Reunion between Worlds

by Yidenia

Summary

Fifteen years after Tony Stark's sacrifice to save the universe, thirty-year-old Peter is balancing between being the new leader of superheroes, helping Pepper with Stark Industries, being a big brother to Morgan Stark, and being a husband for MJ and father to their son.

One day, an innocent accident sends Peter careening into a reality where, twenty years after Thanos snapped out half the universe, sixty-eight-year-old Tony Stark had watched his daughter grow up. He had lived with the knowledge that there was nothing they could do to bring back Peter Parker and others that were lost, and had stopped trying to be a hero ever since he failed in the one moment it mattered.

One way or another, this was all going to involve some ugly crying.
I was pretty affected by Endgame. I loved it, was moved by it, and I wanted to preserve what it accomplished, but I also wanted more Irondad and Spiderson moments. This was my plot bunny. Hope you like *hides*
Chapter 1

There was a roomful of children in a lab.

Peter crawled past the opening to get to the area of the vents where he could talk without being overheard. He related this news to the team.

"Damn it," said Johnny. "I was hoping I could just burn the place."

"You definitely should not burn this place," said Ned. "Pete, what's the plan?"

"Gotta try to be discreet," said Peter. "Who knows what these psychopaths are willing to do. If they get spooked, they might just kill all the children."

"You need some distraction though," said Nova.

"Ned, can you track the surveillance?" Peter asked. "At least hide the footage from anyone watching, then I can try to get to the kids and maybe sneak some out through the halls."

"That's gonna be difficult," Ned replied. "I can hack it no problem, but can't place all the cameras on loop. The way out's too dynamic. Anyone watching for more than a few seconds will know something's up."

It figured that Ned already hacked into the security systems. He probably used the tracker in Peter's suit.

"What kind of distraction were you thinking of?" Johnny sneered, presumably at Nova. "Using your galactic corp ability to blow up the children?"

"You're really nowhere as funny as you think you are," Nova snapped back.

"Guys," Peter chastised, thinking not for the first time that this whole operation would go more smoothly if literally anyone else had been available. The building had looked like a standard corporate building, albeit fancier than anything else on Staten Island, complete with a lobby with friendly receptionists, and the rooms with windows looked like offices for any business. Peter had been doubtful that this was even the right location for the human traffickers, so he had elected to scout the area first. Nova and Johnny had been irate about being left out; the two, despite their similar approaches to conflicts, still had trouble getting along. It might have to do with the fact that both actually had somewhat explosive tempers to go along with their very explosive powers, but whichever the case, neither had the stealth or subtlety that Peter had honed over the past sixteen or so years. Unfortunately, while Peter was inside, these two were outside. Together.

"Guys," Ned echoed, because at this point, he knew Peter so well that he could finish Peter's sentences, "You two are adults. Start behaving like it. Peter's all by himself in there and he needs your help to get those kids out."

The two grumbled.

Peter groaned. "Seriously, guys. Even Nick Fury would have been better than you and the dude's like eighty years old."

"Shut up, Spider-Pants," said Johnny. "We got this. Look, how about I go in as Johnny Storm rather than, you know, Fantastic Four member?"
"How exactly is that different?" Nova demanded.

"I don't need a distraction. I need an extraction. Get to the top of the building and lie low. Don't flame on." Peter groaned. "That's not the only way to dispose of an enemy."

"Yeah yeah..."

"Look, how are you gonna move a bunch of kids all the way up to the roof when they're in the basement?" Nova pointed out. "You need a distraction."

"I don't need one distraction, I need multiple, all at the same time. Look, I got this. I'm gonna check the kids out first, make sure they're okay. If there are any who are injured...we may need to leave and come back with reinforcements."

The children were all seven through eleven years old. They were piled up in the single room. Most were curled up by the wall, sitting. There were too many of them to lie flat, though a few had to because—as Peter had feared—they were injured. Some had gaping wounds on their chests and abdomens and back; their captors had not bothered patching them up. Blood seeped into the disgusting carpet underneath.

Fifteen years ago, Peter would have just rushed in, unable to bear the thought of leaving these kids to this horror for another second. Now, though, he knew the importance of having a decent plan so long as he had the luxury of forming one. Time was of essence for a number of them, but there was no way he could save all of them by himself.

He drew back from the opening and returned to the corner where he could talk.

"So those bastards had been cutting them up," he announced, and heard Ned swear.

"Whaddaya need from us, Chief?" Johnny asked.

"I need a distraction." Halls were a no go, but some of the kids might make it through the vents, and the ones that could not walk...might have to wade through the crowd. Peter considered, not really liking this; whenever possible, it was always better to rely on stealth, but doing so with this many injured children was far-fetched. They were going to have to brute-force this one.

"Told ya," said Nova.

Peter ignored that. "I need one of you to come inside and deal with the guards individually. I'm talking hand-to-hand; no fire, no shockwaves, just punch your way through the crowd."

"I can do that!" Nova exclaimed.

"Yeah, you're a regular meathead," Johnny griped.

"Good grief, guys," Peter wondered how he was friends with these two. "I'm picking Rich because Johnny's too high profile. I'm gonna hop in with the kids to defend them from this end. Johnny, you're gonna collect the kids that can actually crawl. I'm gonna send them through the vents to the window on the corner near the manhole. Turn up that Human Torch charm, cuz these kids probably aren't eager to trust strangers given what they've gone through. The ones that can't move on their own, I'm gonna have to carry out little by little. Rich? You think you can handle, like, a one or potentially two, maybe three-hour brawl against super soldiers?"

"Never did a non-stop three-hour dungeon crawl outside of a video-game, but if that's what it takes, I'm sure I'll figure something out."
"I'm heading around."

"Guy in the Chair?"

"I got eyes and ears on all of you," said Ned.

"Remember, no shockwaves, okay? I can handle the debris but some of these kids are in a bad way. If they're getting to be too much, give us a head's up."

"Yeah yeah I got it."

The drones from Peter's suit undo the hatch in the ceiling, making just enough noise that the children below knew to look up at him as he slides through.

"Spider-Man!" one child gasped softly.

"Hey guys!" Peter whispered, jumping down lightly and careful to avoid landing on a kid. "Shhh!"

The kids were mutants, Peter noted once he had a better angle to look at them. Some had fur, others had weird-looking eyes and weirder-looking hair. There was no mistaking that they were children, though. They were all at least bruised and battered. The ones with open wounds did not sit up to look at him. A couple were missing limbs.

Peter took a deep breath, which was a bit of a mistake, as the stench of blood and urine flooded his nostrils then; despite being in a ventilation system, there was no air circulating up, so he did not smell it until he was actually in the room. Regardless, he was able to rein in his temper; no need to scare the children, after all, and Nova was taking care of punching the living daylights out of the bad guys, so Peter needed to keep his cool.

"Guy in the chair, you have Drone Six?"

"On it."

"Okay. Guys, whoever can crawl, I'm gonna have you follow this little guy." Peter extracted the drone from the compartment in his chest.

It was in the shape of a spider, and crawled like one. If any of the children were scared of spiders, though, none of them voiced any complaints. Perhaps they all understood at this point that the human monsters were worse than arthropods.

"He's gonna take you out of this place," Peter said, both to the kids and to Ned, who automatically assumed control of the drone to guide it up the vent shaft. "One of my friends, Human Torch, is waiting outside for you, so just follow him, stick together, and you're gonna be okay. Those who can't walk, don't worry, I'm gonna get you out too, okay?"

The children wasted no time. Their trust in him was absolute, and Peter had to marvel at it. Fifteen years ago, when the universe lost Iron Man, he had assumed that the best he would ever achieve was looking out for the little guy in the neighborhood. Dealing with super soldier organizations like this one was more of an Avengers thing, and Peter had not felt very much like an Avenger for a long time. Six years later, when Peter became the head of the new Avengers, he had to stay behind the scenes for a while, just to get a handle on how to delegate, how to organize and coordinate. He did not have Tony Stark's natural charisma, nor Steve Rogers' leadership skills. Plus, with the universe restored from Thanos' snap, and everyone aware of just how big the cosmos was, there was the Fantastic Four, there was the X-Men, the Eternals, the Defenders, the Champions, the wizards from the Sanctorums, and everyone had their own ideas. Peter was one man among many amazing heroes,
and he had to figure out how to work with them and how to get them to work with each other. It could have all crashed and burned. Peter felt like a trainwreck for many years. But he must have done something right, because in the last fifteen years, the people he needed to help never doubted him. Everyone knew Spider-Man, and believed that when Spider-Man was around, things will be okay.

He lifted one child after another into the hatch while talking to Ned, who was reporting on the activity in the building.

"No changes in the patterns of patrols. Trojan horse still in place; they haven't tried to boot it. How many kids do you got?"

Peter did a quick count. "Twenty to twenty-five, give or take. You good, Johnny? Medical on standby?"

"No, nowhere to park, but if these kids can walk, will get them out, no trouble."

"Hey!" Nova called out, but he was not talking to them. "You have restrooms around here?"

"Should contact Kitty Pryde," Peter remarked, ignoring Nova's shenanigans for now. "This is more her territory. Didn't realize they're kidnapping mutants."

"Ooh, Shadowcat. She'd be good for this sort of thing." There was some clicking from Ned's side, while Nova appeared to have started the fighting, if the grunts were anything to go by. "I'll get her online. She can also help with reinforcements, with her phasing ability."

"If she's still up in Westchester, show's over before she gets here. They trashed Blackbird again last week because they couldn't wait a day for me to come and take a look."

"Stupid," Ned muttered, which Peter agreed with. "Should've learned from the first two times they didn't come to you for maintenance."

"I didn't know Pete fixes planes," Nova piped up. "Ow! Get off! Ha!"

"Focus on fighting and not losing an eye," Johnny chastised. "And yeah, duh, where do you think the X-Men get all their upgrades?"

Nova did not reply immediately, because he was too busy fighting. The last child went up the vent, which left Peter to take care of the wounded.

Webbing made acceptable tourniquets, considering he had no actual bandages. There were eight kids, though, and Peter could not carry all of them. None of them could move on their own. They had lost too much blood, too much flesh, too much limb.

"More guards headed toward Nova. They're shooting," Ned reported. There was a thudding sound as something hit the pipes behind the wall on Peter's left. "Dude! Angle yourself away and try to go up—the bullets are gonna go through and hit the basement!"

"You're so picky!" Nova complained, but presumably complied, because Ned did not press the matter further.

Even so, there was a low boom, then the whole room shook.

Nova's side crackled. Peter heard him swear, and the whole room shook again.
"Nova, what are you doing?" Johnny demanded. "The whole building's shaking!"

"It's not me!"

"Well then stop it! You're gonna crush the kids!"

"Nova," Peter stated more calmly than he felt, "You need to deescalate."

"I'm trying, damn it—"

This time, the tremor through the building was enough to crack the ceiling, causing small showers of debris and dust to rain down over their heads.

The children were silent, simply watching Peter. Having lived a nightmare for who knew how long, they were, perhaps, numb to horror at this point.

"Hey guys!" Johnny's voice was suddenly high, chipper, and way too loud. "Quick, quick, c'mon! Let's get you outta here; go go go!"

The first group were getting out. That was something.

"Ned, anyone above me?"

"Uh, yeah. Dude that looks like a purple Hulk, except smaller and way more warty. Guy with big guns. They're headed down the stairs. Might be going right for you."

"Damn." There went his idea of just punching a hole in the ceiling and webbing all eight kids together to pull them up. Not that it was a great idea, but there were no great ideas at hand right now.

Peter suspected he was going to have to fight, even before entering the building. First things first, though; secure the room with the kids as much as possible. He pressed on the web dispenser, and stretched the silk across the ceiling, covering all the cracks. He then stretched another layer over the walls to tamponade any new cracks that might form from whatever Nova was doing upstairs.

He stopped briefly to check on one child, whose face had been mutilated. She was a girl. She wordlessly folded her arms around his neck.

"Hey there," Peter tried not to cry, since the girl was not even crying. "You're gonna be okay. We'll get you out, okay?"

She did not answer, but she held on for a few seconds before letting go.

And then Peter heard the footsteps.

"Wait here," he told everyone, which was unnecessary because what else could they do? He then rushed out into the hallway.

Purple warty Hulk was a pretty apt description. Guy with big guns was also a pretty good description, since he carried two of them, one in each hand. Those calibers would easily cause collateral damage, so Peter's first goal was to go over their heads to draw their attention away from the room with the kids. Now that they were about-faced, Peter punched Purple Hulk right in the nose. He heard the bones crack, and the squirt of blood, though the giant only stumbled and did not fall.

Guns shot at him. Peter's spider-sense moved him out of the way.
"Hey, man, you sure you wanna swing that thing around in close quarters?" Peter jumped to the ceiling. "Might shoot something you don't wanna break!"

"Don't see none of that," Guns sneered, revealing missing teeth as his lips parted.

"Might want to get your eyes checked then!" Peter aimed and fired a glob of web right at the man's eyes. He yelled, grabbing at his face without letting go of the gun, and sure enough, shots rang out, though they were directed at the ceiling.

"This is why I don't like guns, Sam," Peter reenacted the conversation he had with Sam Wilson. "They're too easy to misuse."

Then the ceiling caved in.

Peter was thinking ungenerous thoughts about ever working with Nova again when he managed to shove aside the rubble on top of him. Said centurion was currently engaging both Purple Hulk and Guns, who had managed to rip the webbing off his face. Ned's voice was yelling in Peter's ear, while Johnny was herding the last kid out of the vent hatch.

"Your web's not holding! You gotta get those kids out of the room! Are you with me? I can't see you!"

"I'm here." The problem was, there was rubble in front of the door. Peter could clear it out, but Guns and Purple Hulk were in the way. Fed up with this, Peter shot his electric web at Purple Hulk, hoping to fry the guy, but to his disappointment, the static did nothing; apparently the warts did not conduct electricity very well.

There was already a convenient hole in the ceiling, Peter thought as he dodged a blow from a purple fist, before swinging back with one of his own. He did not hold back. Purple Hulk flew through the air. Nova ducked as the body sailed over him.

"Hey! Watch it!"

"You watch it!" Peter exclaimed. "After this, we're gonna need to work on your deescalation skills!"

"Do you need me to come in?" Johnny asked.

"Get the kids out of here and to medical!" Peter managed to slide into the room with the kids.

"Kitty Pryde is on the line,“ Ned announced.

"Yeah well kinda busy right now. Do your chair business and fill her in!"

The children were getting anxious, and looked at him with oppressed faces, like there was too much fear to be expressed.

"Alright kids, we have a way out," albeit, not entirely out, but at least out of the basement through the hole above them out in the hallway. So much for getting them out gradually; Peter was going to have to pull them out of here in one fell swoop. "I'm gonna wrap you guys up in this web, okay? It'll be like...like a sleeping bag, yeah? And I'll pull all of you up." His spider-sense blared, and he twisted out of the way just as a bullet whizzed past.

"Nova, get him out of the way!"

Nova was, admittedly, dealing with Purple Hulk, and knocked the guy out. He let out a breath,
turned to Peter, and griped, "Cut a guy some slack! I was dealing with this loser over here!" He then reached out to grab one of the guns and bent the nozzle. The man's jaw dropped. "Yeah, super soldier your way out of this!"

Peter did not watch Nova strike at Guns, instead turning his attention to the kids on the floor. These trusted him as much as their ambulatory friends did, and allowed him to wrap them up in a cocoon without complaint.

A few, Peter knew, might not survive till morning. He tried not to dwell on the thought.

Guns was good at arm-to-arm combat, unfortunately, so even without his weapons, he was giving Nova a hard time. Peter pulled the eight cocoons across the filthy carpet, feeling very much like a real spider dragging prey around. It was touch and go to get to the hallway with all the cement and plaster on the floor, but he pulled them up through the hole, only to find himself faced with a squad of soldiers, guns all aimed at him.

"MJ is calling," Ned announced.

"…Dude, are you serious right now?"

A wall of fire suddenly lit up in front of Peter, right between him and the soldiers.

"Spidey!" Johnny yelled. He had actually burned a hole through the wall. His entire body was lit up with flames. Stepping to the side, he made a beckoning motion. "Come on come on come on!"

Peter wasted no time. He managed to drag his cargo through the opening just as the first shot was getting fired.

"She's asking if you can pick up laundry detergent because Benjy apparently tried to imitate MJ doing chores and had dumped the whole bottle onto the lawn."

Nova panted. "That guy's biceps are no joke. Also, Benjy's adorable."

"Oh God," Peter groaned, still dragging the poor kids over the sidewalk now—and he thanked the stars they were somehow already on the side of the building, because he was not sure if they could afford to navigate more hostile complex. "Tell her I'll pick them up if the stores aren't closed by the time I'm done with this. I have eight kids who need to see doctors asap. Torch, where's medical?"

"Follow Drone Six!" Johnny called back. "Get outta here, Spidey! Nova and I will handle this! Now, who wants to get roasted?!!"

Drone six was on the curb, scuttling around as if it did not know what to do with itself.

"Kitty wants to talk to you once you get the kids somewhere safe," Ned reported.

"Yeah, fine," Peter used a little webbing to stick the cocoons together. Now was not the time to be dignified, and he could not swing across the street while ensuring the kids do not get knocked into the walls. The world's weirdest piggyback ride it was. "Tell her I'm staying with the kids while Torch and Nova go to town on the bad guys."

Stores were open, because this was the Big Apple, after all. Benjy, having committed enough mischief for the night, was sound asleep in his crib.

"I'm just glad he didn't choose to drink any of it," MJ muttered as she took the new bottle of
"detergent from Peter to put it on the kitchen counter. "You look beat."

"I feel beat," Peter groaned. "It's sick, what they were doing to these kids. Kitty couldn't stop crying."

"They're at the hospital?"

"All eight are in the intensive care unit. It's pretty bad." Peter ran his fingers through his dusty hair. "I'm gonna shower and go straight to bed."

"Alright. I'll finish up the laundry."

"Do you really need to do that tonight? It's pretty late."

"I've nothing to wear if I don't do the laundry." MJ shrugged. "It's my own fault. Shouldn't have waited last minute."

"Sorry," Peter felt bad. "Should have helped."

"No," MJ squeezed his shoulder. "You needed to track those monsters down as quickly as you could. And it sounds like it wasn't a moment too soon."

*It might have been moments too late.*

Some of the desolation might have been on his face, because MJ pressed her forehead to his. She was originally a little taller than him when they first met, but though they both grew, Peter was now taller than her, so she had to tip his head down for them to meet.

"No one expects you to be perfect, Peter. You were never supposed to be able to save everyone. That kind of power is frankly scary."

Peter thought of the long-destroyed Infinity Stones, the toll that had taken on Tony Stark. He swallowed before nodding. He knew MJ was right.

"Go shower," MJ kissed him on the cheek. "And thanks for buying this."

"It's my laundry as much as yours," Peter pointed out, before going upstairs so he could get in the shower. On the way, he stopped by Benjy's crib again. The toddler was sleeping with the kind of peace only happy babies could have.

Peter smoothed the little one's hair, before stepping away. He still needed to shower and wash today off his skin.

Tomorrow was another day.

Pepper was a little flustered the next morning, which was unusual given that this woman was very hard to rattle.

"I'm getting too old for this," she announced to Peter without any sort of preamble when he popped his head into her office to check on her.

"You don't look a day over forty."

This was true. She did not.
"My bones don't lie."

"Your bone structure is exquisite."

"Flatterer," Pepper smiled anyway, but the smile dimmed when she saw his face. "Hey, you doing okay?"

"Mission yesterday. Didn't go wrong, necessarily, but," Peter shrugged, not sure if he should burden her with details. "It's just hard, sometimes. You'd think, with half the world gone for five years, people would understand the value of life." Even mutant ones. Especially children.

"The world's a big place. There will always be people we cannot understand."

"Truth. Anything I can help with?"

"Actually, yes. I need you to sign these forms."

"Who does my soul belong to after that?" Peter picked up the tablet she handed to him even as he spoke.

"Your soul belongs to whomever it belonged to from the beginning, but you'll be heading a joint project with Biogen for the foreseeable future."

"Thought you didn't want to touch biomedical."

"I wanted to wait until the extrapolates were more favorable, and they are." Peter did not read the contract too closely; he hoped Pepper would not actually retire anytime soon, because he was so accustomed to her taking care of everything. The wife of the late Tony Stark could be no less.

"Morgan's coming home for the weekend," Pepper announced as Peter was signing.

"Yeah?"

"She wants to see Benjy."

"I dunno. Benjy dumped all of our laundry detergent on the lawn yesterday. He's turning into a little brat."

Pepper laughed. "Oh, that's so precious! Why did he do that, and how did he get his hands on the detergent? Oh!" she grew concerned. "I'm assuming he didn't try to ingest any of it?"

"No. Thank goodness. And he was trying to imitate doing chores."

"Aw," Pepper pressed a hand to her heart. "Reminds me of when Morgan was little. You'll think back fondly on incidents like this later on."

Peter grinned, because he did not actually feel the annoyance of his words. Benjy was a joy. The moment he was born, Peter knew that he was the best thing in the world, the most beautiful thing Peter had ever seen. His eyes traveled down, to the photo on Pepper's desk: Tony, Pepper, and Morgan, framed in red wood. Morgan was two years old in the photo, eyes full of character and a wide, beaming smile. Compared to her, Tony and Pepper's smiles looked heavier. The weight of their loss against Thanos draped over them despite having moved on. Tony Stark was warmed by fatherhood, but that darkness never left any of his photos since the first Snap.
Next to that photo was Morgan at eighteen, starting college. She was a sweet, slender thing, much like MJ had been, much like Pepper was in her old photos. On the other side of the desk was Morgan and Peter; Peter when he graduated with his doctorate, with a teenage Morgan wearing his pillow hat and holding his diploma out of the way. Peter looked like he was about to fall apart with mirth.

"Time flies," Pepper mused, lost in her own thoughts. "I still remember when you were a baby-faced youngster. Now you have a baby of your own. This is insane."

Peter handed the tablet back to her. "I'll definitely bring Benjy by. He needs to see his aunt and great-aunt. Saturday good?"

"Yes, that's perfect." Pepper accepted the tablet. "The collaborators want to meet with you this week; what times are good for you?"

"I'll need to check," Peter made a note to stop at his secretary's desk. "I'll text you. Probably Thursday. Wednesday's kind of full."

"Sounds good."

Work at Stark Industries was mostly in the office, despite the numerous projects. The Iron Man suits were on display behind glass cases on a floor replicating Tony Stark's old workshop. There were early models of arc reactors, which Peter had since improved upon, but most of the engineering in the building, besides one wing, was more as a memorial than for actual research and development. Peter felt less like a scientist and more like an administrator, answering emails and making phone calls for much of the morning, before reviewing papers and editing manuscripts in the afternoon.

Johnny had taken over the mutant kids, along with Kitty Pryde. Peter got a text with updates: one of the kids died in the PICU. He sent an acknowledgment and tried to focus on his draft about the application of Pym particles. He was interrupted with another message, this time from Morgan, confirming that he was coming over on Saturday and bringing MJ and the baby. She did not elaborate over text, but she mentioned she wanted to discuss with Peter about NASA, and possibly interning there for the summer before her senior year. She had not discussed with Pepper yet, because she really was not sure if this was what she wanted.

Peter promised they will discuss this on Saturday, then made a note to reach out to Dr. Richards before the weekend.

Then an alarm blared.

"There has been a minor explosion in East Hall, Room C," FRIDAY reported.

"A 'minor' explosion?" Peter moved back from his desk. "Anyone hurt?"

"Minor injuries."

"Should still go and check it out."

Dr. Peter Parker had no enhancements or powers, as far as anyone knew, so Peter's presence was really more for morale than for anything else. He could probably get away with a little grunt work, but there were enough people already lifting the debris in Room C, which was more of a giant atrium that housed big machinery, that Peter was instead stuck listening to the report of what happened. Apparently it was an innocent mistake, caused by miscommunication about what steps in the protocol had already been followed. One technician suffered some minor burns to her forearms, while another got an impromptu haircut. The equipment actually took the brunt of the damage.
"As long as no one was hurt," Peter looked at the two techs. "They should probably be checked by a doctor." At least the one with the burns; the other's hair would grow back, but the offer still stood.

"We're going to have to repair or replace this," The lead engineer, an Indian Sikh man with a fondness for chai (and was, in fact, holding a cup of just that while assessing the scene), gestured over at the remains of the equipment.

"Let's see what components actually need replacing," Peter replied, stepping forward to examine the cracks in the plastic and metal. "What project is this for again?" It was new, and was overseen by Cassie Lang, who was conveniently not at work today. Peter might be able to recall what it was for if he saw the name, but at the moment its purpose eluded him.

He was lifting one of the plastic shards that were half-broken from the frame when his spider-sense blared in alarm. The lead engineer had started to answer his question, but Peter never heard him.

Everything tunneled in. Sound muted. The world darkened.

A roll of thunder rumbled, followed by several lightning flashes and more thunder. The light illuminated what Peter needed to see, however.

He was standing in a large, mostly empty atrium. The ceiling was high. Old model wind tunnels lay dormant across from him. The windows showed that it was nighttime, but New York City had never been this dark at night, no matter what time. Rain splattered against the glass in aggressive sprays as wind gusts blew at the buildings.

There were tables and chairs, haphazardly scattered across the great room. Supplies on the floor. The air was stale and humid, the smell of years of neglect and abandonment.

Spooked, Peter was afraid to move at first, but his spider-sense had quieted down. After a moment, during which all was still inside the room, he stepped gingerly toward the window.

Manhattan was…different. The buildings looked decrepit, even in the dark. Below, a lone car drove along the mostly empty street, ignoring the red traffic lights. There were perhaps one or two windows throughout the entire city that were even lit.

Oh, Peter thought. I'm not in Kansas anymore.
There was no power in the building, and it was raining cats and dogs. Peter's cell phone was completely dead, even though it had adequate battery before whatever brought him here.

He also had no cash.

Peter shed the suit he wore to work, tapping the Wakanda-inspired pendant to summon his suit. His webshooters were on a watch and a brace, respectively, and he could use them without the suit, but he did not want to risk it for obvious reasons. Thankfully, whatever had fried his phone did not fry the suit or his webshooters.

"Karen," he called, "you online?"

To his relief, after a few seconds of lag, he got a reply. "I'm here, Peter."

Peter had enough experience these days that Karen was often more of a distraction than a help on team missions. He never had the heart to update her, and while Tony Stark had programmed her to be self-evolving, over the years, the hardware had advanced to the point where Karen's code no longer ran as efficiently. Pepper often told him that Tony Stark would want Peter to improve on Karen. Peter understood this, and strangely, he had no problems improving on the arc reactor, or even FRIDAY, but Karen had been designed for Peter. Tony Stark had put thought into her code, in consideration of what the young superhero might need. He had 'put everything in the suit', and now that Peter had outgrown her, it felt wrong to change her when it was the last thing Tony Stark had ever given him. In a way, it was a gesture of how much he had cared. Peter did fine without the upgrades so far, so he never had the heart to alter any of her original code.

Which was still fine, because it seemed Karen was working.

"Is there any internet service here?" he asked.

"Yes. The internet database is sparse and has not changed much since 2018."

Peter had a feeling of why, but he had to be sure. "Um, okay. So, first of all, do I exist in this place?"

Karen took a long time to respond. "Peter Benjamin Parker, date of birth August 10th, 2001; decimated April 14th, 2018."

"...Decimated." That was what they had called it. Decimation. "Wow. Hm. I'm assuming Thanos also exists. Existed. Here."

"Thanos was executed by Thor of Asgard in 2018."

"Thor." Peter was starting to get an idea of what might be different in this place. "What about Scott Lang? Is he still decimated?"

"Correct."

"Is Thor still alive?"

"There is no report of his death, nor obituary."

Ned, MJ were both 'decimated'. So was Aunt May. Johnny Storm was alive, but not the Human Torch, and Richard Rider was not Nova. The current population count was actually 2 million,
because even though Thanos had snapped away half of all life, a great many people had died due to
the sudden disappearance of vital operatives: pilots, drivers, surgeons, construction workers, mothers
in labor, engineers, and more. The corresponding twenty years after the Decimation saw a drastic
population decline, leaving behind a skeleton world.

Peter was old enough to forget quite a bit about things that happened ten years ago, let alone fifteen,
and he struggled to remember names that he hoped might be alive.

"What about Steve Rogers? Status?"

"Alive."

So were Black Widow and Bruce Banner. Hawkeye had died, killed on one of his vigilante
missions.

"Tony Stark?"

Karen paused again for a long time, as she was prone to do.

"Alive," she said.

Land of Oz, you suck,
Peter thought.

The rain itself was not the issue with Peter's updated suit and web, but the lightning was. He decided
to sit tight, do a little more detailed research on this universe, think before he acted, until the thunder
let up. This ended up taking several hours, during which time morning slowly dawned, revealing a
city that was every bit as run down as it had looked in the night. The rain eased as the sky lightened,
but with the day, the city got no busier; it looked like something out of an apocalypse, with the one
person going down the sidewalk every so often in an area where there should be hundreds.

The windows were rusted, so Peter just broke them; he doubted anyone would care around here.
New York smelled fresh after the rain, and this time there was the distinct absence of gas and diesel
fumes.

The world smelled empty, and it largely was. The population of the whole planet in this reality was
less than a quarter of his own New York City alone.

"Tony Stark has a FRIDAY here, right?" because everything else, from Berlin to the ferry to
Vulture, had been the same.

"Would you like me to attempt to connect to FRIDAY?"

Good question. Peter had a feeling this could be overwhelming for everyone involved, but he needed
help to get home, where he belonged, so he could make sure Benjy did not swallow laundry
detergent, that Morgan got notes on NASA, that Pepper did not retire and the children were properly
settled with Kitty at the institute. If Tony Stark was alive, he was the greatest mind on the planet.
Peter needed that.

"Maybe just find his address. Hm, there's no way to pry without FRIDAY detecting you, is there?
Maybe…is Morgan Stark alive?"

"Correct."

"She's gotta be in college now, yeah? Maybe look in their server, see if you can look up her
address." FRIDAY might detect this too, considering she could detect any inquiries into Morgan
Stark even at home, but she may not know the culprit. Peter wanted to see the Starks himself, figure out the situation before alerting them of his presence.

Karen was slow, but she did eventually find the address; somewhere in Long Island. "Plotting course."

Peter followed, swinging. He hoped this Tony Stark did not have hostile relations with this version of Peter Parker. There was no reason to believe they had a bad relationship, considering everything before the reversal seemed to be the same, but not everything was on public record.

Tony Stark was...old.

Peter had watched Pepper age, so seeing her was not a huge shock. Tony Stark, though, was old. It made sense, all things considered. This version of Tony Stark was around sixty-eight years old. He looked good for someone nearing his seventies; his figure was relatively trim, and his posture still straight, and it was not like he was ancient, but he had shortened a little over the years, his shoulders no longer as broad, and there was no hiding how gray his hair was, his beard, the looseness of his face.

Iron Man had always seemed big to Peter, not just because Tony Stark had been taller than when Peter was a teenager, but also because Iron Man was just big. Strong, mighty, and formidable, having him at one's back was like being backed by a dragon, and all obstacles seemed surpassable when he was around. All threats seemed minor so long as one had Iron Man on the team. In the flesh, Tony Stark had been larger than life, his mind brilliant and sharp, his personality as great as his wealth, his charisma boundless. It was fitting that such a person would be the core of something like Iron Man.

Sixty-eight-year-old Tony Stark was...old. He might have barely passed that line separating middle-age from elderly, but he crossed it all the same.

He came out of the wooden house with Pepper on his arm. He was dressed casually, while Pepper wore a suit; she was headed to work, while her husband intended to stay home, but she was escorting her to the car. Peter's enhanced hearing picked up bits of their conversation: Morgan was coming home, this time to their house. She had no Peter Parker to discuss summer internships, no Benjy to be an aunt to.

The two disappeared around the corner toward the garage.

Peter watched from behind the tree across the driveway and felt his eyes sting. They looked so content. So peaceful. Retirement suited Tony Stark.

This is how it should have been, if Tony Stark lived.

He turned away, even though he could not see them anyway, and waited for him to return. This did not take long, and he remained hidden until the man reappeared, wound around the front, and went back inside the house.

Peter debated on how to introduce himself. Would it be less or more believable to tell the plain truth? This world did not know about multiverses, had never performed a Time Heist, broken the barriers between dimensions. Peter was a good fifteen years older than he was when this Tony Stark knew him. He could come up with an alias and try to achieve the same goal. Call himself Ben Reilly, after his uncle and his aunt's maiden name, and ask for Tony Stark's engineering expertise.

But he would not know how to explain any of this to a man he was not sure he knew. A lot could
happen in fifteen years. People die. People live. This Morgan Stark had nothing to do with Peter. This Pepper had never watched Peter grow. And clearly, this Tony Stark had other priorities.

He was still fooling around with the notion when he finally summoned the courage to go up to the door. There was nothing for it; he had nothing to lose. If Tony Stark chose not to believe him, not to help him, Peter was back to square one, but at least he would be no worse off than he already was.

He rang the doorbell.

Enough time stretched that Peter rang the doorbell again, even though his keen hearing had heard it go off inside. The reason for the delay was evident as soon as the door slowly opened.

Tony's face looked almost impassive. There was no smile or frown on his lips. Up close, the crows feet and wrinkles around his mouth were deeper. His eyelids drooped slightly behind the pair of readers on his nose. His cheeks sagged a little.

He stared at Peter. His eyes did not move at all. He did not say a word.

Any plan to come up with a fake name instantly dissipated. Tony Stark recognized him. Somehow, despite being about twice as old as he was when he last fought alongside Iron Man, when this Tony Stark should have known him, Tony Stark recognized Peter Parker before he had opened the door. He had not opened it because he had been reeling.

The revelation was just as stunning for Peter as it apparently was for the older man. Peter was usually more articulate, but for a long moment, he truly had no idea what to say. He realized that this moment was bordering on traumatic. He was witnessing Tony Stark's mind being blown.

If he was honest with himself, Peter's own mind was blown. It was getting blown ever since he arrived here.

"Mr. Stark," he finally managed, "I'm...I'm from another universe. And I need your help to...get home."

Tony Stark did not say a single word. Peter had to make tea for the both of them, because the man seemed to have completely glitched. They stood in the kitchen with the same layout as Peter's own universe. Peter sipped awkwardly from his cup. Tony Stark held it when Peter handed it to him, but then set it down on the counter, unable to drink it. He never took his eyes off Peter, even as he worked, boiling the water, pulling out the tea bags, the mugs.

Maybe a quip would do it. Tony Stark responded to quips.

"Never thought a speechless Tony Stark existed in any universe." He smirked, hoping to coax the man out of this odd funk.

Tony Stark's expression did not change, and he kept staring at Peter, barely blinking. He did speak, though.

"You died in my arms twenty years ago," he said. His voice was steady, but detached.

He was in shock.

Peter recalled the one true hug his own Tony Stark had given him, five years after the Decimation. He remembered the awe and wonder in the man's eyes that preceded the gesture, like he had witnessed a miracle, the fulfillment of a heartfelt wish.
He set the mug down. He strode forward, the way Tony Stark had done fifteen years ago. "Come here."

But this Tony Stark had not been Iron Man for twenty years. When Peter walked forward with his arms outstretched, the older man stepped back. His eyebrows pinched a little, and abruptly, tears flooded down his cheeks.

He let Peter hug him, but he did not hug back. Instead, his breath choked, then wheezed out of him in suppressed sobs. They were not happy. They were filled with anguish and shame. When his arms did lift, it was not to embrace, but to clutch at Peter's arms in a tremulous grip.

Peter tightened his hold. This Tony Stark was not so tall. He was still taller than Peter, but in this moment, hunched and grieving, he felt very small and frail.

He held Peter's hands when they relocated to the couch in the sitting room. For a long time, neither of them said anything.

Then Tony Stark managed a hesitant chuckle.

"You're so grown up."

Peter smiled back. He heard it often from Pepper over the years. She and Tony really were a good match. "Yeah, time flies."

"...You're still Spider-Man, huh?"

"...Yeah. I still have Karen. Heh. E-Everything was the same. Up till. You know." Peter ducked his head, feeling stupid.

Tony Stark sniffled. He was actually still crying a little. "You're doing okay?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Um, got a wife. You'd like her. Name's MJ. Short for Michelle Jones. Have an eighteen month old son. Kind of a little brat. Poured out all of our detergent trying to copy his mom."

A tight squeeze to his hands. Tony Stark's eyes shone.

"What, uh, what's your, um, profession now?"

"Oh. Uh, well, by day, consultant at Stark Industries—I have a doctorate in biochemistry and mech E, so I'm a consultant as well as a leader in some projects; also pseudo-Vice President, cuz...um, Pepper's overworked. But, mostly Spider-Man, and...leader of the new Avengers."

"Yeah?" The man's eyes shone with something more than tears this time. It was delight.

"Yeah. Lots of...of heroes that need coordinating. I coordinate."

"...Are we not paying you enough? Why are you doing your own laundry?"

"Oh! Uh, long story. It's...it's kinda funny actually. We—we actually had an accident with, uh, with Dum-E."
"Oh for Christ's sake—"

"Yeah, haha, and, uh, MJ didn't want to ever try again—"

"Of course it was Dum-E. I forgive you."

Peter laughed, and he realized he was crying too. "Yeah, haha. Morgan—Morgan keeps insisting she'll give us a better—but, uh, I told her to focus on school, rather than a robot washer. Who knows? Maybe once she does graduate, we'll, um, never have to wash our own laundry again."

"M-Morgan's…Morgan keeps in touch with you?"

"Oh yeah. She's…uh, I babysat her a lot. Also web-slinging…trips. Totally safely! Uh, I probably shouldn't have told you that…"

Tony Stark was now laughing and crying at the same time, just like Peter. His glasses were all wet and foggy. They must be a sight: two fully-grown men sitting on the couch facing each other, holding hands with tears streaming down their faces while chuckling. It was undignified. It was surreal. It was as warm and loving as Peter had never dared to imagine.

"What about me?" Tony Stark asked, still grinning. "Do I treat you okay?"

And all at once, all the mirth evaporated from Peter. He felt his lips contort downward. Oddly enough, his mind did not bring up the image of Iron Man, bloodied, charred, too overwhelmed to even speak, staring wordless at Rhodey, at Peter, at Pepper, before the light faded from his eyes, and the arc reactor, that self-sustaining energy source that should have been able to keep a heart beating for eternity, dimmed and went out like a blown candle.

Instead, it was the many pictures of Tony Stark, dotting the family home, smiling heavily at his wedding, holding his child, never changing even as Pepper grew grayer, as Morgan grew taller, and the more he stayed the same, the more the world turned without him, until the leader of heroes was Peter, not Tony Stark. The leader of the Avengers, the leader of the superheroes, was Spider-Man, and a whole generation of kids grew up never knowing Iron Man except from textbooks and the odd statue carved in memory of him.

"You died," he gasped. "You saved the universe and it killed you. You saved me and everyone and—and—"

He could not continue. All of the sudden, the grief choked him, as fresh as if everything had happened yesterday. More, because Peter had never lost his composure as thoroughly as he had just now.

A beat later, Peter felt himself pulled into a hug once more. It was softer, warmer, quieter, but just as strong as the hug from fifteen years ago, tight with emotion. He felt a hand in his hair, cradling his head. Felt a gray beard press against his cheek.

"It's okay, Pete. I got you. I've got you."

"How did you do it?"

There was hope in his eyes, and Peter wanted to weep at the sight of them. He thought of the sheer desperation, the rage of battle. Steve Rogers wielding Mjolnir, Hawkeye and Dr. Strange, the Guardians of the Galaxy, Captain Marvel. Iron Man, proud and tall, hair and beard dark and eyes bright with fury, the jewels of the cosmos glittering on his gauntlet. "I am Iron Man."
It was not that he did not want Tony Stark to die, though there was that as well. Peter related the tale easily enough, because he understood that this would not change anything. Out of the fourteen-plus million outcomes Dr. Strange had seen, only one led to victory.

Fourteen-plus million outcomes, and Peter's reality had been the only one that won. There was no way for this Tony Stark to save the universe, because he was not part of that future. Scott Lang never left the quantum plane to inspire the Time Heist, and even if they managed to find him and started now, Tony Stark was sixty-eight years old. His hair had gone gray. He had not been Iron Man for twenty years, and had neither the strength nor agility to be Iron Man ever again. Rhody had suffered a heart attack that required a stent, limiting how much activity his body could tolerate. Black Widow was also compelled to slow down due to bad knees and hips, arthritic after a lifetime of strenuous survival, while Hawkeye had been dead for eight years. Fifty-three-year-old Steve Rogers, with the changes of time weighing his cheekbones and loosening the line of his jaw, could never pose as the twenty-seven-year-old Captain America of 2012 to steal the Scepter from Hydra.

After Peter finished, the older man bent over his knees, holding his mouth with both hands, and rocked in misery. Peter embraced him, letting this Tony Stark bury his face in Peter's shoulder as the came to terms with a hope now lost all over again.

But Tony Stark did not move on to build a family because he was the type to wallow. Once upon a time, Pepper had told Peter, he might have, but not after the Decimation. He was blessed to have kept all the people he cared about, and they had kept him, so he plunged forward to make the best of this new world. Peter's arrival, ultimately, did not change things.

Even the lack of reversing the Decimation did not change certain things.

"With your spider metabolism," he scolded while waving his spatula by the stove, "you need to be more cognizant of things like this."

"What, was I supposed to show up and say, 'Hey Mr. Stark, I need help getting back to another universe, but first of all can you make me a grilled cheese sandwich because I haven't eaten in like six hours?'"

The toasted bread sizzled satisfyingly on the pan, and the smell was already making Peter's mouth water.

"First of all, it's Tony; why are you calling me 'Mr. Stark'? Second of all, if you did that, at least I wouldn't have wasted all that time in the sitting room trying to sort things out while your blood sugar slides. At least drop me the tidbit early on, or something."

"I didn't realize I was hungry either." A very rude growl from his stomach had notified both of them of that. "And I'd always called you Mr. Stark."

"Yeah," Tony hesitated for a beat, "well, uh, you're all grown up now, so you've graduated to calling me Tony."

Sensing him becoming pensive again, Peter piped up, "Okay, Tony. Make me a grilled cheese sandwich."

Tony barked into laughter, and a huge grin split across his face. "Prepared to be wowed. I make a mean grilled cheese sandwich. Stick around a bit longer and I'll make you an even better cheeseburger."

Peter's eyes stung a little at this. He could guess why Tony was good at making cheeseburgers. "That
does smell good." He had offered to help, but Tony had insisted that he sit on the stool at the counter 'like a good boy' and just let Tony 'take care of things'.

"Alright," Tony scooped up the sandwich, with the cheese all gooey and melty, onto the plate. "Do you want some milk?"

Even though he was cutting the sandwich into two halves and Peter could just grab the milk himself, he still yelled at Peter to stay put.

"Aren't you gonna make a serving for yourself?" Peter asked as Tony slid everything over to him on the counter.

"I already ate breakfast, Underoos. And I'm an old man; my metabolism has slowed down, if anything. If you want seconds, let me know; got plenty of bread, butter, and cheese." Tony was still smiling, and his eyes were still shining behind his glasses. Peter looked down to pick up the sandwich, but he felt Tony's gaze like a blanket over him.

The sandwich was good. Tony knew what he was doing.

"Oh man," Peter said at the first bite, "okay, I definitely want seconds and thirds."

Tony barked with laughter again and clapped his hands. "Coming right up!" His head did a little shake as he walked, almost giddy.

Peter did not think he had ever seen Tony so happy.

"So is this house husband thing new?" Peter asked. "I mean, you seem happy. At peace."

"More like resigned," Tony replied, and Peter reflected that this was a good description of all the photos after the Snap. "Can't change what can't be changed, so might as well stop fighting, you know?"

"Hm. Do you still make stuff in the garage?"

"Yeah, but my mind's not what it once was. Even ten years ago, I'd say my brain's pretty darn sharp, though already there were moments that make me question. Aging sucks, you know."

"Ha, yeah." He had heard his aunt and Pepper complain about that a lot after they hit fifty.

"Once I turned sixty, though," the bread sizzled with the butter on the pan, "I could really feel my mind's no longer what it used to be. The ideas just don't really come so easily, you know? But I'd say I'm pretty good for an almost seventy-year-old."

Despite just thinking that, Peter protested, "Dude, you're sixty-eight. You're not supposed to jump the gun here. You didn't even let me jump the gun."

Tony laughed, and though his back was turned, Peter saw him lift a hand to wipe at his eyes. "Fair is fair. Ugh, you haven't really changed that much. Still a smart mouth. Much more mature, though."

He sprinkled the cheese with the other hand. "You've turned out basically as I thought you would."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How do you mean?"
"You were always better than I was. When I was fifteen, I was, heh, more interested in myself than anything else."

"You went to college when you were fifteen. You were a prodigy."

"Pfft. I was going up against a different pool of applicants. Plus, I went to private school before. System was totally different. Didn't have to take all the nonsense classes you guys did. By the way, did you end up going to MIT?"

"...Uh," Peter was a little wary of admitting this, but, "No, um, I didn't. I, uh, didn't apply."

"What? Why not?"

"Well, uh, I was afraid I wouldn't get in, also, like, my aunt's...all by herself, there's the neighborhood and MIT was kind of six hours away up in Massachusetts—"

"Excuse me, you thought you wouldn't get in? What delusion made you think that might happen?"

"Dude, I was a kid, okay—"

"Damn right—"

"And I didn't want to disappoint you—I knew you wanted me to get in and it would have been worse if I couldn't than if I simply chose not to—"

"That's ridiculous—"

"No but you had just been dead for like a year, a year and a half, it was kind of fresh, okay? But for what it's worth, Morgan went to MIT."

"Well of course she did, but you—"

"—missed out a great opportunity all because you don't believe in yourself—"

"—and I have a ton of colleagues who did go to MIT, and a standing offer to teach there—"

"—and if you sell yourself short like—wait, really? That's impressive." Tony did look impressed. "Though teaching there's not as fun as studying there. You party a lot less."

"That's why I didn't take the job. Plus," Peter shrugged, "New York. This is my home."

Tony inhaled. "Alright. But just so you know, you missed out on a great opportunity for us to exchange our MIT pranks."

Peter's eyes were burning again. "Yeah, well, I didn't exactly predict this would happen."

Tony flipped the bread. "Yeah, well, even so. And if MIT rejected you, it's because they're idiots, not you. And I would know, whatever universe I'm in."

*Oh God.* Did Tony chop onions without Peter noticing?

"Ah but it doesn't matter, obviously. You get good education anywhere. I have a particular fondness for MIT just because...well, it was MIT, and to be honest, those years were the best years of my life. I was among cool people, made great friends, and we were all really...inquisitive, very open. I felt
like I belonged, in a way I never did before. And as much as a fifteen-year-old could belong in…
when you're young, those three years matter."

"Yeah." Peter laughed. He heard what Tony did not mention: And I wanted you to have that too.

"It's just as well, though. You're too square." Tony moved the sandwich around a little before lifting
the pan to slide it on another plate. "I saw you, and then I met you, and I thought, 'this kid's gonna be
better than me and Captain America combined'. Rogers had his flaws, but you had all his virtues, and
you were so smart and clever, you'd probably make Iron Man look like a dimwit by the time you get
going. One reason I wanted you to engage Rogers yourself was because I had hoped Rogers would
see a little of himself in you."

"Hm." Peter took another bite of his sandwich as Tony slid the second plate to him. "Steve really
missed you, you know."

"Oh, he's Steve but I'm Mr. Stark?"

"Well I knew him longer than you," Peter pointed out. "We didn't get a chance to establish what to
call you. After you reversed the Snap, I think I spent all of, like, a minute, talking to you in between
all the…all the other stuff going on, and…and then you were gone."

Tony paused in front of him. "Is he still alive?"

"…No. He, um, died a long time ago. I think it's been twelve years now? He, uh, went back to place
all the Infinity Stones back, and then just decided to stay there. He said he took inspiration from you,
cuz you told him to live a little, so he went and married Peggy Carter. They have kids, by the way.
James and Sarah Rogers. They're, like, both older than you, actually. Some of their grandkids are
older than me."

"Hm." Tony looked thoughtful as he turned around to make a third serving.

"Um, you don't have to…like, wow, this—this isn't something I ever thought I'd get to experience,
like, ever, let alone three times over—"

"Heh. I never thought I'd ever have a chance to feed you either. Indulge an old man, won't you?"

Peter fell silent. Yeah, alright.

"How long can you stay?"

"…I don't know. Depends on what's happening at ho-home." Because ultimately, this was not his
home. Not really. "I shouldn't stay for, like, years, maybe, because…I mean, when Hawkeye
reunited with his family, he was five years older than when they started and…that kind of caused
problems." Nothing insurmountable, but aging was aging.

"Yeah, I know. But you're staying here until we figure this out?"

"Well…I have nowhere else to go."

The bread sizzled again. Tony seemed pleased by this. "So the first place you chose to go when you
arrived, was to me?"

"Well, you were my best chance at getting outta here. There's also the matter of me wanting to know
whether you'd get fat in your old age."
Tony barked again. "You little imp! I'll have you know, I think I look pretty good!"

"You do look good." For sixty-eight. Definitely older than Tony in his fifties. "That, uh, kind of reminds me…before I go, I kind of…want a photo?"

Tony turned, glasses misty. "Yeah, I'd like one too. Maybe a few."

Peter tried to direct Tony to get down to business, but Tony was resistant to the topic, and he could tell that Tony was simply not ready. He was too emotional, too distracted by this new development. It was a little surprising, because while Peter understood that Tony had cared about him, even back then, in the middle of battle, Tony had still been focused enough to win the war.

Perhaps it was because there was no immediate threat, and Tony was in his home, his safe space, and had twenty years to stew over the loss. He did not seem to want Peter to go in the first place, even though he clearly understood that Peter will need to leave eventually. It was, perhaps, a bit of a stretch to expect Tony to jump at working on kicking Peter back out, given that everything from today was clearly something Tony had longed for, but had given up as lost.

They took some pictures in the sitting room using Karen, since cell phones may or may not survive a jump, whereas Karen already proved to be more robust. Tony lent Peter some of his own clothes to change out of.

"Why didn't you revise her code?" Tony asked, when Karen's lag became too much to bear.

"Heh," Peter scratched the back of his head. "Well, I couldn't touch the great Tony Stark's code."

"You said you revised FRIDAY."

"Yeah. Reluctantly. And Morgan needed an efficient AI, so she took precedence over you, but Karen's mine."

"...I'm revising her for you. This is unbearable. It's like living in the 1990's. And when you get back, I want you to revise her code. If you could revise Friday and update the arc reactors, and the suit, you can revise the AI I programmed specifically to protect you."

Yeah. Okay.

Tony was pleased with Peter's modifications to the suit. It still had elements of the old suit Tony had given him, but it had been altered enough that it was more Peter's design than Tony's.

"Princess Shuri taught me how to fit it in a pendant," Peter told him. "Well, she taught me how to fit it in a claw necklace, but I felt weird with it, like, cultural appropriation? So, I fit it in a pendant. She was kind of ticked off; I think she was miffed that I was able to squeeze it into a smaller thing than she did. Well, she could, but she never thought to, since those claw necklaces are all the rage in Wakanda."

"Impressive," said Tony. He said that a lot. "Why'd you get rid of the parachute?"

"Uh, well, uh, I didn't need it, cuz, uh, I could just use my web—"

"Put the parachute back."

"...Okay." Tony's tone left no room for argument. Parachute it was.

"How many kids do you intend to have?"
"Well, one's already a handful, as you can probably tell. It's up to MJ, really."

"Hehe. Benjy, was it?"

"Yeah."

"After your uncle?"

"Yeah."

"You can always make Morgan babysit if it gets to be too much."

"I would, but as much as I love Morgan, frankly, having them together just means Pepper and I have to babysit all of them at once."

Tony's laugh was not loud, but it vibrated through his bones and he looked like he could hardly contain himself. "Yeah, I can see that. Morgan's a handful here too. Props to you for putting up with her all these years."

"Nah. She's the best. Best parts of both her mom and dad."

"People here say that she's equal parts too," Tony mused. "She studying aeronautics over there too?"

"Yeah. She's thinking about interning at NASA, actually."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but she wanted to discuss it with me first. She hasn't told Pepper. Hadn't. Yet."

"I see." Tony rubbed his chin, perplexed. "There's nothing wrong with interning at NASA."

"Well, over there, Pepper's...um, alone, and, uh, she wanted to spend time with Morgan over the summer so..."

"Ah." Tony looked sad.

"Yeah."

"I see."

"Yeah. And, well, even though my official job is at Stark Industries, I actually spend most of my time dealing with the superhero clowns like Nova and Human Torch so, uh. Yeah. Plus, it's just different, having your own daughter at home, you know."

"Yeah."

"But nothing's set in stone! She was just toying around with the idea."

"Yeah. And it's just for the summer. I'm sure Pepper would be fine as long as that's something she really wants."

"Yeah. No biggie."

For some reason, Tony chuckled. "You remind me so much of your teenage self when you hunch over like that."

"Do I?"
"Yeah. Still Peter Parker at the core. All grown up and mature, but I'd know you anywhere."

He had proved as much. "Well, short of a brain transplant, I can't change that much, right?"

Tony just smiled. "Your version of me must be overjoyed."

Peter did not bother to remind him that his Tony Stark was not alive to be overjoyed. He knew what Tony meant. "I hope so."

"I know so. And, seeing you," Tony took off his glasses because he was crying again. "Man, these waterworks won't stop, but I really didn't think I would ever see you again." He wiped at his eyes, and Peter was compelled to hand him a tissue from the coffee table. "Thanks. But. Yeah. I'm a self-centered man, always have been, you know, and…and when everything went to pieces, there were worse things, easily, obviously, I mean half of the universe just—and then the other half didn't—but the worst thing to me, was when you—when I lost you. That. That was the worst thing."

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't. You're not allowed to say that phrase to me. Ever."

"Oh. S—uh, okay."

"This! This is the best day of my life."

"Pfft. Even better than when Morgan was born?"

"Heh. Some ways not, some ways, yes. I thought I lost you." Tony sniffled. Without the frenzy of battle, it seemed, there was nothing to keep the emotions at bay. It seemed that sixty-eight-year-old Tony Stark had also changed more than just in appearance. "Well, I guess I, uh, I did lose you. Still."

Peter wanted to say he was sorry again, but managed to hold the words back.

"Did you know you're the reason I wanted a kid?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You were...such a good...good. You were a...I...I didn't think I'd be a good father, you know? And I didn't try to be, but there you were, being an idiot, and I couldn't stand the thought of a world without you—a future without you—I mean this is what it looks like." Tony waved to the front. "You saw. Everything broken, and humanity dwindling because—we...and the world needs Spider-Man, but we don't have Spider-Man anymore. Iron Man doesn't cut it. Hasn't cut it. But anyway, you were out there, and I thought, God, I have to preserve this brilliant creature. Like, where did you even come from? Did our world produce this?" He laughed a little. "And you were so easy. I mean, you were a teenager, but compared to how things could have been, you were eager to please, and I knew I was your idol so it was so easy to take care of you, and I thought, hey, I'm not doing that bad of a job, this kid's not even my son and I still got this, and I thought, if—if I could protect this little human being, maybe—maybe I can make one of my own? You know? So. I even dreamed it, having a kid with Pepper, before Thanos—and then that happened, and...well. But here you are, and it worked out somewhere. Even if it—it didn't happen here, I'm glad it worked out somewhere."

"I missed you too," Peter said softly.

Tony set his glasses on the coffee table. "Come here," he reached out, and pulled Peter into another hug. He did not let go for a long time.
It was very nice.
The rest of the day passed with absolutely no progress made on getting Peter back home.

Tony oscillated between elation and grief, showed Peter around the house even though Peter had been here before in his own universe, and then took him out for a stroll. With the rain cleared and the sun shining, this area was actually not half bad. Tony clutched Peter's hand tightly as Peter related tales of his adventures as Spider-Man, juggling college and graduate studies with patrols, and the colorful characters he met along the way: the Fantastic Four, Logan, Jean Grey, Scott Summers, Nova, White Tiger, Daredevil, as well as updates on Peter Quill, Rocket, Bruce Banner, Hawkeye, Nick Fury, and many others.

From Tony's end, there were not many updates he could give that Peter did not already learn from Karen. Having retired from Iron Man, Tony had not kept in touch with the rest of the Avengers. Besides knowing the basics: that Hawkeye had died, and that Black Widow was giving up on ever reuniting the Avengers, while Steve Rogers was doing his best to move on, Tony really had not kept track of the details. He did not have much to offer by the way of news, but he did spill out a lot of insight that Peter previously only had an inkling of. For Tony, this was an opportunity to say all the things he wished he could have said.

"I was an ass," he stated outright. "I was a total jerk to you. Don't even—"

"No you weren't," Peter protested while swatting away a random insect that was getting in his face. "I was a teenager, and by default—"

"You were a great kid, and I just didn't know how to be an adult—"

"Teenagers are always annoying, even sweet Morgan was—"

"And I didn't want to get too close cuz I didn't want to corrupt you, you know? I mean you turned out so—"

"—a huge pain when she turned, like, sixteen, and had this crush on Johnny—"

"—good, mostly thanks to the Parkers, and how old is Johnny Storm?"

"He's around my age."

"That's deeply disturbing."

"Lots of teenage girls have crushes on celebrities."

"Well, fair, but. No."
Peter laughed.

"Anyway, what I'm trying to say is—"

"Don't you dare—"

"—that I'm the one who's—"

"If I can't say it then neither can you!"

Tony squeezed Peter's hand. "Your world is exactly how I wanted it. You, and Morgan, leading the way, helping keep Pepper in line—"

"Well it's more like Pepper's keeping us—"

"and yeah, it sucks that I'm not there to see it over there, but other than that…" Tony trailed off and shook his head.

Peter squeezed back. "I'm glad I got to see you again, Tony."

"Yeah."

"It…it means a lot that…that you'd be proud of us. Cuz—"

"Of course I'd be proud. I am proud."

"—there were many times, you know, when I wished you were there instead."

"Instead? No—"

"No but I mean—"

"You should never think that—"

"—just because I didn't know what I was doing, and there I was, and there everyone else was—"

Tony suddenly chuckled. "You remind me so much of Pepper just now."

"Well, she was another aunt of sorts."

Tony lifted their joined hands, overcome with emotion. He did not say anything.

"I asked others for advice of course, but…I often wished I could ask you, what would you do. I mean, you were the heart of the Avengers—"

"Nah, I—"

"—I mean, there wouldn't be a team without you."

"Well, it seems like you figured it out, better than I would have."

"Only because I kept asking myself, 'what would Tony Stark do?'

"No, it's all you. Truth is, I wasn't much of a leader. If you recall, the Avengers disbanded while…you know. I mean, you were there. And…this time around we didn't come back together."

"…Right." Peter ducked his head.
"It's okay." Tony reached over with his other hand so he was clasping Peter's with both. "You're okay. You turned out fine. It worked. We won, somewhere. Fourteen million futures and there was one where it worked. It...it's actually good to know. Cuz, I mean, it makes sense, and, you know, it...I can accept that. I can accept that in this universe, we didn't win, and we'll never win, if it means that somewhere out there, we did win, and you grew up, and look at you. You've become a handsome young man."

"Not that young."

"Oh pssh. You are young, Mister, you don't even—you are much younger than when I became Iron Man. Good Lord, you're such a baby."

"I have a baby."

"You must have broken so many hearts."

"I—uh...yeah." That was true.

"I knew it." Tony chuckled. "Smart and kind and dashing. Sorry, I know I'm being weird, but, had you gone to MIT it would have been perfect, like a mini-me growing up to conquer the world, except a much better version all around."

"Are you..." Peter said slowly, "living vicariously through me, Tony?"

"Oh, we all do. Old farts like us have nothing else going for us; what else are we supposed to do?"

"Oh please. I bet if you go on the red carpet now, you'd break way more hearts than I do. You're Tony Stark, after all."

"As far as I can tell, Peter Parker plays a mean game too." Tony bumped into Peter's shoulder. "And that's just what I expect from my protege."

"I did learn from the best."

"You got that right."

Procrastination only went so far, though. Once noon rolled around, Tony drove Peter out to get lunch. They went to a French restaurant, and over the fine dishes that Peter only got used to after he graduated with his PhD, he raised the subject of returning home one more time.

"The issue is," he admitted, "I'm not as familiar with the project. I don't even know what the machine was called. I can describe it, and I know some of the components, but it had been damaged and I didn't even remember what it was used for. There's also the matter of making sure I actually get to where I wanted to go. So...I think this will all take time, so we should get started as soon as possible."

"Mm," Tony hummed. "Don't worry. I don't intend to keep you prisoner here, tempting as that is. There's a Pepper and a Morgan and an MJ and a Benjy, all of whom need you back, and a whole world that needs Spider-Man. Much as I'd like to see Spider-Man here, this world's been going without him for long enough that it can keep making do."

"I'm just worried because I don't even know where to start." Peter sighed. "The reversal brought back a lot of brilliant minds, allowed a ton of different research to go forward. I'd look things up, except the literature probably doesn't exist here, since those scientists probably aren't even alive."
"Mm."

"Sorry, Tony. I know I'm being a killjoy."

"What did I say about that word?"

"S—um, never mind."

"'Atta boy. And you're not being a killjoy. Well, you sort of are, but I forgive you. I'm just a selfish man."

"No you're not. You—you deserve to take care of yourself. Somewhere."

Tony's fork paused, and he looked thoughtful.

"We'll start tomorrow," he declared. "I want today to be...just about us. Yeah? And when Pepper comes home, we'll have dinner together and watch a movie; one of the new ones. I bet you haven't seen these, considering how...you know. History. But, then we'll all sleep, and tomorrow we'll head up to the Compound to see Nat."

"Nat? Black Widow?"

"Yeah. She keeps in touch with a lot of folks, so if there are any resources to be had, she can connect us with those. So for today, relax, okay bud? Stop worrying and let me handle it. Adults are supposed to take care of their kids."

"...I'm actually an adult."

"You'll always be that fourteen-year-old punk in a onesie swinging around on Youtube."

"Uh, I'm much more than fourteen now—"

"No you're not. Stop arguing with me. You're arguing with me. Adults don't argue with me."

"Uh, that's not how it works—"

"Are you giving me lip right now? While I'm treating you to lunch? Such an ingrate, I can't believe this—"

Peter was laughing, because Tony never sounded as much like his old self as he did now. "I've, like, paid off all my loans—"

"And you're still talking back. Seriously, you're incorrigible—"

"And you're, like, retired. Honestly, am I taking money out of your retirement funds—"

"And now you're calling me old. What mature adult..."

Peter, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, bowed his head. "I yield! To be fair, I can live with always being a junior to the great Tony Stark."

"Well, you'll have to," Tony said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Doesn't matter how old you get. I don't care if you're ninety years old. And Benjy better apply to MIT, since his father was such a disappointment."

Peter raised his head back and laughed. "Okay. Well, only if he wants it too."
"If he wants to," Tony sipped his wine. "That way Morgan and he can trade MIT pranks, the thing you deprived us of. You dunce."

Tony's garage was like his workshop, albeit with different projects. He no longer worked on suits, but he worked on cars and other robots. Despite the homey feel of the house, the garage was very high-tech, all sharp edges and smooth surfaces, and Friday was a familiar presence.

"She definitely needs to be streamlined. Look at all this code that she doesn't need now," Tony scrolled through Karen's text. "You don't need her to contact me anymore. Why don't I get rid of it?"

"Uh," Peter swallowed. "Why don't you just leave it, it's not like—it's not like she uses those algorithms. It's just text."

"I'll turn them into comments."

...Yeah. Fine.

"There's still a Baby Monitor Protocol in here. Can't believe you left that in."

"It's not a bad protocol. I might copy and paste it for Benjy."

"Tch. Cheat."

"Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

"Yeah, yeah," but Tony left that in there too. He also scrolled past the Insta-Kill algorithm. "You're putting the parachute back, right?"

"I said I would."

"Actually, why don't we put one in now?"

"Uh, the suit goes inside a pendant. Do you actually have a parachute that would fit?"

"Hm," Tony reclined back. "Well, can you make one?"

"...Make one? Like, here?"

"Yeah."

"Well, with the right materials, sure."

"Why don't you make one here, and put it in before you leave?"

Half an hour later, Tony was still looking through Karen's code while Peter set to work making a parachute that would fit inside a suit that fit inside a small pendant. There was music playing in the background, though Tony kept it low because he wanted to talk.

"Would have liked fifteen years of this," he suddenly remarked.

"Fifteen years of what?"

"Two of us working on projects like this. It was something I envisioned, somewhat, you know. Back before Thanos."

"You envisioned the two of us working on projects in your garage."
"Well, not the garage, but in the workshop. Fine, I was sentimental even then."

"Your heart was always mush. That was why it was so devastating when you were disappointed in me."

Tony waved at the holoscreen. "I was never disappointed in you."

"...The ferry, Tony."

"Oh. No, I wasn't disappointed in you. That was all me."

Peter waivered from where he was sewing. "That—um, that wasn't how it felt like at the time."

"I know." Tony swung around in his chair. "I messed up." He looked at Peter, and his eyes were glossy again. "I wasn't good to you."

"What? What are you—"

"Look, stop, let me finish, I wasn't good to you, okay? That ferry—that was me. I—look, it's not just that I was an ass. Part of it was that I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't realize what it all was until Morgan was your age. Even though I went through that same age myself, there are certain things you don't really understand until you're a real father, and I didn't realize that you were just—you were just a kid. You were—I expected way too much. And that's on me. But you did—you were just a kid. There was no way you could have known better, and you were so good, you were such a good kid."

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Oh. Tony's grief was even more layered than Peter had thought.

He did not want to start crying again, so he said, "Even about MIT?"

"Well, except for that. God, I was counting on you," Tony sighed in disgust, and the two of them chuckled.

"Anyway, this is nice. And maybe you can help me get my creative juices flowing."

"I'm pretty sure I don't need to do that."

"Ha. You have no idea. Oh. Man. Aging sucks. Don't do it."

"Um, I don't think I have a choice. Even Captain America had to age. A little slower than others, but still. He aged. Died."

"Good for him. But take advantage of your youth while you can. When you get to my age, everything hurts, nothing works, and you break things you didn't even know existed enough to break. The only consolation is seeing you young upstarts rise in the world."

"And then live vicariously through us?"

"Nothing less. Thirty years ago, I'd never have thought this, yeah? But kids really are the future. When they're around, nothing else matters except their future. When Morgan was born, I stopped..."
being afraid of dying, of getting old. I didn't even realize I was afraid of dying, of getting old. I mean, I knew I didn't want to die. I still don't. I don't like getting old. But those things used to be things that I refused to think about, let alone talk about. But once she came into my life, watching her grow… seeing her rise even as I decline…natural way of things, you know?"

"Yeah."

"I know I sound like an old man."

"Yeah, you kinda do."

Tony made a rude noise. "I should add an algorithm in to teach you to respect your elders."

"How? She's not my elder."

"I'd figure something out. See, you're already inspiring the creative juices."

"This is not how I want things to go," Peter laughed.

They worked in the garage until Pepper came home.

It was weird to see Pepper here. Peter knew Pepper, but this Pepper did not know him, and technically he did not really know this version of Pepper either. She looked at him like she was seeing a stranger, and it was difficult to know how to act.

Still, Pepper in any universe was warm and loving, and this Pepper was no different. She hugged him as tightly as if she really did watch him grow up, and he had come home after a long time away.

"Oh God, this is surreal," she exclaimed while still squeezing him. "I can't believe you're so tall now! And—Tony really missed you, you know? You were like a son to him, and when you were—you know? And—he missed you every day, and, wow, I can't believe you're here now, this means so much, you have no idea…"

She held Tony's hand over dinner when Peter related the differences in his timeline. She barely touched her plate. She looked just as sad as Tony when she realized there was no way they could reverse things here the way they had in Peter's universe.

"It's okay," said Tony, and he even seemed to believe it. "It worked somewhere. It's good to know that it worked somewhere."

They took another photo, this time of the three of them, using Karen. Pepper wasted no time printing them.

"It'll…it'll be good to replace the old one," she said.

"What old one?"

She showed him the photo Tony hid in the kitchen, where Tony was presenting Peter with an internship certificate.

Peter had seen it before. He was not sure why Tony kept it tucked behind other things.

"My Tony had kept it too," he remembered, a little at a loss.

"Of course I did," said Tony, looking down at the picture. "It was a good photo."
He did not switch it out, though. Peter was from another universe. Tony's Peter was still gone. Decimated. But he found some more frames and he placed the new photos in them.

When he placed them in the kitchen, they were out in the open.

Pepper arranged a guest room for Peter. It was the room he always occupied when he visited.

Peter and Tony did not go to bed though, even when Pepper did. They stayed up long into the night. Tony drank coffee, which seemed to be intentional. Peter drank soda. It was less intentional, but had the benefit of allowing him to keep Tony company as the clock turned.

They talked, though it was mostly Tony asking questions and Peter answering. Tony asked about how Peter and MJ met, what college was like, when they got married, what it was like babysitting Morgan, being Spider-Man. He did not seem to want the night to end.

"This world's not gonna make it, you know," Tony told Peter, when a silence drifted between them.

"What do you mean?"

"Population's been declining ever since the Snap. Nothing people did could change it. So much for trying to conserve resources to preserve life; Thanos basically doomed us all. Even after twenty years, it's been declining, rapidly. Went from, like, two billion, to two million in two decades. That's insane." Tony looked away. "I worry for Morgan. Part of me hopes she'll be okay. She's smart, resourceful, and she's got a ton of friends. Good friends. But part of me worries anyway. What kind of universe is she gonna have to live in, once I'm gone and Pepper's gone."

"She's smarter than you," Peter replied readily. "She'll come up with solutions even your younger self couldn't think of. It'll be okay."

Tony looked at him. "You know, that sounds like the sort of platitudes I hear all the time from Happy and Rhodey, but coming from you...I actually believe it."

It took Peter until he was twenty-five years old to fully understand how the speaker was as important as the words that were spoken.

"You've been hearing the voices of the past. I am a voice of the future. Even if it's not your exact future, my words carry more weight."

Tony's eyes were misty again behind his glasses. "Yes. Yes you are right."

In the morning, Tony drove Peter up to the Compound.

Pepper did not go with them. Tony did not call Happy. Peter did not question this, even though Tony had not slept all night, which made the safety of his decision a little questionable.

The highways were barren, as Peter had witnessed before. A lot of potholes dotted the lanes, but it was still quick because there was so little traffic.

It was so wrong. Traffic in New York City should never be this smooth.

"You get used to it after twenty years," said Tony. "The potholes, though, are a huge pain."

"I'm sure."
"It's gonna be awkward," Tony went on. "I haven't talked to these guys in years. Now I suddenly show up, requesting their help. We'll see how it goes."

"Sorry."

"What did I say about using that word?"

Peter smiled. "Well, like I thought to myself, the worst that would happen is that I get stranded here. The same as if we don't go to them, right?"

Tony looked at him. "You're far wiser than I was at your age."

"I had a lot of practice arguing pros and cons with everyone."

"Ha. I can imagine that. Your colleagues sound like characters. Way worse than the ones I had to deal with."

"I think I had a better reputation than you, though."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Nick Fury didn't even think I qualified to be an Avenger. Recruited me out of sheer desperation."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. I had no idea."

"Well, now you know. Sounds like Nick was right on you as soon as things started picking up again."

"He hijacked me from my school trip."

"Sounds about right."

"He pinned me as the new leader of the new Avengers right from the start, even though I hadn't reached my majority yet."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"I can't believe he thought you wouldn't be a good Avenger, though."

"Yeah, well, as you said, my reputation wasn't as good as yours, but that was what I mean. You have all the best of us put together, and it was easy to see that your potential was limitless." Tony inhaled. "It's good to know you're out there. It's...it's not as good as if you're here, of course, but it's good to know. You're out there, doing your thing, being Spidey. It's...man, I sound so corny. I've become a sentimental old fool."

"Nah. It—we all try our best, yeah?"

"Yes, yes we do."

Peter touched Tony's arm. "It's gonna be okay, Tony," he said, because he was realizing that his idol, his role model, needed as much reassurance now as Peter did when he was a child. There was something about getting older that seemed to follow the same path as growing up, except in reverse. "We all get dealt different hands, and we make the most of it. When something like this happens,
there's no single right way. Even if they blame you for abandoning them, on the inside, they know they have no right to say that what you did was wrong. And you have me to back you up now. I'm older and more experienced than the last time we worked together. I'm proper backup now, not a stowaway. We're gonna be a real team this time."

Tony grasped Peter's hand with his left, and held it to his right arm. His hand seemed small, but they were warm and dry. He sniffled. "I don't know what is wrong with me, bud."

"It's okay," Peter laughed, "it's just the two of us in this car. No one has to know."

Tony laughed.

Natasha Romanov was, overall, still thin, almost unusually so, but she was not as toned, and her beauty was much more weathered than her photos. She wore looser outfits, softer, to hide how her waist was not quite as slim, her bosom not as firm. Her hair was dyed a copper brown, hiding all the gray, but her eyebrows were not as thick, and her eyelids were drooping somewhat, the way Pepper's did, the way Tony's did. She also wore glasses, bifocals, and looked about as mother-like as was possible for someone with the monicker of Black Widow.

She was aware of their arrival, perhaps from the surveillance cameras, and was there, waiting for them, when they entered the Compound. For a long time, she and Tony stared at each other without speaking. Peter did not break the moment.

After a long silence, the two went up to each other simultaneously. A middle-aged woman and an older man. Neither of them have the strength to fight anymore.

They embraced, because ultimately, they were on the same side.

She looked at them with empty eyes. Peter did not know Black Widow very well; never had a chance, but he could tell Tony was unsettled by her behavior, how tired and despondent she was.

"Nat," Tony remarked suddenly, "you need to take care of yourself. You can't keep wading through this alone."

"I'll be fine," she said.

Peter turned away, shaking his head. She will not be fine. Even he could see that. Something about her was diminished. Dispirited. He would not be surprised if she were harboring some sort of illness. There was a sallowness to her cheeks, a paleness to her lips.

Tony seemed to sense the same thing, because instead of pressing Peter's issue, he started pressing her.

"I'm serious. You should get away from the Compound."

"Where am I supposed to go?!" Natasha snapped. "Not everyone has the fairy-tale life you have, Stark! Where am I supposed to go? Who am I supposed to turn to? Should I turn to you? You, who ignored me for the past twenty years?"

"Nat—"

"What do you want? What are you here for? Who's this friend you brought here?"

"This is Spider-Man from another timeline. He needs our help getting back home."
"Oh that's rich," Natasha sneered in disgust, and turned away.

"Look," Tony started, because even at sixty-eight, he sometimes did not know when to shut up. In this regard, Peter was actually wiser than he, and pressed a hand on his shoulder to stop him while Natasha whirled around and spat back.

"You don't get to 'look' me, you don't get to make demands. You let go of all this, remember? You washed your hands of all this, of all of us." Her face twisted. "Steve was right about you all along. You're not the one to lay down the wire. Everything you do is for yourself."

Peter squeezed, because in his universe, Tony had made the ultimate sacrifice so others could go on, but this Tony had not, and he could feel the guilt crippling him, the muscles seizing under his fingers. Thankfully, he did not say anything as Natasha turned again and walked away.

A long silence followed.

"I'm sorry," said Tony. "I messed everything up."

"No," Peter shook his head, withdrawing his hand. "She had to let it out. She's lonely. Clint told me that the Avengers were her family. She didn't have anyone else. Now all of the sudden, you show up with me, after she's been alone all this time. Of course she's gonna lash out, but you're her family. It's gonna be okay."

Tony looked at him. "When did you become so wise?"

"I've had fifteen years to grow up."

"I wasn't even this wise when I was your age."

"I was an orphan when I was five. I watched my uncle get murdered when I was fourteen. I lost a hero a year and a half later. I've led missions where people died under my watch. I've sent people on missions where they die. I know a thing or two about grief and anger."

Tony stared at him like he had never seen Peter before. "Man, I would have liked to watch you grow up."

"Heh." Peter looked down the hall where Natasha had disappeared. "Let's hang out around here. She'll calm down, I'm sure." He paused. "You guys have to stick together. You don't realize how the rest of the world looks at you, how much our morale depends on you. When the Avengers broke up, it was devastating. Earth's mightiest heroes, the best of us, the bravest, couldn't even work together for a common cause. That's really scary. And it's not good for you either. No one else understands you, what you went through, outside of this group. It's better to have each other. And she really needs you. I don't like how she looks."

"...Yeah. I don't either." Tony took out his phone and sent a text, presumably to Pepper. "Can never get Nat to do what she doesn't want to do though."

"She just wants her family back. And she considers you her family. It hurts her that you don't consider her the same."

Tony's motions were slow. "You're right," he said quietly. "Listen, can you wait here for a moment? New face, new... problem, probably a little much."

Tony seemed to have a plan, so Peter nodded. "Yeah. Sure."
The older man moved past him, and went down the hall after Natasha.

It was a good hour and a half before Natasha and Tony came back out to receive Peter.

"I'm Nat," Natasha held out her hand. Her eyes were a little swollen, but she was composed. "It's nice to meet you, Dr. Parker."

"Call me Peter." Peter glanced at Tony, who only smiled, looking a little worn.

"I understand you're stranded," Natasha went on. "Tony told me a little bit about what happened, but we didn't go into detail. Why don't you come to the back, and we'll see how we can get you home?"

Peter was really curious about what Tony said to Natasha to bring about this change in attitude, but he did not pry. "Certainly," he nodded. "Lead the way."
Chapter 4

Tony fell asleep while they contacted Captain Marvel, who was off-world. She promised to ask around before swinging by, but this might take a couple of days. Wakanda, similarly, offered to look into things and bring some potential supplies to Manhattan, which may take up to three days. Nebula, menacing with her dark eyes, mentioned going to a planet called Knowhere to look for something there. She also needed a few days before she could give them a report.

"Guess he can't pull all nighters like he used to," Natasha noted, once the discussions were over.

"You have a couch around here?"

"Yeah."

Tony did not wake when Peter lifted him, which Peter was impressed by. He was obviously exhausted. Natasha did not comment as Peter carried him to the couch. She even helped him retrieve a blanket; she obviously spent many nights here, a notion that was depressing.

"You and he must have been close." Natasha frowned. "He never really mentioned you, oddly enough."

Peter considered. "I wouldn't say we were close, but I think he thought of me as his personal responsibility."

"Ah." She seemed to understand.

"He knew a lot about me," Peter went on, "made the effort to know, so I think in that way, we were close."

"Yeah." She smiled a little. "Well…are you hungry? There's not much around here. Ever since the Decimation…there are pockets, here and there, where there's…life. But this isn't one of them."

"Yeah, I got that. Eh, whatever you have. I'm not picky."

"There's a sandwich place. I haven't had much of an appetite, lately, so I don't really stock food here. We can go grab something."

Natasha had to buy food for Peter, since he still did not have any money. She ordered very little, so it was embarrassing to order something much larger, especially since there was no way Peter could pay her back.

There was no fooling Black Widow, though.

"Only that? Rogers needs at least twice that." And with that, she got him two giant sandwiches, shaking off his stammering, and also buying Tony a share.

Peter supposed he did overthink things. It was just a meal. Based on what he had seen, budget was not the leading problem in this timeline.

They got back to the Compound to find Tony awake. He was sitting up, bent over his phone. His jaw was tense when he saw them, and he did not say anything.

"Hey, Tony," Peter moved a table over, "sorry, we were just getting lunch. I was, uh, hungry."
At this, Tony managed a smile. He looked relieved, but his eyes were still tight. He had been frightened.

"Getting better," he approved.

"Nat also got you something."

Natasha could only muster up a few bites of her sandwich. It did not seem to have to do with mood, or the taste of the sandwiches, which all seemed fine. Peter eyed her in between his own bites, and when he finished the first sandwich, he asked, "Natasha…is something wrong?"

She shrugged. "I'm smaller than the both of you. Don't need to eat as much."

Tony stared at her with a stricken look.

Peter sipped some water before murmuring, "I deal with young superheroes like Kate Bishop and Tommy Shepherd—not…that…you know who they are, but…starting over, I deal with folks who don't acknowledge their own limits and decide whether or not to assign them on missions. No one eats as little as Pepper does, and she can finish a sandwich."

Natasha smiled bitterly. "You're right," she said to Tony, who still looked stricken. "He is smarter than you." She pushed away from the table and withdrew out of the room.

Peter looked at Tony, who was still staring after her. "I thought my arrival here was only going to be a burden to you all, but I guess it's kickstarting some helpful things too."

Tony's eyes flickered to his. "You're never a burden, Peter. She died in your world, right? To—to get the Soul Stone."

"Yeah."

Tony looked after her again. "It can't be. She's young."

"What's the healthcare situation now?"

"Huge need. Lots of machines, but no one to operate them. That's not the issue, though. People like Nat don't go to doctors. You always find something wrong, so you don't bother."

"That's true." Those with super-healing have fewer issues, but the teammates Peter had, like Kate Bishop, who were not physically enhanced, were just as stubborn about avoiding treatment.

They finished their meals in silence. Tony's whole face was shadowed with fatigue.

"Why don't you get a little sleep," Peter suggested. "We have to wait anyway, and there's no telling how long this is going to take."

"You're tired too," Tony pointed out, when Peter herded him to the couch. "Is there another couch?"

There was in the room, but not another long one.

"Maybe another room has one?"

"That's okay. I have an idea. Don't tease."

"Oh wow. I can't promise that. This I have to see."
Peter activated his webshooters. Tony instantly caught on.

"Oh God," the man wheezed with laughter. "Are you serious, Spidey?"

"I said don't tease!" Peter shot a strand of non-sticking web to the ceiling.

"This how you normally nap, Pete?"

"No, actually. I just got this idea," Peter admitted, as he climbed up to twist the web properly so it was less elastic. "Just before the accident, I was on a mission. Child trafficking. There were these kids who couldn't walk, so I had to get them out somehow, and lacking other resources, I used my web to wrap them up. I told them I was making sleeping bags, so it wouldn't sound like I was saving them up to eat later, the way real spiders do." He shot another web, and then another. "It kind of worked, and not badly, I mean there were no other injuries once we unwrapped them; silk is tough."

"So a hammock is a natural extension of that." Tony paused. "I kind of want to try it."

The web hammock, once Peter twisted everything properly, did work very well. Tony giggled like a child when he reclined on it, and the two of them ended up sharing the hammock and the blanket between them.

"Spider hammock," Tony kept saying, too delighted to sleep initially. "Oh man. Of all the uses. Heeheeheehee. You gotta do this with Benjy. This is actually really comfortable. Nice work."

"Gotta time ourselves though," Peter warned. "Three hours and the whole thing dissolves."

"I'm pretty sure Nat will kick us out before it hits one."

But neither of them got to sleep, because right as Tony closed his eyes, Peter heard footsteps approaching.

Steve Rogers was dressed in a sweater and cargo pants. He was not fat, but like everyone else, his figure was not quite the same shape as it was in his youth. His face had some wrinkles, and his hair was thin on his scalp. Still, the last time Peter had seen him, he was a centenarian. This Steve Rogers actually looked unrecognizably young.

He stared at the hammock wordlessly, then at Peter.

"Hey man," Peter called out, simultaneously alerting Tony of their visitor. "Don't mind us, we were just fooling around."

"Queens?" Steve exclaimed, coming closer.

Peter was surprised. "Didn't think you'd remember that."

Steve looked at Tony hesitantly. Neither Tony nor Peter had sat up yet.

"…Hey…Tony."

"Hey Cap." Tony finally twisted around. Peter used his sticking abilities to avoid tumbling to the floor as the weights shifted. "Long story, but we're trying to get the kid home. Got a kid of his own to get back to. They grow up so fast, huh?"

"Uh…yeah. Nat…told me there was someone stranded from another…timeline? I guess this is it, huh."
"Yeah."

There was a new layer of awkwardness between Tony and Steve, one that Peter decided not to broach. These two respected each other far too much to really need him.

"I'm gonna go see if Nat got any responses so far."

"Yeah, uh, okay," Tony was half-glaring at him as Peter made his escape. "You…go…do that."

Nat was in a room that served as the command center, the same one the three of them had been in earlier to make their various contacts. She was just sitting there, staring at the screens. She glanced up when he entered the room.

"Yeah, I would get out of there too," she smiled a little. She had guessed why Peter had come alone.

"Way above my pay grade," Peter waved. "Whatcha doing?"

"I hardly know, these days." Nat looked back at the screen. "Each time a year passes, it catches me by surprise. Can't believe it's been twenty years. Morgan's in college, whatever good that will do her."

Tony had implied as much, but, "Why has the population declined so much?"

"Lots of reasons," Nat replied. "Not enough manpower to contain the damage from…all the things we were doing before. The Snap was random, not even, so, lots of young people got snapped away, lots of women, lots of skilled workers. It's just a relentless cycle." She paused. "Originally, I was trying to find some way to fix things, but now, I've just been coordinating attempts to avoid losing more of what we do have. Not sure there's much of a point, from the sounds of it."

"Don't say that."

"Hm. When you get to my position, you say whatever you want."

"What is your position?"

Natasha looked at him. She knew what he was really asking, and chose not to answer it. "Heard you're the new leader of the Avengers. Tony made it sound like you're some combination of Iron Man and Nick Fury."

"No one can be Iron Man except Tony Stark," Peter replied, letting her change the topic, "but something like that."

"He's really proud of you."

Peter sat down next to her. "Tried my best."

"Definitely the better timeline between the two of ours."

"Think it's a bit early to make that assessment."

Natasha paused. "Tony's right about one thing. It is nice to know that somewhere out there, we did win." She sounded surprised.

Peter was surprised too. He was not sure he would have thought the same in their position.

"I wish I could have come to you sooner," he admitted, "or someone had come to you sooner."
"I don't think it would have worked." Natasha shook her head. "So many things hinged on luck. That is up to chance. People being in the right place at the right time…you can't arrange that. Can't plan for it. Can only hope, and be grateful if it works."

"When I go back," Peter offered, "you can come with, potentially. There's no Black Widow on our end. No Natasha Romanov, anyway. We have…skilled workers, and doctors, and such. And there's a whole wide world of colorful idiots I can use your help with."

Natasha snorted, but her eyes were sad. "I don't know. Will think about it."

They ended up sitting next to each other without talking for some time before a beep alerted Natasha to a message.

She opened it on the holoscreen. "It's Bruce."

It was a written message.

*Hey Nat,*

*Good to hear from you. I'm doing well! Would love to meet up to catch up in addition to helping out. Think our world's got enough problems without extra-dimensional visitors. I'm currently in Vancouver. Can be down tomorrow afternoon. See you soon!*

*Bruce.*

"There goes another day," Peter muttered to himself.

"At least he's coming," Natasha pointed out. "And you're waiting anyway. What do you mean, another day?"

"Tony's procrastinating."

"Ah." Natasha typed in a reply. "Can you blame him?"

"No. Honestly I'm not eager to leave either. Lots of things I've always wanted to say. Wanted to ask. One reason we pulled the all-nighter. Once I go back…" Peter hesitated, "pretty sure there would be consequences if we make this a routine thing, so…I probably won't see him…ever again."

Natasha hit send. "We'll get you home to your family, don't worry. This is going to take a while, to make sure we don't send you somewhere else, where, Heaven forbid, Thanos wiped everyone out, or something."

"I know. And I don't mean to say that I want to leave sooner than I have to."

He did miss Benjy though. And MJ. And his Aunt May.

"How did you keep everyone together?" Natasha suddenly asked.

It was an odd question to come from someone Peter had always thought of as his predecessor, someone he needed to emulate. Black Widow was a hero, and her efforts to maintain the team, and the vision, the dream, played a huge role in the success of the Time Heist. If anything, Peter had wanted notes from her, not the other way around.

But this Black Widow was defeated and heartsick. She had not seen what victory looked like, and assumed everything about her situation was the result of failure rather than inevitability.
"My team looks nothing like how it started," Peter replied. "Even when we won, people left. New ones join, old ones leave, old ones come back, new team members go, back and forth. You can't keep everyone together, all the time. But so long as you stay true to what you believe in, they might not all flock to you at once, but they're never far away." He turned to her. "You're not alone, Natasha."

She looked away. He caught the glimmer of light on her cheek as a tear trailed down.

He did not comfort her further. He was not the right person to emphasize that.

But, "What happened in this timeline was not your fault. Neither is the struggle to get back up on your feet. The Decimation was a loss of many battles. That is why it was called a war. Thanos was able to cross many lines of defense. Yours was just one among many, and the loss was great. That you are fighting at all, against these odds, is a victory in and of itself. Truth is, none of us win these things on our own, so none of us lose on our own either. Others leaving the cause has less to do with you, and more to do with them. And so long as you still draw breath...story's not over yet."

Natasha looked at him for a moment, before looking back on the screens. She did not reply, but her expression was pensive, as if he had given her something to think about.

The awkwardness between Tony and Steve did not ebb when Peter rejoined them. They were sitting on the smaller couches and just staring at each other, so Peter hopped on the hammock.

"Hey Queens," Steve smiled, looking a little relieved to have a third party in the room. "Nat doing okay?"

"Yeah. Bruce is coming from Vancouver; said he'll be here tomorrow afternoon."

"That's good."

An uncomfortable silence fell.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" Peter asked, even though he sort of knew.

"Helping out here and there," Steve shrugged. "It's a big coincidence that I was in town. Usually I'm elsewhere. DC. LA."

"Gotta love the Parker timing," Peter reflected. Tony raised his eyebrows.

"You seem to be adapting fairly well," Steve noted. "You're not at all bothered by being in this...uh...timeline, are you."

"It's not that I'm not bothered," Peter pointed out. "I've learned when to freak out and when to take it easy, is all. Rushing things isn't gonna help. I don't really know how I ended up here, so it pays to be patient when working on a way back. Besides, got friends here. It's always nice to hang out with Tony Stark and Steve Rogers."

"We hung out?" Steve asked, sounding surprised.

Peter made a face at him. "Believe it or not, Brooklyn and Queens are compatible. Also, along the Avengers spectrum: youngest kid, oldest geezer," he pointed respectively, "We somehow clicked in a way other pairs wouldn't. You were always like an ancient grandpa I never had. Looking back, I think I brought some energy to your creaky bones."
Tony's eyebrows were all the way up to his hairline. He did not say anything, but he was clearly astonished by Peter's impertinence. Steve, though equally shocked, flung his head back with a loud laugh.

"God, those age jokes never stop either way, do they?"

"Nope. Even after you died, people called you a fossil, albeit a proper one."

This time Steve nearly fell over with laughter.

"So you two hung out a lot, huh?" Tony sounded faintly jealous. Steve was still shaking with mirth.

"A few times," Peter admitted. "Not a lot; I was busy with school, and stuff, and you were living pretty low profile by that point, but every once in a while. You never stopped calling me Queens."

"I wouldn't think so," Steve wiped at his eyes. "Oh God, I haven't laughed that hard in ages."

"And you called him Steve," Tony's forehead pinched a little.

Sensing he was getting genuinely upset, Peter admitted, "It was mostly through Sam, and Bucky. And after I became head of the new Avengers, I called everyone by their first names, except people I didn't like."

"People you didn't like, huh."

Wow. Tony Stark could be kind of childish at sixty eight. Peter did not think he was so transparent before the Snap. "Without the honorifics."

"Uh huh."

"Cut me some slack, dude," Peter swung his legs. "I came to you first, didn't I?"

"Uh huh," but that was the right thing to say, because Tony looked happier at this reminder.

"So, uh, how are Sam and Bucky now?" Steve asked.

"Sam's retired, man," Peter swung his legs again. "He found a girl."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. She makes the best mac and cheese, like, you can't stop eating it—I've tried and I still just devour the whole thing, it's like my self control has inverted itself."

"I'm not surprised," Steve murmured quietly, "Sam was particular about his mac and cheese."

"Bucky helps out at the Compound," Peter went on. "I sent him on a mission in Guatemala a couple of weeks ago." He hoped Bucky was okay. It was always jarring to have to send someone on a mission without him.

"It's really weird to hear you talk about sending people on missions," Tony stated.

"You didn't think being a leader would entail delegating?"

"I didn't think much further than that you would be a leader," Tony confessed. "And despite everything, I can't unsee this chatterbox of a kid who takes too many risks and is still growing into his potential. This is so surreal."
"People still say I talk too much during fights," Peter shrugged. "Happy would say that I'm still a chatterbox of a kid who takes too many risks."

"Well I'm glad someone is still looking after you over there." Tony sounded long-suffering.

"Hey! I'm handling it just fine. Happy just worries too much."

"Good. Someone should."

"Uh," Peter realized there was a major bit of news he forgot to mention.

"What?"

Peter scratched the back of his head. "You're, uh, you're not gonna believe this."

Steve looked expectantly between the two of them. He looked very entertained.

"What is it?" Tony asked cautiously, not quite anxious, but wary.

"So, uh, Happy's…married."

"About time. To?"

"…my…aunt?"

Tony scooted forward. "You're joking."

"I know, it was—"

"Aunt Hottie? Like, for real?"

"Dude! She's my aunt! And you have Pepper!"

"Way to go!" Tony pushed his glasses up his nose, looking utterly beside himself. "He managed to snatch up your aunt? Oh Happy, I'm so proud—you tell him that when you get back—"

"Oh God—"

"—I mean, I honestly can't think of a better—"

"—I can't believe you're taking this—"

"—match, I mean really—"

"—so well, it was traumatic—"

"—and it's perfect because then he can look out for you—"

"See, that's exactly why it was traumatic—"

"I mean, just—it all works out so beautifully—"

"I can't believe this, I'm not even gonna talk to you—"

Steve was grinning so hard, his face might get stuck that way. He looked at Tony like he was seeing an utterly new side of him, which, Peter reflected, he probably was.
"You tell Happy that I am a fan—"

"Ugh, no, like he needs more encouragement to torment me—"

But Tony was too tickled by the idea to let anything Peter said weigh him down. "Oh man, when Strange told me it was one in fourteen million, I didn't think that all the pieces would be such a win —"

"You're intolerable—"

"Like, just everything, like, you, and May and Happy—"

"Ugh, stop—"

"And Morgan's going to NASA—"

"That's still up in the air—"

"And old Cap here is an actual fossil—"

"Oh, right, right," Steve interjected, "that's also up there for you—"

"You gotta admit, it's a long time in coming."

"Uh huh."

"Shoe finally fits in all ways—"

"Uh huh. Yeah, you would enjoy that—"

"Old on the inside as well as the outside. I mean—"

"Uh huh."

"—can it get any more perfect than this?"

Wow. Peter was utterly speechless, because he had no idea that Steve and Tony could be so immature.

"Hey, but no sweat," Tony jabbed on, "I'm sure you still looked good—"

"Right, here it comes—"

"I mean, your ass—"

"Of course—"

"—probably can't handle that first suit, but the later ones—"

"And you would be like that, huh—"

This is kind of awesome. Peter did not have a lot of insight into Tony and Steve's friendship. He knew, based on Rhody's anecdotes and Steve's own retelling, that the two had a mutual respect for each other, even though they had disagreed heavily on the correct approaches throughout their association. Both Sam and Rhody had insisted that there was no way the two would not clash, but they also insisted that each meant a lot to the other. It was easy to see that the two still cared about each other.
He hoped they would stick together after he left.

Tony seemed to be in good spirits on the drive back. He played some 80s music in the car, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Steve had elected to stay with Natasha; he seemed to be as worried about her as Tony was. If Tony had not needed to come home to Pepper, he might have offered to stay at the Compound as well.

But, he had a wife, and a guest, so back to Long Island they went.

"Seems like you'll be able to meet Morgan," Tony said thoughtfully. "She's coming home Friday evening. Would be good to introduce the two of you."

That was going to be strange. Peter had watched Morgan grow up, knew her quirks, her likes and dislikes. Morgan confessed things to him that she did not want to share with the adults. He had been her older brother in all but blood. She even introduced him as her brother, sometimes. He made her Benjy's aunt.

But this Morgan knew none of that. He doubted she would handle things as smoothly as Pepper. He doubted he would handle things as smoothly as Pepper.

"Does she know of me?"

"...I've told her about you. She found the photo." Tony did not say which one. "She knows you were Spider-Man. Didn't see a reason to hide it."

"Would be nice to see her," Peter said, even though his stomach was twisting in knots.

Tony looked at him. "It'll be great. She'll like you."

"Well, I hope I learned something from all the babysitting."

"...Might be interesting to see what the differences are."

"...I love you three thousand."

Tony did not react for a moment. "Come again?"

"That's the last thing you two said to each other." Peter folded his arms. "Kind of our code, with the Starks. Three thousand. She's teaching that to Benjy, even though he's not a Stark."

Tony did not reply.

"She doesn't remember you very well," Peter went on. "No surprise there. I don't remember my parents either, and I lost them at the same age. So...some things aren't ideal."

Tony did not seem to know what to say. He drummed the steering wheel again as they skirted around another pothole.

"I'm sorry," Peter sighed when the silence stretched. "Me and my big mouth—"

"What did I say about that word, kid—"

"I'm sorry! I—ow!" because Tony had punched him in the arm. "Jesus!"
"You deserved that. You don't get to apologize for the choices I made."

"Alright, alright. Dude, I think you bruised me—"

"Oh, grow a pair."

"I'm serious!"

"Don't talk back. That's rude."

"So is punching someone!" Peter rubbed his arm for a good measure. "Still vicious as always! Makes me worry about how Morgan turned out in this universe."

"You can handle it."

"Ha! Like, maybe barely…"

They chuckled a little, before subsiding to quiet again.

"Well, she had you, clearly," Tony blurted out, almost out of the blue.

"Ugh," Peter groaned.

"What?"

"No, just, I meant," Peter hesitated, "it's more she turned out okay despite me."

"Nah, I don't believe that."

"God."

"What?"

"I had to give her the talk."

Tony was floored for a few seconds. "You gave her the talk?"

"Yeah. I know."

"Where was Pepper?"

"Pepper also gave her the talk. The talk isn't just a one-time thing, as it turns out. Why she went to me, instead of Happy or Rhodes—I think it's because we're closer in age, but, ugh."

Tony started laughing. "Well, how did it go?"

"She didn't seem worse for wear. Was crushing hard on Johnny Storm during that time. Not long after, she asked if there was a way for me to set up a meeting."

"…Oh."

"Don't worry," Peter reassured, "I also gave Johnny the talk. The lengths I went to for your daughter, I swear to God—"

"What sort of talk did you give Johnny? Did he also need you to—"

"No, not that talk, the other talk."
"What’s the other talk?"

"Where I tell him, very civilly, that I will smash his beautiful face in if he even gets the idea to hook up with my sister who’s definitely too good for him even if she weren’t too young for him. That talk. Johnny and Peter were very good friends, but Peter had absolutely meant to carry out the threat, and Johnny knew, not that Johnny had any intentions to begin with. It was hands off all the way when the two did meet, which had the happy coincidence of making Morgan much less impressed with Johnny Storm.

Tony looked at Peter fondly. "Sounds like you had it in hand."

"Wouldn’t have been as good as if her dad were there."

"…Maybe not," Tony allowed, "but it’s good enough on my end. Honestly, over here… I cou—uh, couldn’t tell her that much about you; she wouldn’t understand. She’s never met you and… people like you aren’t… there aren’t a lot of people like you around. Here. But sometimes, especially when she gets those tantrums, I wished I could say something like, ‘you should learn from Peter Parker’, though that does remind me a lot of how my old man used to idolize Captain America, good grief—"

"You should know, Pepper says those exact things, and Morgan finds them utterly annoying—"

"Yeah, I know, but she’s clearly done okay—"

"—like, really annoying—"

""Tony snorted. "But—but the point is, if I’m not—if I’m not there, I’m not there, yeah? There’s nothing for it. But—you didn’t have to be there, you and everyone, but you were, and she was loved, and hey, would have been great if I were there, but I’m not complaining, right?"

Peter stared at him.

Tony had also gotten much more insightful over the years. "There’s nothing you can say that will disappoint me, Pete. Not about Spider-Man, not about Stark Industries, and certainly not about my daughter. Even if you did something totally wrong, even if she got—even if you think she got hurt because of you—I know you too well."

"That’s really generous of you."

"That’s me. Generous. But even if—"

"She never got hurt, really, but it was more because—"

"—you think you messed up royally—"

"—there were other, better people around—"

"—I wouldn’t blame you, okay? You don’t have to worry. If anything, I’d blame Pepper. I’d blame myself first. She’s a Stark. Good God."

Peter burst into laughter. "That’s actually true. Oh man."

"Jesus, the poor kid."

"She has your crazy ideas and Pepper’s patience. It’s a disaster from the start."

"Exactly!" Tony slapped the steering wheel. "NASA has no idea what’s coming."
Peter chuckled, but something occurred to him. This was an opportunity he needed to take advantage of. "Hey, Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"Um…so Morgan knows about my other job, obviously."

"Uh huh."

"And she's pushed to, uh, be part of that. Too."

Tony paused. "Uh huh."

"I've managed to persuade her to finish her studies first," Peter went on, "but she's got both of your stubborn streaks and it was…hard. Would you…be mad…if she became an Avenger?"

Tony was silent for a long time.

"I don't like the idea," he confessed as they swerved toward an exit. "But, if that's what she wants, and with you at the helm…no, I wouldn't be mad."

Peter blew out a breath. "I'll try my best, man, but even Pepper's having a hard time, and she's her mom. I'm just worried that if I don't take her in, she's gonna go do her own thing anyway."

"That sounds familiar. See, you're already doing better than me and convincing her to go to college first."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Peter," Tony stated quietly, "the Decimation took out more than just the front lines. It took out people right here on this road. Folks in the Bahamas. Those isolated villages in the Amazon. Barton was hanging out with his family, preparing hotdogs. Staying out of things doesn't necessarily protect you. Having Pepper stay back home didn't keep her out of that danger. She was lucky. Happy was lucky. So, I don't like the idea of her rushing into the thick of things, but…if your Morgan chooses to join the Avengers, at least she has the Avengers to join. You've been taking good care of her, but she should also know how to take care of herself."

"And if something happens to her out there, I'll say this ahead of time, I forgive you, okay?"

"Okay."

"I mean it, because I know you're gonna blame yourself and I won't be there—"

"Well—"

"Nuh—uh. You might be the fancy leader of the new Avengers, but I'm still your…uh…"

"…Um…?"

Tony did not seem to know what he was about to say, and for a moment Peter worried that he was having a stroke, right here in this car, but then he said, quickly, "I'm your work-dad, okay?"

"A 'work-dad'?" Peter exclaimed, incredulous.

"Yeah. Like, work-wife, work-husband. I'm your work-dad."
"That's…"

"Don't care."

"Um, okay."

"Besides," Tony pointed out, "you just said Morgan was your sister. That makes you my son by proxy."

"Does that mean I can wear your Iron Man suits?"

"I'm surprised you haven't already."

"Seemed tasteless."

"Kid, have you known me?"

Peter laughed. "I'll take that as permission to go on a joyride in them as soon as I get back."

"Now you're getting it," Tony grinned. "In fact, if you want, in the garage…"

"You'll need to show me the ropes."

"After dinner?"

"Oh yeah," Peter clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "This is gonna be so cool."

"You remind me so much of your teenage self," Tony laughed. "Man, I wish I could have watched you grow up." He paused, and when he spoke next, there was a hint of tears in his voice. "Truth is, you were mine from the start. From the moment you told me why you were Spider-Man, didn't—didn't matter what happened afterwards. Knew you were—were special. This incredible kid. Didn't want anything to happen to you. And look at you now. I was right. If only…" he sighed.

Peter leaned his head back. He could not say he was okay, because he was not this world's Peter, but he could at least provide the same insight that this Peter could not relate.

"It didn't hurt," he said to Tony. "It—it was scary. I was scared. But you—you being there—it helped. A lot."

In retrospect, it probably was not as helpful as Peter intended, but Tony nodded anyway. After all, it was all he could give.
Chapter 5

Bruce Banner was surprisingly unhelpful in so many ways.

"So my arm just stayed busted?"

"Yeah."

"Huh."

"Clearly that's the most fascinating part of the other timeline," Tony remarked dryly.

"It's just hard to wrap my head around," said the green giant. "I've shot bullets in my mouth and it didn't do anything."

"Infinity Stones probably pack a great deal more than lead bullets, Bruce."

"Evidently."

It was odd, because Bruce Banner had been the one to realize that he was the best member of the Avengers to use the gauntlet due to its lethal attributes in the first place, but perhaps he was just perplexed about the mechanics of it. The Bruce Banner from Peter's world had not dwelled on the matter, but he also seemed to have a greater understanding of what exactly transpired. He did, at least for a moment, wear all the secrets of the universe on his hand.

Peter used the time to sketch what he remembered of the machine, though he doubted they would want to go by the exact design, given that the accident was uncontrolled and unpredictable. They were actually not at the Avengers compound, but at the abandoned tower that never got remodeled to Stark Industries headquarters. Bruce, Peter, and Tony helped straighten out some of the chairs and tables, but there was not much to do for the dust and the general sad neglect of the place.

"If there's a tear in the barrier," Bruce mused, "maybe if we find it, we can just...push you back. You probably just slid across. Didn't seem to have any bumps along the way, so the journey wasn't long."

"I just wish I remembered what that thing was supposed to do," Peter muttered. "Cassie's a quantum physicist. Took after her father, Scott. In fact," Peter frowned, "Scott might actually be alive. Well, maybe. Five hours was five years, so maybe for him, only twenty hours have passed. You built a Quantum Tunnel in my universe, but that was with Scott's help. Maybe if we find Scott, we can build one that is modified to cross dimensions instead of going to the Quantum Realm."

"That's an option. Where was he supposed to be?"

"California."

"Worth taking a look," Tony exchanged glances with Bruce. "Something to do with quantum physics sound about right, given the situation. This is right up on the Pym particles shenanigans."

"Poor Scott," Peter murmured. "Wonder what we'll find. Hope he didn't need to use the bathroom while in the Quantum Realm."

"Did you call everyone by their first names except me?"

"Dude, it wasn't like that, and I'm calling you Tony now, aren't I?"
"Hn." Tony let the matter go. "So, trip to San Fran. Guess I'll get the plane set up."

"There's a possibility that this universe didn't win the war because whatever device Scott was using had been destroyed," Peter pointed out. "We shouldn't count on him, necessarily, or the device he was using."

"Hank Pym did publish studies," said Bruce. "I can look into those, see if I can pull something cohesive out of the work he had managed to share."

"What about looking for the rift, or split, or whatever," Peter reminded them. "If there is such a thing, that would be so much simpler."

"We can look at that on the plane," Tony replied. "Science is science, no matter the timeline. If it was published somewhere, we can figure it out." He was on his phone, already making arrangements for the flight. There was a focused energy to him that had been absent when Peter had first arrived; he had not realized it was that vital element that was missing until he saw it again.

It almost wiped off twenty years from his shoulders. He even looked taller.

"We'll need some raw materials to build the device, whichever one we go with," Bruce pointed out.

"We'll do some research and see where to start. Once we make a decision, we can start building. Need to obtain parts to fix the arc reactor and power up this place anyway." The building was still dark, illuminated only by the ambient light of the afternoon.

"Sounds like a plan."

"It might be worthwhile to look at the Sanctorum as well," Peter added.

"Sanctorum?"

"Remember Dr. Strange?" Peter reminded Tony.

"The wizard?"

"Yeah. Turns out, he has this whole library on whatever they do, so there might be something there on this side."

"He's the one that handed over the Time Stone," Bruce looked at Tony for confirmation. Tony nodded. "I can check it out, since I'm here."

"Great. Plane's coming to pick us up on the landing pad on the roof," said Tony. "Should be here in about fifteen."

"That quick?" Peter raised his eyebrows as he picked up his suit clothes from where he had rolled them up when he arrived.

"It's my private plane. It's not doing anything else." Tony raised his eyebrows at Peter's jacket and slacks, but did not comment.

"But you still have to assemble the crew."

Tony shrugged. "They weren't doing anything else."

"Ha," Peter chuckled. "Tony Stark is always something else, no matter what the situation, eh?"
"You know it. Come on, let's head up to the roof. Bruce-honey, you good?"

"Ha. No complaints. Will be in touch."

"You got it."

While Tony downloaded articles on the tablets, Peter looked over the city, with its cracked concrete and piles of debris that no one was available to collect.

"So if Morgan realized she's actually a lesbian, you'd be okay with that?"

"Would be kind of unexpected, all things considered, but whatever makes her happy."

"What if she didn't want to take over SI?"

"Again, whatever makes her happy. SI was my dad's work. I turned it around, made it my own thing, but if she wants to do something else with her life, I don't take it personally. I know what it is to feel trapped."

Peter was trying to come up with all sorts of scenarios, just in case. "What if she's trans?"

"That would be even weirder, considering she's never shown any evidence of being uncomfortable with being a girl, but again, whatever makes her happy. Super weird though, but I'd get over it.

"Is she trans where you are?"

"Not that I know of."

"Hm."

"What if she decides she doesn't want to go into science?"

Tony lowered his tablet. "Kid, you're killing me here. Morgan not in sc—I did watch her grow up, even if I didn't watch you. Morgan not liking science is about as likely as you becoming a neo-Nazi."

"Hail Hydra."

"You little piece of—" Tony whacked Peter on the shoulder with the tablet. Hard.

"Ow! But seriously, what if she, like, needs to find herself and decides she wants to go backpacking?"

"She's more likely to shove her way into the Avengers than to go backpacking—"

"That's true—"

"—but hey, backpacking's not a bad idea. Self-improvement, see the world, and all that. Can go backpacking even if she didn't want to find herself, just wanted to go see what the world has to offer. Unlike this one, your world actually has stuff."

"And other galaxies too," Peter murmured. "What if she decides to move to Xandar? Marry a Xandarian?"

"If he or she treats her well, I'm a hundred percent for it. If he or she doesn't treat her well, you have my express permission to beat them to a pulp."
"I'll tell her you gave me permission to beat up her spouse."

"If they don't treat her well."

Peter just grinned at Tony, who whacked him with the tablet again.

"Ow!" Peter was exaggerating, of course, since none of the hits hurt even a little. "So moving on, what if Pepper decided to marry again?"

"Did she?"

"No, but what if? Kid's out of the house, she's still a catch."

"It'll be just what I deserve for leaving her again," Tony reflected. "It depends on how happy he makes her. There's a theme with my answers, if you haven't caught on already."

"I'll tell Pepper that you're giving her permission to find a boyfriend. Ow! You're so abusive, Tony!"

"It's what you get for being a little brat."

"Uh huh. That reminds me," Peter went on, even though there was nothing about Tony whacking him with a tablet that should remind him of what he was about to say, "I think you should give me a message to take to them. You know, a note, or a video. More like a video. Say what you wanna say to a Pepper and Morgan who didn't get to keep you."

"I find it hard to imagine I didn't already do that when I decided to embark on the insanity that was the Time...Heist, was it?"

"You did, but that was fifteen years ago, and you didn't know you were gonna die. I know, it's silly, all you're gonna say is 'whatever makes you happy will make me happy', but if I'm gonna cross dimensions to meet a version of you that was there for Pepper and Morgan, I'm gonna take advantage of it."

Peter suddenly felt a hand wrap around the side of his head and pull him over. Tony's lips pressed hard into his crown.

"You're such a good kid. What on earth did I do to deserve—where did you even come from, huh? What made you? If you had been fifteen years older, all fourteen million futures would feature us winning. I'll make a recording and have Karen store it. God, I wish I could have watched you grow up," Tony turned back to the tablet. "But it's probably for the best though; I'd have kidnapped you eventually, and both May and Happy would have to murder me. Here, you read these articles and I'll read these articles. Let's start reading before I melt."

The plane arrived shortly afterwards, landing on the roof. It was a curious model, one that Peter had never seen before; apparently, technology went in a different direction in this timeline, but like the planes in his own timeline, it was able to land vertically; galactic trade and exchange of ideas did a lot to advance aeronautics.

The interior was about the same as any private plane. There was a bar, some couches, pristine carpets and velvet curtains over round windows.

Tony, once he got to reading, was every bit as focused as Peter might have expected. There were, overall, few papers to be had, and the newer ones were quite different and of poorer quality compared to most studies in his own universe, but they trended in the same direction. He glanced up every once in a while to observe Tony's intent expression, glasses on his nose, ignoring the flight
attendants around them. He had worn a similar expression when revising Karen.

Peter could not help but feel that Tony looked very fatherly this way. He raised the pendant with the suit, lined the camera with his eye, and snapped a picture. Tony read on, oblivious.

An hour and a half into the flight, Tony had to get up because his rear was sore from sitting in one position for too long, and he was also getting thirsty.

"Aging sucks," he complained. "Can't do anything; can't sit still for an hour, can't read for too long. Should have brought artificial tears. My eyes feel like there are giant Hulk boulders sitting on them."

"It's not aging, even I need to stretch my legs." But to rub it in, Peter went up the wall and stood upside down on the ceiling, letting the blood rush from his feet to his head.

"Show off."

"It's such a good stretch though."

"It looks like it," Tony remarked with a touch of envy. "And—really? You're gonna—yeah, okay, so you can drink like that without snorting stuff through your nose. Should have figured."

"Yeah, you should have," Peter nodded at the flight attendant, who did not seem to know what to make of him as she handed him a napkin to go along with his ice latte. He had been rather casual about revealing his abilities; he felt no pressure to preserve his identity here. He was going to leave anyway, and, depressingly, he had no one to protect here; there was no MJ, no Benjy, no Aunt May, and Spider-Man had not spent the last twenty years building up a list of enemies out for his blood.

Even so, the flight attendant did not ask questions or make any comments. Maybe that was part of her professionalism.

"This is ridiculous," Tony declared after a moment. "Come down and stand like an adult. I can't talk to you like this."

"Hold?"

"Yeah I'll hold your latte. Good grief." Tony handed it back when Peter was right-side up.

"Growing up's no fun if you can't act childish every once in a while."

"Uh huh. Does Benjy also stick to walls?"

"He hasn't shown any spider abilities, which is honestly a relief, because that kid gets everywhere as it is. I don't even know what MJ and I would do if he can defy gravity."

"Would serve you right. You're such a little punk."

Peter grinned. "Should try and restore my phone. Got a lot of photos; I hope they didn't get wiped clean the way the battery did."

"Do you have it on you?"

"Yeah." Peter took it out. "Battery's dead. Didn't have a chance to check the memory board."

"We'll take a look when we get home. Ant-Man first." But Tony pocketed Peter's phone. Which was fine, since it was not like Peter could use it anyway. He thought about telling Tony that he and Ned
take turns upgrading Stark tech all the time, and he could just fix his own phone, but Tony had been a little weird like that ever since Peter arrived. From the grilled cheese sandwich and milk, to Karen, it seemed like Tony just wanted to do things for Peter, even if Peter could do them himself.

They both returned to the couches, but Tony did not seem to want to go back to reading. Neither, frankly, did Peter, so they ended up chatting about more of Peter's Spider-Man adventures.

"Harry and I actually met in Columbia. Harry and I just clicked; I dunno. And he's actually a really smart guy, but his dad's got a big stick shoved up there for some reason. Like, your son's in Columbia. I get it's not Harvard, but it's still Columbia. Hello? And also, I'm in Columbia, but Norman Osborn always seemed fascinated with me. Like, to the point of creepiness. May told me to avoid him. Pepper did too, but I thought it was more because of the Osborn and Stark rivalry."

"Hmph." Tony grimaced with distaste, but he was scowling ever since learning that Peter had ever been in close proximity with the likes of Norman Osborn.

"But anyway, it actually got really intense, like, Pepper went toe-to-toe with this guy once because he was trying to recruit me to work for OsCorp over the summer, and I was like, um, no, I have to help Pepper manage all these projects and also babysit Morgan, plus the patrols, which I didn't mention, of course, but he got mad at me! I was like, chill, dude! I'm sorry I'm turning you down, but SI got to me first! Like, literally years ahead of you!"

"Damn right. So Pepper put him in his place?"

"You should have seen his face. When Pepper gets going, she puts your sharp wit to shame."

"Who do you think I practice with?"

Peter saluted with two fingers. "Fair. Anyway, I didn't know there were so many words for the word 'idiot' and the like; she sounded so eloquent too."

"Sounds about right."

"It was awesome, but it made things really awkward for me and Harry."

"So what happened next?"

"Well, it turned out Norman was experimenting with these serums, except...he wanted the serums to work better than the super soldier serum. And he had this idea to mass-produce them for civilians. But what he actually made was a gas. And it—"

"Wait, what—"

"I know! And—"

"Wait, hold on a second—"

"—and, no, it doesn't stop there—"

"He tried to make a serum, as in, a liquid—"

"Yeah! But that's not all: so this gas does enhance your speed, strength, and endurance, but only for like, eight hours, and—"

"So he wanted to make something better—"
"—right, and not only that—"

"And it doesn't even last—"

"Right, and it also turns your skin green—"

"Wait, so he was trying to turn people into Hulks?"

"Pretty much, because it also made you psychotic—"

"So wait, hold on—this—"

"And the psychosis doesn't go away, that part stays—"

"It—are you serious? Oh Christ this guy was even dumber than I thought—"

"And he was exposing himself to this gas over and over again, trying to fix it, because the idea of testing it on something like a lab rat, or even a spider, didn't occur to him—"

"Oh my God—"

"Until he was just completely crazy, right, so finally Harry came to me and was like, 'My dad's been behaving really weird lately, like, more of a trash dad than usual' though of course he didn't actually say it like that, but he was at a loss. Problem was, Harry's his son, and Osborn's a really controlling dad, so Ned and I had to try to find all sorts of excuses for Harry to stay away from home, while his dad started dressing up in this weird Power Rangers armor, named himself the Green Goblin, and started stuffing his gas into these pumpkin bombs and setting them off in Times Square."

"Oh God."

"Thankfully, atmosphere dilutes that gas to like, ten percent of what it usually does, so these people run around like lunatics for a little less than an hour—"

"No…"

"So after we round them up, Fury's all ticked off, blames me for not preventing all this—dude, I'm not psychic, I don't have precognition, and I have finals and lab reports to write, okay? Like, the lab experiments are fine but the lab reports are, like, publication-style manuscripts that take hours to edit, it's hard enough to patrol—"

"Fury's an ass."

"And I tell him, I'll bring down Norman Osborn, he's a creep, but you gotta also help me out; I need Harry out of the way before things go down, someone please take Harry into protective custody because I have nowhere to hide him, me and Ned can only do so much, and he goes, 'We don't know if Harry is complicit'. I'm like, Harry's the one who came to me. Hello? He's literally trying to hide from his father? How is this complicit?"

"Fury's an ass. And a total moron."

"Anyway, so I got in an altercation with Norman at their oversized house, Harry saw me fighting his dad, got mad at Spider-Man for getting his father arrested, got mad at Peter Parker and Ned because we couldn't keep hiding him, so there went that friendship—"

"Apple doesn't fall far from the tree, apparently. He's just as dumb as Norman—"
"And then later, while we were still in college, he found his father's notes, and decides it's a good idea to try to replicate this gas—"

"Oh Jesus Christ—"

"So all of the sudden this guy who called himself the Hobgoblin starts throwing pumpkin bombs everywhere, and everyone's like 'what the hell?' And then he busted his dad out of jail, and you should have seen Manhattan, man, it was a madhouse. I swung from the upper west side down to Union Square, and it was like a rampage. I was so confused, and Dr. Strange was there, and he was like, 'what is all this?' He actually saved my life, because when I realized the Hobgoblin was Harry, I sort of...froze? I mean, I felt bad, he was my friend and I wasn't able to help him—"

"Oh pssh."

"So he then stabbed me, right here, like, all the way," Peter went on, figuring that his presence and current health status ought to diminish the magnitude of that particular incident, especially since he had told this story to the newer members of the Avengers and no one had batted an eyelash, "and I literally hear the squish of everything just spilling out—I thought I was done for, and then I woke up at the Sanctorum, and Strange just yelled at me for the next forty-five minutes, I counted—"

"As he should." Tony's expression had blackened after hearing Peter was stabbed. "What kind of self-sacrificing bull—"

"I panicked, okay? This never happened before! I didn't want to hurt him—" He was cut off because Tony was picking up a tablet and whacking him on the head with it. "Ow! Why?!"

"Well I wasn't there to do it then, so I'm gonna do it now!"

"Strange already yelled at me!" Peter pouted. "And besides, I healed!"

Tony whacked him again.

"Ow! You're a mean old man!"

"I want you to think of that every time you even think of something so stupid again!"

"Okay, okay!" Peter was a little dismayed, even as the corners of his lips turned upwards. Tony did not look angry, necessarily, but there was a light to his gaze that was not that amused. "Strange already ripped me a new one! Geez, this was ten years ago! I've figured things out since then!"

"You figured out that true friends would never blame you for not helping more than you're actually able? What a revelation!"

"Yeah yeah…"

"Seriously, your life is important too, you little brat—"

"But—"

Tony raised the tablet, and Peter ducked, laughing despite himself. "Okay! Okay! I swear that never happened again!"

Tony settled, huffing. "At least Strange did it for me at the time. I almost forgive him for handing over the Time Stone."

"He was so mad."
"Someone should be!"

"It was so unfair because he told Happy and May—"

"As he should have!"

"You're totally not on my side for this, are you?"

"Absolutely not!"

Peter broke down with laughter, while Tony rolled his eyes with a sigh. "Damn it, kid, my hair does not need to get grayer. Tell me you have better self-preservation instincts now."

"I had no choice! And now I really don't have a choice. You're a scary old man."

Tony kicked him in the shin. That one hurt no more than the taps with the tablet, but Peter made a point of writhing while still bubbling with mirth.

"You little sh—God I hate you so much," Tony picked up the tablet to read this time. "I'm recording a message to Benjy to tell him what an utter moron his father is."

"Turning my son against me?"

"Every step of the way."

Peter blew a raspberry at him. Tony bunched up a napkin and threw it at Peter's face.

San Francisco was a sunny, bright city with overpriced rent and good weather, but in this universe, it was actually kind of gray. The sky was as clear as ever, but the city itself was old and dilapidated, emptier than Manhattan and very hot and dry. Forest fires had eaten away at a lot of California, Tony explained, and there were not enough people to fend off the conflagrations, so people had generally migrated out. It was still prime real estate, relatively speaking, but the streets were full of garbage that no one collected, and entire neighborhoods stood abandoned and ignored.

"So what are we looking for?" Tony asked. He had stayed inside the plane when Peter had wandered out. When he did emerge, he was clad in a t-shirt over khaki pants. He handed a similar set to Peter.

"A van," Peter replied, musing that even after being the Avengers leader for almost ten years, he was still not as good at anticipating things as Tony Stark. He shrugged off the sweatshirt as he headed back to the plane.

It was a good thing Tony brought a change of clothes, because Peter would probably develop heat stroke otherwise.

Back outside, Peter continued, "So it was a 1972 Ford Ecoline that should be in some storage room; I don't know which one, not like Scott took me on a tour pointing it out. Is FRIDAY uploaded to the tablets?"

Tony threw him a dirty look.

"They always referred to the van as Luis' van, but I think it was registered under Scott, so if we look up the storage rooms for where Scott Lang's belongings were stored, we can probably find it."

"Should be easy then," Tony had donned a pair of shades as he looked down at his tablet, though the
sun was beginning to set. In the golden light, he looked very reminiscent of the Tony Stark of old. "FRIDAY, sweetheart, look up Scott Lang in the storeroom registries of San Francisco."

There was a beep. "On it, boss," Friday acknowledged from the tablet. An address popped up. "Storeroom found. Plotting trajectory."

"Oh hey, it's a twenty-minute walk," Tony held the tablet up. "That's not bad at all. I was afraid it was gonna be like six miles away."

"You think you can walk it?"

"It's twenty minutes, not twenty miles. Don't turn Cap's old age jokes on me, Underoos. It doesn't work."

Peter laughed. "I was gonna offer to swing us there."

Tony gave him another dirty look. "I'll pass."

Peter chuckled. "Okay." Let the man preserve his dignity; swinging was much better as the driver than the passenger, so to speak.

The security guard, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not give them much resistance when they asked to see the van.

But when they opened the back doors, they both realized why this timeline was not the one in fourteen million.

"Oh," Peter murmured.

There was only a torso and a left arm, but there was no doubt it was once Scott Lang. The body had desiccated in the heat, and the lingering putrid odor was faint. The edges of the remains, leading to the missing parts, looked gnawed.

Tony pinched his nose as he tilted his head to the side, unexpectedly unperturbed. "Did something eat him?" he wondered, his voice nasal from the nose pinch.

Carnivorous tardigrades. Peter turned away and covered his face. "Damn," he whispered, feeling chilled all of the sudden, and his mind was spinning. He had lunches with the Langs. He still had lunches with Cassie. Scott had tried to teach Peter magic tricks, which fared poorly despite Peter's otherwise great dexterity.

"What the hell?" the security guard exclaimed.

"Well, that explains where he's been all these years," Tony stepped around. "You alright there, Underoos?"

"Yeah, uh, yeah, just gimme a minute." Poor Cassie.

"Do you need to go sit down? Get some water?"

"I'm gonna have to report this," said the security guard.

"Yeah, you go do that," Tony waved. "Pete? Talk to me, come on."

"I...yeah." Peter was not sure why he felt dizzy and overwhelmed. He knew a bunch of people were dead in this timeline, never to come back. He was dead in this timeline. So was Aunt May, and Ned,
and MJ. And Scott was alive in his world, doing very well, making lots of money with Cassie, who
was always fun to work with, she had a daughter who was slightly older than Benjy, so there was
really no reason for him to be so—

"Yeah, why don't you come with me and we'll sit you down, you're okay."

"Yeah, sorry, sorry, I don't know what's gotten into me—"

"Kid, what did I say about apologizing? That word's not allowed."

"Yeah, yeah…"

Tony sat him down. Sat down next to him. Squeezed the back of his neck with one hand. His fingers
felt slippery, and Peter realized his neck was covered with cold sweat. "That was really gnarly and
graphic. You're okay. You're okay."

"It's not that."

"It's totally fine, kid, there's nothing to be ashamed of."

"It's not that. I've frankly seen worse." The poor kids on Staten Island, carved up just because they
were mutants. "It's not that."

"It's fine if it is."

"It's not. I think it's just realizing how close, how c-c-close—"

That was fifteen years ago, you're way out of the danger zone, okay? Other me and the other
Avengers brought you back, Scott Lang didn't get chewed on before he was brought back, and
you're okay. You're okay, you hear me?"

"Um, yeah."

"Come on, you're being ridiculous. You're not a child, you've seen worse like you said. He had been an Avenger and Spider-Man and had comforted and sheltered other superheroes
who were new to the ugly side of things without breaking a sweat; why was he reeling from
something like this now? Get it together, Parker… "I'm okay, I just need a minute."

Tony did not let go. If anything, he hugged him more tightly. "Hey, these things are scary. I was
scared. I'm sure I was scared. But once the danger passes, it can't hurt you. This danger can't hurt
you. You came back and you're staying. You got a mischievous son. You have a whole crew of
superpowered idiots to coordinate. You're not going anywhere."

He did not release Peter until Peter's heart rate slowed. Peter did not even realize his heart rate had
gone up.

"Hey, nothing to be embarrassed about, okay?" Tony kept an arm around him. "That was upsetting.
That should upset you."

"Heh. Well, you didn't freak out."

"I totally did. That right there? That's gonna give me nightmares for the rest of my life. To think, we
didn't win in this timeline because of that. That's never leaving my brain, unless I get Alzheimer's.
Even if I get Alzheimer's, that's still not leaving my brain."

Peter inhaled deeply. "He was such a dork. He's so silly. Even now, every time I see him I know
nothing's gonna get done and all I'd be doing is laughing at everything he says."

"Hey, this sort of thing isn't supposed to be okay. You don't have to explain."

Peter watched the guard retreat to the office to make a call.

"Tony, we gotta get the Quantum Tunnel before they confiscate everything for an investigation."

Tony blanched and tapped his arm. "G-get—use your super strength—go. I'll say that you had to go barf. FRIDAY, put the cameras on loop. Go go go!"

Tony's excuse would not even have been far from the truth; Peter had to jostle Scott's remains in order to get the tunnel out of the van. It had other components as well, all covered with dried up… body fluid. He managed to bolt out of there without making any noise. Tony shooed him out while the security guard's back was turned.

He ended up swinging back to the plane, a journey that took about two minutes. The folks on the plane did not remark on his bizarre cargo; they, of course, had no idea what it was, and what was on it. The thing could barely fit through the door, but he managed to squeeze it in, and he propped it up in the middle of the cabin and tried not to think of Scott's mummified viscera staining the carpet.

Tony came back half an hour later. By then, it was dark enough that sunglasses were no longer practical. He barely even looked at the tunnel on the floor, waving instead at the crew to depart for New York, and heading straight where Peter was.

"You okay, bud?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Other than having no dignity left.

"That really sucked. I don't blame you."

"Yeah."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"No. Yeah. I dunno. What the hell." He was not sure what he was referring to: his own inexplicable breakdown, or what happened to Scott in this timeline.

"Yeah."

"…You're taking it well."

"Kid, half my world got erased with the snap of one guy's fingers. You turned to dust in my arms. The therapists still need therapists after that God awful day. That being said, that was gross. Like, horror movie material, so no, I'm not actually taking it well, but I can take it better than you because I've literally been living in a horror movie for the last twenty years, whereas you were living in as normal of a version as is possible. One in fourteen million. Don't feel bad."

Peter sighed. "I just lost it." So much for being a mature, thirty-year-old father and husband and experienced superhero. "God."

"You didn't lose it. Come on, if that was losing it, I've never had it together."

"God, that was embarra—"

"Nuh-uh! Nope! Don't even—look, kid, even while your brain was exploding, you remembered to
get the tunnel”—and the plane was rising off the landing pad and taking off into the sky—"and even I was all distracted, but you had your game on even while you were freaking out, which, if you recall the battle on Titan, wasn't something everyone was good at, and now we can get this thing to Bruce without worrying about how to get it from the police."

Peter sighed deeply.

"You want something to drink? Water? Wine? Can you even get drunk? Cuz Steve couldn't."

"Yeah, alcohol does affect me, actually. Makes me crawl all weird. You ever see those spiderwebs they weave when they give spiders drugs? I didn't become immune; I just get hungover quicker."

"Damn. That kind of stinks. Well, whatever you want. We got a three hour ride ahead of us. You wanna nap? There are throws."

Peter sighed. "No, I'm okay. I should—ugh."

"You're still pale. You're not quite okay." Tony touched Peter's face. "Lie down. Don't argue with me. You, fetch a blanket, and some water."

The ease in which he had Peter all settled hurt a little. This Tony was a real father. So was the one that had looked at Peter with eyes full of awe and wonder on the fateful day when the Decimation was reversed.

"Your Morgan's so lucky to have you," he murmured once Tony sat down again.

Tony reached out to smooth the throw. "Get some rest, kiddo. I'm right here."
Peter slept, and dreamed that Benjy was trying to eat his web fluid out of the canisters. MJ yelled at him to baby-proof his workstation, and most of the dream consisted of him stressing out about making sure Benjy could not get to the ingredients.

He woke up really missing his baby. It had been two and a half days since he last saw his son, and Benjy was asleep by the time Peter had gotten home. He wondered how they were doing now, if MJ was worried, if Benjy even knew what was going on. Aunt May would definitely be worried too, and poor Morgan had wanted to talk to him about summer internship at NASA. It seemed very likely that Peter would not make it in time.

They were still flying, but the cabin had gotten dark. Evening had fallen in the direction they were headed.

Tony was still reading, his face illuminated by the light of the Starkpad. He was actually reading Peter's assigned articles, which Peter should have been reading when he had been sleeping instead.

"You look better," Tony remarked as Peter sat up. "How do you feel?"

*Like a total loser.* "I feel better." He bowed his head and sighed.

"Hey," Tony set his tablet down. "Look at me. That was upsetting. Your reaction was totally appropriate. No. Look at me. Listen. That wasn't you being squeamish at the sight of a dead body, even though that would have been reasonable too, because that was someone you knew, someone you cared about, who probably had cared about you too, and you're not supposed to be okay with something like that—but—that was you realizing—no, not realizing, *feeling* just how precarious… existence…being…really is. All it takes is *one* thing out of place, and so utterly out of your control. Okay? That—I know how that feels, because I've been there. I've been there. And believe me, that still terrifies me; losing the people I care about and being totally helpless to stop it. Okay? And I just spent the last two and a half hours trying not to think about how easily that could have been you. We're not guaranteed all fourteen million outcomes, are we? And all the things that can go wrong since, and I would never have been able to see you—see, I'm doing it again, and I'm trying not to, but this freaks me out too, okay? So, it freaked you out, because it should. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You're okay. You're okay."

As the plane descended, Peter noted that they had headed past Manhattan, over Queens and to Long Island.

"We're not gonna pick up Bruce?"

"Bruce has his own place up in New Jersey."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah. Loser."
Peter laughed.

"We're gonna get some food in you, okay?"

"Okay."

But when they landed on the estate, they received a call.

"Hey Cap, you're on speaker," Tony announced. "Peter's here too. What's up."

"Hey Tony, Peter. Just wanted to let you know that we heard back from Nebula. She apparently found something in the archives of some museum in the middle of nowhere that she thinks might be helpful. She's gonna drop that by on Sunday."

"It's Knowhere," Peter corrected. "That's the planet. She must be talking about the Collector Museum."

"I vaguely remember that," Tony glanced at Peter. "Is she headed to the Compound?"

"Yeah, don't know where else to direct her, and it seemed to make sense."

"We'll be there."

"Did you hear from Bruce? Nat said that Bruce was supposed to come to New York today."

"He dropped by the old tower. Not sure if he's still there; we went to San Fran, just got back."

"San Fran?"

"Yeah, got a new toy, have to figure it out. We're calling it a night tonight, but we're gonna head over to the tower tomorrow with it, if you and Nat wanna join. By the way, how is she? She there?"

"She called it in. Hey Tony," Steve's tone changed. "Do you know what's going on with her? She's always been kinda petite, but she looks really skinny now. I saw her wrists earlier and they're... they're really thin."

"She hasn't said anything to me." Tony glanced at Peter, who shook his head. "You got anything?"

"No, but she doesn't eat much, and she's always holding her stomach. I'm worried."

"You know that out of all of us, I'm the last person she wants to talk to."

"That's not true, Tony."

"You should probably ask Bruce to go up to the Compound," Peter suggested. "He knows enough medicine to at least have a direction, even without the tech or facilities."

"That's a good idea. I'll give him a call."

"Keep us updated, babe."

Steve made an incredulous noise and did not dignify that with a response.

"Come on," Tony nodded at the Quantum Tunnel, "let's get that to the garage where it's safe, and then get some food in you. You haven't eaten real food in like eight hours. I'm surprised you're not passing out."
Peter was, oddly enough, not all that hungry. Tony's forehead pinched as he led Peter from the garage and into the house. Pepper had already come home and was chatting with Morgan on a Starkpad. Peter kept himself out of frame so the mother and daughter would not be interrupted.

There was food already, and Pepper had already eaten her share. Tony tossed the remainder in the microwave and shooed Peter to the guest room to shower and change. When he came back out, he donned a set of Tony's PJs, because he was so done with today.

Tony gave him a look of approval, having set the table during this time.

"And the test ends at nine thirty," Morgan was saying, "and I don't need to go to the other lectures on Friday because I actually already went over the notes, so I'm just gonna get on the bus, so I should be back around four or five."

"That sounds good," said Pepper, "though don't make a habit of cutting class."

"I don't, but the professors kind of suck. Their notes already go over the material anyway, and I read faster than they talk."

"It's uncanny," Peter muttered, as Tony slid his plate over to him. "She says the exact same things in my timeline."

"Tch. Not go into science," Tony rolled his eyes.

"Hey, we're just going by guesswork over there!"

"It's lousy guesswork is what it is. And besides, you shouldn't do everything based on whether or not I approve. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not always right, and believe it or not, Morgan and I have butted heads quite a lot. You should have seen how we were when she was thirteen years old. So many problems. Teenagers like you, whose worst character flaw was being too selfless with your own life—if I could go back in time and tell my stupid fifty-year-old self anything, I swear...but you're supposed to butt heads with your parents. That's the natural order of things. Kids should think for themselves, not just do what their parents tell them. Annoying as it is."

"It's different when you're not there, though. And it's different when you can't validate either. Many times I wish I could talk to Uncle Ben, you. For a sounding board, if nothing else. Half the things we deal with now are things you can't really fix, but knowing your dad supports you, agrees with you, increases the chances of you being right. Plus, you're not there to tell her you're proud of her even as you're disappointed in her individual choices."

"Ha. Well, I suppose that's why you are here now. You can relate the message."

Peter suddenly thought of something. He had offered Natasha...technically Tony was in the same position, but...

It would not be right. And it would not, really, be right for Natasha either. Still,

"Maybe when I go back, you can drop by and say hi."

Tony chewed and did not say anything.

Peter did not bring the subject up again.

"By Mom. Say hi to Dad for me."
"Bye sweetie. I will." Pepper ended the video call. She looked over to them. "Well?"

"Got a new toy. Gonna mess around with it tomorrow. Gonna feed the kid and, I dunno, relax a little bit. Long day. Traveling for six hours is exhausting even if you're just sitting the entire time."

"Six hours? Where did you go?"

"San Fran."

Pepper was nonplussed. "You went to California?"

"Had to check on something."

"No wonder you got back so late. Is this gonna help?"

"We hope so," said Peter. He suddenly did not feel like eating.

He must have turned a little green. Tony slid some water over to him.

"Hey, Underoos, chin up. Eat. You need to eat. I'm not sending you home looking scrawnier than when you came."

"I'm not scrawny."

"You will be if you don't eat like a good boy. Come on."

"Man," Peter could not help laughing, and Tony's tactic worked; food was in his mouth almost without him realizing it. "I haven't been called scrawny in ages. Like, I get treated with respect back home."

"Do you?"

"Yeah, believe it or not. No one whacks me with Starkpads. People call me Dr. Parker."

"Dr. Parker huh?"

"Yes. And they also call me 'Sir'."

Tony nearly spat out his food. "Alright hotshot, you're a big guy at home."

"I have interns who squirm with anxiety in my presence."

"Uh huh."

"I get invited to big events. Receptions with Nova Corps. I wear a suit."

"Uh huh. They were good cufflinks."

"Thanks. MJ got them."

"Uh huh."

"I have influence! If Morgan wants to get to NASA, guess who's gonna help her network her way there."

"Oh?"
"Actually, not me, but I was gonna talk to Reed Richards about it. Networking, you know? Friend of a friend of a friend."

"Reed Richards?" Tony tilted his head. "He sounds familiar. Think he went to Cal Tech."

"Yeah, when he was fourteen, so he was even smarter than you."

Tony threw a pea at Peter, who caught it in his mouth.

"Show off."

"Anyway, he's one of the smartest guys I know. Really nice guy. He's married to Susan Storm, Johnny's sister."

"You're good friends with this Johnny kid, aren't you?"

"Johnny's great, man. I was just on a mission with him right before I came over here. Actually, he reminds me a little of you."

"Oh hell no."

"Oh hell yes, but he's actually a really great guy."

"Excuse me, he 'reminds' you of me but he's a really great guy?"

Peter laughed. "No, no no no—"

"Why, my poor heart—"

"No—haha! That's not what I meant! Noooo! Pepper he's being mean to me!" Peter turned to Pepper just as it occurred to him that he was treating this Pepper like his Pepper, whenever he wanted her to be on his side against Morgan or Rhodey or Happy.

Pepper took it in stride. "Tony, be nice."

"But where's the fun in that? I mean, I see how it is, you don't call me by my first name—"

"Nooooo—"

"You hang out with a guy who's like me except he's also a great guy—"

"Dude!" Peter looked at Pepper. "Should have figured this is the treatment I'll get."

Pepper smoothed his hair in an entirely familiar way, just like her counterpart in Peter's world. "Eat up before it gets cold again."

"Yeah, yeah."

After dinner, Pepper ended up washing up while Tony tried to fix Peter's phone.

"This thing's completely wiped," Tony noted. "Must be quite a blast of magnetic field. I'm surprised Karen didn't get wiped too."

"Must be the vibranium in the suit," Peter mused. "Good thing all the photos were uploaded in the server, but I guess I can't show them to you."
"Probably for the best. Might get the urge to kidnap him."

"Ha."

"Not much point in fixing this thing if it's only gonna die again when you go back." Tony tossed the phone back to Peter. "Got some things I wanted to finish up with Karen though."

"Go for it. I can read up on some more things in the meantime to see how we can modify the Quantum Tunnel."

Tony looked at him. In his reading glasses, he looked really grandfatherly. "Sure, if you're up for it, but if you're tired, you should go to bed."

"I'm fine." Peter had the sense that Tony was referring to Peter's breakdown in San Fran. "I probably overreacted because I should have eaten a snack."

"Hmph!"

Tony brewed coffee prior to going to the garage.

"Why are you making coffee at this hour?"

"Eh. I'll sleep when I'm dead." Tony froze for a moment, as if realizing that was not apropos. "Ugh. Damn it. That was careless of me."

"You need to take care of yourself, man. How am I supposed to feel, knowing your poor habits when you still have Morgan and Pepper depending on you?"

"I usually have nothing to do," Tony admitted. "I was done. I'm retired. This is the most excitement I've had since Morgan went to college."

"What's college like around here, even?" Peter wondered. "I mean, this place is…so barren."

It was Pepper who answered. "Most colleges shut down. There aren't as many as there probably are in your timeline. The ones that remained…it's very different. The approach to education is very different…after the Decimation."

"Morgan's experience in MIT is much different from mine," Tony elaborated. "Fewer resources, and the faculty's not as inspired. A good portion of their faculty were decimated. The number of students who are enrolled over the years is also much lower than it could have been. It's just not the same."

"I'm surprised you let her go so far."

"We did think about keeping her close," said Pepper, "but…MIT still has a strong name, and a strong network. By the time Morgan applied, they had graduated enough classes that it seemed safe to go. Harvard was just around the corner, and both of their alumni networks were strong enough that the schools had more support than most others."

"That being said, I did consider Columbia." Tony poured the finished coffee into a thermos. "She wanted to get out of New York. What the hell. She should. See other places besides the Big Apple. Whatever's left of them, anyway."

Peter bowed his head as he leaned against the counter. "Damn."

"Yeah, that's what loss feels like. Go figure." Tony moved past him.
Pepper squeezed Peter's shoulder. "I'm calling it a night. Don't go to bed too late now. Sounds like you have a few busy days ahead of you."

Peter ended up not absorbing much of what he read. His mind kept wandering to the state of this universe, how there were certain things that seemed tolerable; Tony was still ridiculously rich, and there was food, water, security, services, but Peter had the sudden sense that the main reason his experience in this world had felt relatively ordinary was because it was all filtered through Tony's wealth and technological prowess. Besides his first swing around the city on the first morning, he had not gone anywhere without Tony. There was a reason the human population on Earth was declining, despite the relative normality Peter had witnessed so far.

Tony and Pepper both seem to just be whiling away the days while they had them. Tony had yet to talk about his own Morgan's ambitions. He had a somewhat defeated attitude about her potential, even though it was clearly not due to any lack of intelligence or ability on her part. Unless the topic shifted to Peter's own life, or Peter's Morgan, Tony seemed rather dispirited.

"Is there anything I can do? While I'm here?" Peter asked, as Tony flicked at the holoscreen in front of him to continue scrolling through Karen's code. "What's holding everyone back? In my experience, humanity is much more resilient than this."

Tony looked up at him over his readers.

"Think lots of folks would appreciate it, including myself, but I honestly don't know what that is."

"Maybe bring some things over from my universe?"

"Have a feeling that might cause issues. The problem here is life, not tech. And if you have two versions of something…that might cause a singularity. You're lucky this timeline's version of you doesn't exist anymore. Who knows what might happen otherwise."

*This Morgan is under a lot of pressure to bring the world back up,* Peter realized. Given everyone's behavior, and what Peter was able to glean, twenty years after the fateful Snap, this universe had yet to get back on its feet. There was some hope; those like Morgan were born, grew up, becoming adults, but Tony's generation would probably never see things turn completely around.

Tony himself had lost his faith. He no longer had the passion or drive to fight for the world. He could only try to support his daughter in the hopes that her own fire had not died before it ignited.

Ironically, though Peter's world lost Tony Stark, Iron Man lived on, eternal in the history of the world as the one to bring the universe back. In this timeline, though Tony Stark lived to be with his family, Iron Man had been benched, and Tony's own heart could no longer deal with the effort of hoping, realizing that heroic dream. Even now, what spirit he mustered to streamline Karen, to modify the Quantum Tunnel, was all for Peter's sake: a world that had won. Not his own.

"Don't be sad. Why are you sad?" Tony asked him, noting Peter's frown.

"I feel like I'm abandoning you," Peter admitted. "In my world, you died, and I couldn't...do anything for you except try to help Pepper take care of Morgan, SI. Now here I am, and you're alive, and I still can't help you. Instead I'm eating your food, wearing your shirts, and then bailing out."

"You're not bailing out. I'm kicking you out," Tony smirked a little. "And you are helping me. You've helped me more than you know. You've—you've brought me peace, kid. And I never thought I was gonna have that. The young should not die before the old. That's just a fact. And when it happens, it's all wrong. I spent twenty years wishing it were me instead. I think of this bright life that our universe lost, so kind and optimistic and innocent. You were so pure, far better than I ever
was, and it felt wrong, wrong for you to be the one taken away while I remained. Later, Morgan was
born, and I devoted my life to her and Pepper, but there was still that sense of wrongness. One child
doesn't just replace the other; that's not how it works either, you know?

"Knowing you are out there, that there's a timeline like yours, out there, brings us more comfort than
you can ever imagine. I know it's probably hard for you to understand—I barely understand it, but
since meeting you, for the first time I feel like I can actually live with what happened, all the choices
I had made, knowing that they could have—they did lead to this bright future, where Morgan's
thinking about interning at NASA and wants to join the Avengers, and you're the leader I always
knew you could be.

"Peter, you've done this long enough to know that none of us were sure that we could carry the
burden of protecting our world. All of our choices were so heavy, so potentially disastrous, but we
still had to make them, and we have no other feedback besides the result. All these years, our only
feedback was this failure. We failed, Peter, and people can argue that it wasn't our fault, but even
when we try our hardest to believe it, just to live with ourselves, none of us do.

"For the first time in twenty years, we have concrete proof: it really wasn't our fault. You're here.
Everything had been the same, except for one thing. And I know, that is scary too, but I could not
forgive myself until you came and I saw you." Tony smiled pensively. "That's the greatest gift I
could never have asked anyone to give me. You don't need to do anything else for me. Just…live
well. Be happy. Try and be happy. As long as there's a version of you out there that is happy and
well, we can manage over here."

Peter looked at him, at his gray hair and gray beard, the glasses reflecting the holoscreen light. A man
who had lost his defiance in the wake of crippling guilt. Peter understood what that was like. Had
tasted it in the echoes of failure, each time an ally died under his watch, each time a life was lost that
he could not save. All the excuses and reasoning in the world could not smother the soft voice that
whispered in quiet moments: responsibility and accountability and blame.

Peter had been affected by Scott's remains because he had known Scott, had laughed at Scott and
with Scott, had depended on Scott, trusted Scott, cared about Scott. The corpse was not just a
horrifying and devastating portrayal of the man: they were also evidence of just how easily Peter
might never have known Scott, never married MJ, never had Benjy, never walked a world full of
colorful life forms, with all its heroes and villains and everyone in between. But Tony was able to
keep his composure because Scott's corpse was just more ammunition against something even worse:
that Tony was somehow at fault for the state of his universe, the nightmare that had become reality. If
anything, the remains gave Tony further relief, because he was even more absolved of that guilt.

How did Tony live for the last twenty years with this in his head?

"You really are the strongest man I know," Peter whispered.

Tony probably would have quipped some witty remark under normal circumstances, but he decided
to go straight this time.

"Your life's still on the rise," he said, turning back to the hologram. "And I hope you never face the
kind of failure we faced here, but if you do, I hope you won't blame yourself the way we did. Very
likely, somewhere out there is a timeline where things worked out when you've done everything the
same. No one expects you to be perfect, Peter. You should not either."

Friday morning, Pepper made breakfast. Tony had actually gotten up earlier, and had gone to the
garage to continue working on Karen. It made Peter feel bad for sleeping in.
"Oh, you know how he is," Pepper waved it off. "He's so happy to have you here. And I remember when he programmed that AI for you; he kept telling FRIDAY to make sure she's nicer because he 'didn't want to frighten Underoos with a HAL 9000'."

Peter flushed. His own Pepper had mentioned this to him, but it was still a little embarrassing, even though it was touching. "He's putting in all this work, and I'm sleeping in like some lazy schmuck."

"Oh he's just thrilled," Pepper did not even bother to acknowledge his remark. "He only gets like this when Morgan comes home, these days. Pours his whole heart into it. He's an old man and I'm an old woman. There isn't much we can do for you young people."

"You're not that old. Neither of you are that old. You talk like you're eighty instead of sixty."

"Here," Pepper slid a giant, fluffy omelet onto a plate and nodded at him to take it. "I'll make more, but you might as well get started while it's hot."

"What about Tony?"

"Oh, Tony knows. FRIDAY?"

"Boss is coming," the AI reported.

Tony was still in his pajamas, since he got up at an ungodly hour. Peter slid his omelet over to him, while Pepper transferred hers from the skillet to her plate.

"Does Morgan like Pepper's omelets here too?"

"Yes she does."

"She likes Tony's grilled cheese sandwiches more," Pepper grinned, "but we have to switch it up every once in a while. Can't always eat grilled cheese; that's not healthy."

"Gotta love the spider metabolism. What's unhealthy for you…” Peter raised his eyebrows several times, letting the sentence trail off. "Though it kind of broke my aunt's wallet, even with the Stark internship salary. It was kind of miserable during college. Fortunately there was this one cafeteria where they served buffet-style food; I'd go there every chance I got."

"Pepper didn't subsidize?"

"Why would she subsidize?"

Tony looked dismayed for some reason. "You could have reached out."

Peter tried to think quickly, because the oncoming conversation threatened to be very awkward. "Uh, I guess, but we didn't think to. There was, um, a lot going on. I mean, I ate over a ton, when I visited, but. That was for sharing."

Fortunately, Tony was not so insensitive to the workings of regular working class citizens that he pushed the matter, but Peter did spy him giving him a glance over, as if judging Peter's size. The term 'scrawny' from the previous night weighed heavily in the air.

"I'm fine now," Peter pointed out, because he was not 'scrawny' now, no matter what Tony said. "I earn my own income and everything. Pay my own taxes."

"Uh huh. How long were May and Happy together? I pay Happy a handsome sum. Maybe more than I should."
"May and Happy?" Pepper's eyebrows nearly rose to her hairline.

"Not long after the reversal, in fact. But, uh, it was still all May, I mean, Happy wasn't my dad. He's still not my dad, actually, since May's my aunt, technically. Look, I wasn't starving, okay?" Tony was giving Peter a thoughtful look that made the latter somewhat concerned. "You're starting to worry me here. What's on your mind?"

"I was just thinking that I would have liked to be there for you while you were growing up," Tony rubbed his chin. "Seems a bit cruel to bring you back only to abandon you to your own devices."

"I wasn't abandoned. I turned out fine."

"Right, but still."

"You couldn't do anything about it."

"Right."

"Besides, I got hired by SI, AKA Pepper," Peter gestured with his free hand, "which protected me from Norman Osborn and OsCorp. If I weren't already a Stark intern, I don't know how I was gonna get out of that one. And I was getting paid, for the internship. I was just a bottomless pit. It really wasn't that bad."

"Hn."

"Dude!"

"Well, not much to be done about that, I suppose," Tony remarked.

"It's really not that bad."

"I get it."

Pepper smiled sadly. "You know how he is, Peter."

"I do know how he is," Peter glared at Tony in exasperation. "You can't blame yourself for not being there, Tony. That's really not fair. And you underestimate my ability to take care of myself, as well as my aunt."

Tony waved his left hand, relenting. "Fair."

After breakfast, they loaded the tunnel, hosed down and dried overnight, to a very domestic-looking Lamborghini SUV, painted a very mellow blue. Peter also brought some materials in order to make a semi-miniature arc reactor, one larger and stronger than the one on Tony's chest, but still relatively portable.

"Can't take credit for this particular one," Peter admitted. "Harley Keener came up with it."

"You met Harley?"

"Yeah."

Peter and Keener did not actually get along. Keener was incredibly intelligent, but he had a lot of baggage. Between a father who abandoned him and a family who did not understand him, he grew up with a particular world view that was simply not compatible with Peter's. Keener definitely resented Peter as well, for having Iron Man's attention and gaining the prestige Peter eventually
earned. They had collaborated several times, and could be civil, but Peter found Keener a depressing presence to be around, if not an uncomfortably antagonistic one. The guy was definitely good at heart and incredibly smart, but he was not the most considerate or proactive about helping others. He would sit around and just stare, or make snarky comments rather than assist if someone else were struggling with the equipment, or the door, or really anything at all. It was so bad that even the born and bred New Yorkers, who were used to ignoring others and being ignored, thought he was a jerk. For all his intellect, Keener's rapport with colleagues and supervisors had severely limited his overall potential. He also had a tendency to be passive aggressive and interpret innocent remarks in a hostile manner. Peter actually did his best to avoid him.

But Peter was aware that Keener had met Tony before, years before Peter himself did, and the other had idolized Tony Stark in a similar manner. He did not have the heart to ruin Tony's impression of him.

"Got anything for me to say to Keener?"

"You call him Keener?"

...God...damn it Parker. Peter's strength had never been in espionage. "Uh, we're not there yet," he tried to cover, but he could tell from Tony's expression that this was fruitless. "He's one of the smartest people I know. Good guy."

"Uh huh."

"What's that 'uh huh' for? You gonna give me a message to send to him? Guy idolizes you."

"Would it really be of any benefit to give you a message if you two don't like each other?"

"I didn't say that." I totally thought that, but I didn't say it.

Tony started the car. "I forgive you for lying, only because I know it's because you're too damn good for your own good."

"You're not making any—"

"Don't push it, though."

Peter snapped his mouth shut. So much for that.

Tony burst out laughter. "Kid, this makes me wonder how you were able to keep any secrets while leading the Avengers."

Incredibly embarrassed, Peter admitted, "Well, I didn't. I mean, you know me."

"So what if the mission is on a need-to-know basis?"

"Then I say so?"

"What if it's potentially a shady mission?"

"I tell them. If I don't know, I say so. If it's something I can't tell them yet, I say that. If I think I might be sending someone on a suicide mission, I just say it. They have the right to refuse."

"Do they?"

"......No."
"Transparency," Tony shook his head as they began crossing what was once the Triborough bridge. "You of all people would figure out how to make that work. What if you're trying to unearth a mole?"

"I—"

Suddenly, Peter's spider-sense shot up and down his spine. His right foot tried to slam on the brakes, even though he was on the passenger's side.

"Tony, stop! Stop stop stop stop stop!"

Tony floored the pedal, halting the car with a screech. "What?"

"Back up!" Peter waved. "Hurry! Back up!"

"Okay okay," Tony obeyed. "You know those potholes aren't any easier in reverse—"

"Just back up!"

"Okay!"

He had Tony back up until his senses calmed down. Tony turned to him once they stopped, one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the gear stick. "Pete?"

Peter heard the sound of another engine, and turned around. There was a truck coming along in the lane next to them.

Tony, afraid that Peter's spider-sense had been reacting to the truck, yelled, "Get down!"

But that was not the danger. The truck went past. Peter was already opening the door when he felt a shudder in the ground.

"Tony, back up!" he ordered, before sliding out.

"Peter!" Tony yelled.

A crack split in the ground about two hundred feet in front of them, and with a thunderous groan, the bridge gave out completely under the truck.

Peter had already shot a web for the truck, which caught the back end. He shot a net to stick his end to the ground and then ran for all he was worth, because the web was not going to hold. That truck was already speeding forward, and it looked full, possibly overweighted. From the opposite side was a lone sedan, which was already dropping as the pavement gave out underneath. Peter shot another web, and this time he flung back, tugging that car up and over him. He jumped up, catching the car by the bumper, and landed, trying his best to gentle the descent.

The truck was dangling by the time Peter set that car on the street. Peter ran to the edge of the gaping crack, using the suspensions on either side of the bridge to swing up. He managed to web the front of the truck as it swung. He pulled it up, twisted the vehicle around, and set it down about face so it was back on solid ground.

Tony had come out of the car and was talking to the family in the opposite sedan. "You okay?" Peter heard him call, and the family murmur the affirmative.

The truck driver was shaken and a little banged up, but he was fine too.
"You some sort of mutant or something?"

"Long story. Tony, we gotta wall off this bridge on both ends! Get your car across the lines on that end; I'm gonna swing over to the other side!" Peter looked at the truck driver. "You got a cell phone on ya?"

"Um," the driver stammered, "Y-Yeah?"

"Call 911. Tell them this bridge is collapsing. We gotta get a more permanent barricade because I can only put up a temporary one."

Tony was already reversing his car so that it was at the junction of the bridge and the remainder of the freeway. Peter jumped up and swung to the other side, webbing off the opposite lanes.

That could have been Tony, Peter thought, as he created a large net to block the bridge. That could have been Tony and Pepper, Morgan. If Peter had not been here, Tony would have fallen.

He swung back to Tony, who was waiting outside the car. The older man slapped a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Tony nodded, and then leaned against the hood of the car as they waited for the police to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

I realize there are some Harley Keener fans out there that might take issue with my interpretation of his character; I'm not trying to bash him, or say that he's otherwise unsympathetic. This was my attempt to explain why Harley Keener was never mentioned again since Iron Man 3. He was also not the most endearing child in the movie. Peter was a compassionate boy who would race into a burning building to rescue someone who had tried to kill him. Harley Keener asked "What's in it for me?" when Tony Stark asked for help (granted, Tony was also sort of a jerk about it, but still, can you imagine Peter saying something like that?) so from the beginning, I just didn't think these two characters would be close. Would they work well together? I think so, actually; they are both smart, clever, innovative, and appreciate science, so there is that common ground that would make them a good team, but I think in terms of ethical principles, Peter would take some issue with Harley and vice versa. I imagine Harley would think Peter were too "square", as Tony put it, and Peter might think Harley's not selfless enough. I also wanted a good divide on why Tony Stark might have been so emotionally invested in Peter when Harley had been of more help during a time when Tony really needed it, so having these two be very different in their overall attitudes toward people and life just made sense to me. I dunno. Let me know what you guys think?
Chapter 7

I can't help but find it appropriate to update on Father's Day weekend. What do you think?

"Similar thing happened up in Detroit," said Bruce. "Their roads were murder to begin with; ice and snow that never goes away, lots of salt, crumpled right under when they couldn't commence with reconstruction as they usually would. Didn't think of the Triborough having the same issue, but we did have some earthquakes over the last five years, probably enough to rock the foundations, and that thing was not at its prime to begin with."

Peter looked up from where he was piecing together Harley Keener's model of the arc reactor. Peter's own model was stronger and lasted longer, but took longer to make, and he figured that powering the Quantum Tunnel should not require such a complex version. Keener's model was good if one needed to make one quickly.

"Tony, why don't you make some drones to help maintain the infrastructure?"

"Vandals," Tony replied.

Peter raised his eyebrows. "Wow. People suck."

"Tony did actually try to contribute quite a bit to the recovery efforts after the Decimation," Bruce elaborated in weary tones. "There are still Stark tech wandering around out there, in the hands of whomever. People have a habit of recommissioning them for other purposes, like building bombs, biologic weapons, et cetera. Things got out of hand really quickly. About a year after it all, Tony and I sent out a virus that killed all of the drones world-wide. He hasn't produced any since."

"I'm old," Tony pushed his glasses up his nose. "I can't keep designing these things to be hack-proof, or vandalism-proof, or whatever. Besides, all this tech does require some labor. We joke about having robots to maintain robots to maintain robots, but there needs to be a human at the end of it all, and I'm just tired, Pete. I wish I had a better reason."

"No, you're just one man," Peter said sadly, "and you've done your end. If others don't cooperate, you do have better things to do with your time."

They were gathered at the Tower, because the Tower was closer to both Tony and Bruce. It had started to rain shortly after the bridge collapsed. Fortunately, there were no mishaps, and the police came by to block off the lanes more permanently than Peter's webs. As soon as they had arrived, Tony got Peter out of there; they did not want to answer any questions about just how Peter had saved the truck and the family in the sedan.

"Have you had a chance to go to the Compound?" Tony asked Bruce.

"Not yet, but Steve did call me, said he was worried about Natasha."

"What do you think?"
"Don't know. Would have to see her for myself. Going by second-hand observations is always hard. Besides, if it's just a matter of her being very thin and tired…could be anything from something minor to something major. Won't know until I rule things out."

"Fair enough."

Peter continued to assemble the arc reactor. Tony and Bruce took apart the Quantum Tunnel in order to plan for any modifications.

"Morgan is coming home over the weekend," said Tony as they worked. "Peter and I will be staying in Long Island and putting this dimension-travel business on hold until Sunday. You and the others are welcome to join us."

That was news to Peter, but he did not say anything. Leaving Tony was already going to be hard. He did miss MJ and Benjy though. He hoped they were not too worried about him, but he had a feeling they would be. Hard not to, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

"Was thinking I could go visit Natasha tonight, actually," Bruce admitted. "If it's something sensitive, she might not want everyone around her all at once. Are you coming to the Compound on Sunday?"

"…Yeah."

"Good. Squirt's coming too?"

"Yeah."

"Did you just call me 'squirt'?" Peter exclaimed. He could not believe this; even in another dimension, there was no dealing with these people.

Bruce had the decency to look a little embarrassed. "Sorry, Pete. Kind of a habit. When you're as big as I am, everyone's a squirt."

"He can handle it. He is a squirt."

"Oh my God," Peter rolled his eyes. "You call me that in the other timeline, that's all."

"Really?" Bruce looked pleased.

"Really?" Tony looked more surprised than pleased.

"You're just as big," Peter pointed out. "Besides, you knew me since I was a teenager."

"Did literally everyone get to watch you grow up except me?" Tony sounded dismayed. "First Steve Rogers, then 'Honey I Shrunk the Kids', and now Brucey?"

"Black Widow was dead," Peter reminded him, but this did not seem like much of a consolation. "Besides, here I am, technically still growing. Older."

Both Bruce and Tony let out…some kind of sound. It was a mix of a laugh and something else. Peter had heard it before from people like Nick Fury, and he still did not know how to describe it.

"Lord help me," Tony rubbed one of his eyes, "this kid's ridiculous. I can't believe you have a kid of your own. Good grief. It's really not fair."

He spent the next half hour stewing a little over this, wavering between fond exasperation and a hint of grief. Harley Keener's arc reactor came along halfway, but Peter needed to rest his fingers; they
were getting a little stiff, so he stretched and flexed them to loosen the muscles and improve the circulation.

Bruce examined one of the panels and turned the discussion to the task at hand very briefly, before he too was distracted by Peter's timeline and all the differences. He was very curious about how Peter came to lead the superheroes at home, something that attracted Tony's attention as well, because Peter was a horrible liar and the worst at keeping secrets.

"Well, initially, it was Nick Fury at the helm, of course," Peter explained as he searched for the correct screws. "I was just way too young. And I put it off for as long as possible, I mean, I had school, and there was actually a time when I wondered if the world really needed Spider-Man; I've come to learn that there are good days and bad days, good times and bad times, and they always come all at once. It's never evenly balanced, like, having good things interspersed with bad things; no, it's always several disasters happening at once, and one after the other, and it's like, when's this pattern gonna break? Why do I fail so hard? Am I really doing the right thing? When I started getting involved with the mutants, there was this one news corporation, the Daily Bugle, which hated my guts. They always publish these conspiracy theories, like one time when they had an interview with Pepper and suggested that Tony sat around for five years on the solution to the Decimation without doing anything. That was so out of line, the interviewer got death threats and the whole company almost shut down—but—freedom of speech, and they didn't actually commit libel in technical terms, so they're still around, gracing the rest of us with their presence. Anyway, that was absurd, and people knew it, but there were some things they actually get right, even for the wrong reasons, so Fury had to do a ton of damage control on that front.

"At one point, maybe about five, six years ago, I was still doing my PhD, when things were the craziest they had ever been ever since I started being Spider-Man. Every mission was a trainwreck, and everything was happening at once. The X-Men were dealing with Jean Grey and the Phoenix, this jerk of a doctor, Victor von Doom—yeah, that was really his name, I know, ironic—was getting the best of the Fantastic Four, I was dealing with Venom, and it's just—everything was all at once. It all kind of crashed and burned, Fury got hurt, and was in the ICU for months—that was, actually, why I had taken over in the first place, but it was just—everything that could go wrong went wrong under my watch. People died, others were permanently crippled which might be even worse, and of course, just as I was doubting every decision I had ever made, ever, the Daily Bugle blames it all on me and my incompetence. I actually gave up being Spider-Man for a while, decided to focus on my thesis and…just let others handle it."

"What made you go back?" Bruce asked.

"It was Adrian Toomes, actually. He broke out of prison to save his daughter—that's another story, but he showed up in my studio. MJ was visiting her folks, so I came home to this guy sitting on my couch. He asked me to help him. I said no, of course," Peter paused, "and told him I don't do this sort of thing anymore. He's didn't believe me, said he knew better, like he knew me better. I told him I wasn't the same person as the kid who fought Vulture, and ended up giving him this rundown of just how awful the past few months had been—I know, I know, not the wisest move on my part, but I really thought I was done. And anyway, he knew who I was all this time and didn't tell anyone, so I knew he had a sense of integrity."

"Wait, Adrian Toomes knew you were Spider-Man?" Tony blinked, eyes wide.

"Um, yeah?"

Tony swore.

"I mean, it's fine. It's—it's fine. He's…he's dead." Peter kept his eyes on what his hands were doing.
"That's, uh, that's another story, the other story, but, uh, he, um, listened to how everything just blew up in my face, and after that, he just said, 'You need to go back.' I was like, 'what are you talking about?' and he said, 'The world's not asking for someone who wins all the time. While you're here, feeling sorry for yourself, all of your allies are losing because you're not there for them.'

"It didn't make a ton of sense at the time, but I did...sort of...send out feelers? I guess? And I learned that Toomes was actually right: no one had said anything, because they wanted to give me space, but —people were trying to make do without me, but it wasn't working. I realized, I couldn't just—I can't just quit, you know? Cuz people will lose. We can't win all the time. But we need to know how to deal with failure, with loss, and my giving up is not the answer. So I went back, and of course, unsavory things continued to hit the fan and it was just awful, awful stuff, but Nick Fury recovered, yelled at me for being an idiot, and promoted me as 'punishment' for being an idiot, so that...was how it started."

"That's actually a very Nick Fury thing to do," Tony reflected.

"He did hold the reins for the most part because I needed to finish my thesis," Peter went on, "but once I graduated, like, he kicked his feet up and retired. And the first six months was just me trying to figure out how to get settled on a more long-term basis.

"I have no poker face, as you know, so I only worked with seasoned Avengers, and the new recruits and agents don't really interact with me because I know I'll pass along sensitive information. And the new recruits know this: they know I'm not giving them the cold shoulder because I don't like them, or something, but mainly because I suck. Then as they gain credit and get promoted, I start interacting with them more, so that was how I could...keep my job, I guess."

"So people kind of babysit you." Bruce raised his eyebrows. "They make sure you're not in situations when you might reveal something you shouldn't to someone you shouldn't."

"Basically. It's teamwork, you know."

"I actually feel kind of envious," Bruce reflected. "I mean, someone who's that honest, being the leader; I'd follow him."

"I know, right?" Tony exchanged a look with him.

Peter could feel his face burn. Some things do not change, and one of them, apparently, was how both Bruce and Tony have the ability to embarrass Peter to no end.

Bruce asked other questions about life in the other timeline but the talk of this better world, where things actually worked out to some semblance of normal, eventually became too overwhelming for him, so the topic shifted to Peter's childhood instead.

"Born and raised in Queens," Peter related while getting back to work on the arc reactor. "Mom and Dad were scientists. Mary and Richard Parker. They died in a plane crash when I was five."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I had Ben and May; they raised me. Any of my character flaws are my own fault though."

"Were they also scientists?"

"No. Spared nothing for my education, though." Peter clicked two of the components together. "Uncle Ben would pick up extra shifts to help with the expenses."
"They must be so proud of you." Bruce glanced at Tony. "How are they now?"

"…Uncle Ben's been gone for a long time," Peter said slowly, "since before I met Tony. Before I became Spider-Man. Aunt May's…fine."

"Since before you met Tony? You were a child then."

"Fourteen."

Bruce shrugged his big shoulders slightly. "So your aunt raised you afterwards? By herself?"

"Pretty much. Thankfully, I was pretty self-sufficient, and then a few years later, I went to college, so she did have some time to take care of herself."

"Still must have been hard. How'd you and Tony meet?"

You never told him? Peter's eyes flickered to Tony before he could stop them. Bruce knew about Peter in the other world, though he never said how; it was possible that Tony, or someone, had told him about Peter after Scott was freed from the Quantum Realm.

Which was interesting, because something felt strange about that, but Peter could not identify what it was.

Bruce gave Tony a disapproving look once Peter related the tale, but only murmured, "You always knew that someone like Thanos was coming, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Hm," Bruce looked thoughtful.

By this time, Tony had a sour expression on his face, though he did not seem to have been listening very intently to the conversation.

"You were more proactive about the Avengers than even Nick Fury," Bruce went on to Tony. "Did he know about Spider-Man?"

"If he did, he never told me."

"He did," Peter piped up, "but he kept his distance because I was 'just a kid'."

"Huh," Bruce raised his eyebrows.

"Not that he was consistent about it," Tony threw Bruce an odd look. "He approached Peter several months after the reversal. Peter was still a minor."

"Well, the world needed a new Iron Man."

"The world needed Spider-Man. Iron Man was part of the old world."

"Well…” Peter trailed off, feeling lame, because Tony was not wrong, even if Peter did not like it.

"How did you manage to finish graduate school and be Spider-Man?" Bruce wondered.

"By the skin of my teeth. And it's the reason I didn't try to pursue a doctorate in math."

"You could have taken a sabbatical from Spider-Man," Tony pointed out, "but why would you want
a doctorate in math? What would you do with that?"

"Math is fun?"

"He could have fit it into his Avenger duties," Bruce chuckled. "Decrypting messages by day, web-slinging around by night. It's Spy-dar-Man, spelled S-P-Y and D-A-R."

"..."

"...

"You know, like, spies and radars?" Bruce's eyes flickered between the two of them. "No?"

"Oh!" Peter blinked.

"No," Tony replied flatly, whole face pinching like he had just swallowed something nasty.

"I should mention that to Ned," Peter twisted a bolt into the metal. "He'd like that one. Though I probably shouldn't; he'd be insufferable. It would be like Rhodey with 'Tony Stank'."

"Tony what?" Bruce exclaimed, while Tony jerked up from where he was sitting.

"No," he gasped. "Really? I sacrifice my life to save the universe and this is how my honey bear treats my memory?"

Feeling a bit evil, Peter exaggerated a scoff. "Please. He got over it in, like, 2 weeks."

"Rhodey!" Tony took out his phone and then dropped it. "Damn it! I can't even yell at him; it's the wrong one!"

Peter giggled so hard that he literally fell off his chair and onto his face.

The arc reactor was finished by mid-afternoon, and the Avengers Tower lit up for the first time in over twenty years.

"Not bad," Tony approved. "Harley Keener designed this, you said?"

"Yeah. Well, mostly. I had to improvise some minor stuff, but overall, this was his blueprint. Simple, easy, fast. Gets the job done, unless you really need a powerhouse, but...all things considered, usually you don't need the big guns."

He nodded, looking faintly impressed. "People are going to wonder what's going on in this place. Let's get FRIDAY downloaded so that no trespassers come wandering around inside."

It was a little slow going, with the outdated hardware, but after about half an hour, FRIDAY was completely downloaded.

"I'd say this has been productive," Tony rubbed his hand, perking up for the first time in a while. "We figured out how the tunnel ticks, well, as much as we can without actually turning it on to test it, and we got the power back on in the tower. It's been a good day. I'm down for going home."

"I should head up to the Compound," said Bruce, and the two older men shook hands. "I'll keep you updated as much as I'm able. See you Sunday?"

"Barring any collapsing bridges," Tony stepped back, "but with Pete's spidey-sense and his super
strength, there's a good chance we'll make it."

Bruce heaved a long-suffering sigh, though he was smiling. "Don't jinx yourself, Tony."

"Too late, but you know me. I live to challenge what's right and proper. Underoos, let's go. Morgan should be arriving at Penn Station right about now, we're just in time to pick her up."

Peter was something of a ball of nerves when they pulled over on the street to wait for Morgan. There was actual parking in Manhattan now, something that Peter never thought would ever happen, but it made sense, given the low density of the population. Tony whistled some nondescript tune while tapping the wheel, clearly excited to see his (real) kid, and Peter managed to smile and nod without appearing like he actually would rather not meet this version of Morgan.

But whatever he was expecting, it did not happen. Morgan Stark came out, looking almost identical to her counterpart, except paler than Peter remembered. Her hair was paler than Tony's, but not as red as Pepper's. Her features were a nice blend of her parents, but the way she expresses her face resembled her father a little more than her mother, whereas the Morgan of Peter's universe had resembled Pepper far more. She dragged some luggage with her, which had Tony and Peter hopping out to help load into the car.

"This is Peter Parker," Tony told Morgan while heaving one of the bags, "from another dimension. Had a little accident and got lost. We're trying to get him home. He's your older brother in the other universe."

Morgan took a few seconds to process this. "You're from another dimension?" She wore a thoughtful expression. "Cool."

Peter waved at her, already astonished by how well she's taking it. "Yeah. Everything the same, except we won. Well, and a few other differences." He was not sure how well she would take the notion that Tony was dead in his timeline.

Tony had no such reservation. "Yeah, and apparently I'm dead, so he was the one that raised you, so be nice to him."

"...Wow." Morgan blinked, taking another few seconds to parse this, before laughing and exclaiming, "Oh God. I am so sorry, Peter."

"Nah, you were worth it," Peter beamed at her. Her eyes curved as she smiled back, and maybe it was because the two Morgans were ultimately the same person, because he just knew that she already liked him.

For some reason.

Morgan of Tony's world was much more hopeful and optimistic than her parents, or really anyone else Peter had met so far. She was a little quieter than the Morgan of Peter's timeline, with less bravado and sass. She was definitely not immediately close to Peter as her counterpart was, but neither was she shy or wary as Peter had feared. There was something about her that seemed more grounded, steadier, softer. Peter's Morgan could be very acerbic, with sharp tongue and hard edges, quick with a quip, much like her father, and a little rash. It did not occur to him that, also much like her father, this was largely due to a certain sense of insecurity. Raised by a single-mother with a hodge-podge of other confused caretakers, Morgan of Peter's timeline used the same coping mechanism as Tony Stark whenever faced with something she was uncomfortable with. But this Morgan had both parents, and even though the world was no less dangerous, perhaps even more so, she felt more secure. Safer. She had no need to compensate.
The world after the Decimation was all this Morgan had ever known. All things considered, she was quite satisfied with it, and Peter had a feeling many of the younger generation might share her feelings.

"They talk about how much better the world was before," Morgan told Peter from behind Tony's seat, "but, I don't know how I'd feel if we went back to that. There's something nice about being able to walk in a mall and know that there's no one else to bother you, you know? Like, there's so much room. We go to Six Flags and there aren't a ton of rides, sure, but no one has to wait in line. There are no lines in Disneyland or Universal Studios. You can have private conversations in bars. Like, I have my own dorm. There are two beds in each dorm so there's always an extra bed, kind of like a guest bed, so we sleep over at each other's place, and that's nice, and I prefer that, you know? It's much better to stay with someone I chose, after getting to know them, rather than sort of pulling a lottery and potentially winding up with someone I can't get along with, and be stuck with them for a full year. And it's nice to have individual attention; our professors actually know our names, and if any of us are actually falling behind, they can reach out to us, and we can reach out to them, and that's nice. I dunno. What do you think?"

Peter shrugged. Amadeus Cho had been his roommate in Columbia, and they had become tight friends and still have a friendly ongoing prank war to this day, though Cho had transferred out of Columbia after a year to go to Stanford in order to get away from New York, and Peter subsequently began commuting from home in order to save money. His own Morgan was close to her own roommate, but what did that matter to this Morgan? That would never be her life. "It worked for some people but not for others."

"Did you have roommates?"

"Yeah, I did. We lived in a pretty dilapidated dorm; the floor wasn't even straight, you put a ball on it and it automatically rolls over to one side of the room."

"Oof."

"Gotta love Upper West Side."

Morgan giggled. "Makes me glad I chose to go to Cambridge."

Tony looked over at him. "Why did you have to live at the dorms at all?"

Peter was at a complete loss on how to respond to this. "Is that some sort of trick question?"

"We had a flat in Manhattan, you could have just stayed there. Upper East Side, view of Central Park."

"I know that one. I've been there to babysit Morgan. It had a fantastic view of Central Park. We used to go to that castle and the Shakespeare park when the weather was good, remember Morgan? Wait, no, of course you don't remember." For a moment, Peter's mind spun, and he felt oddly disconnected from his body, before the next breath grounded him. "Um, wow. That was embarrassing."

Morgan laughed again. "That's okay. I'm sure it gets confusing."

Tony did not laugh. He did not say anything either, keeping his eyes focused ahead on the road.

Peter did not know what to say. He doubted there was anything that would make Tony feel better after realizing that his relationship with Peter had never progressed as far as he had hoped. Peter himself was somewhat shocked that Tony had even wanted that. Peter himself had repressed hopes, but the Tony Stark of his time had never given any clear indication that he saw Peter as anything
more than a chance responsibility, something that absence and regret had rendered poignant.

But the silence dragged on, and soon it was obvious that Peter needed to address this sooner or later. "Pepper trusted me with your child. Happy trusted me with your bots and FRIDAY."

"I know," Tony said readily. "That's good."

"I wouldn't have felt comfortable, otherwise, you do know that, right?"

He saw Tony's jaw tighten underneath the gray beard.

"They were giving me space. Nick Fury barely gave me any time to think before throwing me in your shadow. Having everything done for me, handed to me, in your name, wouldn't have done me any favors. Wouldn't have made me the leader I became. I don't have your charisma. I could never measure up to what you've accomplished. I had to make my own way."

"I didn't think you could stop talking," Tony veered around a pothole. "I joked to Happy, once, that you'd keep talking my ear off from the grave. I thought I'd kiss your feet if you could just shut up for once. And then I didn't hear your voice for twenty years."

That hurt. Peter could not break the silence this time. He was not sure why he was feeling the pain. Some childish part of him felt injured by the admission that he really had been as annoying as he suspected. The adult, more mature part of him, understood that sometimes the thing a person hated the most was the one thing they also miss when it is gone. If Tony had truly found Peter intolerable, he certainly did not have to maintain any kind of relationship with the teen. If he found Peter's personality simultaneously endearing and irritating, and did not think much of the latter until he could no longer appreciate it…

He thought of that look his own Tony had given him, that fateful day fifteen years ago. Peter had been so excited, so overwhelmed, eager to confide in this brilliant mentor whom he trusted and respected. Tony had looked like he had never witnessed anything more wonderful in his life, and rather than telling Peter to focus on the battle around him, he had taken a moment to embrace Peter.

"This is the best day of my life," this world's Tony had said three days ago.

"Dad?" Morgan probed tentatively from the back.

"Sorry, baby girl," Tony's voice sounded stronger. "It's been an emotional week. I know I didn't tell you much about Peter."

"Happy told me about him," Morgan admitted.

This surprised Peter, who turned around. "Really?"

"He kept a log of all your text messages. You really bombarded his phone."

"Oh my God." Peter was horrified. "Oh my God. Does this mean Happy showed it to you in my world too? Oh my God! Did he show it to Aunt May?! No no no no—"

Morgan was cackling with laughter in the back. Even Tony could not resist a small smile, but when he looked at Peter, he still appeared sad.

Peter did not bring the subject back up. He and Morgan otherwise monopolized the conversation, as Tony chose to play the silent chauffeur for the rest of the way home.
Chapter 8

To Peter's surprise, Tony did not tell Morgan very much about his Iron Man days. Morgan learned most of what she knew from Happy and Pepper. Even Rhodey, whom Peter had yet to meet in this world, had been closed-lipped about their heroic days.

"I think it's because he gave so much," Morgan confided while Tony was setting up the grill outside the cabin and Pepper was in the kitchen preparing salad. Peter and Morgan were helping, but they lingered in the living room to take advantage of the relative privacy. "Then it all…you know. And he doesn't want to think about all the effort that went in."

Considering the Tony of Peter's universe had been similar up until right before his death, Peter did not struggle to believe this.

"He was Iron Man," he told her, because there was no other way to put it. "When he's there, you know that the odds are in your favor. More than anyone else. If he was there, the odds are in your favor. And even without the suit, whenever he's there, if he's on your side, you can do anything."

Morgan was part of a world where Iron Man lost. Peter was part of a world where Iron Man died. Somehow, both shared a moment of agreement.

"Hey," Tony poked his head through the sliding door to the yard, "what are you two scheming about? Underoos, give me a hand out here."

"What's 'Underoos'?" Morgan asked.

Tony had already ducked back out, but he heard her. His cackles practically echoed from everywhere.

"No respect," Peter complained as he followed Tony out. Morgan was behind him, bemused. "I get zero respect here. Morgan, I don't know if anyone told you this, but your father is a complete troll."

Consistent with her less restless nature, the Morgan of Tony's timeline was somewhat less adventurous than Peter's version. Part of that may have to do with there being fewer adventures available around Cambridge, though the officially sanctioned group activities in this universe were, in Peter's opinion, completely insane. A popular recreational activity among college students was apocalypse survival, and in line with the sort of shenanigans kids at MIT come up with, students here have various events related to building bunkers, camping trips, building giant aquaponics sets, and competing in these designs throughout the year. Bunkers especially was a big event, because MIT would build one and Harvard would build one, and each were then ranked based on comfort, sustainability, and durability, the last of which was tested by the opposing sides blowing them up (with both teams at a distance).

"This sounds kind of not safe," Peter mused while Tony set burgers to sizzle on the grill. Tony had allowed Peter to help move everything out of the garage, but shooed him off to sit with Morgan, as with the grilled cheese sandwiches and Peter's phone. Peter always figured Tony's mother-hen tendencies were more along the lines of helicopter parenting through trackers and the notorious Baby Monitor Protocol. This instinct to feed and do things for others was a little surprising.

"The whole world's not safe," Morgan remarked. "And none of the bunkers can prevent someone from getting Decimated. Besides, it's fun; we get to beat Harvard at football and survival. Win-win."

"Do you actually beat Harvard?"
"How can you ask that question?" Tony glared playfully behind him.

"I'd say we do. Usually takes three or four tries to destroy our bunkers, if not more. Harvard emphasizes comfort." Morgan shrugged. "Not that I think they're necessarily comfortable. I mean, they've got the old European aesthetic, velvety cushions and all of that, but we have a holodeck. Cabin fever is very uncomfortable, you know."

"Harvard doesn't make holodecks?"

"They don't bother. Which I think is a huge oversight."

"It definitely is a huge oversight," Tony agreed.

Peter would also rather have a holodeck than velvet cushions, but out of a certain loyalty to his fellow Ivy-Leaguers, he opted not to mention this. He also wished he could have blown up more stuff at Columbia, but that would defeat his earlier remark about Morgan's safety.

"Well, I gotta say my college days don't feel as exciting compared to yours."

"My college days weren't as exciting either," Tony chuckled.

"Well, you were Spider-Man, weren't you?" Morgan pointed out.

"That's more of an extracurricular," Peter inclined his head back and forth, "and yeah, I guess if you counted that, then it's pretty exciting. Less fun. But exciting. There were bombs. There were also deaths. It's kind of ugly. So stay safe."

"Wow," Morgan commented wryly. "That escalated quickly."

"What did you think I did as Spider-Man?"

"I was thinking more of walking little old ladies across the street and pulling cats out of trees."

"Damn it, Tony," Peter glared as Tony guffawed in front of the grill. "Dude!"

"I did tell her that you stop robberies and gang fights," Tony was wiping at his eyes, "but other than Adrian Toomes, you were the friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. What else was I supposed to tell her? Plus, you were a kid and she's a kid. What was I supposed to say?"

"You could have said that I punched Thanos in the face several times, damn it! I think all things considered, I ought to get some credit for that! Not everyone was able to punch him in the face! Especially not a fifteen-year-old!"

Morgan was also laughing at Peter's dismay. "Hey, you were cool! You were cool, don't worry! Does your version of me think of you as a hero?"

"Oh, you didn't care as long as I take you web-slinging," Peter brushed it off, too embarrassed to admit that Morgan's favorite Avenger was a tie between Iron Man and Spider-Man, and as a child, she would role-play as Iron Man with an Iron-Man action figure while making Peter play Spider-Man—that was awkward on many levels, and Rhodey let Peter know it at every opportunity. Thank goodness the girl grew out of that phase.

Pepper brought salad out, and the sizzling meat was starting to make Peter very hungry.

"Oh man, I can't wait," he rubbed his hands together. "These are supposed to be even better than the grilled cheese sandwiches and they sure smell like it."
"I've had about twenty years to figure it out," Tony flipped the burgers. "Eat up, Pete, because Pepper and I both need to watch our waistline and Morgan doesn't have a lot of capacity. Have you lost weight already since coming here? Because I can't send you back looking skinnier than you came, that's just not on."

"Trust me; based on the smell, I'm at no risk of getting skinnier. Were you always this good at cooking, or did that come later?"

"Who would he have cooked for?" Pepper pointed out.

"Fair." Peter watched Tony's back and was struck by many different feelings. He was almost seeing different images overlying on top of each other: Iron Man in full armor, Tony Stark when he first announced his heroic identity, Tony Stark, the would-be mentor who scolded and praised him in equal measure, each of them proud and larger than life, but somehow all packed into this…kind of grandfatherly old man.

A billionaire genius, who crafted revolutionary advancements in technology in a cave in the middle of a desert, and spent the next ten years fighting evil and defending mankind, was currently grilling cheeseburgers for Peter.

"Doesn't take higher education to figure out a grill," Tony declared. "Okay folks, choose your own toppings, but we got the meat and cheese!"

"Yay!" Morgan hopped up, but let Peter go first, though Peter tried to let her go first.

"Peter, you're the elder, you go first," Tony ended that one decisively.

If Morgan was at all resentful of Peter stealing her thunder by intruding on her return home, she gave no indication of it. She asked about some of his adventures as Spider-Man, and in an effort to keep the mood light and not set Tony off about some injury or other, Peter kept to the funny and happy ones, like the alien that loved bunnies and did not realize there were consequences for putting male and female rabbits together without neutering them. There was another one where Peter, as the leader of the Avengers, and the director of the CIA had a disagreement, and they somehow settled it with a headstand competition.

Tony nearly died at that one.

If that one in fourteen million had been better, this could have been Peter's life. The odd weekend at the Stark residence, with Tony flipping burgers, Morgan somehow more grounded with her father's presence. Tony would have Benjy on his lap; before coming here, Peter would never dare imagine that, but he could definitely see Tony monopolizing Benjy from the moment he was allowed to have his hands on the little rascal. MJ and Pepper could commiserate on the idiot men in their lives. Aunt May and Happy would make sure Benjy did not torment Tony too much. Rhodey would be plotting with Morgan on the next prank with Dum-E and U…

By the end of the night, Peter had eaten more burgers than he ever had in one sitting, much to Tony's delight.

"How long are you staying?" Morgan asked.

"As long as it takes to figure out how to get home."

"That stinks," she remarked. "What kind of incentive is that? I don't want you to leave."

Peter glanced at Tony, who was pretending (and Peter knew he was) to be engrossed in cleanup with
"...I know," Peter said quietly.

*But I gotta.* His world had moved on from Tony Stark, and Peter had moved on with it. He could not stay for this one. Not when he had an Aunt May, an Uncle Happy, a wife and child who needed him.

Not when he had Spider-Man.

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News of the old Stark/Avengers Tower lighting up for the first time broke at some point in the night, and in the morning, the news stations were still talking about it. It was actually somewhat odd, watching television in this world. There were so few people that entertainment became quite scarce. The CGI effects that once threatened to overwhelm everything were kept to a minimum, and the news anchors wore professional, but simple clothes, and sat on simple sets. Their mannerisms were also different; they all seemed very heavy and grounded, making the news anchors of Peter's world look hyperactive in comparison.

Morgan shrugged when Peter pointed this out. "I think the older shows were campy. Fox and CNN were both ridiculous."

Peter did not disagree, but he was still struck by how everyone seemed to share this pessimism.

"I'm still not sure I understand," he confided in Pepper. "I mean, you guys seemed to have moved on. Made the best of things. How come everyone has this doom and gloom feeling to them when there are people like Morgan?"

"When people like Tony Stark have given up," Pepper pointed out, "it's hard to believe those like Morgan wouldn't do the same." She did not miss the irony of Tony Stark finally stopping just when Pepper wanted him to keep fighting. "Who am I to say, though?" she noted. "He had already done everything he could. What more can anyone ask of him?"

Tony had woken up at the crack of dawn again, and was in the garage, this time doing maintenance on the SUV.

"Didn't feel the potholes bang it up that much," Peter frowned when he saw the older man under the car.

"Not the potholes. Haven't done maintenance on this thing in a while. After that bridge, just figured"—and Tony grunted as he cranked something underneath—"I should check before driving you all the way upstate. Hopefully the Whitestone Bridge doesn't tumble on us."

"Could always take the suit and I'll tag along."

"Yeah, but eventually I gotta fix this thing anyway, when I pick up Morgan."

"Well, it's breakfast time, so you might wanna put all of that on hold. When's Morgan going back, by the way?"

"Sunday afternoon."

"She gonna head out with us?"

"Nah. Pepper's gonna drop her off at Penn Station."
Peter fidgeted a little. "Sorry for ruining your weekend plans."

"...What are you talking about?" Tony rolled out from under the car. "Also, what did I say about that word? Anyway, you didn't ruin anything. This weekend would have been the same boring old weekend whenever Morgan's around; you actually made things more interesting. Do kind of wish I didn't promise them that we'd be up there tomorrow though; would much rather hang out here. Anyway." He got up. "I'm gonna wash up; I'll join you in the kitchen."

There was nothing different about how Tony behaved, but Peter had a rush of insight, as he sometimes did since managing the Avengers team and learning to read different personalities. It was how relatively untroubled Tony looked, the sheer lack of curiosity about the task at hand, coupled with the early morning workshop sessions that he conducted all by himself. One could assume that Tony had been working on Karen and the suit or his cars all this time, but that was getting less and less likely as time went on.

Since coming here, Peter had deferred to Tony, allowing Tony to pick the research articles and take the lead on things. Part of the reason was because Tony was more comfortable with this world. Another reason was because it just seemed natural to let his old mentor make such decisions. And Peter trusted Tony.

He went back to the kitchen, thoughtful. He remembered Tony's tight grip on his arms as he wept. Tony hugging him close while Peter freaked out about Scott. Sitting by him on the plane after covering Peter with a throw blanket. The expressions of dismay whenever he perceived some inadequacy in support, as Peter grew into adulthood. Morgan had hit it on the nail: if the deadline was 'whenever possible', it really was not a good incentive.

Problem was, Peter mused, Tony making up that lost chance at fatherhood was getting in the way of Peter's own. Who knows which milestones Benjy was hitting, and Peter was unable to witness. He also had his brotherly duties to his own Morgan to tend to. As time stretched on, there was a very real possibility that bad things might happen, might have already happened.

Still, Peter was aware that returning home was a one-way ticket. Even if Tony had already figured out how to send Peter home, he still needed the materials, the energy source. Those were all things that needed time anyway. And in the meantime, if Tony wanted to make the most of his stay, to take care of Peter the way he never had a chance to in either timeline...

He just had to make sure Tony was not procrastinating any more than the time they had strictly needed.

By the time he sat down, though, Pepper's phone was blowing up.

"They're looking for Tony," she explained with a long-suffering look. "Figures that when the tower lights up, they were gonna sniff their way here. FRI, would you please...?"

"Of course," FRIDAY replied.

"You're sic'ing FRI on the paparazzi?" Peter glanced out the window, though no reporters or photographers were ambushing them. Yet. "That's new."

"Been doing that for a while now. Years, in fact." Pepper reflected for a moment. "When Tony stopped supporting the infrastructure and reconstruction efforts, they were hounding us, nonstop. They really had nerve," and there was anger in her voice as she related, "after all the years mocking him, insulting him, bullying him for being Tony Stark, for having the audacity to be rich and famous and smart, nitpicking at whatever perceived mistakes, questioning his choices, once he let it all go, all
of the sudden they were trying to pressure him into doing everything. Tony was so exhausted. He
gave his all for Thanos, and then afterwards he gave his all to try to get our world back on its feet.
He was always all or nothing, as you know. Loved with all his heart. Cared. Pushed through the
panic attacks and the nightmares to look brave and be brave. When he finally couldn't...he just
couldn't, you know? And he's just a man. He needs to be taken care of, just like anyone else. He
needs people to care about him."

Peter glanced at Morgan, who stared down at her plate and did not look at anyone. She probably
remembered that time.

The paparazzi were at the estate when Tony joined them.

"FRI, windows."

There was a hum all across the house that made Peter's spider-sense buzz in an uncomfortable way.
He shuddered.

Tony froze. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Peter gave his whole body a quick shake. "Whenever windows do that, it triggers my
spider-sense. Not for danger, it's just kind of like a zap. I'm fine."

"Okay," Tony said warily. "Last time your spider-sense went off, you saved us from falling off a
bridge, but if it's just a reaction to privacy windows..."

"Yeah."

"You have privacy windows too?" Morgan asked curiously.

"Some places, yeah."

"Are you a celebrity too?"

"...Not in the same sense." Peter was well-known in certain circles, but he had a relatively low
profile otherwise. Certainly nowhere as famous as Tony Stark was.

Is.

"It's for Spider-Man?" Pepper looked at him with amusement.

"Yeah."

"How come privacy windows set off your spider-sense?" Morgan asked. "What makes that
happen?"

"I'm actually not certain about that. I tried looking into it, but it's hard to tell what exactly makes it
buzz."

"You should look into that," Tony stated grimly. "If there's a way to hack your spider-sense, so to
speak, someone might take advantage of that."

"Way ahead of you there," Peter replied reflexively. "And it's not pretty when it happens. Thing
about privacy windows, though, is that they don't really trigger it. They tickle it, I guess. I think it just
makes my spider-sense a little uncomfortable, but it doesn't really set it off, so whatever they do is not
through the same mechanism as overtly manipulating my spider-sense."
"Someone hacked your spider-sense?" Tony's voice grew sharp.

"Uh," Peter looked at Tony and wished that there were fewer things in his life that would cause such an expression on the man's face. "Y—er—um…"

"Oh for God's sake, Pete, tell me you figured out a way to block them—"

"Y—um, sort of."

Tony leaned forward. '"Sort of'?"

Damn it. "Well, I know when some outside influence is affecting me, but in the heat of battle, there's no real way to combat it. Well, there is, if it gets triggered, but there's no way to combat it if it's a suppression. Mainly cuz—"

"We need to work on this—"

"No, wait, listen—"

"I mean, I don't really know neuro, but Bruce—"

"No, listen, I worked with an actual neurosurgeon on this—look, this is—it's all settled."

Tony stared at him.

Great. Tony was going to worry about him either way.

Peter wrestled with the decision. Tony was going to get really concerned if he told him the story. The problem was, he was going to remain concerned, and hurt, if Peter kept it secret. There was no winning the situation; there was only the matter of losing less.

"There were three instances when my spider-sense got hacked." It then occurred to Peter that he could have just said one. He wondered what was happening to him and his filter; he was never this bad, even with MJ.

Okay, maybe I was this bad with MJ. It was the people Peter inherently trusted, something Clint had scolded him about, Dr. Strange had scolded him about…

Many people have scolded him about.

"…Yes," Tony enunciated when Peter was silent for too long, "that's nice. Elaborate."

"The first time was after I went to college. I was interning with someone who…I think it was mostly his neurodegenerative disease that made him go nuts. Otto Octavius. The short of it is that he was attempting to design artificial limbs, much like Rhodey's legs, except these—you know, the upper limbs require more complex neural connections, and he had this chip that fits on the base of the skull, right there," Peter pointed to the back of his own, "but he couldn't get it to work. I thought I was being discreet, but he knew I was Spider-Man and somehow figured out that I had the spider-sense. So he was trying to hack it without my knowledge when I was testing the prototypes for him. He could shut it down, or set it off." Peter's fingers spasmed suddenly at the memory, and he swallowed. "That…wasn't fun."

"Where is this Otto Octavius?" Tony asked with a casual composure that was somehow more intimidating than when he was flat out angry. "Is he still alive?"

"Um…" Peter took a bite of eggs and chewed as he considered how to break the news without
looking completely incompetent. "Yes, as far as we know."

"As far as you know."

"Well, as far as I know. We took care of him, and I haven't received updates."

"You mean he's missing and you don't know where he is."

 Damn.

"Who are the other two?" Tony demanded.

Tony Stark could be very scary. Peter mused to himself that there will always be part of him, no matter how old or accomplished, that was cowed and in awe of Iron Man. He glanced at Morgan, who stared back in worry.

Venom was definitely not a topic for the breakfast table. Peter never even told his own Morgan about the symbiote. Kingpin was a little palatable, but only just.

At least Fisk was incarcerated.

"There was this mafia boss who got hold of Octavius' tech," Peter tried to water it down. "As far as I know, he and Octavius didn't actually work together. Ruthless son of a gun. I was in the med bay for weeks afterwards." Tony blanched, and Peter cursed his runaway mouth. "He's…in jail, now. Daredevil, Punisher, and I kind of beat him to a pulp. Obesity really doesn't do you any favors."

Tony's face soured further. "An obese mafia boss? You wouldn't happen to be talking about Wilson Fisk, would you?"

"You know him?" Peter gaped. "I don't think he really rose to prominence until after the reversal."

"You don't get as big as he does overnight," Tony pointed out, "And it takes money to be a boss. Money, and brutality. He was a rags to riches story, showed up at charity galas, even invested in some Stark projects before the Decimation. You know me; these events are as sleazy as they come, I don't even notice—but I noticed him. Always thought that there was something very wrong, like, more wrong than usual, about his whole story. Just the ensemble; how he accumulated wealth that quickly, and his personality was so instinctively manipulative. Knew there had to be something running in the black market, though a lot of people do. A lot of people also asked about you, but I don't know, something set me off when he did."

"He asked about me?" This was news to Peter.

"He asked about Spider-Man," Tony clarified. "Asked if I had run into you, had any idea who you were. Again, lots of people do. You're on Youtube, after all. He had suggested you work with the Avengers. Said you were smart, inventive. Knew a lot about you for someone who didn't actually know who you were. He's in jail, you say?"

"Yeah."

"A special one, I hope?"

"…Sort of. He was incarcerated several times; his goons would always break him out. Did I say Daredevil, Punisher, and I beat him to a pulp? I meant more that Daredevil and Punisher beat him to a pulp. I never want to work with those two ever again."
"Oh?"

Peter glanced at Morgan. She was twenty years old; she could handle this, right? "Well, I don't know how familiar you are with the Punisher—Frank Castle's got a lot of issues, and he really wanted to kill Fisk. The only reason he didn't was because he didn't want to shoot me. And Daredevil's also… kind of insane. He pretty much broke every bone in the guy's skull, kind of negating the need to kill him. It was bloody. And I had to be accountable, because I was the genius that agreed to bring those two to the scene. Was debriefed for like eight hours. Those two never apologized."

"The bastard had you in the hospital for weeks,"

"The—well, yeah?"

"I wouldn't either," Tony stared. "So you're saying that Wilson Fisk shouldn't be a problem because he's got brain damage."

"Well—yeah…yeah that's…about it."

Tony heaved a sigh and rubbed his forehead. "Okay, so two people with brain problems. What about the third?"

"Uh, the third one's an alien."

"An alien."

"Yeah. Kind of boring, to be honest." Peter did not want to go into the details. Or anything at all, when it came to Venom and its very special bout of creepiness. "Just, my spider-sense doesn't go off when the alien's around."

"Why?"

"…Because."

Tony glared. "You're killing me, kid. What kind of universe am I sending you back to?"

"One with colorful characters! Many of whom don't want to kill me. Did I mention that the Punisher didn't kill Kingpin because of that?"

"Oh goodie."

"Is the alien still around?" Morgan asked.

"No." Because technically, Venom was not around.

"You don't play poker, do you?" Tony raised his eyebrows. "You'd lose so much money if you did. Stick to slot machines."

"Har har, you are funny," Peter retorted flatly, having heard that sort of ribbing from basically everyone in his life.

"You and I should figure out how your spider-sense works before you leave," Tony went on. "That way you can defend against things like this."

"I already did, with Dr. Strange. He was a neurosurgeon before he became a wizard. I mean, it helped, I know there are certain missions I'd be useless in, so I send other people instead, but again; triggers, I can block. Suppressors, I can't do anything about. Ultimately, though, that kind of works.
It's like hallucinogens vs a blindfold. It's much more problematic to sense things that aren't really there, than to work with loss of perception. The latter, I can compensate for. I got nothing for the former."

"…Fair." Tony sipped his coffee, and Peter had the distinct impression that he had foiled one of Tony's budding plans to somehow procrastinate even further.

"What is the plan for today?" Pepper inquired. She had been quiet all this time.

"Beach?" Tony suggested without hesitation.

"You were thinking about this since yesterday, weren't you?" Pepper smirked in amusement. "It's kind of cold to go to the beach."

"Just a stroll. Don't need a hundred degree weather to go to the beach. The beach is still there other parts of the year."

He clearly did think about this since at least yesterday.

"I'm down," Peter remarked, eager to get away from the topic of his misfiring spider-sense, but then remembered the paparazzi. "Uh…how are we—"

"FRI?"

"On it, boss."

"Dad has some decoy cars in the garage," Morgan explained to Peter with a giggle. "Makes the paparazzi run around in circles."

Peter should have figured. The man did grow up in the spotlight, after all. By now he has had sixty-eight years to figure out how to dodge attention when he wanted.

"I had a dream about this once," Tony murmured. "Back when Morgan was four. You were smaller, of course, the same age as when I last saw you. You were hunting seashells with her."

That totally happened in Peter's timeline. Peter debated whether or not to say so. Tony looked at him, then shook his head, the fond look giving way to exasperation.

"How did anyone take you seriously as any sort of Avenger leader?" he exclaimed, clearly knowing already, despite Peter's silence. "Good grief."

Peter had never seen the beach since crossing over. He had been to the beach in his own universe, of course, and there were more people. More importantly, there were more birds.

In that, there were birds at all.

"I forgot. Twenty years of this and you get used to it," Tony stated apologetically.

Peter had seen a few photos and videos of beaches from before the reversal, but it was still different to be surrounded by such emptiness. There were no seagulls in sight, and very few seashells to speak of. It was like stepping into the Manhattan of this world; mostly barren, a slow-moving wasteland.

But the sea remained constant, with the crashing waves, and Morgan sauntered ahead, unbothered by it all. Strangest thing was, she looked like she belonged. The Morgan of Peter's universe would look distinctly out of place. This Morgan was unperturbed, and she was like the one flower blooming
from the ashes, young and bright and hopeful.

"Think we'll find conch shells?" Morgan called out, before turning around and realizing Peter had lingered back. "What are you waiting for?"

Peter joined her.

The sea even smelled different, Peter realized. There was just less of it, and though the salt remained, a lot of other scents were missing. There was minimal foam on the waves as it rolled and floated and folded. But the rhythm of the water was constant and reassuring, the same as it had always been. It was not hard to figure out why Tony wanted to bring the family here. There was something about the sea that seemed cleansing; things just disappeared into it, and it was so vast, full of mysteries and secrets. Though it was always moving, it somehow always stayed the same; the same water from millions, trillions of years ago cycling in the currents.

They found no conch shells, but Morgan had fun drawing in the sand. They avoided the water, because it was chillier out here, with the wind and the ocean sprays floating in the breeze. They made a game out of testing the elasticity of Peter's web fluid, with Morgan tugging a strand as far as she could without sliding back from the recoil.

The entire time, there was not a single bit of life besides the four of them. Not even another human being.

Three hours pass almost without them noticing. Morgan was so tired from all the fooling around that she had to use Peter as a clutch to get back to her parents. Pepper and Tony just stood there, murmuring to each other while staring at the two of them.

With how Tony was behaving, Peter was a little surprised that the man was content to just stand back and watch Peter with his daughter; he figured Tony would want to be more interactive.

"Mom, Dad, I'm hungry," Morgan declared.

Tony was looking at Peter when he replied to her. "Yeah, it's noon. About lunchtime." There was an odd light in his eyes, one that was both sad and happy at the same time.

Morgan trudged ahead with Pepper towards the car. Tony slapped a hand to Peter's nape and squeezed while they walked behind.

"It's easy to see that you raised her," Tony noted.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"She's a little different."

"That's hard to avoid, I expect." Tony paused. "Always did wonder what she'd be like if you were around. I haven't seen her have that much fun in a long time. Pepper and I are old, and the other kids…no one really has that same energy."

"There's not much world to play with."

"…No. There isn't." Tony squeezed. "I am glad you were able to grow up in one with more."

"Too much, you might say."
"Don't say that," Tony chastised lightly. "You've seen the alternative."

"Yeah," Peter sighed. He took the opportunity to gently remind Tony of their primary objective. "But... you know how it is. You have some idea. And the longer I'm not there..."

"I know." Tony shook his hand a little while keeping it on Peter. "We'll get you home. But we'll make the most of your stay here as long as you are, yeah?"

"Hmph. Yeah."

"Come on, before the girls get antsy," and Tony took his hand away. "Let's eat out. Paparazzi's probably not done yet."
Chapter 9

He dreamed that MJ was feeling harassed and overworked. Benjy needed a diaper change, but then he did not, and then Aunt May was suddenly there, swooping the toddler up and kissing his chubby cheeks. MJ was still in a mood as she washed the dishes and did the laundry and vacuumed the bedroom. "Aren't you gonna do something productive?" she demanded.

"I'm kind of trapped in Mr. Stark's house," Peter tried to explain. "My stuff's in his garage and the man doesn't sleep so I can't sneak in. Also, FRIDAY is always watching, like Big Brother."

"Then hack FRIDAY, nerd," she snorted.

Peter woke up knowing for certain that hacking FRIDAY would be a mistake, primarily because Tony would inevitably find out, and gaining an extra day or two was simply not worth the everlasting hurt feelings after the fact.

It was four in the morning, and as Peter expected, Tony was up, though he was in the kitchen rather than the garage. He looked tired, which was a little unexpected. Somewhat like the Tony that had fallen asleep at the Compound. He stiffened when he saw that Peter was awake as well.

"Hey, everything okay?"

"Should ask that of you," Peter joined him at the counter, noting that Tony was simply drinking water. "Got a potentially long day coming up. Something on your mind?"

"Nah. Just filled with a lot of energy lately. You must be a revitalizing force, cuz I feel like I'm ten years younger."

Peter was not sure what was going on with Tony, but it was clear the man was hiding something. He slid an arm around the older man's shoulders in a slow, warm, one-armed hug.

Whatever it is, he decided, it had to do with Peter's presence here. Even if Tony was happy, even if he wanted to be happy, Peter's presence was still disruptive to this family, disruptive to Tony's emotional state. Maybe he really was too happy to fall asleep. Maybe he was too sad to, as well.

"You're not eighteen anymore," he reminded Tony. "You're not thirty-eight, or forty-eight, or even fifty-eight. If you don't sleep now, while I'm sleeping, you're gonna be sleepy during the day."

"No I won't. That's what coffee's for."

"Coffee doesn't make you alert. It just keeps you awake," Peter reminded him, "and I want to make the most of our waking hours. We know there's a time limit on this whole spiel."

He could feel Tony's spirits sink. The man did not reply.

"Go to bed when I do," Peter encouraged. "We'll both be unconscious at the same time, and we'll both be conscious at the same time. Good?"

It was a shot in the dark, the direction Peter was taking, but he seemed to hit the target, because Tony heaved a sigh.
"I don't want to miss anything," he admitted.

Tony felt small. Peter remembered how big Tony had seemed, back when he was a teenager, and Tony had been Iron Man. He seemed small now, and Peter was not sure if it was because he had grown or if Tony had shrunk somewhat. Maybe it was a combination of both. He gave Tony a squeeze.

"It will never be long enough," he pointed out.

Tony sighed again. "Yeah."

"I don't want to go either," Peter confessed, feeling Tony stiffen at this. He pressed on, "In the beginning, they had murals and memorials and you were everywhere. Saw your face, everywhere. Saw your name. Every time, it was like a blow to my ribs. A shock. Couldn't believe you, of all people, were gone. So soon after I lost my uncle. Felt like I lost another."

Tony's arm wrapped around Peter as well. He did not look at Peter. He seemed afraid to. He managed a nervous laugh.

"We still got time. Still gotta figure things out. Gotta make things work, gotta make sure." He heaved another sigh. It sounded like he was trying not to cry.

This, if nothing else, confirmed what Peter suspected.

"You already figured it out."

Tony did not answer. He suddenly seemed to hold his breath.

Peter squeezed again. "That's okay. I'm not mad. We still gotta build it, yeah? Configure, locate. I read enough to know what puzzle pieces need to be put together."

Tony's arm stiffened around Peter, as if he were locking it in place.

"I don't want to make it." He whispered. "I'd rather build a bomb."

It was Peter's turn to try not to cry. He failed miserably. Sniffling, he leaned in and pressed his head against Tony's temple.

"I wish there were a way to combine our two worlds. Take you and your Morgan and your Pepper out of this place. We could also use a Black Widow and Steve Rogers."

"Ha." This time, Tony's arm squeezed, hard. He pressed his head back against Peter's. The water was loose in his other hand, supported by the countertop.

"But hey, now you know my world's out there, and I'm out there," Peter pointed out, "and I know that you're out here, and there's a world where you were able to take care of Pepper and Morgan and get old and gray. It's okay if it's not my world, as long as you're somewhere."

Tony swallowed. "Yeah," he whispered.

"Your world's not lost yet," Peter went on. "Your Morgan…she'll turn things around. She and all the crazy kids in her generation. They'll fill this world with different things than mine. That's okay too."

"…Yeah."

"It wasn't your fault. You saw. We both did. You can finally be at peace." Peter rocked them both,
gently, where they stood. "And...you'd be bringing me home and setting me free, at the same time. So I can realize my future. That's far better than any bomb."

Tony turned around and wrapped his other arm around Peter into a real hug. Peter reciprocated, holding on as long as Tony's arms were around him.

"Give me just a little more time." Tony whispered, voice filled with tears. "I'm really not ready. I'm sorry."

No quips or witty remarks. This was not really procrastination. Tony could not start yet. This was part of the required time.

"Okay," Peter replied. "That's okay."

Tony went to bed afterwards. In the morning, his eyes were swollen, but he was alert and much more composed. He wanted to back out of going up to the Compound, but Morgan had to leave early in the afternoon to go back up to Massachusetts anyway, and Pepper, ever insightful of her husband's shenanigans, offered to be the one to drive everyone upstate.

Morgan flopped about, reluctant to pack her things when she felt like she had just packed her things to come home in the first place. It was still a good four to five-hour journey in this world, because there were no personnel who could build the infrastructure for high-speed railways.

"I don't wanna go to class tomorrow," she groaned. "Wah. Why do they start class so early? Why is it a whole hour long each lecture? Everyone knows you shouldn't pay attention for more than twenty minutes."

Peter had been there and done that, once with his own generation and ongoing with Morgan's.

"Just wait until you grow up," he teased. "There won't be one-hour lectures. There will be sixteen, twenty-four hour work days, especially if you're a mom."

"Then I won't be a mom."

Tony and Pepper exchanged a knowing look.

"Will I see you again, before you leave?" Morgan suddenly asked.

She got attached quickly, Peter noted. He looked at Tony.

"I can pull you out of class if need be," her father promised.

"Yay!" Morgan hopped up. "Okay. No goodbyes today. You're not allowed to say goodbye to me until Dad's machine is up and running."

"Lots of things to do before we actually launch," Tony muttered.

The Starks were in relatively good spirits throughout the morning and early afternoon. Pepper drove out, sniffing condescendingly at Tony when he warned her about the bridges.

"So? That can happen anytime. With the Amtrak too. How are we supposed to protect Morgan when she's headed back up to Cambridge?"

"Why don't you use your fancy private helicopter to fly her over there?" Peter asked as they left the estate behind them.
"Pete, no!" Morgan exclaimed in horror.

"See, even he thinks it's a good idea," Tony stuck a thumb backwards from the passenger seat.

Morgan punched him in the arm.

"Ow!" Peter exclaimed. "Like father like daughter—"

"I spent ages talking Dad out of that!"

This Morgan missed out on about fifteen years of being bullied by Peter, so he did not feel bad about pressing the issue. "Seriously, you should land on that big dome—"

"Peter!"

"In fact get a helicopter, that makes more noise—"

Morgan hit him again, harder, and it actually hurt a little, though Peter would never admit as much. He was laughing too hard anyway. Tony, true to his trollish nature, was nodding emphatically.

"The idea has merit," he declared with great gravitas; how he managed to keep a straight face was beyond Peter.

"Morg," Pepper scolded, "Quit hitting him and stay put. We're in a car, not a playground!"

"But Mom!"

Pepper sputtered at her daughter's whine, unable to contain her amusement. "Oh God, this is what it's like to have two children, isn't it?"

Tony turned his head around to give Morgan a look, thoroughly entertained, while Peter nudged her to get her out of her exasperated mood.

"There's still time to call a helicopter," Tony grinned.

"Dad, no! Peter! You're so evil, oh my God!"

Tony did not call for a helicopter, and Morgan was deposited safely in Manhattan. Once she exited, Tony slid from shotgun to the back.

"I want to say hi to everyone. I haven't seen Natasha in too long," Pepper declared.

"You've kept in touch with her?" Peter asked.

"Every so often. Less so these days." She paused. "I think it's been over the year since we last talked. Gosh."

"Wonder if Nebula already dropped off the intel," Peter murmured to Tony. "Think she has anything to add?"

"The mechanics? Maybe. We do need a direction though; figure out how to aim." Tony rubbed his fingers against each other. "I was going over it in my head," he began, looking a little anxious, "and...I was wondering if..."

"Hm?"
"I'm not trying to delay things," Tony paused. "Okay, I am trying to delay things, I guess, but I don't think it's safe to try it on a person right away. If you get my drift. Maybe throw in a jellyfish, or, I dunno, an actual spider, see if it gets there safely, and you say that there's Harley and Richards and Hank Pym there—"

"And Shuri of Wakanda, and Jame Foster, Adam Cho, and a bunch of others, yeah."

"Right, so what if we send the plans over there, have them make one as well to send an 'OK' over here, before throwing you through whatever quantum tunnel thing—just in case?"

"Peter," Pepper murmured from the front, "I think that's reasonable. If you could take precautions, why shouldn't you? Even if it works, there must be other universes out there, not just ours and yours. What if you end up in the wrong place?"

"Or," Tony said to Peter, "the journey can kill you. Deposit you in the correct place, but kill you on the way. Mr. Ants-in-my-pants needed a special suit for his Quantum thing."

That was always the rub with applying theory to practice, Peter noted. One never knew if the technology in question was compatible with…well…life.

"I'm not against taking an extra day or two to be safe," Peter pointed out, "but sending plans for building machines that can traverse universes sounds pretty dangerous if we don't know where it's going."

"Not exact plans," but the problem remained.

"One thing we have, that you don't—one person, anyway, is Dr. Strange," Peter reminded Tony. "If we can utilize him, any version of him that happens to be willing to cooperate, we don't have to worry about the tunnel being able to sustain life; if Strange knows which direction to go, he can open a portal directly here."

"A Dr. Strange who's willing to cooperate might not necessarily be a good guy."

"Maybe the others have an idea," Pepper said from the front.

"We'll ruminate for a bit," Peter said to Tony.

"'kay."

Peter stared. "Not too long though."

Tony slapped his hands on his own knees and squeezed. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna keep you trapped here. I don't really want you here."

He looked very vulnerable.

"Yeah," Peter said quietly, "I know."

"We'll figure out what we can do before trying to troubleshoot."

Peter glanced up front and met Pepper's gaze through the rear view mirror. She looked sad.

"Anyway, it's not something we can address today," Tony remarked.

The atmosphere at the Compound was tense. Tony, Pepper, and Peter found the group in the lobby,
consisting of Natasha, Steve, Bruce, and Nebula. The latter three seemed to be facing Natasha all at once, who looked like she was seconds away from either drawing her gun on them, or turning around to run away. When Tony and Peter joined them, the group turned as one, leveling the two with gazes so heavy that both men stopped in their tracks.

Nebula had remained physically unchanged, much as she remained unchanged in Peter's world. She did not acknowledge Peter with any gesture suggesting that she remembered him, though she must have; Nebula was a cyborg, after all, and never forgot anything, even things she did not notice.

"Pepper! Long time no see!" Natasha smiled. There was something odd about it, that did not sit quite right on her face. "And here comes the man of the hour," she looked at Peter. "Tony's treating you well, I see."

She looked very wan, and though her voice was controlled, her eyebrows furrowed, betraying her distress.

"Sometimes he behaves," Pepper responded, though her tones were perplexed; she also realized that Natasha looked unwell. "How are you doing? I heard you were working hard. Have you been eating?"

Tony looked at Bruce, noticing the same thing. "What's going on, Doctor?"

"Bruce," Natasha's voice was hard and threatening.

"Nat," Steve began.

"They're here," she interrupted. "We shouldn't waste time. Kid's got a family to go back to. Nebul —"

But Peter had already pieced it together, and he was certain Tony did too, even if the man might not want to admit it.

"It's terminal, isn't it?" he stated quietly, freezing Natasha as she turned around to lead the way.

Silence fell, heavy and cold. Everyone was still. Tony was not even breathing.

A heavy weight settled in Peter's stomach.

"How long?" He asked.

Natasha did not answer, nor did she move, other than the minute tremors in her shoulders.

Steve and Bruce sank back. They clearly had gone over this with her before Tony and Peter arrived.

Tony turned to Bruce. "What is it? What exactly—"

"It's ovarian cancer," Natasha finally spat out, sounding like the words were punched out of her. "It's stage four. I've had it for a while—tried fighting it, but it's hard to detect early and by the time I found…it's just like any other gift from the Red Room. It's…it doesn't matter." She turned around. "Can we focus on the task at hand?"

"No," Tony stared, eyes wide and face pale, while Pepper lifted her hands to her face. "No, the task at hand right now is you. What the hell? When did you find out? And why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Why would I tell you?" Natasha's eyes flashed with rage. "You and your perfect wife and daughter
and perfect life—what would telling you possibly do for me?" Her voice was shaking towards the end. Her eyes became bright and glossy, decades of loneliness threatening to pour out.

"I would have helped you!" Tony was aghast.

"Right, because you would have felt you had to. Well, guess what, I don't want that! I don't want your help. Can we move on?"

"Natasha—" Pepper started to reach for her.

"No. No. I'm not doing this." This time, tears spilled from her eyes, and Natasha wiped them furiously before spinning away. "I'm done. You guys figure out how to get the kid home. I'm done!"

"Nat, wait!" Pepper started, but Natasha ignored him, moving down the lobby, and soon she was gone.

Bruce swore under his breath.

Tony whirled toward Bruce. "She's young." She shouldn't be dying, his eyes screamed. "She was experimented on by those maniacs while they were turning her into a weapon!" Steve reminded him, too overwhelmed himself to watch how he phrased the bitter truth. "You think they cared if she lived past menopause?"

Tony pressed his hands to his mouth and looked like he might cry himself. Pepper was already crying, eyes wide.

"This can't be," Tony insisted. "She's healthy."

Peter went to Tony and pressed a hand against his nape, just like Tony had many times with Peter.

"She was the first person I knew!" the older man whimpered, eyes wide with shock and hurt. "And she's young. She's the youngest of all of us!"

Bruce swore again, bowing his head and rubbing his forehead with one hand.

Peter did not know what to say.

Steven looked in the direction Natasha had left. "She shouldn't be alone. I'll go check on her."

"If you go," Peter pointed out, "She'll feel ambushed."

"What else do you know?" Tony whirled on Bruce. "What—ovarian cancer? What's the—what's the treatment? Success rate? She said—she said stage four, that's—that's—"

"Late," Bruce replied gravely. "She's young, as you said. This sort of cancer is much more aggressive in younger women like her. And the type she has has about a twenty percent survival rate in the next five years."

"Twenty percent. We can work with that. Twenty—we can—"

"She stopped her treatment two weeks ago," Bruce interrupted.

Tony blanched. "What?!"

He started for the hall as Pepper exclaimed, "But why?" Peter barely had a chance to react, grabbing
"Tony!" he pulled the other man back. "Don't go charging in there—"

"I need to beat some sense into that woman—"

"No, Tony," Steve moved to block the path, "you need to calm down—"

"Did you hear what he just said?" Tony pointed at Bruce. "She's giving up! Nat is giving up, the one who wouldn't give up on the Decimation for the last twenty years is giving up because of—"

"Tony!" Peter yelled, aware that he might be the only one who could talk sense into the man. "You can't go to her like this; you'll scare her!"

Tony started at this, but at least he was not pulling away from Peter anymore. He huffed a disbelieving laugh. "You don't know Nat. Nothing scares that woman."

"Everyone is scared of dying!" Peter exclaimed. "Even you were! Even I am! You think busting in like a lunatic to yell at her is gonna make her feel better about all this? This isn't what she needs from you! Why do you think she kept it from you? She didn't want to deal with all this!"

Tony shuddered as Pepper squeezed his other shoulder. "Oh my God. She's so young. Why would she stop treatment? This is insane…"

"Why don't you guys sit down," Peter recommended in a gentler voice. "I'll check on her. She doesn't know me and I don't know her. Less explaining to do, if I go."

Tony grasped at Peter's hand. He was breathing deeply, but seemed in control now, even though he looked like he wanted to burst after her. "Yeah," he murmured. "Okay."

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Natasha had collected herself by the time Peter sought her. She was sitting in the office, hunched over the desk with her head in her hands.

Peter knocked on the door to announce himself, though he knew that someone like Black Widow would know even without any sort of notice on his end.

"Hey," he called out. "Wanted to check on you. Us guys aren't the most sensitive bunch."

This surprised a laugh out of her. "That's okay," she replied in a rough voice. "I'm not really a damsel."

"There's nothing wrong if you are," Peter reminded her. "Took me a while to get over it, but I'm still a scared little boy, afraid of losing those I care about. There's no shame in that. And there's no shame in feeling helpless and scared of what's coming." He entered the room. "But you don't have to hide, you know."

Natasha leaned back. "It's not the same here," she said quietly. "On your end, we patched things up. Over here, we've had twenty years to let resentment grow." She wiped at her eyes. "It's easy for you to say. Your Black Widow died a hero, saving those she loved. All I've done was hurt people, and fail the one time it mattered. You have no idea what I have done, all the things I've chosen to do."

"You didn't choose to be Black Widow," Peter leaned over the desk. "Not like Tony chose to be Iron Man, or Steve chose to be Captain America. You were forced into that path. And you were trapped there."
But Natasha was shaking her head.

"I liked it," she whispered. "I liked the power it gave me. I felt so strong. I was willing. And I think of how... that's all I have to say. When I go, wherever I end up, that's all I have to say. I wish I had died the way your Black Widow did. At least she was able to make up for all the horrible things she had done, all the people she hurt. What can I say of my life? What good have I done? The last twenty years, failure after failure. Nothing. I have nothing good to show for how I have lived my life. And I'm so... so scared." Her shoulders trembled, and her breaths hitched with silent sobs as more tears shimmered down her cheeks. She crumbled rapidly. "I don't want to die, without having a chance, to... to... I'm so scared!"

Peter felt grief split in his chest. He went around the desk to her side and wrapped the poor woman in the tightest hug he could get away with. Natasha clung to him, a relative stranger whose opinions she cared little about and so would not think much of revealing her shame, and wept, openly, in ugly, frightened keens.

He never thought his own Natasha Romanoff had been particularly lucky. Her death had always been a shadow over Clint, dying on a faraway world, a cold sacrifice for the good of the universe, and with her persona more secretive than Iron Man's, few remembered her, and fewer still mourned her. But if Natasha Romanoff had been destined to die, as all mortals are, perhaps that one in fourteen million really had been ideal for her. She had died at peace, assured of her repentance, of her self-worth.

There were a lot of things he could say to this Natasha Romanoff, to address her self-doubts, but nothing would have comforted her as much as the heroic act she was denied in this timeline.

In any case, Peter knew, it was not his place to try. This was a job for this world's Avengers, or what was left of them. So he rocked her like he would his own son after a nightmare, and said nothing.

The others also said nothing.

When Peter and Natasha joined the rest, Tony, Bruce, and Nebula were already deep in discussion about some formula they needed to put into the Quantum Tunnel, one both refused to relate to Peter when he inquired. Nebula, eyebrows fierce and eyes dark, was showing a document written in an alien language, one that Peter could decipher if he had his suit, but the suit was still in Tony's garage. Steve and Pepper were on the side, talking quietly. Pepper's face was tight, and she looked at Natasha for a moment when they entered, but did not otherwise speak to the woman.

Natasha wavered, perhaps wondering where she would fit into the two conversations taking place.

"Guys," Peter finally called out, and his sharp command made all the older heroes snap to. "Since the immediate problem is getting me home, meaning I have to do the traveling, I would appreciate someone briefing me on what we have so far, starting with Nebula. What do you have for me?"

Nebula hesitated for a second, possibly because she was caught off-guard by Peter's authority, but she recovered quickly.

"There was a record from the Collector's archive, alluding to an event several million years ago. They called it a Tear in the Veil, and apparently, some life forms have been lost to it. But the tear went both ways, and some things came through. Those who studied the Tear noted that it takes the welding of multiple stars to rip such a tear in the fabric of reality, and that, once torn, the fabric cannot be sealed. The Tear in the Veil eventually grew into something like what you humans would call a 'black hole'. It was the size of an entire star system and took out all things that overlapped..."
within its boundaries. The Aether was eventually used to reseal it, but the cost was great, and nothing that was lost was ever recovered. Based on the descriptions, it is very possible that Peter Parker arrived here through the same phenomenon."

"If that's the case," Peter glanced at Tony, "I should be able to just slide back, like we mentioned on Friday."

"And the biggest issue would be to seal it before anything else goes through, either way," Steve noted, "especially if the tear gets bigger with time."

"The tear's not visible to the naked eye," Peter looked at Nebula. "How do we find it? I was standing around that first morning, and I didn't slide back and forth. The parameters must have to be exact if I'm to slip through."

"Finding the tear requires seeing the base of the universe," said Nebula. "Sealing it requires the same. In the past, such power was within the Infinity Stones. Now that they are destroyed, this is no longer an available approach."

"But that's where the Quantum Tunnel fits in," Peter glanced at Bruce. "That machine must have been another version, one that misfired. The tear might be very small, too small for anything else to pass through."

"So we can get Underoos back home," Tony looked at Bruce as well, "and then figure out what to do to seal the tear from our end. Peter will have to figure out how to seal the tear from his end."

"Both will have to be from within the Quantum Realm," Bruce nodded.

"Have you guys tested out the Quantum Tunnel any more?" Peter asked.

"...Not really," Bruce admitted. "We just got started with inputting the formula when you came."

They had been too upset about Natasha's situation before Tony, Peter, and Pepper had arrived.

This was something these Avengers should take care of after Peter leaves. He could tell Natasha was not eager to dive back into her problem, even though Tony looked like he was more than ready to readdress the issue. Still, he did not speak, the way Peter thought he would. Instead, he was looking to Peter with an expression Peter had never seen from him before.

Subordination. In this matter, Peter was going to take the lead. He already had.

He saw a similar expression from everyone else, people Peter had looked up to, and still did.

It was an unusual feeling, even after being the leader of the Avengers for so many years. This, more than anything, made Peter realize just how far he had come, since gaining his powers, making his own suit, and meeting Tony Stark for the first time in the living room of the apartment he had shared with his aunt.

Peter turned. The last of the original team was waiting for his command, to undertake a mission for his sake. This was, from accounts, the first time the team had convened all together since the Decimation. The only one missing was Thor, but Thor had not been involved in Berlin either, and either way, this was the most complete the team had been in twenty years.

It was a little mind-boggling, how Peter was responsible for their reunion.

*Avengers, assemble.*
He waved his hand forward to charge. "Let's give it a whirl."

Chapter End Notes

Natasha Romanoff really draws the short straw of everything, doesn't she? T_T <3 you Nat, hate that I'm doing this to you, but it made the most sense and as much as I hate it, I do think dying the way you did in canon was probably the best outcome you would have chosen.

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