change your mind you let me know and I'll come get you. Or if you stay and it doesn't work out, we can send you to Xavier's at another time. Neither me or the school is going anywhere."

"Do you... do you really mean it, Mr. Stark? That I can stay? With you?"

"Of course I mean it."

Peter starts crying, then, and sniffs against it, "I think easy is boring."

Tony's smile brightens, but he prods to hear the words themselves, "I think so too. But I need you to say it, Peter. What do you want to do?"

"I want to stay," he says without pause. He rubs at his wet cheeks and meets Tony's gaze with wide and honest eyes.

"Then you aren't going anywhere."

"Really?" Peter's mumbling is smothered as Tony tugs him into a hug.

Peter buries his face in his neck and cries and cries. His arms wrap around his shoulders and his fingers curl into his shirt. Tony presses a kiss to the side of his head and carefully stands, holding Peter against him and supporting him with one arm around his waist and the other in his hair. His grip is strong and he has no intention of letting him go any time soon.

Tony looks at Fury who's staring skyward with pursed lips.

"You're welcome for the paperwork," he says with a cheeky grin.

His heart is full of love for this boy who's going to be his son; he just has his own paperwork to draft up. All he wants to do is smile and cry and he's choosing the first right now. He wants to take Peter to the park, or Disneyland, and get him ice cream and teach him how to strip a car and then how to drive it. He wants to paint his room and get him posters and video games and take him to the zoo. He wants to be the kind of father Peter will want in his life no matter how old he gets.

Fury shakes his head and sighs, "You're a pain in the ass, Stark." He turns and stalks back to his
The hand that's in Peter's hair drifts down to rub his back to try and calm him. He knows these are happy tears (he hopes?) and is more than willing to give him all the time he needs to process the sudden turn of events.

He turns around to face his friends with a grin that's gone from cheeky to sheepish, "Whoever says, 'I told you so' is going to get coal for Christmas."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Tony," Clint says, hands up in surrender.

Fury returns to Tony's side before anyone else can comment. He holds out an envelope for Pepper, who's gotten closer, "His documents. Do me a favour and don't call me again." This time he leaves and doesn't come back.

Pepper places the folder beneath her arm and takes Peter's suitcase in hand, "I'll bring this back downstairs and get the paperwork ready." She steps into their little bubble and kisses Peter's temple affectionately and then presses one to Tony's cheek too, "I'm proud of you, Tony," she whispers to him.

"I thought you'd be mad," he says, meeting her loving gaze over Peter's shoulder. "You said not to get attached."

"After I got attached, I knew there'd be no hope for you," she smiles.

He shrugs. She's certainly the more resilient of the two of them.

"I'll let you know when I have everything sorted."

"Thanks, Pep."

Peter hiccups, an effect of his crying, and Tony continues to rub his back as he watches her leave. The helicopter takes off behind them, and everyone waits until the sound fades out into the distance before talking.

Rhodey places a hand over his heart and smiles brightly, "About time you make me an uncle, Tones! I thought you'd keep me waiting forever."

Tony laughs; it's a little hysterical.

They take turns congratulating him. Clint's making plans to introduce Peter to his kids, Bruce mentions school, Steve talks about working with him to control his powers, Sam brings up a therapist because that needs to happen.

He feels a little dizzy in the flurry.

Natasha kisses Peter and whispers to him until the crying stops and he falls asleep. Tony meets her gaze and sees the same unshed tears reflected back at him. She was never given a chance; Peter has one and she's going to fight for his happiness. Rhodey's going to be an uncle, and maybe the Stark family will grow to include all the Avengers as aunts and uncles. He thinks he'd be okay with that. To add a speck of formality to the unofficial family they have been for a while now.

Within a few hours (if he knows Pepper's efficiency), he'll be signing his name on a dotted line and by morning he'll be a dad. He's going to have a son. The sleeping boy in his arms is his son.
So. A reason this chappie took a bit of time is that I kept going back and forth on how I wanted this to go. My idea was always for it to go this way - at this moment Tony finally realizes what he wants, what is already there.

This possibly feels a bit anti-climactic for some people and I'm a tad worried that that might be the case. I did consider having Tony not stop Peter from going. However I've written the story and their relationship up to this point to grow at a certain pace, and I felt that stalling any more would be pushing it just for drama's sake.

And this is a fanfic, not a novel. I don't need things to go wrong at every turn because that's what's expected. At least, that's how I think of it and that's why I decided to go this route.

All this to say; I'm sorry if you wanted a bit more drama before the wholesomeness, but I hope you all enjoy the fluff :)

Also, there won't be much more to this story I think. I'll see where my head goes with this I guess?

All the love to you beautiful kuddos/commenters/bookmarkers/readers. You're all wonderful people and I hope you continue to enjoy this story :)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I don't even know, brahs. This chapter just ran away from me.

Enjoy!

Pepper and Tony have equally high standards. Just focused on different aspects of their interests.

Tony can create the arc reactor and still feel there's room to improve. Pepper, on the other hand, can take a couple of fake identification documents and get adoption paperwork drafted up by the country's best lawyer within five hours and still feel that she could have done this faster. Tony has told her to run for presidency, but she's fired back that someone needs to run his business and it's not like he'll do it. (He won't. He has a son now.)

After leaving the roof, he takes Peter back to his room for him to nap a bit while Tony unpacks the suitcase. He puts it back in his closet and wonders if burning it would be therapeutic or a little bit psychotic. He drops the idea and goes back to sit in Peter's bed and reply to emails until he wakes up a half-hour later.

"Mr. Stark?" Peter mumbles sleepily. His eyes hold a tint of red and puffiness.

"Hey, kiddo." One hand holds his phone, and the other drops down to his hair to brush it back. "Feeling okay?"

Peter nods. He sits up and leans just enough against Tony to feel each other, but not so much that it's familiar. He's hesitant, but Tony understands.

"Was that... Um. What's..." Peter clears his throat and tries again, "Was that real?"

Tony hesitates a moment, not quite sure what he's referring to, before deciding it must be all of it. "All real. I promise."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm completely sure." Tony sets down his phone. He wraps his arm around Peter's shoulders and pulls him against him. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't know what I'm thinking," Peter says.

"That's okay. I know this is sudden. Are you hungry?"

Peter shakes his head.

"Are you happy?"

"How long do I get to stay?"

"Until you get bored of me."
"What if I never get bored?"

"Then you get to stay forever."

"Then I'm very happy."

Tony doesn't try to stop himself from pressing a kiss to his head. He thinks he can do that freely now; he's not quite sure what is normal 'father' behaviour. His own father had never told him he loved him, and he and Peter have already done that.

"I love you, kiddo."

"I love you, too." Peter smiles. There's no doubt about the choice he's made.

"There's a lot we have to figure out with you staying here. Are you ready for all that?" Tony asks. Because he'd been made dizzy by everything, and he has no idea how overwhelming this might be for the eight-year-old.

Peter nods, and that smile never wavers.

"I love you," Tony repeats, kissing him again. Peter only giggles, out of place with the show of affection. "Okay, let's get out of here."

There's a lot to do. The Avengers and Pepper are there to make sure he forgets nothing, but he's trying his best. He makes arrangements for a therapist to see Peter. Twice a week for the foreseeable future. She's signed NDA's a mile long and Peter seems to like her. She asks pointed questions he has problems answering.

"Can you tell me your name?"

And isn't that a can of worms? He only answers, "Mr. Stark is my dad." because he knows nothing else. "So, Peter Stark."

Neither of those names is his but he likes them both.

Tony sits him down in the living room while waiting for Pepper to have the paperwork ready, five hours later. In the meantime, he's sat Peter in front of the TV while Jarvis is showing him data on various schools in the region. None of them are up to his standards, but he has to pick one. They have about two months to get Peter ready for school, for the third grade.

Peppers comes in later on and sets the pages on the coffee table, smiling at Peter and giving Tony the semblance of a glance. He knows that's expected when you have an adorable child in the picture. She sits next to Tony, Peter on his other side, as he ties himself to this child.

"Here we go. Initial here and here, and then sign here. Take time to read it, Tony. It's important."

He glances over it and his pen glides over the empty spaces she's pointed out to him.

"He's my son, not much else to say about it, is there?"

"If something happens to you tomorrow, you realize this makes him your heir, right? These pages will state he won't take full control until he's at least eighteen, should anything happen," Tony signs them without a pause. "You should be reading this, Tony."

"I trust you."
She sighs. She won't admit to flattery.

"This will keep me in charge until he's eighteen, and then he'll decide if I stay CEO or if he wants to take over. Of course, if something happens to me you need a backup. Then you'll take over and-"

"Yeah, yeah. That's what I hired you for, didn't I? Look, if it's not you or Peter, it'll be Rhodey."

He initials and signs.

Peter's right next to him, but he's not following this conversation at all. Jarvis is playing 'The Sword in the Stone' for him.

She sighs, "You realize he's eight, right? There's a lot of years-.

"Stane was on me for years about an heir, and I'm not interested in putting Peter in that position. He's a kid, and he'll be a kid until there's no other choice. I want you or Rhodey to take care of this company should anything happen to me. Does this," he gestures to the papers, "make that true?"

"It does," she says.

"Then that's all I care about." He signs the last page. "I don't want him to spend his life trying to be what this company needs. If he decides he wants to be a journalist, or a vet, or a secretary, then, by all means, I'll support him. I have no intentions of pressuring him to be something he doesn't need to be. Stark Industries has run its course, if no one takes over, then so be it."

She doesn't kiss him, but she wants to.

"Okay," she says. She takes the documents in hand. "I'll get this sorted while you get the rest figured out. Let me know if you need anything."

His hand falls into Peter's hair, a touch of love and affection, and he simply nods to her words.

She leaves and he picks up his phone to continue reviewing schools. He has no intention of letting Peter go to college early, as he'd done, because although Peter will undoubtedly get bored with school, being surrounded by people so much older is worse than boredom. Tony knows. There are STEM high schools in the area, but Peter needs to get through elementary first.

He's found one nearby that Happy can make the drive every morning and afternoon without too much wasted time. There's nothing special about it, and maybe that's okay. The world will know that Tony Stark has adopted a child, and they'll never know the why. He's okay with that. There's a lot of work to do, and that's okay too.

Pepper steps back into the elevator to make her way to her own office to make magic happen and it doesn't quite sink in that he has a son now. He stares down at Peter as his eyes are fixed on the animated movie and he knows he's been a father long before he'd signed the paperwork.

Mizaya Toia is a well-known therapist and Sam highly recommends her. She signs the NDA's without a thought. She sees Peter twice a week, except for the week they aren't in New York.

As much as they need to prepare Peter for school, they need to prepare him for society. He's never been around children before and has no idea how to interact with them. Clint and Laura Barton invite Tony, Peter, and Aunt Nat around for a week. For Peter, this will get him used to other children, and Natasha always loves to see her niece and nephew.

"What's 'hide and seek'?” Peter asks.
They don't play that very long because he can hear their heartbeats and it's a little like cheating.

"Thank you for having us," Tony says to Laura, shaking her hand and smile brighter and more genuine than it has ever been on TV. Clint takes Peter out to introduce him to his two children with the third on the way.

"It's our pleasure, Tony. Clint's told me a lot about what's going on. I hope this can help Peter feel a little better around kids his age."

"I hope so too."

Cooper and Lila Barton take to Peter instantly. It's hard not to be fascinated by a child with superpowers. He climbs a tree with Lila on his back, and Tony is slowly learning how to discipline.

"I don't want you climbing anything, alright? I know you're enhanced, but if Lila fell that could have really hurt her."

"I'm sorry."

There's not a lot of room in the Barton country house, and at night Natasha cuddles in with her niece while Peter and Tony share the pull-out sofa. Over the next few days, Peter spends most of his time with Cooper and Lila, despite the hesitant start.

"Clint has two children, a son and a daughter. Before you go to school, I think it's important for you to spend time with other kids. How do you feel about that?"

Peter smiles and nods, willing to do anything Tony suggests lest he decides he's not worth the trouble.

He doesn't know what 'tag' or 'hide and seek' or 'hopscotch' is, but he's willing to learn. He does learn. The thing with having Hawkeye for a father is that there's room for a little bit of weirdness and they're perfectly okay with that. When Peter's uncertain what a 'game' is, Lila answers with a bright smile because Peter seems like a lot of fun, she just has to show him how it's done. Cooper makes him follow him along as they go from one game to another because it's summer and there are no expectations and he thinks Peter's a bit of a nerd with the dissecting questions but also pretty cool because he can climb a tree with spidery-sticky hands.

"If the cops are the good guys, and the robbers are the bad guys, why would the cops shoot the robbers? Doesn't that make them all bad people?" It seems deep to a nine-year-old Cooper, but Peter's simply curious. They don't know as much about him as their mother but are as kind no matter how odd this boy is.

"Of course not!" Lila answers, "When you stop the bad guys, that makes you good."

"That doesn't make sense."

"That's politics!"

Peter doesn't know what that means, but he laughs with them.

Aside from the games, Peter learns a lot about what it means to be a child.

He likes Mizaya, but she isn't a child. He knows as much as Tony does that he needs to learn how to assimilate into normal society. He's trying. He learns their games. Learns how they behave in
regards to their mother and father. He doesn't think he can ever be that... straight-forward with Tony (asking for cookies or extra time outside), but maybe he'll grow into it.

He's still trying to call him 'dad' instead of 'Mr. Stark' because Lila says once, "Why do you call your dad Mr. Stark? That's weird, isn't it?"

He hasn't gotten around to that yet.

That night, huddled in their bed, Tony has his phone out for work, because he can't help himself, and Peter leans against him and asks questions and neither of them realizes the time until Jarvis says, "Sir, I'd like to let you know that it is three in the morning and Peter should be in bed at this time."

"Right, right. Bedtime." Tony hesitantly sets his phone down and lays in the springy bed that once was a sofa. Peter's fascinated by the functionality of turning a sofa into a bed. Tony reaches out and spins the nob on the lamp until the light turns off. Peter curls in against him.

"Mr. Stark?" He asks in the darkness. He hums in response as encouragement. "I know you said since you adopted me that you're my dad, but is it okay that I call you 'dad'? Lila said it was weird that I call you Mr. Stark, and I know we're trying to be normal, so." Peter pauses there.

"I'd like that," he admits because it's dark. The farmhouse has a window covered in curtains, but the moon still shines through and he can see his son's face pressed into his shoulder. As if he might disappear.

"Okay."

They're there for seven days, six nights. Each night, Tony finds himself with a snoring Peter resting against him. This is a little too much sleep for his insomniatic self, but Peter is happy and he'll suffer through hours of restlessness to make sure he's well-rested.

He's never considered himself selfless; he's known Rhody since his teens and Pepper nearly as long, but they're fully independent of him. Having Peter around means he has to acknowledge that there is nothing he wouldn't do for this boy, because if he doesn't protect him, who else will? No matter how enhanced, at the end of the day, Peter is just a child. There is a missing adult in his life and now that's Tony.

It takes weeks for that to sink in.

"There seems to be a lot of trauma that he's yet to open up about, but he has nothing but good things to say about you, and that's a good thing," Mizaya tells him, after the third meeting.

"Dad?" Peter says, hesitantly. That's new. In general. "Miss Laura says breakfast is ready."

Tony sleeps a bit sounder knowing the world is safe and there is a child out in that world expecting him to be the adult he's never known himself to be. He's going to be a terrible father, but he's going to be better than Howard. That's a promise.

He's a little surprised by how well he's slept, though he must have only fallen asleep a couple of hours ago after falling asleep to his son's gentle breaths.

Natasha hands him a plate of eggs and toast and then hands one to Peter. She sits at the other end of the table and digs into her own breakfast. Steve, Sam, and Bruce are the Avengers left at the Tower in New York to protect the earth. Rhody is doing his own job like a proper adult. Jarvis is prepared to let him know of any emergency, but so far it's been silent.
Tony eats his food, watching as Peter interacts with Cooper and Laura. He's enthusiastic and happy, full of troublemaking capabilities. So far, he's only had to tell Peter off for climbing on things a normal child shouldn't be able to climb; he's a little excited for what else he'll be able to discipline. He doesn't know if that feeling is normal, and he doesn't ask about it.

Clint tells him about what it's like to be a first-time father.

"I'm not going to pretend I know what it's like to grow up as a Stark," Clint says, a glass of apple juice in his hands. Tony's trying to learn sobriety and the other Avengers have been understanding about it. Their unquestioning loyalty is... a lot. He ignores it because that's easier than being thankful. Clint knows what it all means and simply hands him a glass of juice of his own. "But being a dad is rough no matter who you are. I have to leave Laura for weeks on end to do things Shield asks and it's... it's hard to leave her. To leave the kids. Look, I know you don't want to hear it, but Peter's better off with you than at Xavier's. No matter what. You love him, it's obvious."

Tony chugs down his juice, wishing a little that it was whiskey but knowing what that would mean. His mouth is dry, but he looks over his shoulder and sees Peter sitting on the couch with Lila and Cooper and talking about cartoons. Peter doesn't understand the plot, and the Barton children are trying to explain it. He wants to kiss his son and hold him close.

"Have you ever wanted to hug them until they grow up?" Tony asks.

"Every day," Clint says. He switches his full glass with Tony's while he isn't looking. "I think all parents feel that way. Keep in mind you're eight years behind. And you happen to have a really smart kid on your hands. He got our tractor working today and that thing's been broken for months. Look, let me be honest with you." He stands and takes both their glasses.

He dumps them down the sink as Tony watches. "If Peter weren't so bright, I'd think anyone could handle him. But he's too smart, and I think you know exactly what that's like. I've worked with Shield, I know that your dad was smart too and he expected a lot of you, but Peter's not like that. He didn't grow up a Stark. He doesn't have that expectation. He can be whoever he wants, but he needs to be... nurtured, I suppose is the word for it.

"It takes someone like him to understand him, if that makes sense?" Clint sits back down with empty glasses.

"It does," Tony answers. "Thanks for letting us stick around," he says, "I think it'll do a lot for him. Lila and Cooper are amazing."

"They aren't genius'," Clint says, "But they know what it means to be a kid."

It's a rough mix, between Peter being smart enough to know what's going on and the Barton kids trying to teach him what it's like to be his age.

At first, he's hesitant to leave Tony's side. A mix of 'what if he decides he doesn't want me' and 'what if I don't understand them'. Clint's taught his children well and they take Peter in like a strange cousin who happens to not know what a 'game' is. Laura runs her hand through his hair and smiles like the universe is still in those seconds. Peter smiles back because he'd feel awful if he didn't. She's very nice.

"Tony tells me you'll be going to school in a month, do you want to tell me how you feel about that?" Mizaya asks.

Peter doesn't know what to answer.
Those kids aren't Lila and Cooper. They're his friends. But they live in Missouri and Jarvis' map tells him that that's not close to New York.

"It'll be okay," he responds hesitantly.

After a week, seven days and six nights, they leave the Barton residence. Lila and Cooper hug him and he hugs back. He's never had a friend his own age; no requirements, no expectations. Just love, or whatever counts at their age.

"Thanks, Clint," Tony says, shaking his and his wife's hand.

"You're very welcome, Tony. Feel free to bring him around whenever you want, alright? Peter's a wonderful boy and we'd love to have him."

Tony think Laura and Pepper would be good friends, if either of them had the time for things like friendship. Peter steps next to Laura and his hand hovers over her stomach, "Bye bye baby, take care." She takes his hand in hers and presses it to her stomach. She can't hear it, but she knows Peter can hear the unborn baby's heartbeat. They can both feel it against her skin.

"I'm thinking of calling our baby Nathan, after Aunt Nat, what do you think?"

"I think that's really cool."

"When you and Tony come down for Christmas, I'll be sure to introduce you to Nathan. Or Nathalia, should our doctor be wrong." She kisses his forehead, and Tony takes in a deep breath. This boy is loved, even though he doesn't understand it yet.

"Thank you, Miss Laura. I'm excited to see the baby." He feels the pulse under his palm and wishes the best for this unborn child.

Tony gently draws him back against him, wrapping his arm around his shoulders, "Thanks for having us, Laura. I owe you one. I know Clint is stubborn, but let me know if you need anything, okay? I put my number in your phone. If you need anything during the delivery or afterward, I'm around."

"Thank you, Tony. Don't be a stranger either. School's going to be a new challenge for you, Peter, but you're a brilliant kid and I have full faith that you'll figure it all out on your own, but if you need anything don't hesitate to call. You too, Tony. Being a parent requires a learning curve, especially for an enhanced kid. Call me if you need anything, and I mean it."

"I know." He doesn't say thank you again, though he wants to a hundred times.

Pepper has arranged Peter's enrollment at his chosen school and presents him the paperwork on his return. He doesn't pause before signing it all because he trusts her.

They paint Peter's room a light blue and they get in new things to give it a homey touch. He's shown a love for the animated works and he gets posters that they staple to the walls. The books get some proper shelving, and Tony adds the Harry Potter series and some Animorphs because he'd rather Peter talk about those than spend the rest of his life hearing the most random facts.

He doesn't need to know that clown fish (or amphiprioninae which Peter tries to pronounce for a solid thirty seconds before deciding to give up) can change their sexe at will.

For his ninth birthday, Tony takes him out to a movie theater to watch Despicable Me while Pepper
and Bruce decorate the penthouse. He even lets him take his shoes off once the room goes dark. They're not going overboard, at least not for his first birthday with them. Tony leaves the theater a little teary-eyed (the adopted father thing a little too on the nose), but he's happy he's been able to give Peter this experience.

He'd slipped into his room early that morning to wake him up with a kiss and a gentle, "Happy birthday, Spider-baby."

"What?" Peter mumbles sleepily, blinking to clear the sleep from his eyes.

"Nine years ago today you were born."

"Oh. What does that mean?" Peter sits up and stares at him with that confused scrunch of his nose.

"It means today is your birthday, and we're going to celebrate it."

"We're celebrating me being born? Why?"

"Because it's special. Because you being born has made the universe a much better place and that's worth celebrating."

"You think so?"

"Mhm. And I've got a couple of things planned for us today, so get dressed and meet me in the kitchen for breakfast. Don't forget to brush your teeth."

Before he's out of the door, Peter speaks up, "Wait! When's your birthday? Because I want to know when to say happy birthday to you."

Tony laughs through the warm feeling in his chest, "May 29th and don't go looking for the year. You don't need to know how old your old man is."

"But older is wiser," Peter says with his full now nine-years-old cheek.

"And never forget it. Now hurry along, kiddie, the day awaits."

As the morning drew on, more people gave him hugs and birthday wishes and apparently it's a normal thing. Peter asks everyone their birthday's in turn, to be sure to return the kindness.

Once out of the theater, Happy picks them up to take them back home. He reaches into the backseat blindly and says, "Happy birthday, kid." There's a familiar wrapper in his hand and Peter takes it with the biggest smile.

"Thank you, Happy!" He's already asked his birthday (January 3rd).

"At least I don't have to worry about you spoiling your appetite."

They'd had popcorn and there's lots of food waiting at home, but Peter happily bites into the cheeseburger with no concern about that. He'll still be hungry. Bruce is assuming that he'll even out on the food intake when he's an adult, as right now he needs the calories to sustain both his high metabolism and the normal process of growing.

"Want some?" Peter holds out the half-eaten burger and Tony sadly shakes his head.

"I'm good. If I don't come in with an appetite, Pepper will torture me with business meetings for a month."
Peter nods sagely and returns to his food. At first, he might have thought that that meant literal torture, however, he's beginning to learn more about jokes and sarcasm and isn't taking everything seriously.

There's a vanilla cake, since Peter is one of those weirdos who likes vanilla more than chocolate, and pizza and chips and soda. They've hung a few streamers and there are balloons and when they step through the door everyone is lounging around and they take their time to wish him a happy birthday. They don't surprise him since they don't want to scare him.

"How was the movie?" Pepper asks after greeting him.

"It was really cool!"

Tony sets the baseball cap and coat that are his incognito disguise in the closet (it's as much effort as he's willing to make). He heads to the kitchen and leaves Peter to be passed around the group of adults and two children. After how well he'd taken to Lila and Cooper, Tony decided last minute to fly them in and his son's smile is enough to know that it was a great decision.

Rhodey's in the kitchen, preparing himself what looks like a virgin bloody mary.

"How's my nephew?"

His best friend is incredibly excited about being an uncle, apparently. Tony walks by him to the fridge. He pulls out a carton of grape juice and he pours himself a glass. "He's great. Happiest kid in New York."

"When's his first day of class?"

"August 30th," he answers, "and he's going to find the third grade really boring. Kid's about as caught up as he can be. My only concern is whether he'll manage to fit in or not."

"Kids can be little shits," Rhodey agrees, "but Peter's got all that nerdy charm; I'm sure he'll be fine."

"Didn't get that from my side of the family that's for sure," Tony jokes.

"It's from mine, obviously."

In the living room, Peter sits between Lila and Cooper on the floor in front of the television. The adults have made their place around them; Clint, Laura, and Sam are on the sofa behind them, Natasha's curled on the armrest and chatting with Clint. Pepper's in the recliner next to the sofa and talking with Sam but also keeping an eye on her phone because there's a business to run. Steve and Bruce are on some spare chairs and are both content to watch the kids play. Rhodey and Tony come back into the room and hand out drinks and food, and bring in some extra chairs for themselves.

It's a very casual affair. Judging by Peter's face, Tony thinks they've done this right. Peter's a loved child and he's slowly realizing it. And one day maybe he'll accept it.

He sets the cake on the coffee table, where Peter only has to turn and blow out the nine candles.

(He has to remind Peter that most children don't have webs that come out of their wrist when he tugs a spoon across the room because Lila asked for one. Peter apologizes and Tony picks up the loose webbing, a little fascinated and disgusted.)
As much as he considers a ten-foot-tall teddy bear to be an appropriate birthday gift, Tony hands him an Avengers backpack instead. Something to remind him of home once he's in school. Peter loves it and points out the heroes he knows as people. Except for Thor, but the longer the wait the better (in Tony's opinion, because no Thor means no danger).

A week and a half before Peter's due to go to school, Mizaya tells him, "He's told me a little about some of the things he's gone through; it's enough to make anyone queasy. That kind of trauma... I expect that this will follow him his entire life, and I highly recommend reading up on PTSD to support him as much as you can. Here are some pamphlets to get you started, and we can always make an appointment to go over it some more or if you have any questions or concerns about your part in this."

Yeah. He knows a thing or two about that, but he takes them and thanks her anyway. He meets with her once, too. Because every night that week Peter wakes from a nightmare, stress and anxiety breaking apart his sleep. And Tony doesn't know what to do about it.

It's pre-emptive separation anxiety, Mizaya tells him.

The first night, Peter curls in bed and lets the hours pass. When he slips into the kitchen with bags under his eyes, Tony prods until Peter tells him the truth.

"What did I say about bad dreams?"

"To wake you up if I have one." Peter stares sadly into his cheerios.

"And did you?"

"No..."

"Why's that?" He keeps his tone gentle and takes a seat beside him.

"I didn't want to bother you," he answers simply.

Tony reaches out and physically turns Peter on the stool so they can face each other. He locks eyes with his son and says, "You will never be a bother to me, alright? You can wake me up every night for the rest of our lives and I will never be bothered by it. I promise."

"Thank you."

It falls on the back burner until Peter wakes from another nightmare that night.

It's always the same things. Memories; phantom pains. Blood, a lot of it. A fear that when his eyes open, he'll be back in that room with a thin blanket and textbooks and his body hurting from some experiment or other. Or Tony leaving him. That one hurts the most.

He hesitates, despite what Tony'd told him.

Peter inevitably finds himself leaving his room and walking the short path to Tony's door. He stands there for a while. After a minute or two, he can hear Jarvis alert Tony of his presence and there's no backing out now. The door's opened and Tony's there with a smile.

"Hey, Pete. Another bad dream?"

He nods silently.

Tony kneels down and takes him into his arms. He carries him to the bed and sets him next to the
warm spot he'd just left.

"Do you want to talk about it?" His blinds are open and the New York City lights are keeping the room well-lit. He can see Peter shake his head. He wraps the blanket around him and slips in beside him, "That's okay. You can stay here with me. I'll keep you safe." He runs his fingers through his hair and Peter curls in against him.

He doesn't know what Mizaya knows. And much less than Natasha, who knows everything that Peter's been through. Tony's fairly certain he could ask her and she would tell him something; not everything because she's always good on her word, but enough that he would know what to do to help him.

The nightmares persist. Peter sleeps in his bed every night. School draws closer and closer and he can see the stress in his eyes and the tapping of his foot.

Since he's caught up on schoolwork (a little too well caught up), he spends a lot of time either in the lab with Tony or with Bruce. A bit insulted, it seems that Peter's taking an interest in biochemistry. He had told Pepper he'd support him no matter what, however, and lets them nerd out together without a word.

Bruce has noticed too. They all have.

Mizaya tells him it's normal, so does Sam. Children get scared about going to school for the first time, and being late to the party is going to make it worse. They say he'll feel better after the first day is over, but Tony can't help feeling uneasy about it.

"I'm taking our little spider out. We'll be back in a few hours." Natasha walks into the kitchen where they're having breakfast and promptly steals Peter for the day. She's wearing an ugly baseball cap and a coat; if it ain't broke don't fix it.

"What for?" Tony asks.

"Aunt and nephew time."

"You're not his aunt," he says with a raised brow. It's a joke and they both know it; Peter's as loved by her as he is by Rhodey. Tony definitely loves her as he would any pain in the ass sibling.

"I am now. Let's go, nephew." She puts on a pair of sunglasses and Tony knows it's for looks because he does it himself.

Peter glances at Tony, who sighs. "Go on, then. Let me know if you expect to be back for dinner."

She doesn't have him back for dinner. They come back around seven that evening and Peter's licking an ice cream cone and can't for the life of him stop talking about his day with Aunt Nat. Tony listens half-attentively at the start, but then the pieces fall into place.

If they had been siblings as children, he thinks Natasha would have been the first to pin him during play fighting and would probably have caused a black eye or broken bone, but would also have clocked anyone who looked at him dirty because no one gets to hurt her brother except for her.

"The fair was super cool!" Tony hadn't known there was a science fair at a college in Manhattan, but he doesn't look into that stuff either. "There were all sorts of experiments. One lady had a whole project about the effects of talking to plants, and one did research on if oil comes from dinosaurs."

"The fair was super cool!" Tony hadn't known there was a science fair at a college in Manhattan, but he doesn't look into that stuff either. "There were all sorts of experiments. One lady had a whole project about the effects of talking to plants, and one did research on if oil comes from dinosaurs."
"Sounds awesome. Did you learn lots?" He has to get a wet towel to clean him up from his ice cream adventures.

They settle in the living room to rest a bit before it's Peter's bedtime. Natasha sits back on the sofa and kicks her feet up on the table; it's been a long day. Peter is cross-legged beside her, finishing his cone and talking all the while. Tony cleans him up and takes the empty spot on his other side.

"So much! One guy had a whole project about butterfly wings, and what it would take for a human to fly on their own. It was so cool. He said..." he goes on and on about the project with the enthusiasm of a nine-year-old.

Natasha, who had been there and knew all this already, still sits there and watches him talk. Tony listens attentively, asking questions and probing for details. He wants to encourage this.

"After, there was a place for kids to do some stuff too. We did stuff with light, and how it refracts in water, and we also made slime, and we got to play around with a circuitry board. It wasn't very complicated, nothing like your suit, but it was still cool."

He's glad that Peter was able to have this kind of day before going to school. Which is two days away, at this point. It's the next bit that gets his attention.

"There was another boy there too. He's my age and his name is Ned and he's really funny. Aunt Nat talked to his mom and dad and he's going to go to my school. I hope we can do more games together. We built the board together and it was so much fun. He's smart and he likes science too."

Convenient, Tony thinks.

He looks at Natasha as he says, "What a happy coincidence."

She smirks; Peter doesn't notice the exchange.

"Are you excited to see him again on Monday? Maybe you'll be in the same class, wouldn't that be great?"

"I hope so!"

He talks more about his day, but it comes back around to his new friend a lot. Once it gets late he sends him off to bed, taking some time to tuck him in and give him a kiss goodnight. Natasha's still sitting in the living room once he's done, and he crosses his arms and stares at her.

"Do I want to know how you got this together?"

"It was a lot easier than you'd think."

He takes a seat on the other side of the couch and she turns, placing her feet in his lap.

She explains, "I found the other kids that would be in his class and did a bit of research to see which one would be most compatible with Peter's personality. Ned Leeds has the best grades in his year and has an affinity for science. His parents buy video games all the time and take him to the library at least once a week. Seemed a good match. Then I sent them an invite to the fair in the mail and knew the kid couldn't refuse. Easy."

"That's..."

"You're welcome," she says with a smile.
Tony leaves it at that.

Peter doesn't come to him that night. School is a lot less scary knowing there's a friend waiting there for him.

Chapter End Notes

Like I said.

I don't know lol.

This is a culmination of a lot of little ideas. I hope it didn't seem too rushed or fast-paced? The next chapter will likely be similar because I don't have any big plans but I have small moments I want to share with you guys. I think maybe another chapter or two to this story, I'm not sure. I'm free-styling lol.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A shorter chappie before what will be the final one I believe to wrap this up.
This chappie is a sort of insight into what it means to be a Stark.
Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony drives Peter to school for his first day (or first week).

He takes his most inconspicuous car to stay lowkey and parks in front of the regular-sized school which probably looks enormous to Peter. He lives in the tallest building in the city, but it's school that seems larger than life.

They've done a tour; Peter knows the halls and knows where to find his class. They've met his teacher, a kind middle-aged man with a Mr. Rogers meets Miss Frizzle kind of vibe. (Peter's been watching 'The Magic School Bus'.)

Tony kisses him all over his face until the worried frown turns into a smile and a giggle.
"You'll do great, baby. If you're worried about anything, you tell Mr. Ali that you want to talk to your dad, and he'll let you call me outside of the classroom, okay?"

Peter nods.
"But you're going to love it, kiddo. Lots to learn and your friend Ted's going to be there."

"It's Ned, dad."

"Right, right, my bad. Remember what we talked about?"

"No sticking to walls. No using my webs. Be careful of my strength. And..." He pauses for a second, "Oh, yeah! If someone asks about the adoption I tell them to ask my dad and say nothing."

"That's my boy."

Tony intends to do a press release soon, after Peter's school jitters have passed, with the intention to explain that he's adopted a son and to give a bit of context before people start getting ideas. Or before they find out about him on their own and try to pester him for details. Peter doesn't share much about his time with Fénix, but if asked straightforwardly he's likely to say things that don't need to be known.

He brushes back his hair and gives a final kiss, then places the Avengers backpack on his lap.
"Now off you go."

"Yes, dad."
He watches him step out of the car and make the trek up to the front door. Peter turns back to wave one more time and then the sea of students take him out of sight. Tony doesn't start the car right away. His eyes are fixed on the front doors, thinking. Wondering. Hoping.

He hopes, god he hopes, that Peter will be okay. That his friend will be there and the teacher will be kind and the other students won't be dicks. Peter's brave, the bravest nine-year-old in the world if someone were to ask Tony.

Aside from his time with Rhodey, and some classes with intelligent teachers who treated him with respect rather than as a nuisance as some others did, Tony didn't have a good time in his school years. He'd had fewer than most, but the ones he had were rough. From feeling out of place because of his age to being surrounded by fake friends or assholes of the more straightforward variety, it was rough. Then with the extra weight of his father's expectations, Tony had studied around the clock just to get out of there as soon as possible.

At least Peter won't have a father like Howard Stark. He'll get to go home and find empathy and love. That's one thing Tony does have control over.

The engine revs and he's off.

Every employee in that building has signed NDAs and several arrangements have been made with the teacher to keep Peter's situation quiet. Including, as he'd mentioned, allowing Peter the option to call Tony should he get overwhelmed, and additionally, not using last names during rollcall.

He'd considered, briefly, letting Peter keep Fitzgerald as a last name, but when he'd brought it up Peter had pointed out that that name didn't belong to him either, and that Tony had given him 'Peter' and he liked that well enough. They'd gone with Stark. It's selfish, he knows. Fitzgerald is incognito; people could know he has a son and might even see him around, but it's a layer of defense. There'd be no, "Stark? Like Stark Industries?"

It's true he'd named him Peter, since he'd had no proper name before, but giving him Stark feels like it means more, for some reason. It's a part of him he can share with Peter. Some parents have blood, they get a name.

It feels special, but it also feels a little... old-school. Or territorial, like he's staking his claim. There's an uneasiness that he can't quite shake. Not in those first few weeks as he's diving into parenting books.

Between returning from the Barton's and signing the enrollment documents, he hesitates. Debates on the choice he's made about something that seems trivial but that will follow his son for the rest of his life. Clint had decided to stay home a few more days, and there goes his usual choice for parenting advice. He's the only Avenger with children (the second, now), so he goes to Sam, who so far hasn't steered him wrong.

"I want your opinion on something," he starts, and Sam nods while he explains his dilemma. He says as much as he's willing, and finishes by asking, "So what do you think? Fitzgerald or Stark?"

"It's obvious that Peter's pretty indifferent about it, though I think he's leaning on the Stark side of things. Other than how he feels about it, it's up to you."

"I figured that for myself, thanks."

Sam rolls his eyes and presses on, "and either option is perfectly sound. Equal pros and cons. However, I'll clear up one thing for you. There's nothing wrong with you wanting him to be a
Stark."

"Stark has a pretty shit legacy on its ledger."

"Peter wouldn't think so."

"He's never met his grandfather."

"He'll be better for it. Did you ever notice that Laura and Clint named their kids after themselves? And they plan to name the new baby after Natasha. Do you know why?"

Tony wants to joke and say because they're conceited, but he likes Laura too much and also doesn't know her well enough to insult her. He shakes his head.

"It's out of love, Tony. That's why some people name their kids after their grandparents, or other family members, or friends. Because the idea is that Clint knows Laura will live on in Lila, and vice-versa with Cooper. And Nat's done so much for their family, that they want that legacy to live on in their new baby. It's not about claiming someone or being selfish. In twenty years when he's old enough to realize what being a Stark really means, do you think he'll be proud of it?"

"I don't know," Tony says honestly.

There are plenty of people out in the world that would claim to want to be his child, or spouse, or family, the idea of being linked to his wealth and genius. They don't understand what it means, underneath all the red tape and layers.

"He's going to be the proudest, and happiest, kid in the world. Because he has a loving father. And you're going to love him no matter what, no matter if he takes over the company or goes off to Australia to wrestle alligators. Tony, that kid's brilliant and broken and he needs family. I'm honestly really proud that you've decided to adopt him, I wasn't sure you would, but it's the best thing for both of you. And you need to start acknowledging that this is for you, as much as it's for him. Once that sinks in, you'll figure out this name thing for yourself."

Talking to Sam is sometimes like talking to a therapist, and he's had his fair share of them. He's spoken to Mizaya enough in the past two months that she may as well be his therapist too.

He walks away thinking and returns to the enrollment documents with a lot on his mind.

One thing sticks in his mind, and he writes out the name "Peter Stark" in the field asking for the name of their new student.

Twenty years passed nine-years-old, that would have made Tony twenty-nine. He wasn't proud of his father or his name then. All he wanted was booze and women and to sit in his lab and make weapons he thought would serve a better purpose. It took a few years, but now he has juices boxes in his fridge and a CEO he's in love with and a son he wants to teach how to rebuild the world.

This feeling? He wants Peter to have that at twenty-nine. Or nineteen. Or twelve. He doesn't want that pride to ever waver. He doesn't want his son to live as he was forced to. He wants Peter to be proud to be a Stark.

He wants this legacy, the one he's trying to restore, to live and breathe and grow in Peter. Like Natasha's will live in Nathan's.

Howard Stark will be insignificant in comparison to what Peter Stark can, and will, accomplish in the grand scheme of things.
So. They decide on Stark. But that won't be advertised on his first day of school. The public doesn't know yet, and that's his next issue. They need to set up a press conference, something small just to get the news out.

Peter doesn't call him during the day. That almost makes him more anxious, but Pepper reminds him that he'd only told Peter to call if he was upset about something and no call meant he wasn't upset. He'd expected a call, expected that he would talk down his son and make him feel better. No call is like standing in the eye of the storm waiting for the world to crash down around him.

"Can you glance over the payroll? Make sure everything makes sense?" Pepper places a tablet in his lap as a means to distract him. There are only a handful of people that directly report to Pepper, but occasionally she'll look over payroll from top to bottom of the business to ensure there are no loose ends or people trying to get away with things they shouldn't. It's a thoughtless task, and exactly what Tony needs as he watches the clock out of the corner of his eye.

Much earlier than necessary, he takes the car back to Peter's school and settles in front of the main entrance to wait for him. He hears the bell, signaling the end of the day, and waits. And waits. The seconds feel like hours. He plays with his phone and glances at the door every third second. Some kids start to meander out and his focus falls from Candy Crush back to the doors.

His eyes flicker back and forth, going from one small child to the next searching for the one that's his. Finally. Finally, there's Peter. Next to him is his new friend and they're talking and smiling. In that second his breath evens out and his heart is at ease. Peter's okay.

His car is easily spotted and Peter waves goodbye to his friend and shuffles into the vehicle. He sets his backpack down between his legs and turns to his father with a wide smile.

"Hi, dad!"

"Hi, baby," Tony pulls Peter into a hug, words coming out a little strained. He kisses his temple and is thankful for his happiness. Tony doesn't mind stewing in his own anxieties if his son turns out okay at the end. "How was your day? Tell me everything."

Peter does, of course. Always willing to talk when it's Tony.

"It was a lot of fun! Ned was there, and we played a bunch of games to get to know each other. There was this one where..."

It's been a long time since Tony has been around nine-year-olds, but they seem to be better people than teenagers and the so-called adults in his college classes.

At the Tower, Steve's made dinner and the Avengers are getting together in his penthouse once more to give Peter some company. They had all known how nervous he was about his first day of school and were there to support him.

Tony's happy to know his son is loved but... he doesn't need them around all of the time.

He's never had a family that was around so much. Neither have any of them, really. They've lost parents young, or were estranged from them, or never knew them to begin with. This is a new start for them, whether they actually understand that or not.

Peter's smile is bright and he knows he can get used to this.

After they're gone, he takes Peter down to the lab to go over notes for a prototype for the next Iron
Man suit and that's a lot easier to take in. It's quiet and relaxed, Peter asks questions but mostly listens to him talk. It's peaceful.

He tucks his son into bed and gives him a kiss. In his mind, he loves thinking the words 'my son'. Suddenly it's true. He'll never tire of it.

Tony drives him to and from school for that first week, and then does a press release over the weekend to announce the adoption of a son. It leaves no room for questions. All he gives them is basic details, an age but no name, and papers and blogs will print it out like gospel.

Peter will be found out eventually, but by then the news will be on to something new and it'll be a passing fancy.

The first week of school doesn't introduce homework, so Peter spends most of his time with Tony having a blast in the lab and talking about everything that happened that day. The next Monday, after the press release, there's no difference.

His friend Ned inquires about the Stark name, and Peter tells him the truth, otherwise, people his age have no interest in modern news and pay it no mind.

It'll change as he grows, but so will Peter.

He will grow into his legacy and eventually he will learn what it means to be a Stark. What it means to have the people's attention and defy them at every turn. For better or worse.

Chapter End Notes

Folks.

I can't even thank you all enough for the response I've gotten over the past few chapters. I have an idea for the final chapter, but don't know what it'll look like. But you've all been wonderful and amazing and I love each and every single one of you that have left a comment or a kuddos or who have come back to this story to read each new chapter. You're beautiful people.

Cheers.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The End

Chapter Notes

Okay, all I have to say will be at the end...

Please enjoy the final chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The media has a field day with the announcement that Tony Stark has adopted a son. Stories go both ways; "The Stark name will live on!" is the headline for one paper, and on the other, "Is Stark pulling an Annie on us?" They seem to have forgotten that the love ends up genuine at the end of that movie-slash-play.

Peter's been given some form of privacy, at least. His picture's in a few tabloids but people steer clear. Anyone who works in the field knows not to piss off Tony Stark, because unlike some celebrities who might get annoyed or even violent, getting on his bad side means being out of a job come morning.

Every afternoon Peter comes home with another story to tell. Another anecdote to share about his time in class or with Ned or during recess. Happy's expression is enough to know it's not the first time he's telling these stories. His head of security grumbles and complains, but Peter is assuredly the safest kid in the country. After all, Happy Hogan has kept Tony Stark alive for years and that's no easy feat.

"During recess, we played tag. That's the one where you run around after each other and have to make someone else 'it' by touching them. The others got tired fast, so I pretended to be tired too."

Tony knows himself well enough to know that he won't always be able to greet his son every weekday or entertain him every weekend. He has work, he might have to fly out to China next week and will have to spend days away from him. He might get lost in his work down in the lab and forget to come up. His anxieties might get the best of him, he might need to spend his time secluded to wait out a panic attack. There might be a relapse, or two, or three.

Pepper is a godsend, but she'll grow tired and he'll have to pull his weight again.

But the days he can be there? He will be. He's going to make every minute that they can spend together count. There won't be a second in his life where Peter will have to wonder if his father loves him.

"Oh yeah? Bet you could outrun Steve."
Peter's on the island stool and Tony's puttering about the kitchen. He's trying to do more home cooking and he's standing diligently in front of the stove and mixing his stir fry. Every word Peter says, he hears. He listens. He acknowledges.

"Do you think so?"

"Absolutely. You could do it in your sleep."

He's been training with Steve and Natasha. They're impressed with what he already knows, and work with him on refining some basic self-defense techniques. They also help him learn what is considered 'normal' human abilities; how much weight a nine-year-old should be able to lift, when his stamina should start depleting. Not sticking to things. His mental abilities are all his own and they don't tell him to pretend otherwise.

Amongst his classmates he's a little on the eccentric side, asking questions that are odd ("what's that?" he asks about a deck of playing cards) and not understanding the concept of raising your hand to ask or answer a question, but no one suspects any enhanced abilities.

"Have any homework?" Tony steps away from the food and leans forward against the island to look at Peter.

He's drawing schematics for a boat; a boy in class had been talking about pirates and now boats are something of interest.

"No, I finished the work in class. There was some vocabulary words and simple multiplication."

"Nothing you couldn't handle, I imagine?"

"Mhm."

It's during dinner that Peter drops his bombshell.

Fine, it's not that dramatic, but it certainly feels like it. For most dinners, they usually have at least someone to keep them company, if it's not Pepper popping in or Happy sticking around after dropping off Peter, it's one of the Avengers coming up to visit them (they want to see Peter, Tony's accepted that about being a father). Tonight it's just the two of them, but that makes it no less chatty than usual.

"Dad, do you know how Eight-five's doing? At the Raft?" He continues to eat his dinner like that's a perfectly ordinary question to ask.

"Eight- oh, yeah. I mean, it's prison, so she's not going to be at her happiest, but..." Peter looks up at him with hope and he sighs and smiles, "she's okay."

"Ned said that people who go to prison get to come out eventually. That's what you said, too. When is she coming out? Is she going to come here?"

He breathes out slowly.

"Where's this coming from?"

"A girl in class was talking about how her brother is in juvie. Ned told me that's kind of like prison but for kids, and I told him that I have a... a kind of sister and she's at the Raft. He said people come out of prison, but that they don't come back from the Raft. But you said..."
"Right, I see." He sets down his fork and reaches out to take Peter's hand in his. "People who end up at the Raft tend to be people who did really bad things. And people who do really bad things don't get out, because it's not safe for them to be a part of society. I don't know what's in store for Eight-five. She's done a lot of horrible things, she needs to serve her time."

"What did she do?"

"I... I think that's a conversation we should have when you're a bit older, kiddo."

"Okay," Peter agrees dejectedly. He attempts to withdraw his hand but Tony holds on.

"I know she means a lot to you. I'm not going to tell you that you shouldn't care about her, or that you shouldn't see her as a sister. What she has done for you, in her twisted way, is special to you and that feeling isn't wrong."

"Can I see her?"

This isn't a good Wednesday dinner conversation.

"I'm afraid not." His eyes turn sad and Tony thinks. His thoughts circle around and around until they still. He squeezes Peter's hand and gives him something that seems like putting a band-aid over broken glass, but it's something. "It's unfortunate that the Raft has no visiting rights, but I'm sure they'll allow letters. Why don't you write her a letter and I'll make sure it gets to her?"

"A letter? What's a letter?" His interest is piqued, his expression brightens that little bit.

"On a piece of paper, you write down all the things you want to tell her. Then I'll send it along for her to read it."

"Really? I can do that?"

"Absolutely. We'll get on that right after dinner, what do you say?"

"Thank you so much, dad!"

Peter devours what's left of his dinner as quickly as he can. Tony tries to go faster not to keep him squirming in his seat impatiently, but he's still a few minutes behind. Once they're both finished, Tony loads up the dishwasher and takes Peter to his barely-used study. He sits him in the plush seat behind his large oak desk and places a few sheets of blank paper in front of him. He hands him a pencil.

"So, letters usually start with 'Dear name of the person you're addressing', and finish with something like, 'sincerely, Peter'. You can ask Jarvis for some ideas. Let me know when you're done and we can get you an envelope to put your letter in."

"Thank you!"

Tony's forgotten as Peter starts on his letter. It takes him a while to finish, and when he finds Tony nearly an hour later, he has a few sheets of paper in his hands.

"Have a lot to say?"

"She has to catch up on a lot of time."

He finds an envelope, as promised, and carefully folds the paper into three. He tucks it inside and neatly folds it closed.
"How long until she gets it?" Peter asks.

"I'm not sure. A few days, maybe a week or two. I have some stuff to figure out."

"Can she send a letter back? If... if she wants to."

"Of course, kiddo. If she wants to write back, she'll be allowed to."

Tony has a few ideas how he's going to make this happen, but he's going to need to throw his weight around quite a bit. Maybe get Pepper in on this. Or Natasha.

He takes it away. Peter goes to his weekly meditation session with Bruce.

As much as he's learned to hide his powers with Steve and Natasha's help, it's imperative that he learns how to control his emotions too. That's where Bruce comes in; he's sort of the expert on the matter. In a good state of mind, he knows how hard to hit not to shatter a person's skull. Upset or angry, that self-restraint starts to slip. He needs to know how to take it back before he ends up doing something he'll regret.

So they do meditation and all sorts of anger management exercises. (And Bruce teaches him all sorts of other things once they're done.)

The next day, Peter plops down next to his friend and tells him with a smile, "my dad let me write a letter to my sister! I hope she likes it."

"I didn't think they let letters into the Raft."

"Dad said he'd figure it out."

Day's pass; Tony's not one to break his word and he figures out how to get the letter to the Raft and then to its prisoner.

There's debate about it, of course.

Most prisoners in the Raft don't have family or friends, no one who'll want to visit let alone send a letter. They've never come across this situation. Is a letter a privilege or a right? Does she deserve it, after all she's done? Yet there are prisoners in civilian jails who've done crimes as horrendous who get mail without a complaint from anyone. It gets through.

One of the guards takes the letter, unsealed of course, down to the cell where she's being held.

He slides his keyguard and presses his thumb into the fingerprint scanner. The door slides open.

The woman of many names is sitting in the bed, staring at the wall. Fénix named her Eight-five, she named herself Queen Cobra, but the Raft knows her as Luella.

There's a cuff on her left wrist that's locked into the ground by a long thread of chain. At the longest reach, she can stand in front of the doorway. The room is super-proof, her strength and speed and flexibility are useless here. She's in drab grey wear and her hair's been cut short. Her canines have been removed; her venom has been taken from her and she hasn't been the same since.

He walks up to her and places the envelope on the bed in front of her.

"Mail for you, Luella. Read it and be done with it. I'll get rid of it once you're done."
Her eyes flicker up to him and then down to the blank envelope. She doesn't speak.

He steps back and stands next to the doorway, waiting for her to do as told. They don't trust her with anything and won't leave her alone with this letter.

After a quiet minute, she reaches out and takes it in hand. She pulls out the pages and reads. The Raft is quiet, and this is new. She's never seen this handwriting and has never gotten a letter in her life, but she knows who's words these belong to.

It starts:

Dear 8-5,

I was just told that I'm allowed to send you letters. I've never written a letter before. I hope you like this because I want to write you lots. I want you to know everything that's going on, so that you're up to date when you're allowed out of the Raft.

She knows this is a life sentence, there is no 'out'.

Mr. Stark. Tony. He's adopted me. He's my dad now. It makes me very happy. Sometimes I wonder if he's going to change his mind, but so far he hasn't. He's been very nice to me, I think you would like him if you gave him a chance. He's very smart, and he likes to build things. He has these robots in his lab that are friendly and smart. He has an AI, an artificial intelligence, that lives in his building and he knows everything. His name is Jarvis.

I go to school now. It's fun. There's a lot of kids and I don't know how to behave around them. But I have one friend, his name is Ned. He loves science and Star Wars. I haven't seen the movies yet, but he says I need to.

He talks about his time with Tony and the Avengers and Ned. It goes on and on and on. Three pages worth of pointless garble that makes her stomach warm. She reaches the end of the letter.

Dad said you could write me back if you want to. I hope you do. I want to know how you are. He says I can't come see you, but this is good too. Please tell me how you are. Or if you want me to keep sending you letters. Or if you want me to stop.

You know, I didn't know letters existed. I was talking to Ned at school and told him I have a sister that's at the Raft and...

That goes on for a little while. Her eyes stay fixed on the word 'sister' for a few minutes, then she manages to finish the letter.

It's signed:

Your loving brother,
Itsy Bitsy

The 'I' is dark, written over a couple of times. He is the boy of many names; Four-seven, Defect, Peter, and then offered the second name of Fitzpatrick and he chooses Stark. He goes to write Defect, but she knows him by a name she's given him herself.

She's going to spend the rest of her life in this room. There's no Fénix, no family, no friends, to rescue her. Peter is better off where he is.

She sets down the pages.
The guard walks closer.

"Wait! I want to keep them. Let me keep them, please..." she takes them into her hands and presses them to her chest.

"It'll be stored. When you want to read it over again, you can ask. Special orders from Stark. Seems you have friends in high places all of a sudden."

She hesitantly lets him take the papers from her. He sets down a pen and a blank sheet of paper.

"You can write back. Don't take long."

She slides off the bed and sets the paper on the floor for a hard surface. She doesn't think, only writes out a message before they change their mind.

It reads:

_Dear Itsy Bitsy,_

_One day, I will see you again. For now, send me all the letters you want._

_Give Stark this message: the King has a Prince now, and perhaps the Knights will be worthy after all._

_Your surviving sister,_

_8-5_

Chapter End Notes

This journey is over. I chose to end with Eight-five's thoughts, since she sort of started this story, and here she is at our end.

Thank you to all of those who've been with this story since the start, and to those who've joined in : ) Thank you for the comments and kuddos. Your kind words encouraged me to finish this story and I can't thank you enough. I'm overjoyed that you all seemed to appreciate the wholesomeness of this story and the little twists and turns along the way.

I would love to hear your final thoughts now that this story is drawn to a close.

Brief words about Eight-five for those who want to know more: at the end here, she hasn't done a 180. If she were to escape, she'd go back to wreaking havoc. She's not a good person. However, in this situation she's lost everything. Her freedom, her powers, and the people who made her. But here's this boy that she's known since he was four-years-old sending her a letter because he genuinely loves her. She cares about him, in her own way, and he's all she has left in the world. (In the sense how Loki is a bad person, but it can't be denied that he loves Thor, in his own twisted way).

I do have some thoughts about making this a series to add a couple of other bits about this story that didn't fit in here. (I'm considering a one-shot about Morgan, and some other things.) If there's anything in particular you'd like to see, let me know and I might write it in the future.
Here's to the end :) 

End Notes

Please leave a comment with your thoughts! I'd love to hear from you :) 

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