ever in your favor

by iron_spider

Summary

Peter startles awake when someone shakes him.

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He remembers what day it is, and his heart beats like a drum at someone’s execution. But he tries to put on a mask, make it all seem normal. It’s everything but, despite the fact that he’s been dealing with reaping day since he was born, between himself, Ben and May. That fear that one of them could be taken away. Sent to surefire slaughter. But now Ben is gone, taken despite never having his name drawn from a bowl, and May’s finally safe. Now Peter’s name is in there alone. The last Parker sitting on the chopping block. He doesn’t know how to be. He doesn’t know what normal is, when the Hunger Games are looming on the horizon.
Here it is. The Hunger Games AU. I am writing this as we go, so bear with me. I hope it's gonna be everything everyone has wanted :) The character list will probably grow! Also, I'm making changes to their rules to better work for my story. So if you see something that's different, it isn't an accident or neglect, it is purposeful! As always, I hope you enjoy!
Peter Parker is dreaming.

He sees faces he barely remembers, but they pick him up, swing him around, smother him with kisses. There are streaks of color and light, pencils scraping across paper, and the woman’s voice says carry the two. But then they’re gone—there’s a bunch of gray and May, and the sounds of screams. TV screens. Tears, dark hair. He’s a hero, baby. He’s a hero. Fear crawling up his arms like spiders. Death peppering his life like clockwork. Boom, boom, boom, in garish, unforgiving technicolor. And he’s next.

He always wonders what they do with the bodies—

He startles awake when someone shakes him.

“Sorry, honey,” May says. Peter blinks a couple times and she comes into focus, her hair pulled back from her face. She’s trying not to look a certain way, but he can see it in her eyes anyway. She clears her throat, keeps talking. “But it’s…” She glances away, wets her lips. “You gotta get ready.”

He remembers what day it is, and his heart beats like a drum at someone’s execution. But he tries to put on a mask, make it all seem normal. It’s everything but, despite the fact that he’s been dealing with reaping day since he was born, between himself, Ben and May. That fear that one of them could be taken away. Sent to surefire slaughter. But now Ben is gone, taken despite never having his name drawn from a bowl, and May’s finally safe. Now Peter’s name is in there alone. The last Parker sitting on the chopping block. He doesn’t know how to be. He doesn’t know what normal is, when the Hunger Games are looming on the horizon.

But he’s gotta try. He’s gotta try to act like it’s gonna be fine, for her.

“Nap went on too long,” Peter says, smiling a little bit.

She nods, and straightens up, crossing her arms over her chest. “It feels strange,” she says. “The first year I’m not in the damn lottery, but you—I just wish I could—”

Women can’t volunteer for men anyway, so her wishes are falling on deaf ears. Like most wishes whispered into the night of District 12.

“It’s all gonna be fine,” Peter says, as he gets up. He kisses her on the cheek, smiles again, tries to live in that phrase. It’s all gonna be fine. It’s all gonna be fine. And part of him believes that, because what kind of universe would take someone else away from May Parker? After all she’s lost already? Carving away at her heart until there’s nothing left.

He catches sight of the one photo that he has of him and Ben, sitting on the shelf in the gold frame he found at the Hob. He looks away just as quick. It’s hard to look at it sometimes. Hard, not to hear his voice. He was the level head, the center of their unit. The optimist. He and May balanced each other out, made each other better. Sometimes, Peter still feels like he’s just in the other room. Like he might come around the corner any second.

“I’ll let you get ready,” May says, her eyes lingering on Peter’s face for a moment, like she might not get to see him again. But then she turns and walks out the door, closing it gently behind her.

He finds his outfit in the closet, the one he got last reaping day, the one he’s quickly growing out of. But they don’t have the money to get much fabric, or much of anything else, so this is gonna have to
be it. The last time they were able to get more clothes was before the Peacekeepers started cracking
down on the Stark funds, and Peter wonders if Tony Stark is gonna find a way around their new
rules so he can continue supporting the district with his own money. They haven’t seen him in a
while, but it’s rare to see him at all.

Peter tells himself he’ll approach him, next time he sees him in person. Say something. Anything.

He gets dressed, tries not to think too much, and walks out into the living room. The air is stiff and
stifling, worse than normal, and he feels like it’s probably like that everywhere in 12, the whole
population struck with anticipation and not-so-hidden fear, whether their names are in that reaping
bowl or not.

It’s like knowing someone has decided to kill you, but not yet.

May is sitting there, the remains of their breakfast still on the table, and she gets to her feet quick
when she sees him.

“You heading out?” she asks, like she might any other day, not a day like this.

“Yeah,” Peter says. “Gonna walk there with Ned. You know they expect the kids up front. And you
don’t have to line up this time, lucky lady. Just gotta lounge back, watch the spectacle.”

May glares at him.

“Kidding,” he says. He walks over to her, wraps her up in a hug. “You know I’m kidding. I’ve
never seen you lounge a day in your life.”

She laughs, but there’s no heart in it. She squeezes him tight, her hands mapping his shoulders. And
he allows himself to worry, for just a moment, while she can’t see his face. He closes his eyes,
clutches at her, and tries to anchor himself here.

“It’s gonna be fine,” he says. “I’ll see you—I’ll see you there. I’ll see you after.”

~

He catches sight of Ned a little ways away from the Hob, not at all where he expected him to be.
He’s got something in his hand, and he widens his eyes when he catches sight of Peter.

“What are you doing?” Peter calls to him.

“Wanted to get us some good luck charms,” Ned says, wiggling his fist in the air.

Peter rushes across the street to catch up with him, and he stops himself from launching into a full
scale hug that might have knocked Ned flat. They’ve faced a lot of reaping days together, going on
ten years now, and sometimes Peter thinks he’s more afraid of Ned’s name coming out of that bowl
than his own.

But he holds back, tries to act like it’s any other day, and he floats a little closer in Ned’s orbit than
he usually would.

They both look down when Ned opens up his hand.

“I figured I’d take the Wasp, and you’d take the Iron Man,” Ned says.

They’re little steel pins, one for each District 12 Victor. Peter doesn’t exactly like to participate in all
the fanfare, considering the Capitol is literally torturing and killing people, making their lives a living
hell, but secretly, he does have a favorite Victor. It’s been Tony Stark for as long as he can remember. He knows what Tony did, how Tony manipulated their own arena and created something none of them had ever seen before or since. He’s lucky they didn’t kill him. But he’s...unlucky for everything they took from him after.

Peter wishes he could be half as brave as Tony Stark.

*He’s a hero. He’s a hero.*

Peter takes the Iron Man pin with reverence, and the mask looks so much like the contraband poster he has under his bed. The Capitol doesn’t like to talk about the Iron Man aspect of Tony, because he humiliated them, but the nickname stuck, and the people don’t forget. There are only a few images left of the suit Tony made, and Peter grabs them up whenever he sees them, careful to keep them hidden.

“The Collector had ‘em half price,” Ned says. “I figured we could put them on our inside lapels, but we’d...we’d know they’re there.”


They quickly put them on, looking around to make sure nobody is watching. Ned nods a couple times, patting the place where his is.

“Makes me feel a little stronger, carrying Janet with me,” Ned says, wearing a nervous smile. “She’s so badass.”

“Yeah,” Peter says, remembering what Janet Van Dyne has lost, too.

Sometimes it hits him so hard, all the death, all the killing, all the horror, and he can’t breathe. He wishes, so, so badly, that something could be done. That they could stop this, stop it in its tracks, blow the whole thing up. He wasn’t around for it, but he knows there was a regular world once. Without the Capitol, without the Hunger Games, without fear coursing through their every step.

“One day we should just, like, try to go over there,” Ned says. “To Victor’s Village, to meet them. Just, like, pretend we’re delivering something or something. And we don’t have to act crazy, we can just...meet them. Meet them, thank them, tell them we’re...we’re sorry.”

Peter’s throat goes a little tight and he nods. “Yeah, I mean. Yeah. We should.” He meets Ned’s eyes. “After this Games. When they get back, we can—do that.” Peter knows it’s probably an empty plan. Things are so much harder for the Mentors when they come back. District 12 hasn’t had a winner since Tony. Every year, they have to watch two more people die that they’d gotten to know. Two more they couldn’t save.

But Ned looks a little happier, so that’s something.

Peter glances down when he feels something rubbing against his leg.

“Oh, look who it is,” Ned says.

Peter smiles to himself, and reaches down, picking up the orange and white cat, quickly draping her over his shoulder. “Hey, Goose,” he says. “Hey, little lady.”

Ned starts petting her head, making little kissy noises.

“Not the best day to be district hopping,” Peter says. He still thinks it’s cool that a Victor’s cat likes
him. He’s never met Carol Danvers, but Goose absolutely knows who he is.

Peter locks eyes with Ned as he rocks the cat back and forth, listening to her purring. “This is a good sign,” he says. “Goose always shows up when good things are about to happen.”

“Right,” Ned says, nodding. “Last time she was here we got those doubles for the month. Capitol being generous, not...well, not the norm.” He clears his throat.

“Right.” Peter repeats. He quickly kisses the side of Goose’s head. “Right, right. We’re gonna be fine.”

~

Once they get into the main square, all of Peter’s optimism falls to the wayside as he watches everyone eligible to be reaped line up in front of the City Center. It’s a sea of gray, of stiff backs and quiet murmurs, everyone waiting for this to be over with.

Their mayor and a few Capitol people are sitting on the platform, and Peter looks around, tries to find where May is. There are ropes separating those who are eligible and those who aren’t, and he sees her, off by the second entrance with the two tallest trees. She stands up on her tip-toes and waves at him, and he waves right back, trying to quell the worry in his heart.

Peter looks at Ned. Ned quickly pats his chest, where Peter knows the Wasp pin is. Peter pats his chest too, his own pin, and feels his heart rattling like a bird in a cage.

*Be like Iron Man. Be strong like Tony Stark.*

Everyone shifts like they might fall over if there’s a harsh breeze, and the sun beats down on Peter’s head. He can already feel the burn on his face, and he shields his eyes from the brightness as soon as Justin Hammer walks out onto the platform. He’s District 12’s Escort, and probably the worst of the bunch. Some of the Escorts grow to care, stray farther and farther away from their Capitol roots, but Hammer always seems selfish, like he’s...here to have fun. Peter remembers him saying the phrase ‘here to party’ a couple years ago. It filled him with rage then, the same rage that boils under the surface now.

Hammer’s purple suit catches the light, and it’s blinding. Peter sighs, shifts closer to Ned so their arms are touching, and he wishes he could be standing next to May, too. Hammer is handed a microphone, and it squeals feedback. He winces, smiles, waves the thing around in the air for a second, and brings it back up to his mouth.

“Alright,” he says. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Peter tries to stay calm. He looks down at the ground while they play the same damn video they play every year, about terrible war, about their triumphant games, about one man and one woman from each district, striving to be the best. Peter believes, in the beginning, the Capitol wanted the tributes to kill each other, but when they realized that only the districts closest to them would make the attempt, they upped the ante with their arenas, with the shit they sent in to torture everyone. It’s been them doing most of the killing, for sixty years now.

Their video is a manipulation, and Peter doesn’t even watch it. He knows things went down different than what they’re showing, knows nobody from Districts 4-12 fights anyone else—they only fight to stay alive.

Peter doesn’t look up, but he knows there’s that edited sequence of Tony in the end. Edited to make it look like he killed his best friend, James Rhodes, when Peter, and everybody else, knows Rhodes
was killed by Aldrich Killian. Tony’s only kill, in retaliation. And then Rhodes died in his arms.

But they show a knife in Tony’s hand, sinking into Rhodes’s gut, and Peter just doesn’t want to see it anymore.

He’s beyond tired of their lies.

The video ends and there’s a smattering of applause, mostly from the Peacekeepers and the authorities on the stage, and Peter’s heart starts to beat faster.

Ben never got out of the age of eligibility, because he died when he was 32 years old. Peter remembers the things he used to whisper, the few times they had to stand out here together. Whatever you do, don’t be a pawn in their game. Always be you, buddy. No matter what. Standing out here, standing up there. Always be you.

“Alright, Twelve,” Hammer says, swaying his hips a little bit as he moves. ‘I’m here to pick our next winner, okay? Our lady, our gentleman, one of you—this is gonna be our year! Who’s the next Tony Stark, huh?’

Peter swallows hard, shakes his head. It’s almost over, it’s almost over. He’ll go home tonight. He can have dinner with May and Ned. Maybe they’ll actually get to have dessert for once. It’s gonna be fine. It’s gonna be totally fine.

“Ladies first,” Hammer says. He walks over to the first glass globe, filled to the brim with small, folded envelopes.

Peter holds his breath, and reminds himself that he doesn’t have to worry about May anymore. Hammer fishes around in the bowl, selects an envelope from somewhere in the middle. He tucks the microphone under his arm, pulls the envelope out, and quickly opens it up. He holds it out with one hand, and speaks into the microphone.

“Our female tribute for District 12 is ...Michelle Jones.”

The whispers start again, as they always do when a name is called, and Peter feels cold. He doesn’t really know Michelle, but he does go to school with her, and he sees her in the hallways all the time. She’s quiet, he knows she’s smart because she always pulls high enough grades that people talk about it, and she...doesn’t deserve this. No one does, especially anyone in twelve, but she...he can’t picture her there. He can’t picture her...not here.

The crowd disperses and breaks to his left, and Peter looks to see her, standing with an empty circle around her, where people were moments before. She doesn’t hide her emotions, and Peter can see the anger on her face, in her clenched fists, and she doesn’t look around, not at anybody, not for family. She just moves out of the crowd, and walks up the main aisle towards the platform.

“She was with me in Panem history,” Ned whispers. “She was...she was nice.”

“She still is,” Peter says, without thinking. He watches the hard line of her shoulders as she takes her spot beside Hammer, and his stomach does somersaults.

“Hello hello, Michelle,” Justin says, but she doesn’t even look at him. She shakes her head a little bit, disgust in her eyes, and Peter thinks maybe, maybe they have a winner on their hands.

“Alrighty then,” Hammer says, raising his eyebrows, getting no response from the crowd.

Peter can’t breathe. He swallows hard, doesn’t look at Ned, because if he looks at Ned, he’s gonna
freak out.

Hammer walks over to the other bowl. A long, high pitched noise goes off in Peter’s ears, and he feels like he blacks out this moment every year because it fills him with such terror, his whole body seizing up and every thought in his head screaming please not me, please not me, please not me.

Which is why the next moment is ten times worse.

Hammer holds his selected envelope out, narrowing his eyes at it as he reads. “And our male tribute from District 12 is...Ned Leeds.”

It feels like all the air is sucked out from the space around them, like something strong and deviant is ripping out Peter’s ribs, carving out his lungs. There’s no sound, a weighty, deathly silence. Peter’s eyes immediately fill with tears and he turns to face Ned, whose shock is painted all over his face.

Peter has spent nearly every waking moment with Ned since they met. Hunting in the forest, or their version of hunting, which was getting close enough to deer to be able to touch them. Cooking classes with so much burned bread. Forts in Peter’s backyard. Ned was there when they lost Ben, holding Peter up when May couldn’t anymore. Ned knows everything about him and loves him anyway, and the idea, the very—idea that they think they can take Ned away from him, make him watch Ned die on those TV monitors, it—it boils Peter’s blood.

Ned takes one step and Peter speaks up before his brain can come to any logical decision.

“I volunteer,” Peter says, his voice sounding strange and foreign. “I volunteer as tribute.”

The sound rushes back in and people are talking openly now, and he hears a gutted sob somewhere in the background that he knows must belong to May.

“No,” Ned says, grabbing his arms. “No, no, Peter, you can’t, you can’t—”

“I can’t let you go,” Peter says, not fully realizing what he’s done, what he’s set in motion. He just launches himself at Ned like he wanted to earlier, burying his face in his shoulder.

“No, no, no,” Ned says, crying, holding onto him. “No, no—”

And then Peter feels hands on him, yanking him away and tugging him into the main aisle. He stumbles but stays upright, taking one last look at Ned as they march him towards the stage. He faces forward, staring down at his feet, his eyes straining and burning.

The gravity of what he’s done hits him as he ascends the stairs, and stands there in front of his whole district. He’s been in that audience so many times, gazing up at two people who will never come back again. And now he’s one of those people. That noise is going off in his ears again, and he sees Hammer’s mouth moving, but he can’t make out the words. He sees May out in the crowd, and Mr. Delmar is holding her up, keeping her on her feet. But her face is contorted in pain, and he did that—Peter knows that’s his fault. That look.

He’s signed his own death warrant.

Hammer is close to him, and Peter finally tunes back in, looking at him, bewildered.

“I said what’s your name, kid?” Hammer asks, and his smile is smarmier up close.

“Peter,” Peter says. He swallows hard, tries not to look at May. “Peter Parker.”
“Peter Parker, wow,” Hammer says. “Our first volunteer here in twelve. Our first volunteer ever, that’s...that’s something. You’re something, Mr. Parker, definitely...drawing attention, already. Who’s that, out there? Who’s Ned Leeds to you?”

Peter catches Ned’s eye, sees the grief on his face, and Peter’s own tears start anew. “Uh...he’s my best friend,” Peter says. “He’s my best friend.”

“You must love him a lot,” Hammer says.


Ned looks at him like he’s already dead. Maybe that’s in Peter’s head, because that’s the look they’re all giving him. Both him and Michelle. Ned pats his chest, where Peter knows the Wasp pin is, and Peter covers the spot where his Iron Man is.

“Well, here they are, twelve,” Hammer says, holding his hands out. “Your tributes. Michelle Jones and Peter Parker.”

Peter looks over at Michelle, but she doesn’t look at him. The silence is deafening, like all the people he knows, all the people he lives with, are already mourning their loss.

He feels like he’s falling into a deep pit, and there’s no air anywhere. The peacekeeper to his right walks over, takes him by the arm with a firm grip, and turns him towards the door behind them. He’s never been through this door before, but he’s watched so many tributes go through it and never come back home again.

The peacekeeper grabs the handle, yanks it open, and pushes Peter inside.

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“Tony. Tony.”

Tony is stuck somewhere between sleeping and waking, and last night’s vodka keeps the memories from taking shape. But sometimes, he really thinks he’s hearing Pepper’s voice instead of Janet’s. It feels like ages, since he last saw her. Longer than it’s actually been. Sometimes he wonders if she was ever real at all.


He can hear her boots thumping on his floor. “Sorry, this one’s non-negotiable, unless we wanna go a couple rounds with the peacekeepers.”

That wakes him up, sends a shockwave through his body, because he knows what it means. Non-negotiable means reaping day. He’s drunk most of the time, but Janet keeps him on top of his schedule.

He’s got his back to her, but he covers his face anyway. He allows himself this, every time—that rush of sadness for the people he’s about to meet, the people he won’t be able to save. He doesn’t leave the village very much anymore, because he doesn’t wanna see their goddamn faces. He doesn’t want to get to know any of them, because eventually, the Capitol is gonna hand him two. Two he’ll try to stay distant from, two he’ll inevitably grow attached to, in his own, godforsaken way, and two he’ll have to watch suffer. Two he’ll have to watch die.

His cross to fucking bear, since they won’t let him kill himself.
“Happened already?” he asks, voice gruff.

“Yeah,” Janet says.

She walks over, sits on the edge of his bed, and doesn’t touch him. “Uh, they’re both young, this time. Michelle Jones, sixteen, and...Peter Parker, also sixteen. He...he volunteered, Tony. For his best friend. It was...it was painful to watch. He’s...he’s got heart, it might be...he might be a little much for you.”

He knows what she’s saying. Let me take this one, so he doesn’t break your heart. She’s always looking out for him, despite her own pain, her own losses, and sometimes, it makes him feel like a bigger asshole than he knows he is. Tony clears his throat, and tries to imagine this Peter’s face. Great. Another one that’s gonna chip away at what’s left of his soul.

But part of him...part of him thinks he deserves it.

“No, God,” he says. “I mentor the male, you mentor the female. Don’t screw up what we’ve got going on, Jan.” He turns over, looks at her. She’s already all dressed. “I’ve got him.”

Janet sighs, looks off towards the light of the door. “Fine,” she says. She pats him on the hip. “Get your ass moving. We’ve gotta be at City Hall.”

“Did you break the front door again?” he asks, watching as she gets up.

“No,” she says. “You forgot to lock it.”

Tony sees a long line of shadows in his mind, and the newest one is forming.
“Watch where you’re going.” The leaves crunch beneath Janet’s boots.

“I know how to walk, Jan.”

“I’m surprised your legs even work, you’ve been in the same position for the last three days.”

“I’m not a runner, I don’t...jog. I won’t be your running buddy.”

Tony knows Janet wants a better life for him. Janet knows they’re trapped, and yet she still tries. Still tries to have a life, still tries to drag him out into the daylight. He doesn’t know how she goes on, after what happened to Hope and Hank. After what the hell they have to deal with, every single year. She gets up every morning and runs. She runs in the afternoon, and after dinner. He looks through the blinds at one in the morning and sees her in her living room, running.

They’re both trying to run away, but they’re doing it a lot differently.

Tony looks down at his tablet as they walk, trying not to listen to the trucks and peacekeepers tracking their every goddamn move. He looks at an outdated photo of Peter Parker, watches the footage of him volunteering for his friend. Watches them hug, watches the realization cross the kid’s face as he’s led up to the stage.

Tony feels like he’s gonna puke. He sucks in a breath, and clicks the thing off. He wants to break it. Smash the screen, scuff it up, tear it apart. But every time he breaks a tablet, they hand him another one. Every time he hacks into the Capitol mainframe, they find him, give him a couple pokes with a cattle prod for his trouble.

Maybe one day he’ll hide his online footprint a little better. When the electricity stops feeling like reparations.

“I think Michelle might be a fighter,” Janet says, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “Think she might give One and Two a run for their money.”

“Hope so,” Tony says, trying not to think about it. Any of it.

He needs a drink.

The two of them enter the City Center through the back door, and that’s where Tony sees May Parker. He must do a double take, because she does look familiar—some faint memory, something he must have pushed down deep in his mind—but he doesn’t look away fast enough, and she notices him.

The last thing he needs. He hasn’t even gotten to meet the kid yet. He always tries to avoid the families.

“Tony,” Janet says, touching his shoulder, sensing the oncoming storm.

But May Parker is faster.

She flits down the narrow hallway, rushing up to him. She gets into his space, and the only person that’s been this close to him recently is Janet. And before that, almost a year ago—but he tries not to think about that. The memories are dark, and murky, because he’s made them that way.
May’s eyes are bloodshot, tear tracks tracing down her cheeks, but her grip on Tony’s arm is strong. She has an air about her, a tense determination, and she doesn’t blink. There’s a peacekeeper down the hallway, but he doesn’t move an inch.

“I don’t know if you remember me,” May says, voice low and sharp. “But I’m gonna make you.”

“Ma’am—” Janet starts.

“Tony,” May says, unfazed. “You’ve got my kid’s life in your hands. My nephew. My Peter. And I know, I know—I know what you’ve been through, I know that these faces, every year, you might not—might want to forget, might believe that you can’t—you can’t do anything for these people, these kids, but Peter—you’ve been a hero to him since the day you got back.”

Tony sucks in a breath, and looks down at the ground. He feels like a paper stick figure, like one more word from her will bowl him over.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry,” Janet says. “But we—”

“I need to tell him,” May says, stepping even closer. “Peter was four years old, when you won your games. I didn’t let him watch, but you know how they—usher us all out for thedamn procession, Homecoming, and you were—our second Victor in the history of this whole damn thing, and it was—I’m sure you remember. It was too much. It was too much.”


“We got there early, basically before everyone else, and four year olds—they run, they run all over the place, and Peter—well, he saw you. Before the meet and greet. Saw them, off to the side of the stage, roughing you up. Saw the blood, how you—how you looked. I knew what you’d lost, what they’d—what they’d done—the word got around—”

Tony blows out a sigh, and holds her gaze. He feels like someone is bashing in his skull. The memories are churning in his head, coming together. Trying to rise back up.

“—but Peter didn’t know. He just—instantly sympathized. Are you seeing where I’m going? Do you remember?”

Tony blinks. “Remember?”

“When the crowd came, and you had to come out, you looked like you might collapse. Like you couldn’t take it. And Peter, he—”

The moment hits him, crawling up from where he’d buried it.

They’d killed Pepper and his parents the day he arrived back in Twelve, and after that he felt like the walking dead. Like breathing was too much, living was too much. After what he’d been through, after what they’d done. But he was their poster boy, and they had expectations. The homecoming was important to them, and his behavior wasn’t up to par. Not the normal Tony Stark snark, not enough quips, not enough confidence, but he didn’t even know what the hell any of that meant anymore. He wasn’t the same. His life was in tatters.

They liked to knock him around, and he let them.

But seeing that crowd, that day, two days after he’d lost everything—he was too young to have a heart attack then, twenty-eight years old, but he thought he might. Everything felt numb, his whole
body, and he knew this was the rest of his life. Their mockery, his shame, everything in shambles.

Then that little boy.

He’d been close to the front of the crowd, but he had to push his way through. The peacekeepers didn’t see a threat in a child, and the kid grabbed Tony’s hand. Tugged until he got his attention, and Tony knelt down on muscle memory. The kid touched his cheek with one small hand, and looked at him like he knew something he shouldn’t, or something Tony didn’t know just yet. And then he wrapped his arms around him and hugged him tight. Tight enough that it brought Tony back to earth, broke down everything he’d been trying to keep in. They both cried, and the peacekeepers didn’t even fucking stop him. They just turned off the cameras.

“You remember,” May says.

Tony feels dizzy. “Jesus,” he breathes, squeezing his eyes shut tight. “Uh, uh—”

“It felt important,” May says.

“Mrs. Parker,” a voice says, from behind them.

“You’ve been his hero since,” May says, more urgently now. “Every day, with you, with Tony Stark, with Iron Man. Peter, he’s—he’s kind, he’s gentle, he’s got the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known—”

“Mrs. Parker—”

“Tell me you won’t let him down,” May says, eyes flashing.

Tony doesn’t like to make promises, especially ones he can’t keep. He lets everyone down, he lets Janet down on a daily basis. But that kid—if he was Peter, if she’s not lying—he gave him something most people don’t, whether they’re afraid, or perpetuating the whole goddamn system. He gave him a moment.

“I won’t,” Tony says.

May stares at him, like she didn’t exactly expect a response.

“Mrs. Parker,” the man says, hovering behind her. “You have five minutes to say goodbye to your nephew.”

She nods, doesn’t turn around just yet. “Okay,” she says, looking Tony up and down, like she’s trying to decide what to think of him. He knows she has preconceived notions, news the people spread, rumors the Capitol creates. But now he’s something else, to her. The man who needs to save her nephew.

His shoulders slump under the weight of her expectations.

“Okay,” she says again, and finally turns, following the man to the door at the end of the hallway. Tony watches her go and feels unsteady on his feet, trying to shove the memories back down again, so they don’t catch fire and reduce him to ashes.

He can see the kid sitting there when the door opens. Sitting there with his head in his hands.

“Check in?” Janet asks, softly, hand on his shoulder. “Head to the train?”

Sometimes they meet them here, sometimes they head to the train. There’s no track record, no lucky
way to go about it, because they’ve all died. Every single one of them has died.

He met Janet on the train.

“Let’s go,” Tony says. “Let’s meet them there.”

~

Peter can tell it’s her by the sound of her footsteps.

“May,” he croaks, too scared to look up, too afraid of her anger. More afraid of her sadness. He hears the door close, hears her suck in a breath. “May, I’m sorry.”

“No, no, baby,” she says, hands smoothing across his back when she gets closer. “No, don’t—it’s okay—”

“It’s not okay,” Peter groans, his head pounding from all the goddamn crying he’s been doing since they put him in here. “I—I wasn’t—I just couldn’t let that happen to him. I couldn’t—I couldn’t even think about it, I just—I knew there was one way to stop it and I just—I just did it, I didn’t think, I just—I just spoke up, so fast—”

“It’s okay,” May says, and she kisses the top of his head, once, twice and then again. She squeezes his shoulders, brushes his hair back, and he dissolves into a new round of tears, because this is it. This is the last time.

He shoots out of the chair and wraps her in a hug. He feels small again, even though he’s taller than her. He feels like that orphan child staring at one faded photograph of his parents, feels like that idiot middle-schooler with too much soot on his face, begging to know what happened to his Uncle. His life has turned—this is an all new perspective, one that he’s had nightmares about, one he’s actively prayed to never embody and yet here he is, readying for the death march. They’ve got their claws in him now.

He’ll be one of those bodies he wonders about.

He almost collapses under his fear, but May holds him tight.

“I love you,” he says, voice wavering. He clutches at her. “I love you so much.”

She pulls away, and cups his face in her hands. She looks at him firmly. “I love you, honey. But you’re not gonna die. You’re not gonna die.”

Peter’s heart sinks. “May—”

“Tony Stark. Will not let you die.”

Peter presses his lips together and stares at her.

“He won’t. He won’t. I know, it’s been—a long road. For him, for us, for Twelve and—and all of Panem, but this is—this is you. And it just can’t happen.”

Peter doesn’t know what to say. He knows she’s wrong, knows it would take a miracle to survive what’s ahead of him. But he can’t break her heart more than he already has.

He nods, pressing his forehead against hers.

A few moments pass, and then the door opens. He’s terrified it’s them coming to take him away, but
his heart lurches when he sees Ned walk into the room.

“Peter,” Ned hiccups.

“Ned,” Peter breathes, and collapses against him when he closes in.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Ned sobs, into Peter’s shoulder. “You didn’t have to, you didn’t have to.”

“Yeah, I did,” Peter says, eyes full of tears, and he doesn’t know how he’ll be able to rip himself away.

Ned pulls away, exchanges a look with May. It’s like there’s some kind of silent communication there that Peter isn’t privy to, and then they both look at him. May takes one of his hands, holds it softly in her own. Ned grabs his shoulder.

“You have to win,” Ned says. “That’s it. That’s all.”

Peter shakes his head, looking down at their feet.

“I told him Tony would help him,” May says. “And he will. He will.”

Peter swallows hard, and he’s sweating, panicking, fear prickling all over him. Then there’s a loud bang on the door, and his eyes widen. He feels like his heart stops, and he meets Ned’s gaze. “Ned, you’ve gotta take care of her.”

“I will,” Ned says, nodding fast.

“You know how it gets, afterwards,” Peter says, and he steps closer to them when there’s another round of harsh knocking. “During, while it’s—while it’s...happening—Ned, you know what happened to Tony’s family. You know.”

“I’ll protect her,” Ned says, tugging May closer.

“And I’ll protect him,” May says, holding Ned’s hand. “And Tony will protect you.”

Peter shakes, trying not to panic, trying not to think about the arena, the moment, the moment and everyone will see it, everyone will see him gurgling, gasping for breath, coughing up blood, they’ll see, they’ll see, Tony will see, he’ll be another one of Tony’s failures, another dead tribute, another empty space—

The door opens, and a peacekeeper comes through. Peter sucks in a breath, his eyes going blurry, and May tugs him close between her and Ned.

“I love you,” she says. “I love you, I love you.”


“I love you,” Peter whispers, squeezing his eyes shut tight. “I love you, I love you.”

“Time to go,” the peacekeeper says.

Peter holds on until they yank him away, tugging him out into the hallway. He desperately looks over his shoulder, knowing that this is probably the last time he’s going to see them. “I love you,” he calls. “Ned, May—I love you.”
They start to answer, but then they’re muffled when another peacekeeper pulls the door closed.

Two tears race down Peter’s cheeks and he quickly wipes them away. He looks up to see Michelle walking out of another room, and there’s one woman and a young girl being left behind. There’s a haunted look in Michelle’s eyes, which she quickly masks and tucks away when she sees Peter.

“Hammer,” the peacekeeper says. “You have them?”

Peter looks up, and sees Justin Hammer standing by the back door. He turns around, raising his eyebrows.

“I’ve been doing this for twenty years, jumbo, I think I can walk my new kids twenty steps to the goddamn train station.”

The peacekeeper doesn’t say anything else, just pushes them forward abruptly, enough that they both stumble.

“Christ,” Hammer says. “Don’t they think you’re gonna get pushed around enough? Huh?” He cracks a smile, eyes darting back and forth between them. “Hopefully you get real popular and then no one can touch you without Capitol outrage. And Capitol outrage can go far. Don’t underestimate being the favorite.”

Neither one of them say anything, but so many things are flashing through Peter’s mind that he can’t quite grasp onto one of them. He still can’t believe this is actually happening. He feels like he’s gonna wake up from a nightmare any second.

Hammer clicks his tongue. “Alright, we’ve gotta work on the response time, you gotta—you guys gotta be better than that.” He motions towards the glass door. “C’mon. Follow moi. Train’s nicer than most of the homes here.”

He turns his back before Peter can glare at him.

Peter and Michelle follow, and Peter thinks about running away. He wonders how far he could get—he’s gone through Eleven before, he’s been through the whole district unnoticed, with Ned. But people know his face now, since the goddamn reapings are live streamed to every district, and every home in the Capitol. He could make for the Atlantic Ocean, find out what’s on the other side of it. They don’t ever teach them that, not here, not in these schools, but Peter knows Panem can’t be the only piece of land in the world. There has to be somewhere else, somewhere that treats their people like...people.

He thinks about running away, but he keeps following all the same.

They walk through the back door, start descending the stairs, and Michelle clears her throat.

“I would have done the same thing,” she says. “As...what you did. Volunteering for your best friend. If it had been, uh...if it had been my sister.”

Peter looks at her, and his mouth feels dry. “How old is she?”

“Thirteen,” Michelle says, and a small, sad smile flits across her face. “This was her first year.”

Peter swallows hard, and looks up to watch Hammer swerving back and forth on the sidewalk. The train station is just ahead of them, and there are more peacekeepers there than Peter has ever seen in one place, including the reaping.
“You can call me MJ,” Michelle says. She clutches her hands in front of her, and only briefly looks at him before looking down again. “And I, uh—I’m not gonna kill you.”

It makes his heart dip a little bit, and he lets out a stilted laugh. “Good,” he says. “I know you...probably could.”

“I’m glad you’re bonding!” Hammer calls, over his shoulder, looking back at them with a sickening smirk. “Last year, Jesus—the bickering didn’t stop.”

Peter shakes his head.

“Love that he talks about two dead people like that,” MJ whispers, and she shifts a little closer to Peter as they walk.

As they’re climbing onto the train, Peter lets MJ go first, and turns to take one last look at Twelve from the doorway. He can hear the peacekeepers’ walkie talkies, but past that, it’s quiet, the wind blowing easily, the trees swaying against the bright blue sky.

He wonders if they’ll remember him.

“Hey,” Hammer says, knocking him on the shoulder. “Let’s go, thing’s about to take off and nobody wants you toppling out. Besides, you gotta meet Janet and Tony.”

Peter sorta hates himself for the rise of excitement that blooms in his chest, and he lets Hammer slide the door closed. Then a peacekeeper comes, locks it, and stands in front of it. As if he’d try something.

Peter sighs, turns to follow Hammer.

He’s looked up to Tony Stark forever, for always, and he hates that this is the way he’s gonna meet him. As someone marked for death, as a burden, an obligation. Someone he doesn’t even want to know.

“Trip’s gonna take a little over twelve hours, so get comfortable, and we’ve got plenty of things to keep you comfortable.” Hammer pats Michelle on the shoulder, and moves back ahead of the two of them.

They walk into what looks like a sitting room, and Peter can’t help it when his jaw drops, because they’re in one car on a train, but it looks like it’s worth more than his whole house. Chandeliers, glass ceilings, velvet chairs, full bars. Egyptian carpets like he’s only seen in textbooks, flowers and ornate decorations on every surface.

He wishes May could see it. In a way that didn’t barrel her towards the Capitol.

The train starts moving and both MJ and Peter nearly topple over, and Hammer only laughs a bit, bracing one hand on the wall.

“Yeah, first one’s always a doozy,” he says. “C’mon, your mentors are in the next car. As is...lots of food.”

Peter’s heart starts thumping again as Hammer presses the button to open the door. He can’t prepare himself, way too much has happened today and all the circumstances are completely wrong, and he feels like rushing backwards and hiding behind one of those velvet chairs, maybe downing one of the curvy bottles of alcohol and seeing where that takes him.
But his feet keep carrying him forward, and Hammer steps aside once they’re in the new car.

There’s a lot of stuff in here too, a buffet table that looks about ten feet long, but Peter is frozen.

Tony Stark and Janet Van Dyne get to their feet, and Peter watches Tony’s eyes focus on him. Peter’s mostly seen him in photos, from afar a couple years ago, but now he’s right here, right in front of him.

*He’s a hero, baby.*

*Kid, I—I’m not—*

Peter shakes his head, the memories fizzling out before they can fully form. Something he can’t quite remember.

“Jan, Mr. Stark,” Hammer says, sending a smile Tony’s way, which Tony doesn’t return. “Here are your tributes, uh—Michelle Jones, Peter Parker. Not sure if you saw it, but Peter volunteered. So we already got us a story. Isn’t that fab?”

“Yeah,” Tony says. “Real fab.”

Peter’s heart sinks.

“Michelle,” Janet says, stepping forward and taking both of MJ’s hands. “It’s good to meet you, but I’m sorry you’re here.”

MJ just nods at her, quickly looks at Peter. Then Janet steps into Peter’s space, and Peter sees how kind her eyes are. She cups his cheek, tilts her head a little when she looks at him.

“That was very brave,” she says. “What you did.”

“Thank—thank you,” Peter says, nodding. He doesn’t feel brave at all.

“Nice to meet you both,” Tony says, curt, his hands on his hips. No individual introductions, but Tony keeps looking at him, and Peter can’t tell what he’s thinking. At all. Peter just feels strangely small in front of him. It’s like being faced with a real live mythical creature whose presence takes up half the room.

Tony keeps talking, and his gestures are wild. “Uh, Hammer, can you...go? Somewhere? Anywhere else? This food isn’t for you, it’s for them—”

“Hilarious, Tones—”

“Don’t call me that,” Tony says, wincing. “Your little buddies are a couple cars down, Wilson might be with them, wanna...meet up? Leave us the hell alone?”

Hammer turns to look at Peter, as if he might find some sympathy there, but Peter averts his eyes.

“Alright, Anthony,” Hammer says. “I’ll catch back up with the four of you later.”

He swishes around Janet, grabbing something off the buffet table before he moves on to the next car. The door closes behind him, and it’s quiet, the train rushing along the tracks.

“Oh, let’s get some food, huh?” She wraps her arm around MJ’s shoulders, tugging her forward. Tony only stands there for a moment, watching Peter
until Peter starts moving, following him over to the table.

They gather their food in relative silence, save for Janet saying little things here and there, and Peter thinks that, even though she lost her daughter, that she still acts like a mom.

They migrate over to the dining table, and Peter looks over his shoulder to find Tony staring at him. Or, staring down at his plate.

“You know you can eat more than that, right?” Tony asks, and there’s no judgment in his voice, a strange sort of softness, almost like he’s betraying himself. “I know, uh—well, let’s say I remember the food in Twelve. The normal food, not the gourmet shit they fly in for me and Janet every week from the Capitol.”

Peter’s mouth tugs up a little at the corner. “I remember, uh, when you were sharing, when they—well, before they made you stop. May and I had something like...crown roast of pork or something like that, with all these vegetables and sauces, potatoes, it was...it was...well, she cried, that was for sure.”

Tony smiles a little bit, then, and glances up at Janet. “Yeah, we’re trying to find a way around their bullshit restrictions.” He taps his fork on the edge of his plate. “I think we, uh—actually have some crown roast of pork on this….smorgasbord over here.”

Peter nods, and follows him back over.

~

Tony’s brain is working on overdrive, and the quiet helps him over-analyze. The way Peter holds his fork, the way his eye twitches every so often, the way he tries to wipe away his tears as soon as they form in the corners of his eyes. He eats like he’s never eaten before, and Tony can’t blame him. He looks solid enough, like he might be able to hold his own in a fight, but Tony blinks away those thoughts because they’re goddamn intrusive. They’re in it, but they’re not in it yet. This is the in-between. If there was ever a break in this hell tour, it’s the train.

He can’t stop thinking about May Parker’s face. He looks at Peter, and thinks about that little kid, all those years ago. You’re a hero, the kid had said, close to his ear.

Peter. Not the kid. It was Peter.

“So what are we supposed to do?” the girl asks, once her plate is empty. She leans on the table with her elbows. “When we get in the arena?”

Tony’s chest goes a little tight and his eyes cut over to Janet.

She leans over, trying to match Michelle’s posture, but with a little less tension in her shoulders. She’s so damn good at this, and Tony thinks she would probably be better if she didn’t have to babysit him too. He doesn’t understand how she separates herself, how she learns details about these people and doesn’t let those details cut into her skin, doesn’t burn under the heat of keeping this person, with all their hopes and dreams and eccentricities, safe and alive and whole. It eats at Tony. He hasn’t asked Peter one personal question and he already knows too much about him. Tony will always remember the way he blinks. How he picks at his fingernails. How he cracks his knuckles, rubs the corner of his eyes.

Tony has full portraits of all of them in his head, and he tries to lock them in a dark room. But he can still see their eyes. Pleading with him. Going fuzzy, glassy. Staring. Dead.
“Well,” Janet says. “We’ve got a whole month of, uh, training and activities and...interviews—”

“I know,” Michelle says. “I know we’re gonna do all that crap, I know, but the arena, that’s what I want to know about.”

“Well, we’re gonna discuss it,” Janet says.

“When?” Michelle asks. There’s a brief pause and she looks at Tony too. “When?” she asks, widening her eyes, shaking her head. “Shouldn’t we be filling every moment with talking about that? Because last year, Bucky—he was the highest rated. The whole time. Better than anyone from One and Two, and we thought—we thought we had a winner again, from Twelve, finally. How could he lose? How could that happen?”

Tony goes cold at the sound of his name, and he chews on his lower lip. He glances at Peter, and sees him rolling a grape back and forth between his fingers. “We’re gonna have plenty of time to get you ready,” Tony finds himself saying. “Uh, all that—”

“Right now, we just want you to relax,” Janet says, jumping in. “We know...reaping day is hard. We just left, we don’t...want to inundate you with information right now, because you might not remember it.”

Michelle sighs, sits back, and Tony can tell she still wants to go on, wants to grill them, wants to scream and throw things, like he did back when he was reaped. But he sees himself in Peter too, the silence, the melancholy, the shock dripping off him.

Then, while Tony is over analyzing him, Peter pushes his chair back and gets up.

“You okay?” Tony asks, fast, before he thinks about it.

Peter gently touches the edge of the table with his fingertips, which looks like another nervous tick. “Is there—I mean, there probably is, this damn train is like, so fancy—uh, a place to...lay down? Sleep, maybe.”

“You both have your own cars, if you want to be alone,” Janet says. She meets Tony’s gaze, turns her head a little bit. “He can have the one in the back, but he’ll have to—walk through where Hammer and the others are—”

“It’s fine,” Peter says, and he quickly takes off towards the back sliding door, pressing the button a couple frantic times to get it to open.

There a few quiet moments after he leaves, in which Tony feels like a distinct failure. Part of him demands that he follow, try to comfort the kid, find out more about him. And the other part roots him to the spot, because he already feels too close to the edge of the cliff and it’s been a matter of hours.

“Do you...know Peter personally?” Janet asks Michelle, as Tony sinks back in his seat.

“We go to the same school,” Michelle says. “We’re not friends, but I, uh. I see him around. He’s sweet, he’s...he’s a dork, he’s a big dork.” She shakes her head, looks off the way he went. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

“No one deserves this,” Tony says, a bitter taste in his mouth.

~

“Tony,” Janet says. “We’ve got about ten minutes. You should go wake him up before Hammer
does.”

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose. He doesn’t want to be anywhere near Hammer, ever, and another one of his life’s plagues is to see him for a month straight every single year. But he’s used to him, and the kid isn’t, and that isn’t the best thing to wake up to.

He nods, gets to his feet, and looks over at where Michelle is curled up in one of the lounge chairs. “You got her?” Tony asks, already heading for the door.

“Got her,” Janet says.

Tony weaves through their decadence, takes a few swigs from the whiskey bottle in the next car, and grabs a magazine with Sue Storm’s face on it to shield him when he walks through the fashion car.

They’re chattering away about all their glittery plans when he walks through, and he doesn’t hear Wilson’s voice in the chorus. Sam’s never really at their level anyway, and Tony takes it as a good sign that Peter is meeting his stylist in the Capitol. That’s where Tony met Quill, all those years ago. Quill, who didn’t look like he had a creative bone in his body. Quill, who surprised him in more ways than one.

Tony still wonders if they killed him too.

“Don’t think we don’t see you,” Hammer’s voice says.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony says, from behind his magazine. He hears Hammer huff but he keeps walking, pressing the button and ditching the mag as soon as he gets into the next sitting room. He doesn’t know why the fuck they have so many places to sit, and he sighs to himself as he trudges through it, patting a bottle of champagne that’s situated by the door. He walks through what’s supposed to be Michelle’s car, that she’s apparently never going to use, and then he reaches Peter’s.

He catches himself in his loudness and stops at the door, tapping the button softer than he’s been doing the rest.

He walks into Peter having a nightmare.

Tony has enough of his own to recognize it, and he watches the kid’s hand tighten around his sheet. Tony’s nightmares grip him, grind him up and spit him out, and somehow it’s always worse when he has to wake himself up. Janet can shake him out of them, will hover over him and squeeze his shoulder, and it almost reminds him of his mom, when he focuses hard enough.

He usually tries not to talk to his tribute this much, on the train. He drinks, and he sinks down in too-soft chairs. Janet holds court, and he gets a buzz. He tries to take himself somewhere else, so he won’t see them in their most vulnerable moments. When it’s all new, and horrifying, and when they’ve got a small bit of hope left.

He approaches the cot and sits down on the edge of it. Janet has fewer nightmares than he does, and fewer than that he actually gets to see, so Tony feels strange and out of place on this side of it. He’s heard the tributes of years past having nightmares, but usually, he keeps his distance. Tries to.

Tony clears his throat. That doesn’t work, and the kid keeps thrashing. It almost seems to get worse, and Tony reaches out, touches his shoulder.

“Peter,” Tony says. Peter’s eyelids flicker, but he doesn’t wake up. “Peter, hey.”
The kid startles, and his eyes snap open. He focuses on Tony, his brows furrowing, and then recognition hits him in waves.

Tony knows what he’s thinking.

“Yeah,” he says, the word short and sharp. “It’s still real.”

Peter closes his eyes, sucks in a breath through his nose and blows it out his mouth. Tony pulls his hand back, but continues to sit there like a moron.

“Oh shit,” Peter says.

“Got it,” Tony says. He kneels down, picks the thing up, and sees his own face looking back at him. Well, the face he made, the face he crafted on forest floors, listening to the symphony of death all around him.

He hasn’t seen the Iron Man mask in a long time, and he backs up to sit on the edge of the cot again, still holding onto it.

“Uh, Ned—my best friend, he—he got me that,” Peter says. “This morning. He has a Wasp one.”

Tony stares at it for a couple moments longer, feeling strangely displaced. “Uh, it’s pretty dead on,” he says, handing it back to him. “It was a little more red, though.”

“Yeah,” Peter says, smiling to himself. “Uh, I’ve got—I’ve got a couple posters.”

“Ah, hoarding contraband,” Tony says, and fondness creeps into his expression. “That’s bold, kid. Some people rip ‘em down so they won’t get in trouble.”

“Yeah, they’d rip ‘em down, and I’d gather them up and say I was putting them in the garbage. Except the garbage was in my house.”

Tony snorts, looking down at his hands. The train comes to a smooth stop, and he looks up just in time to see the flash of fear in Peter’s eyes.

“Remember, nobody’s expecting anything of you tonight,” Tony says. “Just pretty much straight to bed.”

Peter nods, the lightness from the moment before all but gone. He quickly opens up his jacket, and puts the pin back on. He meets Tony’s eyes, and there’s so much trust there that Tony nearly blacks out. He clears his throat, gets to his feet.

“C’mon.”

Tony never misses the Capitol. He doesn’t feel at home in the house they built him in Victor’s Village back in Twelve, but he feels like a pariah here, even though they all love him. They love him in the way someone loves a pet, and he knows any number of them would jump at the chance to
have him locked up in their mansions.

They’re looking at Peter like that now, too.

The peacekeepers force an opening in the cheering crowd when they exit the train, and Tony dips his head against all the lurid colors, satin dresses, glittery suits surrounding him as soon as they step onto Capitol grounds. They let Michelle and Janet go ahead, and he finds himself putting an arm around Peter’s shoulders, leading him forward. He knows he’ll have to encourage the kid to be social somewhere down the line, but it’s the first damn day. He can blow through them if he wants to.

They’re heading for the limo the Capitol provided for Twelve’s entourage, and then Tony feels Peter being tugged away from him. He looks up, sees a peacekeeper with his hand locked around Peter’s wrist, and Tony surges over to wedge himself between them, knocking the asshole’s hand away.

“I got it,” Tony says, squaring off in front of the dark mask, and he’s a lot shorter than this dickwad but that doesn’t make him feel small. He knows he’s got problems, he knows he’s three steps away from languishing in the street if Janet didn’t keep care of him, but he’s ten times the man any of these pricks are. “I can put my kid in the goddamn car.”

Did he just say ‘my kid’?

Tony knows he’s an agitator, and the peacekeeper could start shit if he wants to, but he doesn’t regret stepping forward. He raises his eyebrows at him, tilts his head, and watches him step back.

“We’ve already got two of you driving us there. How many more are joining the party, huh? You can come, but you’re not drinking my booze.”

“Tony,” Janet says, from the other side of the limo.

“No takers?” Tony asks, looking around at the multitude of peacekeepers present, staring at him over the screaming hoard of Capitol fans, behind the barricades. “Alright. Thanks for the memories, Gonzo.”

He finally looks back at Peter, and sees him staring, wide-eyed.

“In the car, Mr. Stark,” Janet says, her head disappearing as she gets in.

“Right,” Tony says. “Uh, after you, Mr. Parker.”

Peter nods fast, like he forgot what he was doing, and Tony pushes the door open further so he can get in. He slides in after him, and the peacekeeper slams the door shut before Tony can grab it. He narrows his eyes, meets Janet’s gaze, and sees her shaking her head at him as Hammer and his team shove in and move towards the middle of the limo, still chattering amongst themselves.

“What?” Tony asks, as the car starts moving. He looks up at the divider, sees the two bulky shadows through the transparent glass. “I’m tired of them. I’m tired.”

“Let’s not entice them into fights on the first day,” Janet says.

“What about the third?” Michelle asks. “Or fourth?”

Both Peter and Tony snort at the same time, and Janet shakes her head.

“Alright,” Janet says. “Alright. Two weeks in, that’s the earliest I’ll go for.”

“Deal,” Tony says.
“If you’re getting in fights with peacekeepers,” Hammer says, “gimme a warning next time, so I can get a front row seat. Love watching those rippling muscles do their work.”

“Never doing it in front of you,” Tony says, pointing over at him.

There’s a brief beat of silence.

“You don’t have to do it on behalf of me,” Peter says, quietly.

“Everything I’m gonna do is on your behalf,” Tony says, before he can really think it through.

Janet gives him a pointed look. A pointed look that he pointedly avoids.

Their little foursome doesn’t talk much after that, save for Janet urging Michelle away from the in-car wine. Tony watches Peter stare out the window, and the Capitol’s decadence comes into full view through the eyes of someone who’s never seen it before. This happens every year, but for some reason, this one hits harder.

They park outside the Tribute Center, the windows go dark, and then they wait. Peter shifts, rubbing his thumb over the corner of the window, and then he looks at Tony.

“They’re trying to prevent you from getting a look at your competitors before tomorrow,” Tony says. “We’ve always gotta go in last, because we’re the highest number district—”

“Which means you get the highest number apartment,” Hammer says, sloshing a drink around. “Which means you get the penthouse.”

Tony wonders what the hell the kid is thinking, and he tries to recall what was running through his own head when his escort told him that. So much has happened since then, horror after horror piling on top of each other, and he can’t embody that person anymore. The version of him that first arrived here died when Rhodey took his last breath. And the new one was maimed beyond recognition when they showed him Pepper’s body.

~

Peter assumes penthouse means the top floor. He’s never seen a high rise building in person, only in the books about the Capitol, only on TV when they cover all the goings-on for Hunger Games month.

He still feels a thousand miles away. Like someone else has the reins and he’s just a passenger, observing a set of circumstances that are impossible, that can never happen.

Peter keeps looking at Tony like he’s an apparition. A Capitol illusion. There’s no way he actually volunteered for the Hunger Games. There’s no way he’s actually...interacting with Tony Stark.

Except he pinches the inside of his arm and he’s still here.

The peacekeepers open their doors when it’s time to go in. Peter nearly stumbles over his own feet gaping up at the building, which is so damn tall that the top of it disappears in the clouds. The sky is turning purple, oranges and pinks settling in the west where the sun is going down, and Tony steers him towards the revolving door with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

The inside is all open through the middle, going up and up and up, steel blues and hard golds and too
many peacekeepers. He can hear the vague sound of cheering and chanting, and he wonders if there are more obsessed Capitol people waiting for them here, too.

It’s like they’re waiting to collect little pieces of him. Pieces they’ll chip away for, like they’re mining for gold.

But he feels tarnished just being here.

“We’re making a beeline for the elevator,” Tony says, and Peter nods at him. He can hear Janet talking to Michelle a few paces away, about everything they’ll be doing here. The training, some of their interviews.

Peter gets into the elevator and tries to blink away his fear. He turns to watch the floors fly by out the glass window, and his stomach feels rancid.

“Guess Sam’s meeting us tomorrow,” Janet says. “That’s your stylist.”

“One of the good ones,” Tony says.

Peter nods, and closes his eyes, pressing his forehead against the glass.

~

Their penthouse suite is one of the most grandiose things he’s ever seen in his life, and it almost makes him feel sick. The living room is bigger than his entire block. He thinks the coffee table might be solid gold.

He wanders down a back hallway, and Tony pushes a door open for him.

“This is your room,” he says. “Uh, they got your January measurements, so you’ve got a full closet of clothes, make you look like a real Capitol local. Nothing too schmaltzy, like the bunch of those assholes you saw out there today. More...refined, suited to your tastes. Hopefully.”

The windows take up half the walls, and they’re—they’re not showing the outside. It looks like some deep underwater scene, fish leaving bubbles in their wake, and then it switches to somewhere on top of a mountain, snow fluttering through the air. Then a peaceful moment in a forest, cicadas chattering and the wind rustling the leaves. It reminds him of Twelve. It reminds him of May and Ned.

There’s a fireplace crackling in the corner, a huge bed that’s like two of his own from back at home. He walks over to the open closet, running his thumb over the sleeve of a red jacket. There are more clothes here than he’s ever had.

His head is throbbing. He turns, looks at Tony standing there.

“This is so weird,” Peter says, shaking his head.

The last bed he’ll ever sleep in. The last clothes he’ll wear. Tony’s gonna be one of the last people he ever interacts with, save for the ones they chose for him to die alongside.

“Yeah, uh, it’s—”

“No, I mean...meeting you like this,” Peter says.

Tony cocks his head a little, narrowing his eyes.

Peter feels wild, kind of out of his mind, all of it hitting him at once. “You’ve been my hero since
forever. Since as far back as I remember. There are some memories in my head that involve you that I’m sure I made up, but ever since I was small you’ve—you’ve been there. My Aunt May respected you and she hardly respects anyone, and my Uncle Ben he—well, I can tell you, we played Iron Man vs the Capitol in our backyard until they told us to stop.”

Peter’s vision is getting fuzzy, and he doesn’t know if he’s crying or having a goddamn heart attack. Can sixteen year olds have heart attacks? Maybe if they’re sent to the Hunger Games. Maybe then.

“And Ben was always like, ‘oh, one day we’ll meet him,’” Peter says. “‘Meet him for real’, he’d say. One day we’ll try—and we knew it’d be hard, we knew you’d—you’d gone through so much, and we didn’t wanna bother you more than they were already bothering you. But then he, uh. But then, he—”

Peter steps back, covering his eyes with a trembling hand. He remembers the burns all over Ben’s body. How much pain he was in, the way his breath rattled. How long it took him to die.

“—and then, uh, after—after he was gone, it was like there was this massive, rushing void following me around. An empty place where he should have been. There were questions he would have had the answers to. Routines he was a part of. But he was just...gone. And I caught glimpses of you every year during the Hunger Games coverage and I hated the whole thing and I hated to think of them putting you through this, but most of all I hated that, even if I did get to meet you, that he wouldn’t be there with me. He’d never, ever…” He clears his throat, drags the back of his hand across his cheeks to wipe away the tears. “He’s just a memory now. An empty space.”

Peter hears Tony take a step forward. “Kid—”

“I don’t wanna be an empty space,” Peter says, looking up at him, his eyes straining. “I don’t want—May to walk around that house, having this...rushing void where I used to be. I don’t want Ned to have to sit next to an empty desk. And now, you, you, who’s been my damn hero since I was little, I—I don’t want to be a void for you too,” Peter says, breathing hard. “I know you have so much of that. Everywhere, all around you, all those people and I don’t want—I don’t wanna be another shadow. I don’t wanna be another dead kid.”

He’s so embarrassed, now that it’s out, now that the words are hanging in the air. “I know it’s selfish,” he says, a little softer, bowing his head. “With Michelle, and all the other people who don’t deserve this either—”

Tony gets closer, reaching out and wrapping his hand around Peter’s wrist. “It isn’t selfish,” he says, firm. “It isn’t. Not in the slightest.”

Peter is quiet, and all he can hear in his head is May’s voice.

Tony Stark. Will not let you die.

He’s a hero, baby. He’s a hero.

A memory he’s not sure is real. Presenting itself like a fact.

“You’re not gonna die,” Tony says. “You’re not.”

Peter just stares at him. “I’m—I haven’t even seen the other guys, and I know I’m not better than them. I know I’m not—”

“I don’t care,” Tony says, still holding onto Peter’s arm. It’s strangely comforting. “You’re gonna win.”
Peter scoffs, and Tony shakes his head. “Sorry, kid. Sorry you don’t believe me. But that’s just how it’s gonna be.” He squeezes Peter’s wrist, looks at him hard, like he’s trying to drive the point home. Then he lets go of him, turns on his heel and walks out of the room, leaving the door open behind him.

~

About an hour later, Janet finds Tony pressing his forehead against the wall by the door to the veranda, which can’t be opened, just in case anyone gets any bright ideas. Everyone else has gone to sleep, but Tony can’t. There’s fire and brimstone in his mind’s eye, thunder and lightning and old bones. Himself, swiping at shadows.

“What are you doing?” Janet asks, close to him.

He blows out a harsh breath through his nose.

“Capitol headaches again?” she asks. “Too much Hammer? There’s always too much Hammer. Sam’ll be here tomorrow, he’ll level things out.”

“It’s not Hammer,” Tony says. “I don’t give a shit about him and his hot pink pantsuit.”

“Yeah, he didn’t need to show us what the hell he’s wearing tomorrow,” Janet says. “We’re gonna...we’re gonna be with him.”

Tony shakes his head, pressing it harder against the wall. There are ghosts everywhere in this goddamn penthouse, and Peter was right. There are so many voids, so many empty spaces surrounding Tony that he can barely breathe.

He won’t have another one. Not this one.

“What is it?” Janet asks, a little bit softer.

“I gotta save this one, Jan,” Tony says, not looking at her, because he’s afraid to see her face. “I just...I can’t let Peter Parker die.”

Every year, he’s distanced himself. Disassociated, tried not to get to know them, treated it like a job. He didn’t let them in, or he tried not to. They all put cracks in the wall he built up, but he knew all along he wouldn’t be able to save them. He tried to tell himself he was being realistic, that they were locked in a wheel that would just keep spinning no matter what kind of effort he put in.

But now he wants to break the wheel. Because Peter—Peter has been on the other side of the wall since that day Tony got home all those years ago. The kid doesn’t even remember properly. It’s there, behind a four year old’s gaze, like a gauzy memory that could be something he made up. But the moment is fresh now, for Tony. May Parker dug it up, strung it with lights. Reminded him of its significance. The kid’s face, now and then, makes him feel like he can’t run from this anymore.

Peter Parker isn’t like the others. He’s had his place in Tony’s heart for a lot longer, and the atrocity of this whole situation stands out in his eyes. In the way he speaks. In every step he takes. He was never meant to be here.

And Tony has to save him.
spider-man

Peter wakes up to the sound of Obadiah Stane’s voice. He thinks it’s part of his nightmare at first, and he squeezes his eyes shut tighter against it. But it seems to get louder, dragging him back to the world he lives in now.

He turns onto his side and sees the projection screen lit up with their president’s face. Stane sneers. His speeches are always forced on everyone, whether they’re in their homes, at work, at school, walking down the goddamn street, but Peter has never seen him so big before. He takes up half the wall here, his new position in Peter’s life unbearably close, far too dangerous.

He reminds Peter of a skeleton, and he’s far too jovial for the subject he’s discussing.

“—the schedule of events will be sent to each and every household, so nobody misses a thing,” Stane says. “We’ll have a few surprises today, so don’t worry, you’ll get to know your Tributes very soon. And then tonight, we’ll all come together in a wave of splendor and reveal them to the world at the chariot parade. So don’t miss out! Tune in, and Happy Hunger Games!”

He grins with his yellow teeth, and the broadcast cuts out. Peter covers his eyes with his hand, and tries to sink into the floor. Sink into the ether, into the core of the earth, sink into somewhere where his death will be his choice and not theirs. His fear is stifling, creating a cocoon of heat around him in an otherwise frigid room. His sadness drapes over him like a shroud, or a noose around his neck. But his anger—it’s bigger than the other two. It keeps building, pressing into the walls around his heart and setting him on fire from the inside out.

This is the first morning in forever he won’t get to see May, and he hates them for it.

“Good morning,” he whispers, trying to picture her. “Morning. I love you.”

He sighs, knows he can’t lay in his fantasyland forever. Whoever would have thought his normal life would have become this—a distant memory, something so far out of his grasp that he can only find it on the backs of his eyelids? He’s on a one-track road now. One so many before him have taken, buried under the earth at the end of it.

He tosses the covers aside, wanders over to the closet, and tries to pick something. His colors are usually muted, but there’s a lot of red in here, a lot of blue, and he has a hard time picturing himself in any of this. He finally chooses something, splashes some water on his face in the bathroom, and stares at himself in the mirror for what feels like forever.

He tries to picture himself doing all this shit, and he just can’t see it. He needs to become someone else. He needs to be more like Tony.

There’s a light knock on his door.

Peter braces his hands on the counter, shaking his head. He wishes the windows opened. He wishes he could scale down the building without anyone seeing him. He wishes he could disappear.

“Peter,” Tony’s voice says. “Kid?”

Peter cracks his jaw, nodding at his reflection. He made a complete idiot out of himself last night in front of Tony, and he’s sure it’s not gonna be the last time. He tries to remind himself that Tony has probably dealt with a lot worse.
Peter walks out of the bathroom and over to the door, quickly pulling it open. Tony is standing there, leaning on the wall, and Peter can hear Janet and MJ talking somewhere in the living room. Peter realizes that the overwhelming feeling that’s radiating off Tony at all times is guilt, and it’s there in his eyes right now. Peter doesn’t know what he’s got to feel guilty about. He’s a victim in this too.

“Hey,” Tony says. “You sleep alright? I didn’t wanna wake you up.”

Peter clears his throat, nods. Nightmares plagued him, and he felt like he was drowning. He doubts it’ll get better.

“We gotta go a couple floors down, get all the…..aesthetic stuff out of the way. Haircut, all that. It’s annoying as shit because they don’t try to make you feel good, they’re trying to change you and mold you to Capitol standards.”

Peter nods again. “Okay,” he says. “I ...expected as much.”

“Listen,” Tony says, straightening up a little bit. “It’s gonna suck. But I’ll be right outside. If there’s anything you don’t like, anything that makes you uncomfortable, just call out for me and I’ll be right there.”

“Okay,” Peter says.

“Or just start screaming your head off,” Tony says. “That’ll work too.”

Peter scoffs. “Yeah, I’m sure that’ll go over well.”

Tony shrugs. “I did it. Janet came in and knocked a few heads together. I’ll do the same.”

That sends a rush of warmth through Peter’s chest, and he nods again.

~

It’s more than a haircut. They spray tan him until he’s ‘sunkissed’, they fix his fingers and his toes, they redo his eyebrows, curl his eyelashes. They burn off skin tags, airbrush bruises, cover up cuts. They get rid of every bit of hair that isn’t on his head, and he’s about this close to calling for Tony, if it wasn’t for fear of Tony seeing him like this. The people with the surgical masks are bad enough, and he’s sure they’re gonna start rearranging limbs if he lets them keep going. They finally get around to cutting his hair, he wonders how MJ is faring, if they’re nicer to the girls or if they toss them around like rag dolls too. He feels less than fucking human, and his anger grows.

But then they lead him over to a tub behind a thin curtain, and he sinks into the nicest bath he’s ever taken in his life. It’s warm, smells like things he’s never smelled before, and it fizzes and bubbles all around him. He almost forgets where he is, that he’s in the middle of a place he’ll never leave. He’s hypnotized, sinking lower into the water and closing his eyes.

“Hey, Mr. Parker,” an unfamiliar voice says.

Peter’s heart lurches and he tries to use the water for cover, looking up with wild eyes. There’s someone standing behind the curtain, and the person quickly turns their back.

“Yeah, they told me you’d be done,” the man says, laughing a little bit. “Baths are new this year, they’re still integrating them into the schedule. Apologies for the intrusion.”

“I’m almost done,” Peter says, staring up at him. He was way too distracted by how nice the bath was to remember that there are like twenty people in here. He’s glad he’s got bubbles, because he
doubts the curtain is doing him many favors.

“I’m Sam,” the man says. “Sam Wilson, your stylist. I’m sorry you’re here, kid. But I saw what you did for your friend. We don’t get a lot of volunteering from the higher districts. People are already talking about you. I’m hearing a lot of chatter.”

Peter sucks in a breath. “Great,” he says.

“I’ll let you finish up,” Sam says. “Talk to you and Michelle with your mentors.”

Peter nods, watches him go, and lets out a sigh that was swelling up in his chest. He sucks in a breath, and dunks underneath the water, letting the warmth consume him. For a minute, he pretends he isn’t here. For a minute, he pretends his life is different.

He pretends until he can’t breathe anymore.

~

“They gave you guys baths?” Tony asks, exchanging an incredulous look with Janet. “Shit, that’s nice. Guess they’re done with the era of hosing you down like criminals. I still remember how hard it hit me. Didn’t know water could leave bruises.”


“It was nice,” Peter says. He keeps looking over at MJ—her hair is a little shorter, in soft curls around her face, and she’s wearing a lot more eye makeup. Purple and green sparkles, like a wave at sunset might look, if he ever got to see one in person. He clears his throat, looks back at Tony. “I met Sam.”

“Oh, he’s here?” Janet asks. “I haven’t seen him once.”

Someone comes in, sets a plate of weird little sandwiches on the coffee table in front of them, and Tony immediately nudges it a little closer to Peter. The door closes again, and Peter wonders what the hell they’re waiting for.

“Yeah,” Peter says. “He came in while I was in the tub.”

Tony sighs.

“I’m glad he didn’t do that to me,” MJ says, shifting a bit in her seat.

“He better be making his way in here,” Tony says. “Barging in on people when they’re goddamn bathing, got some explaining—”

“Hey!” a voice says, from behind them. “Sounds like someone is talking shit!”

They all turn around and Tony gets to his feet as Sam walks in, and the two of them meet a couple steps away from the couch in a hug. Peter hasn’t really heard Tony laugh in the short time he’s known him, and it’s a refreshing sound, surprising, like a glimpse of a life they could have had.

“Dickheads sent me right in,” Sam says. “I thought they’d be fixing his hair or some shit.”

“They did that after,” Peter says, standing up too. “Cut it before, styled it...after.”

“Yeah, you’re looking slick, buddy,” Sam says.
Peter thinks he looks like a strange, alternate version of himself. He immediately looks to Tony for confirmation of Sam’s sentiments, and looks away just as quick when he realizes that he did it. He looks at MJ next, then down at his feet. He closes his eyes, his face going a little hot.

“Sam, this is Michelle,” Janet says, as the two of them get up.

“Nice to meet you, Michelle,” Sam says, holding out his hand, and Peter tries to read into her expression, tries to see if there’s any trust there. But she’s got so much eye makeup on that he can barely see her eyes. “I apologize for your situation.” Sam looks at Tony, and Tony sways a little closer to him. “I’m gonna work closely with the four of you throughout this hellish experience. I’m gonna make you stand out.”

“I, uh, liked how you worked with Bucky’s arm last year,” MJ says, a little quietly. She clears her throat, and Peter watches Sam’s face change. Memories molding his expression. “I feel like the stylists from One and Two would have tried to hide it, but you always...drew attention.”

A small, sad smile graces Sam’s face. “Buck,” he says, with reverence. “He was...he was something else. Him and Nebula, last year—last year was hard, yeah.”

There’s a silence, and Peter can see them, one year from now with two new tributes, talking about him and MJ this way. It sends chills up and down his spine, and he chews on his lower lip.

“Well,” Sam says. “You guys got any ideas on what you want your theme to be? Their default for Twelve is always coal, mining, but y’all know I don’t buy into that.”

Peter looks up at MJ, and his mind goes completely blank. Like he’s never liked a single thing in his life. Never had a single thought or preference.

“Uh,” Tony says, reaching out and taking Peter’s shoulder. “We gotta think on that one for a stretch.”

“Hope the stretch is the time between now and our appointment later,” Sam says, raising his eyebrows. “You know I always try to get a head start, and parade’s tonight. I’m good, but I’m gonna need something.”

“Yeah, we weren’t thinking,” Janet says, crossing her arms over her chest. “They keep the schedule the same for however many years, and this year they decide to switch things up. We’ve got the hall of victors and arenas in about ten minutes—”

“Bullshit,” Sam says.

“But they usually save that for later, and they’re rushing the parade worse than ever—” Janet says, her voice rising.

Peter’s getting nervous. They handed him a paper schedule earlier and he barely looked at it, because it was too strange and gross to see the rest of his life planned out like that.

“It’s fine,” Tony says, and he looks at Peter. “We’ll come up with something while we’re—going through their crap.”

“Matter of fact,” Janet says, looking at her watch, “grab some food, we gotta head out.”

“I’ll start putting some things down,” Sam says, nodding at Peter, then MJ. “Any color we wanna stick with?”
“Red?” Peter asks, without thinking. He thinks of those posters under his bed, back at home. The footage he’s watched, over and over, huddling under May’s old picnic blanket, in the backyard with Ned. Red, like Iron Man. That’s an easy choice he can make.

Peter gets an approving look from Tony.

“Okay,” Sam says. “You do some thinking, and we’ll bring it together later.”

“Deal,” Tony says. “Alright, let’s try to lose Hammer on the way down there.”

~

Peter believes they’re keeping them in the same building so they don’t see much of the outside. So they don’t get tempted to escape by a space too wide, full of too many avenues and possibilities. Peter thinks they could keep them here forever, if they hadn’t already decided to kill them. They go down a couple floors, and he spies a few open windows. Just a crack, but there’s a chance at fresh air.

When they walk out of the elevator, they’re lead into a small, dark room by three peacekeepers, and everyone else is there already.

Peter’s breath catches in his throat.

He sees Carol Danvers across the room, talking to a young girl and a taller man. He sees Thor, Sue Storm, so many Victors he’s grown up watching. And he sees everyone else, the male and female from each district...his supposed competition. Everyone is standing in white squares on the ground labeled with their numbers, and Peter notices that some of the middle districts only have one mentor.

He’s sick and starry-eyed at the same time.

He shifts backwards, closer to Tony and Janet. He doesn’t want to look at everyone, doesn’t want to see them, doesn’t want to know them, but he feels like each time he catches a glimpse of one of their faces, he instantly memorizes every detail. And he thinks they’re looking at him too. Hammer walks out ahead of them, waving at another escort.

“You good?” Tony asks, hand on Peter’s shoulder.

Peter nods, trying to focus on him and not everybody else. But he can’t stop himself, quickly glancing over where the District Seven tributes are—standing there with Thor. Seven doesn’t win a lot, or ever, really—Thor is their only living Victor, considering Xavier died about ten years back. But the two people he’s with look...focused. A tall, blond man with broad shoulders, and a shorter red haired woman with dark eyes. They whisper to each other, and they look like they’re keeping secrets.

Peter figures everyone here probably is.

“Don’t worry,” Tony says, leading him over to their square. “Jan and I know all the other mentors here. We’re all...on each other’s side.”

“It’s just sorta weird to see them,” Peter admits, as they migrate over.

“Yeah,” Tony says, quickly surveying the room. “They’re probably thinking the same thing.”

Peter knows there are things Tony isn’t mentioning, like the alliances Peter will have to make if he wants to survive. He gets flashes of what might happen, gets flashes of too much blood, so much
screaming, the booms whenever someone takes their final breath. Names he’s grown to know flashing in the sky. His own name, when he’s no longer around to see it. When he thinks too far ahead, he starts to freeze up, his shoulders going tight and his jaw locking up. He doesn’t wanna think, he doesn’t wanna think.

He’s gonna be dead soon.

They stop in District Twelve’s square next to Janet and MJ, and before Peter knows it, Tony is psst-ing to get Carol’s attention. She turns around, raising her eyebrows and smiling at him.

“Well look who it is,” she whispers.

“Hey, spaceface,” Tony says, reaching out and shaking her hand.

“Shellhead,” she says.

Peter loves Tony, but he feels completely and utterly incapacitated under Carol’s gaze. She smiles softly at him, and nudges the girl standing next to her.

“Shuri,” Carol says. “Here’s your boy.”

The girl named Shuri turns, and her eyes go wide when she sees him. “Oh, Peter!” she says. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

He gapes at her. “Uh,” he croaks. “Why?”

She smiles, a little sadly. “Well,” she says. “I just had a feeling we might be friends.”

Peter feels really stupid for a second but he manages to smile back before the lights flash twice and then dim, and he catches MJ shaking her head at him. It gets so dark that Peter can barely see anything, only the outlines of everyone all around him. He has brief fantasies of all of them banding together, keeping each other alive in the arena. Escaping. Getting free. Staying alive.

A swell of music rises, and it reminds him of the video they show on reaping day.

“This guy is new,” Tony whispers. “The one whose voice we’re about to hear. Octavius...retired.”

“Retired?” Peter asks, looking at him, only seeing Tony’s eyes in the darkness. “Gamekeepers retire?”

“Yeah, when they lose their goddamn minds,” Tony says, and Peter hears someone, mostly likely Janet, smack him in the arm. “Floor’s about to move,” Tony says.

“Stop spoiling it,” Carol says. “You know they put so much into their production value.”

The bass in the music gets louder until Peter can feel it in his chest, and then small partitions rise out of the ground on either side of their group until they’re a little higher than his hip. Then, just like Tony said, the floor starts to move. Peter sighs, staring off into the darkness, and he chews on his lower lip until he tastes blood.

He feels like they’re moving forever, slowly, surely, without purpose, and they definitely must be out of the original room by now. But then he hears a voice, kinder than he’d been expecting, coming from all around him.

“To begin going forward,” the voice says. “You must start with your past.”
“Same goddamn script,” Tony says, clicking his tongue.

“They execute all their good writers,” Carol says.

An expanse lights up on their left, and it’s that desert arena that started it all. The first Hunger Games. Peter can see James Howlett out there on his own, Marko in relentless pursuit. Peter’s seen this moment hundreds of times, but it looks like they could step right into the scene and become part of it, sink into that hot sand and die with the rest of them. He knows what happens next, and he looks over his shoulder to see Howlett dodge, turning to rush the much taller Marko, the seconds between tribute and victor closing in.

Another scene lights up on the right, and this one is from Carol’s year. Peter sees her bow her head in front of him, and she doesn’t look at herself trudging through fiery streets, supporting Maria Rambeau, keeping her upright. Peter clears his throat, too loud, and knows the other woman died soon after this moment.

The next is Thor, and Peter knows it before it even appears, because of all the lightning. Thor is younger, tears still shining on his cheeks, and he drops to his knees on the edge of that cliff. They used that image on posters for years. They had to edit out the bodies.

Peter sees Tony shifting closer to Janet, can see her wiping at her eyes, and the next scene on their right is the year Luke Cage won. They show him with his alliance, and Peter swallows hard, his mouth dry. He can’t imagine how Janet feels, seeing this every damn year—her husband Hank is near the back of the group, their daughter Hope close to him on his right. Peter remembers how hard Luke tried to keep them alive. How brutal the Capitol was, since everyone was banding together. It was a bloodbath.

Hope was so young, and that year, Janet lost everything. Peter closes his eyes, his throat tight, and he hears the storms, hears the screams, and he wonders how many of these they’re gonna fucking go through.

“It’s hard,” Tony says. “Just...try and take a look at the arenas. They’re showing you angles that are a little different than what the general public gets. You never know if they’re gonna copy something from the past.”

Peter nods, and forces his eyes back open. He sees Janet’s year, the water world, and the year Sue Storm won, on the island. Karen Page, the labyrinth. Emma Frost, the warehouses. Kamala Khan, the castle. Bolivar Trask, the grave yards. Eddie Brock, the high-rises.

Then there’s Tony, the never ending forest. The weather that changed each day, from one extreme to the next. The rain that made it clear to Tony where the force fields were, and where they weren’t. The vibranium he broke down from the arena itself to make his suit. They show that here, the way he took out every obstacle, how he was unstoppable, on top until the moment they sent in the flood. They show that too, show Rhody save him. Rhody takes Tony’s helmet off gently, still clinging to the last parcel Pepper sent into the arena.

Peter looks over at Tony, sees the light from the scene shining on his face.

“He was the best,” Peter finds himself whispering.

“Yeah,” Tony says, voice rough. “Yeah, he was.”

The last thing they see is directly in front of them, and the floor stops moving, the partitions going back down. It’s last year’s winner, Jessica Jones, in the middle of the cornfield where it all ended.
And instead of remaining in front of them, like a portal to the past, the scene shoots out and expands all around them, and they’re inside it this time. Peter can see the stalks swaying in the wind by his feet, sees the way the illusion shutters slightly when it brushes against his legs. Barely visible, but he notices.

Jessica holds Danny Rand in her arms, and he’s long dead. The helicarriers are breaking through up above, and Peter squints up at them, shielding his eyes against the sun. They didn’t see this on TV, though Peter can barely remember what happened near the end, because he was so depressed about Bucky.

But he looks down at Jessica now. Her eyes unfocused, her breath coming in harsh huffs, that long cut across her neck bleeding more than it should. She almost died. They nearly lost their Victor, right there in the end.

Last year’s games went on for four months. Longer than any other.

“She’s not here, is she?” Peter asks, leaning in close to Tony.


Peter remembers the footage about their engagement, remembers feeling glad for them. He knows most of the Victor news is forced, manufactured, but what they had always felt real.

The illusion drops, quickly fades away, and they’re in another room, similar to the original one, except the walls are red and there’s a velvet stage in front of them, a man standing in the middle of it. He’s short, has strangely kind eyes, and he smiles, looking around at them.

“I’m Bruce Banner,” he says, and Peter realizes his is the same voice they heard at the beginning of all this. “Your new gamemaker. Otto left a legacy behind that none of us will forget, but it’s always important to usher in a new age. I’m a man of science, and I plan on creating something none of us have ever seen before. I’ve got a couple tricks up my sleeve, and I’d like to thank all our tributes, mentors and escorts for being a part of what we’ve got going on.”

As if we have a choice, Peter thinks.

“Think about who you are,” Bruce says, his eyes scanning over them. “Think about what you can do. What you can make. What you’re capable of. What you can see. What you can be. And that’s who you’ll become in the arena.”

Peter watches Tony roll his eyes, shaking his head.

“I look forward to getting to know you all,” Bruce says, and he looks way too ...nice ...to be the goddamn gamekeeper. “And may the odds be ever in your favor.”

About six different doors open up all around them, and peacekeepers march in. Bruce leaves as quickly as he appeared, and Peter watches the spot where he was.

“Trying to keep us from socializing,” Carol says, turning around. She leans in and pecks Tony on the cheek before anyone can say anything, reaching out and squeezing Janet’s hand.

“Just gonna talk to you even more when the time comes,” Tony says, winking at her.

They start to move when another door slams open. They turn to look at the noise, and a peacekeeper is standing there, this one wearing a red sash as opposed to the usual grey.
“Stark,” the peacekeeper says. “Everhart wants a word with Parker.”

“Oh no,” Hammer says, shaking his head. “Sorry pal, that’s not on the schedule.”

“She traded a key for three questions, they’re all set up, we need Parker,” the peacekeeper says, unmoving.

Hammer turns around to look at them, and for once, he seems caught off guard. He’s usually pretty good at masking those emotions, and it freaks Peter out even more to see him like that. Peter looks to Tony for an explanation, because he knows the name Everhart sounds familiar, but he can’t quite place it.

“She’s really picking and choosing early on, to waste a key on the first day,” Janet says.

Tony shakes his head. “Trying to get a scoop.”

“An interview?” Peter asks.

“Yeah,” Tony says, meeting his eyes. “Well, three questions.” He sighs, looking down at his feet. “Everhart. Tenacious. Not my favorite, I’ve had some—run-ins with her, in the past.”

“Now,” the red sash peacekeeper says, as the room clears out completely.

Peter’s heart is loud in his ears, and he tries to keep breathing normally.

“We’ll meet you back with Sam,” Janet says, nodding at the two of them.

Peter catches MJ’s eye, and she gives him a strange look, clearly trying to communicate something that he isn’t equipped to decode. He hopes he can figure her out more as they go along, because no matter what happens, he wants to stick with her as long as he can.

They cross paths, Janet and MJ going one way, Tony and Peter following Hammer over to the open door. Peter sucks in a breath, trying to calm the tremors racing through his heart. He doesn’t know what ‘keys’ are here, but they’re clearly some kind of currency for the reporters that they can pick and choose when to use. He feels like a commodity, like something they own, even more than he ever has before. They’ve always been stuck under the Capitol’s thumb, but now he’s here to move, push, hurt, touch.

He feels dizzy, and helpless. His blood boils.

Hammer looks introspective for a moment, and then he sets his jaw. “It’s good!” he says. “This is a good sign. They’re interested in him, this is good, Tony. This is a good sign, baby, we’re heading in the right direction. Everhart’s a bitch, but they tune in.”

“Alright,” Tony says, and he leads Peter forward with a hand on his shoulder.

Peter doesn’t think he’d be able to handle any of this if Tony wasn’t here to guide him.

~

Tony watches Peter sit down in front of Everhart’s cameras—and that’s plural, because there’s fucking four aiming at him—and strangely enough, they’re situated on the first floor for once, surrounded by open windows and streaming light. Usually, they keep the tributes away from the first floor unless they’re heading out for an event, but Everhart is the granddaughter of one of the Founders, so she usually gets what she wants. She’s only got two peacekeepers in the room, which is
Tony finds himself worrying about the kid. Worrying about what he’s gonna say, since they haven’t gotten to plan for this shit at all, but worrying about his state of mind. Worrying about how he’s handling it all. It’s clouding Tony’s mind, bringing up things he doesn’t wanna think about, things he doesn’t wanna face.

“Uh, is there any way you can, uh—maybe, prepare me a little bit?” Peter asks, shifting a bit on the stool they’ve got him sitting on.

“You’ll be fine,” Everhart says, smiling curtly at him. She’s all done up today—ruff around her neck, purple roses in her hair. The latest Capitol fashion, covering her from head to toe.

“C’mon, Christine,” Tony says, cocking his head at her. But she just smiles at him, and it’s clear she isn’t gonna make any allowances, despite how many times she’s called him her favorite Victor.

“Rolling,” she says, and the red lights click on. Tony doesn’t make a move to get out of her shot, which probably pisses her off, but he wants to stand by to step in just in case she crosses a line. He really feels like he needs a damn drink, but he’s trying to keep that to a minimum this time, if he can manage it. He wonders what her range is right now, whether this is broadcasting everywhere or just to the richest Capitol residents. Her tone changes, and she sits up a little straighter, putting on that persona she embodies on camera.

Tony hates it. Just how fake everything is here.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have here District Twelve tribute, Peter Parker,” she says.

Tony looks down, sees Peter manage a little smile.

“What was going through your mind when you volunteered for Ned Leeds?” she asks. “We were all very moved by your choice.”

Peter clears his throat, and Tony’s heart breaks when the kid looks back at him, with eyes that say he’s tired of going through that decision over and over again. The pain behind it, the way it brought him here. Tony just nods at him, tries to convey things he hasn’t gotten to talk about yet, not really. The idea of creating someone for the world to see, so he can protect himself, who he really is. Someone they’ll like and root for, without having to betray himself.

Peter sighs, looks back at the camera. “Uh, weirdly, nothing was really...going through my mind,” he says, shifting uncomfortably.

Everhart only bartered for three questions, so she just looks at him, clearly hoping he’ll continue.

“I, uh...I just couldn’t let him go,” Peter says. “I had to protect him, he’s...he’s always protected me, he’s always been my best friend, since we were little kids and I just...I did it without thinking, really. It couldn’t have gone any other way.”

She nods, and Tony wonders if any of this ever gets through her thick skull. “You were just in the same room as the other tributes for the first time,” she says. “How do you think you’ll fare against your competition?”

Tony rolls his eyes. “It’s the first day, Christine,” he finds himself saying.

Peter looks at Tony again, and Tony shakes his head. Peter laughs slightly, looking down at his hands in his lap, and God, Tony just wants to get him the hell out of here.

“Um, well, most of them are taller than me,” Peter says. “Like….even MJ…I mean, even Michelle is taller than me. So yeah.” He clears his throat again.

Tony snorts, covering his face. Perfect.

“Alright,” Everhart says, “for my last question, I was wondering how it felt for you to know your parents—oh my God!”

Tony looks up fast, heart rattling, and Everhart shoves her chair backwards, directly into one of the hovering cameras. “What is it?” Tony asks, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He follows the line of her hand, since her voice is failing her, and sees she’s pointing at a relatively large spider marching across the floor. It’s legs are long and thin but it’s body is big, and Tony thinks it could be poisonous, from the way it looks.

“Oh, hey,” Peter says. “Look at that little guy.”

The cameras follow his movements as he kneels down, blocking off the spider’s trajectory and then cupping his hands around it, urging it into his open palm. Tony watches, flabbergasted, as the spider climbs into the kid’s hand, and Peter stands back up, quickly making for the closest door.

The two peacekeepers jump into action, surging towards him, and Tony rushes over to follow before they can get too close, holding his hands out.

“He’s just putting a spider outside,” Tony says, blocking them. “That’s it. That’s all.” He can hear the cameras whirring, swinging around to capture all of this.

The peacekeepers have their hands on their guns, but they don’t draw them. Tony turns, trying to keep his cool, and watches Peter quickly open the door with one hand before cupping it back around the spider again. Then he kneels in the doorway and gently sets the spider down right outside, waving it off in the direction of the closest patch of grass. He stands back up, pulling the door closed, and he looks at Tony, the peacekeepers, and the cameras with a bit of incredulity in his eyes, walking back over and retaking his seat in front of Everhart.

“Hope nobody steps on him,” Peter says, wiping his palms on his pants.

“How did you just—pick that thing up?” Everhart asks, looking at Peter like he’s grown a second head.

Peter raises his eyebrows, shrugging. “There are all kinds of spiders in Twelve,” he says. “I’m not afraid of ‘em. Usually, if you’re nice to something, it won’t hurt you. Usually.”

“And that was your third question,” Tony says, walking over and patting Peter on the shoulder.

“Yes,” Everhart says, trying to regain some composure. She knows she lost out on whatever question was coming before the spider stepped in, but she can’t argue, because she’ll lose another key. Tony’s happy to go.

“Thank you very much,” he says, urging Peter to get up.

Peter holds his hand out to Everhart, the hand that previously contained the spider. Tony can tell she’s of two minds—happy for his gallantry, for saving her from what she considered such a foul beast. And disgusted, that he ever had the nerve to touch it.
Tony knows a moment when he’s in one. And he watches her shake Peter’s hand.

They turn their backs, head for the door, and Peter seems anxious.

“Wonder how that thing got in here,” Tony hears one of the peacekeepers say.

“Maybe a window,” Everhart says. “Or...someone’s clothes.”

Tony rolls his eyes, but tries not to take offense on Peter’s behalf. He’s in their goddamn clothes now, anyway.

“What do you think she was gonna ask about my parents?” Peter asks, blinking fast.

“Don’t know,” Tony says, trying not to sound too concerned, even though he is. “I’ll look into it.”

Hammer is standing out in the lobby when they get there, and Tony sees the tail end of the ‘interview’ they just walked out of projected on the big screen, rising and falling parallel to the elevators. He watches Peter smile, shake Everhart’s hand, and the numbers climb. Skyrocket.

“Well that was something else, Petey,” Hammer says, raising his eyebrows. “You’re making a name for yourself. C’mon. We gotta go meet up with Sam.”

Hammer starts rushing, and they follow close behind. Tony’s mind is running a mile a minute, and he still has sunspots in his eyes from the few moments the door was open.


“Think you might have just attracted some more attention,” Tony says, wondering if that’s good or bad. He remembers Miles, about four or five years ago now. That kid, the youngest one to come from Twelve, and he made a name for himself alright. Tony still remembers his face, his smile. How his optimism put a target on his back—not from those in One and Two, who were too concerned with each other, but from the Capitol itself. They knew too much love for one person, especially from lowly Twelve, would create something they weren’t ready for.

They head back up to meet Sam, and as soon as Tony sees his face, he knows what he was thinking is true. Peter created another moment, and like his volunteering, everyone saw it. Tony can feel a strange shift, the kind of shift he’s been a part of himself, as a tribute and as a mentor. Even Michelle is looking at Peter a little different. She’s standing on a pedestal in Sam’s workshop, in the makings of her parade outfit.

“Well, that was something else,” Sam says, pointing over at Peter with a couple pins in his hand. His team wave Hammer over to join them, and Sam doesn’t spare him a look as he brushes by. “Something else, kid. For real. How big was that thing, Tony? Looked as bad as some of the shit you see in the arena.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony says, his hands on his hips as he cuts his eyes over to Peter. “It was definitely a, uh—substantial spider.”

Peter shakes his head, his brows furrowed, almost like he’s worried he’s done something wrong. “MJ, I mean...you’ve seen spiders like that. All the time, I mean, they’re like—Midtown is infested with them. They’re everywhere, I’ve picked those things up...so many times.”

“People don’t really pick ‘em up, Peter,” Michelle says. “At least not like you just did, like it was...a kitten or something.”
“And it’s not like that here,” Janet says. “This place is...immaculate, to see one of them here...and to see you pick it up like that—”

“Almost feels like someone set it up,” Sam says, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, if they did, they did him a favor,” Janet says.

Tony can’t even begin to entertain that idea. Who the hell would do that? And why? He runs a hand over his face, and he knows he needs to shave soon before someone harasses him about it. There are too many damn things to think about. “Where’d they broadcast it?” he asks.

“Everywhere,” Sam says. “Everywhere in the Capitol, and all the Districts. And it was a good look. A look I’m gonna build on. I hope you didn’t come up with anything you’re attached to for your costume. You see Christine’s face? That’s every Capitol citizen, man, these people are afraid if their bon-bons fall on the floor. And now we’ve got Peter Parker, gallant, brave, fearless—Spider-Man.”

“Spider-Man?” both Tony and Peter ask at the same time. Tony feels like all the noise is cutting out in his ears, leaving him with only a rushing sound and Peter’s breathing.

“Spider-Man,” Sam says again, slashing through the quiet. “Building off his mentor’s moniker—One and Two act tough, but they’re little Capitol pets, scared of the same shit because they only live one rung lower than all the fluff and pastels. We’re gonna show ’em who they should be afraid of. He looks sweet, but he’s capable of things they can’t understand. That’s our story.”

The TV in the corner plays the footage again as Peter, next to him, gapes at Sam. Tony sees a brave kid, sure, but he sees what May told him, what he’s gotten to know, what he was blessed with in that small moment all those years ago. He sees someone kind, caring. Not one malicious bone in his body.

“It’ll be good,” Tony says, when Peter turns to look at him, so many questions in his eyes. He isn’t sure, but he says it anyway.

“I wasn’t thinking about any of that,” Peter says. “I just—I just didn’t want them to kill it.”

“I know,” Tony says. “But they love their stories.”

Sam makes Michelle a black dahlia dress, reminiscent of what Janet wore in the presentation parade, before she got the Wasp title. He gives her a spider necklace to tie her and Peter together, because Peter, well—Peter is the Spider-Man. One small interaction, one tiny thing that raced across Panem and into Capitol hearts, and now here he is. His suit is red and blue, with webbing details and a full set of spider arms stemming from his back.

He stands in front of Tony, a few feet away from the chariot that’ll carry him and Michelle out into the square. Peter shifts awkwardly, keeps swallowing hard, and Tony can see he’s close to tears. All of the others are milling about, and Thor’s tributes keep looking over here. They both look like soldiers, a star in the middle of the man’s chest, the woman in some kind of stealth outfit. Tony catches Thor’s eye, winks at him, and he gets a wide smile back, a short salute.

Tony looks back at Peter, sees him chewing on his lower lip. Tony’s heart constricts, and he wraps his arm around Peter’s shoulder, careful to avoid the spider legs. He tugs him away from the clamoring and the impending sense of everything starting, everything coming to a head. Tony gets a brief flash of what his life used to be like, before all this. He remembers building. His father’s harshness. His mother’s smothering kisses. The way Pepper smelled like coffee and vanilla. Taking
Rhodey’s hand through the fence between Eleven and Twelve.

Peter had things, too. And now he’s caught up in their games, just like Tony. He’s a cog in their machine, and seeing it, seeing him, here, stolen from his life—Tony feels awake, for the first time in a long time. Peter is different. Peter is part of him.

“I can’t do this,” Peter says, before Tony can muster up any words of encouragement. “I can’t do this, I don’t know how to be...this. I just picked up a spider and put it outside and now they all think I’m...I don’t know, something? Something I’m not? I don’t know how to do this, I don’t know how to be what they want me to be.”

Earlier, Tony was thinking Peter needed to create someone, to protect himself. To become someone else, like a wall to put up between himself and the Capitol fanatics, everyone watching and waiting in the Districts. But what’s going through his mind now is different.

“Pete,” Tony says. “Be you. Be you. I know they don’t deserve it. They don’t deserve to see you, meet you, feel who you are, and it doesn’t matter what the hell they take from what they saw on TV—they’ll make their own stories, but you did that. You started something, just—being yourself. It was a natural moment, and they saw it, and they twisted it, and Sam capitalized on what fucking morons they are. But you’re smarter than them.” Tony takes him by both shoulders, bends a little to hold his gaze. “You can do this. Did you ever see me, back then? In my chariot ride?”

“I think so,” Peter says.

A tear slips from the corner of Peter’s eye, and Tony wipes it away without thinking. He tries not to falter even though he’s close to it.

“I was an idiot,” Tony says. “I wasn’t Iron Man back then, I was almost thirty but I was still acting like a teenager, and I had no idea how to be either. They had me in some coal-miners outfit, and I ripped the arms off the thing, my stylist nearly strangled me. I don’t know if I had a death wish or not, but I wasn’t nearly likeable enough to be myself for these insane people, but I still did it. I managed it. And I made it. I made it, and you’re—you’re already better than me, Peter. You being you, and me with my experience...we can do this. Okay?”

Peter looks at him, nods ever so slightly.

“We’re a team,” Tony says. “The four of us, yes, but—me and you. We’re a team.”

Tony so desperately wants to be the support Peter needs. Maybe if he says it out loud enough times, it’ll be true.


Peter doesn’t look at him, keeping his eyes on Tony.

“You got this,” Tony says. “Just be yourself, and they’ll love you.”

“Okay,” Peter says. He looks like he wants to say something else, but Hammer tugs him away.

Tony watches as they get Peter and Michelle situated in the chariot, closing the back door. They line all of them up, and Tony sees the tributes from District One—a young man with light brown hair, a mustache and beard, a sick looking smile. And a girl with a tight-fitting black outfit and long, silver hair. Two looks just as bad, a tall, dark-haired woman that looks sharp as a razor, and a redhead boy in green.
Tony hates knowing Stane is at the end of this road, presiding over it all, watching with venom in his eyes, planning how he can hurt them best. Tony hates that he’s even gonna get to look at Peter, and he remembers being alone in the white room with him, all those years ago. The things he said, the way he laughed, all the veiled threats. Tony wants to gets Peter as far away from him as possible. Tony’s having thoughts he’s always been too afraid to have. Too dead to have, to broken to have, too frozen and stuck in the cage they’ve built around him. Peter’s gaze is molten, melting it all. Tony never got to have children, and he never will. But this kid…

“Stark,” Thor’s voice booms from beside him.

Tony jumps, realizes that he was too deep inside his own head. He blows out a breath, looks at Thor, towering over him. “What’s up, sparkles?”

“I’d like to propose an alliance,” Thor says. “Between my two tributes and your small spider.”

“Oh, I’m not mentoring the spider,” Tony says, as vague announcements are being made in the square by the Grandmaster himself. “Spider’s probably long gone by now. More free than you and me.”

“Your Peter Parker,” Thor says, less than impressed. “An alliance between your Peter Parker and my tributes.”

Tony clears his throat, watches as the chariots start to take off. Peter and Michelle are at the back of the procession, and he sees Peter look over his shoulder, eyes darting around. Tony waves at him, and watches as Michelle tentatively takes his hand in hers.

“He’s got heart,” Thor says.

“That he does,” Tony replies, his own beating a little faster in his chest.

“But he will be safer with Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers by his side,” Thor says.

Tony remembers Janet mentioning those names, both in the ‘volunteer’ column. He wants to pay attention to his kid, and he sees Janet approaching, but he looks at Thor with no small amount of hesitation in his eyes. “Isn’t it a little early to be asking?”

Thor gives him a strange look that Tony can’t read, a smile that has a lot behind it. “Remember who the real enemy is, Stark,” he says. He knocks him in the arm. “I’ll be asking again.” And with that he walks away, just as the line of chariots arrive in the square for everyone to gawk at.

“What was that?” Janet asks, her voice almost getting lost in the thunderous applause.

“Not sure,” Tony says. “I’ll tell you if it comes back up.”

The District Twelve chariot rushes into the square, last but not least, and Tony’s breath catches when he hears what the people are chanting.

SPIDER-MAN! SPIDER-MAN! SPIDER-MAN!
do a flip

Peter paces back and forth in front of Twelve’s private training room, rubbing his eyes. He knows he slept maybe two hours last night, if that, and he couldn’t get his ears to stop ringing. All the screaming, all the chanting, Stane’s voice. Spider-Man, Spider-Man. Peter doesn’t know what they see in him, what they’re making of him from what they’ve seen, and it makes him nervous. He’s trying to be himself, like Tony said, but he doesn’t think they’ll ever know him for who he is. They’re making him what they want him to be.

He tried to think of May when he looked into the cameras. He thought of May, thought of Ned, pictured them watching together. He wished they were watching with hope and not sadness, not fear. He knows they know him, know that he’s not...not the type of person that wins the Hunger Games. But he wants to be someone they can root for. Someone they can genuinely root for. Someone they can believe might make it home, if only to help them sleep at night.

Someone needs to be sleeping.

The door opens and MJ and Janet walk out. They’ve been in there training since before Peter woke up, and Janet smiles when she sees him. Her long hair is swept up in a bun on the back of her head, and they’re wearing matching black uniforms with big 12’s on the back. Peter wonders where they got them.

“Morning, sweetheart,” Janet says, wiping her forehead off with a towel. “You can head on in there, I’m gonna go grab Tony and swap with him.”

“Where is he?” Peter asks.

“Talking to potential sponsors in the city,” Janet says. “But he’ll be back real quick. You can go in there and wait.” She reaches out, squeezes MJ’s shoulder, and heads for the door.

MJ looks at him once they’re alone, shifting from foot to foot. Peter clears his throat, remembers all the highlighting he got last night, how she kept holding his hand. Like she was trying to keep him grounded, trying to keep him from floating away.

“I’m sorry,” Peter blurts out.

“For what?” she asks.

Peter swallows hard, looking at the door to the training room. “Um, I don’t know—”

“It’s not your fault, how people are acting,” MJ says. “Especially these Capitol people. It’s...an eternal circlejerk and they’re always liable to pull in one of the sweet ones and try to make up their own stories.”

He honeys in on the word sweet and finds his face going hot, and when he looks at her she’s avoiding his gaze.

“I hate that it’s us,” she says.

“Me too.” He picks at the rounded edge of a newly manicured nail.

There’s a brief silence, and she looks like she’s thinking about something she shouldn’t.
“If you could do something…” she says, staring at him intently now.

“Like what?” he asks.

She turns her head a little bit. “These things shouldn’t be happening,” she says. “The Hunger Games, the way the government is, how long Stane has been in power—”

Peter looks up at the door Janet left through, because he knows there are at least two peacekeepers standing guard on the other side of it. He worries they could hear.

“How they took out Thirteen,” she says. She follows his line of sight too, glances back at the door. Then she looks at him again, steps closer. “If you could do something…”

Peter stares at her, and her words are laced with danger. People have tried to do ‘something’ before, and they were never seen again. No one’s been powerful enough, no plans take into account what the Capitol is capable of. “I’m just one person,” he whispers, his mind conjuring up scenarios, possibilities. He’s dead, in all of them. In all of them, it hurts.

“You’ve got me,” she says.

That scares him even more. He swallows hard, running a hand through his hair. “MJ—”

“I know,” she says, stepping back. “I know. They’ve got even more eyes on us now than they ever did in Twelve. I just…I just don’t know. I just can’t stop thinking about it. All the people that have come before us. All the ones that are gonna come after.”

Peter’s heart hurts. It hasn’t stopped hurting since the reaping. Since Ben died. Since his parents disappeared. Since…a memory he isn’t sure is real. He’s admired Tony for so long, he’s crafting things in his own head that didn’t actually happen. He’s always wanted to be significant to him, someone he knew. He’s making it up. He has to be.

He’s a hero, baby. He’s a hero.

You’re a hero, Iron Man.

Kid, I’m not—

“One day there’s gonna be someone even the Capitol people can’t deny,” MJ says, shrugging. “And you underestimate yourself.”

“No,” Peter says. “No, I just—”

“See?” she says, smiling softly at him. She brushes a strand of hair out of her eyes. “I’m gonna go start the tribute research, you, uh—have fun in there.”

She turns from him, walking away.

Peter sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. He knows what she’s saying, and it plagues him too. Eats at his insides, knowing the people he loves live in a world like this. No one deserves this. He just wants a normal life, but he doesn’t even know what that looks like.

He pushes the training room door open, and thinks about impossible possibilities.

The space is large, the ceiling high like the old cathedral next to Midtown. The walls are dark, covered with what looks like foam or rubber, and there are a couple rope nets hanging from the ceiling. He sees the changing rooms directly in front of him, and there’s a matching outfit to what MJ
was wearing hanging up in his own size.

He closes the door and changes fast, hanging up his own clothes in the corner. He slides down the wall, thinking about what MJ said, and he tries to imagine all the fights he’s been a part of in his life. Most of them were defending Ned, and Peter wound up with black eyes, cuts and bruises, headaches for days. He remembers the situation with the miners, when he was too small to be throwing punches, when Ben wasn’t coughing as much as he did in the end.

Peter doesn’t wanna get into fights, but somehow, they always seem to find him.

“Kid,” Tony’s voice says, outside the door. “You in there?”

“Hey,” Peter says, rubbing at his eyes. “Hey, yeah.” He clamors to his feet, quickly opening the door.

Tony’s standing there, already wearing his training uniform. “Hey bud,” he says. “Sorry I was late, I was out there doing the sponsor rounds, talking you up.”

“How’d that go?” Peter asks, walking out and shutting the door behind him. “I mean, you don’t—I mean, you know some things about me, but not—God, what do you even tell those people? What do they want to hear?”

“Fortunately,” Tony says, as they start towards the middle of the room, “people are already, uh, on the Spider-Man train. It’s not taking much to get commitments. And I know more about you than you think.” Tony pats Peter’s arm, and he unceremoniously sits down on the floor, criss-crossing his legs. He looks up at him, resting his hands on his knees. “Why’d you think I told you to be yourself?”

Peter shrugs. “I just thought you were like, being nice.”

Tony shakes his head. “I’m not nice.”

Peter scoffs, and sits down next to him. “You’re nice. You fed the District for years. You were paying for my clothes for the longest time.”

“That’s just giving people things that they deserve as much as I do,” Tony says.

“A nice person would realize that,” Peter says. “I can’t even name all the things you’ve done for Twelve. When you didn’t have to.”

Tony shakes his head, looking at him sideways. “All this—off topic, I didn’t say be yourself to be nice, I was saying it because I—I do know you. You wear your heart on your sleeve, you’re very likeable, Pete. I know that, and you’re proving it to them, too.”

The idea of Tony Stark knowing him at all is still so outlandish, insane, out of this world that Peter feels like he’s malfunctioning a little bit. He looks off towards the corner of the room. “I like building things,” he says, fast. “I’m really good in my science classes, and supposedly—I can’t really remember, but supposedly my parents were good at building things too. Creating things, I, uh—I made this one super sticky substance in class before, it was really strong, could stick to walls, ceilings, but everyone got caught up in it and Mr. Harrington had to report it and they banned me from making it again.”

Tony scoffs, watching him closely.

“Sorry,” Peter says, his neck going hot. “I don’t know why I blurted all that out.” He does know, but
he doesn’t wanna say it out loud. He wants to be known for who he was before, not who he is now. Someone scared, fighting for his life, constantly on the edge of his seat about what’s gonna come next. “I mean, we’re supposed to be here training, I really gotta learn how to fight—”

“What’s your favorite food?” Tony asks, gesturing towards him with his chin. “I know May liked the crown roast, but what does Peter like?”

Peter smiles a little bit.

“Good food, not district grub,” Tony says. “Only good thing to come out of the Capitol is the food.”

Peter knows the answer. He doesn’t even have to think about it. “Cornbread casserole,” he says. He can almost taste it.

“Yeah?” Tony asks, grinning.


“Tell me something else,” Tony says.

“About food?”

“Anything,” Tony says. “I know our fair District isn’t a hotbed for activity—”

“I played the flute, for like, five minutes,” Peter says. “I played with the orchestra at last year’s memorial, but I don’t think you were there.”

Tony looks down at his hands, nodding.

“I wasn’t good at it, so I stopped,” Peter says. “Tried three notes on the tuba, gave up. I placed in a couple of the track competitions.” He tries to think. “Uh, I actually worked on the mural in the square.”

“Oh yeah?” Tony asks, looking back up at him.

“Yeah,” Peter says. They had his whole class work on it, a mural to their two victors, but the peacekeepers strictly imposed the rule of no references to the Iron Man suit or Janet’s Wasp persona. Peter smiles to himself. “I snuck a little Iron Man mask in there where they couldn’t see it. In the background, close to your shoulder.”

Tony snorts. “Ever the rebel.”

“Only when it comes to Iron Man,” Peter says, and feels like an idiot immediately. He hums to himself, trying to drown out his own thoughts. “Uh, I like to paint, I like to draw. We have an old camera, I used it all the time, I like to take pictures. Well, I haven’t done much of it since Ben died, he—he helped me develop them, and it feels kinda weird to do it without him. I did a couple for May’s birthday, last year, but that’s...that’s it, I think.”

Tony looks up at him, and there’s a lot of sympathy in his eyes. And something else Peter can’t name.

“I’m not really ...much,” Peter says, picking at his nail again.

“Don’t say that. It’s not true.”

Peter chews on his lower lip. “I’ve watched the footage of you in the arena a million times,” he says.
“And I don’t know if I can—do what you did.”

Tony raises his eyebrows. “Well, nobody can do what I did, because they made sure nobody could pull any shit like that again,” he says. “I got lucky.”

He turns his wrist over, and touches a couple buttons on a keypad that Peter didn’t see there before. Then, just like in the hall of victors and arenas yesterday, the whole room changes, like they’re both transported somewhere different. A vast forest unfolds all around them, and the sun shines bright and beating at a high point in the sky. They’re sitting in a clearing, surrounded by tall trees, too tall and stiff to have ever grown naturally. There’s a spray of small white flowers amongst all the green, too many weeds, and dandelions blowing in the wind.

Peter recognizes it, and feels a chill run down his spine.

“Hop up with me for a second,” Tony says.

They both get to their feet, and Tony leads him over to the right side of the clearing, where there are two fallen trees, crossed on top of each other. Tony takes Peter’s hand, raises it up and makes him point at a spot just above a few broken branches.

“See the way the light hits it?” Tony says. “Where you’re pointing?”

Peter squints, past his own fingers. He sees the slight shimmer, the way the air warps. “Yeah,” he says. “Is that—”

“That’s where their illusion breaks,” Tony says. He lets go of Peter’s hand, and Peter can see it now even when he’s not pointing. “Back then, when you hit the forcefield, it’d give you a real bad shock, enough to knock you out if the blow was hard enough. But where you see those shimmers, the forcefield was weak, weak enough to smash through and break off the outer rims of the arena itself. Not enough to get out, but enough to...make a suit of armor.”

“You shocked yourself doing it,” Peter says.

“Yeah,” Tony says. “Worth it, though. And they couldn’t stop me. Well, they tried, but nothing got at me until well after I had the full suit.” He chews on the inside of his cheek, looks up and around, and it seems like the memory takes hold of him for a second. “Killian was an asshole. He had his girl on his side, even though she didn’t seem to want to back his plays, and he had the dick brothers from Two, even got Creed from Three chasing after me. But the suit gave me an advantage.”

“It was amazing,” Peter says. It’s so strange to be here with him, in the place where it all happened. It feels impossible. “No one thought like you.”

“Guess I took that possibility away from anyone else later on,” Tony says, glancing away, disappointment and anger in his eyes. He clicks another couple buttons on his wrist, and the scene around them changes, and becomes the farmlands Jessica had to work with. “Now, this is a lot harder,” he says. “Recognize it?”

“Last year,” Peter says.

“This is right at the edge,” Tony says. “But they’ve brushed up, so there won’t be any more Iron Men running around taking from their outer levels. But I’ve been studying it. Talking to Jess, and she saw the weaknesses too. It’s always good to keep your eyes open.”

He takes Peter’s hand again, and points off to a spot in the distance. The corn stalks rustle, and move in the wind. Peter doesn’t see anything.
“You really gotta look,” Tony says. He lets go of Peter’s hand, watches his face.

Peter flexes his fingers a little bit, concentrates hard. He watches the sky, and thinks he sees a bit of bruising, the slightest blur. “Is it—a little green?”

“Exactly,” Tony says, squeezing Peter’s shoulder. “Perfect, kid. It’s very faint, but it’s gonna be the slightest bit green every time, because these assholes can’t do anything right. C’mere.”

Peter follows him, closer to the point they were focusing on.

“This kind of area can still be manipulated,” Tony says, and he physically presses his hand over the greenish part of the sky. “Might give you a little shock, but not like it did in my day, because you’ll never be able to reach all the way through. But look, I can touch here, if my feet were sticky I could walk there. I have no idea what the hell they’re gonna throw at you guys in terms of arena, but this is always a good thing to know.”

Peter nods at him, and tucks the information away. “Are you gonna teach me how to fight?” he asks.

Tony tilts his head to the side, squinting a little bit. “I might teach you how to dodge certain weapons. Later on, in the end, we might do some boxing. But mostly, I wanna teach you how to hide. Where to hide. What to look for. Because these assholes,” he points up at the sky, clearly referring to the Capitol, “they’re who you really need to look out for. Yeah, you’ve got a couple shifty looking people from One and Two. But what the Capitol sends in ...that’s always been the real problem. The real evil.”

Peter steps a little closer, looking around, trying not to give in to his paranoia and suspicion. “Can they—can they hear us in here?”

“Nope,” Tony says, smiling at him. “I fudged the camera’s audio with a fake conversation. Don’t worry, right now we’re talking about the production Twelve put on about President Stane’s first days.”

Peter stares at him, starry-eyed. “Wow.”

“I’ll teach you to do that kind of stuff too,” Tony says. “And weirdly enough, some of that’s allowed, there. They like to hide tablets where you’d least suspect them.”

Peter sighs, and the illusion quickly drops, bringing them back to the training room.

“One and Two are gonna be the only ones on the offensive,” Tony says. “Maybe a rogue from Three, but that’s rare. You’re gonna have a lot of allies, a lot of people surrounding you. And I want you to be an expert on where to find what in the arena. Where to go, how to stay alive. And, uh, worst case scenario,” he says, clearing his throat. “When to break away. How to keep your allies from finding you too. Sometimes, being hidden can make you come out on top.”

Peter thinks about MJ and feels a twinge of pain in his chest. Same thing, when he remembers Shuri’s face. The worst case scenario always comes to pass in the Hunger Games. He doesn’t know how he’s gonna do this.

“Where do you wanna go?” Tony asks. “I’m gonna try to show you as many of them as I can, but you get first pick.”

“We don’t, uh—have to see any of the old tributes, right?” Peter asks. “Like, in—in the illusion?”

“No,” Tony says. “Just the arena.”
“Okay,” Peter says, sucking in a breath and meeting his eyes. “Janet’s year.”

Tony nods, a little solemn. “Good choice.”

~

Peter goes through ten different arenas, learns about how they’re built, where they’re located, how the Capitol brings the tributes in and out. He learns how to find cover, find food, what to avoid, how to maneuver a city arena or one set in the country. Tony tells him the in’s and out’s of the weather patterns as they’ve been using them, and how to avoid lightning strike zones. Tony shows him how to find hidden weapons, and they work on running on different terrains. Peter is so out of breath by the end of it that he nearly sends himself into a panic attack by imagining what’s gonna happen in the actual Games.

“You sure you’re good?” Tony asks, looking at him with concern.

“Yup,” Peter says, taking another gasping breath, trying to blink away the fire and brimstone in his eyes.

“Oh yeah,” Peter says, tentatively, as they head towards the door, back in their normal clothes. “Next time we’ll work on weapons. We gotta figure out something for you to show them in the private sessions.”

“Private sessions?” Peter asks, taking the third bottle of water Tony hands to him.

“Sadly enough, they like to make a thing of judging the tributes in private and giving them public scores.” Tony clicks his tongue.

“Eleven’s really easy to get to,” Tony says, reaching for the door knob. “They barely monitor the border, fence hasn’t been electric for years.”

“Better wheat cakes over there,” Peter says, as Tony pulls the door open.

“Thats for sure,” Tony says.

Peter stops walking when they get out into the waiting room, because he hears clamoring somewhere. The room is empty, but when he looks off towards the double doors he sees shadows moving out in the hallway.
“What the fuck,” Tony whispers, following Peter’s line of sight. He pulls out a tablet from his pocket, and scrolls through what looks like their schedule. “I don’t know what this is,” he says. “Might just be...fans.”

Peter blows out a breath. “Fans? For real? They wanna see me right now? I’m gross, I’m like, really sweaty.” He knows they can’t get back to the apartment without going through those doors. He watches Tony press a few buttons, and the tablet screen refreshes.

Tony sighs, shaking his head. “Yeah, they’re touring right now. Late addition. Goddamnit.” He grits his teeth, meets Peter’s eyes. “Alright, uh—we’re just gonna, plow through ‘em, head up.”

Peter watches the feet moving back and forth under the door. “I know you said I’m likeable, but, uh—if we plow through them, I won’t—I won’t seem likeable for long.”

“No, you’ll seem busy,” Tony says, hands on hips.

Peter shakes his head.

Tony sighs again, heavier this time. “Fine,” he says. “We will...saunter. Well, a little bit faster than saunter, hopefully.”

“No plow,” Peter says.

“No plow,” Tony repeats, nodding, not looking particularly happy about it. “Maybe speed walk.”

Peter laughs a little bit, taking a couple deep breaths. Tony watches him, doesn’t move until he does, and when Peter takes a step, Tony falls in line beside him, putting his tablet away.

“I’ll start throwing punches if need be,” Tony says, staring straight ahead.

“I don’t think I’ll...well, who knows,” Peter says, his chest feeling tight.

“It’s on the table.”

“The peacekeepers won’t like it,” Peter says.

Tony scoffs. “People will like us even more if they attack us. Let ‘em! Sympathy vote is always a big one.”

He reaches out, takes the door knob, meets Peter’s eyes again. Peter feels like he’s outside of himself, watching himself, watching Tony, and it’s like one of those strange dreams he’d have sometimes. Half dream, half nightmare, because he would have given anything to hang out with Tony Stark, but he knew in his heart of hearts the only way that would be possible would be in this situation. Him, a tribute. Tony, his mentor. But it still looks insane, feels like elation and horror and fear and comfort all at once. He doesn’t recognize Tony—Peter knew him, but he didn’t know him. Know his expression when he’s telling a joke. Sharing something personal. Peter saw it all from a distance, but now his hero is here. Ready to open a door for him.

Peter nods, and Tony does just that.

The people outside gasp, don’t converge, though they look like they want to. They’re all dressed up, in oblong hats and tops with spiky sleeves, hair pink and purple and blue and teased, nails long and sparkling. They reach out to touch him, tentative hands, all of them talking at once. Almost all of them are filming in some capacity, and there’s one of those looming cameras behind the crowd.
“Hi,” Peter says, smiling. “Hi, hi, nice—nice to meet you.”

“All right, guys,” Tony says, and it seems like he’s trying to make himself taller on Peter’s right side, making a barrier as the people start touching him, too. “Alright, yeah, nice to see you too. Kid’s got previous engagements, thanks—”

They start handing Peter things—a bottle of wine, a bundle of white roses, a small, plush spider. Someone hands him what looks like a goddamn sword in a leather sheath, and Tony immediately takes it away from him, stealing a look back at the nearby peacekeepers.

“Thank you,” Peter says, trying to make eye contact with as many of them as he can. “Thank you so much, thank you, thanks for the—support.”

They’re whispering, muttering wishes of luck, chanting his name and Spider-Man over and over again. Peter gets a strange, sick feeling the longer he stands here, and his arms are practically full now, half of the shit he hasn’t inventoried yet. Tony helps him move and they’re almost through the crowd, until a blond girl at the end hands him a poster, which he’s only just able to take with two free fingers.

She brushes her long bangs out of her eyes. “I’ll always support Twelve,” she says. “And I think Iron Man was always meant to mentor Spider-Man.”

Tony pulls him along before he can look at what she gave him, and Peter quickly nods at her, smiling.

“Thank you!” he says, his heart booming in his ears.

They rush over to the elevator, and once the doors close, Tony starts taking some of the shit away from him.

“Jesus,” Tony says, looking at all of it. “Someone gave you a fucking sword.”

“A sword,” Peter repeats, barely listening, because he’s looking at the poster.

It’s him, last night, standing and posing in that goddamn Spider-Man suit. And Tony, from all those years ago, in the Iron Man suit. The background is a stark yellow color, and on the bottom in large, bold letters it says SPIDER-MAN AND IRON MAN FIGHT FOR YOU.

“That’s some old school business,” Tony says, looking over his shoulder. “That’s...that’s a little concerning.”

“Oh,” Peter says, his heart sinking, remembering that images of the Iron Man suit aren’t supposed to be produced unless it’s the Capitol producing them. He was too distracted by...being on a poster. With Tony. With that moniker.

“It’s okay, don’t worry,” Tony says. “She probably made it just for you.”

~

Peter gets a shower, tries to fix his hair the way the hairdresser did it, and fails pretty hard. He heads back out into the living room, and finds Tony, Janet, MJ and Hammer all gathered around the TV, which is on mute but, of course, covering the Hunger Games events. There’s a reporter situated outside the tribute center, and Peter thinks he can see his bedroom window.

All the flowers he got are in a vase on the coffee table, and Tony is still poring over the hoard of
stuff, cataloging and separating.

“Peter, I got some brass knuckles,” MJ says, holding them up.

“Oh, cool,” Peter says, walking over and sitting between her and Tony. “I got a sword.”

“We’re gonna check and see if they let you bring them into the arena,” Janet says. “Sometimes they allow gifts to go in, but not always.”

“Sword’s probably a little big,” Tony says, frowning at Peter. “But you got what looks like...a special kind of flashlight. New prototype.” He holds it up, points it at Peter. “We’ll test it out in the next training sesh.”

“Okay,” Peter says.

“And I checked around for that poster,” Hammer says, nodding over to him. “Didn’t find anything, thankfully, so you’re safe on that.”

“Thanks,” Peter says, begrudgingly.


Peter scoffs, narrowing his eyes at her. “I will never throw it away,” he says. His heart dips a little when he realizes he won’t have it for long, and it’ll never get to join the rest of his collection. He thinks he’ll have it sent to May. So at least she’ll have it.

“They were out in spades today,” Janet says.

“Tell me about it,” Tony says. “Hopefully that’s the last tour. Those people don’t need to be in here.”

Peter sighs, looks up at the TV. He sees footage of himself, at the chariot presentation last night, and embarrassment blooms in his cheeks. He feels like he’s playing at something he doesn’t understand, and he looks like an idiot trying to manage it. He always felt like the tributes he watched through the years seemed to know what they were doing, and he didn’t get it, didn’t get how they made that transition, how they were able to deal with the whole show while the Games itself crept closer and closer. Even now that he’s in that position himself, he still doesn’t get it.

He watches himself get hit in the face with a sunflower, and he’s about to cover his eyes when the scene changes. And he’s frozen. Struck, panicking, sick, shaking.

“Turn it up,” he breathes, a cold sweat already breaking out on his forehead. “Turn—turn up the volume.”

Ned. Ned, on the TV, talking to a reporter in Twelve.

Peter’s throat feels tight and he claws at his neck, tears already prickling at his vision. “Why does he have a black eye?” he asks, desperation in his voice. “What did they do, why did they—”

The sound cuts in.

“—and he was always like that, you know, good to people, good to animals,” Ned says, nodding, that telltale nervous twitch in the eye that’s black and blue. “He wouldn’t hurt a fly. Well, uh—”

“He might need to,” the reporter says.

“Right, right, yeah,” Ned says. He looks right into the camera, the corner of his mouth lifting up a
little bit. “I mean, he’s strong. But he’s good, he’s—he’s the guy we should all be rooting for.” He clears his throat, and his anxious energy feeds through the screen.

“Why does he have a black eye?” Peter asks again, his voice breaking. He looks at Tony, and Tony’s brow is furrowed, but he quickly tries to clear that look off his face when he meets Peter’s gaze.

“Pete, I wouldn’t believe it,” Tony says.

“I see it,” Peter says, gesturing towards Ned as the reporter asks him another question. “I see it, right there—”

“They edit these things, Peter,” Janet says. She sounds solemn and grim. “This was purposeful.”

MJ reaches out, putting her hand over his own. Peter feels insane, feels like he’s gonna throw up, and even Hammer looks like he feels sorry for him, glancing back and forth between him and the TV.

Then the shot shifts to May, and Peter’s breath catches. She doesn’t have any wounds or bruises, but there are about six peacekeepers standing in her house—their house—and she looks nervous. Scared. Tired and worn down.

Peter covers his mouth with his hand.

“He’s an angel,” May says, to a male reporter this time. “He’s—he’s the best person there is. The most genuine boy I’ve ever had the privilege to know. Yes, yes people should—they should back him—they should root for him. He won't disappoint, he’s—” She nods, smiling something stiff, and Peter can’t take it, jumping out of his seat and starting towards his room. He feels like he’s breaking apart.

“Kid,” he hears Tony say.

Peter’s intent is to keep going, to throw himself on his bed and scream into his pillow, but he falters in the hallway, covering his eyes with one hand and gasping, a high pitched noise in his ears. His tears wet his palm, slide down his nose and his cheeks, and he can’t move, he can’t think. He sees that purple black bruise. He hears the tremor in May’s voice. Their house infested with peacekeepers, with guns.

He gasps again, his breath getting caught in his throat. He’s choking. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He’s never gonna see them again and they’re already torturing them. They’re gonna follow them for the rest of their lives, long after he’s gone. Long after the whole country watches him die. Long after they take his body wherever they take the bodies of everyone that dies in the arena. Is it some giant landfill, where they’re all moldering? Maggots everywhere? Is that where Bucky is? Hank? Hope? Is that where he’s gonna be?

He feels hands on his shoulders.

“Try to breathe,” Tony’s voice says. “In through your nose, out through your mouth. I’ve got you, I’m right here, Pete.”

Peter does what he says, a couple times for good measure. More tears fall, and he hangs his head, letting his arm drop down.

“They do this,” Tony says, softly. “They’re doing it with a couple others too, right now. Sounds like...that Shuri girl, from Eleven. Her brother. But the black eye, Peter, I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t
believe it. That’s all they are, they’re fake, and they know you’re watching. They’re trying to upset you.”

“It’s working,” Peter says.

“Don’t let it,” Tony says, still quiet. “I know it’s hard. Trust me.”

Peter sucks in a couple more breaths, and tries to picture Ned the way he knew him. May, on her best days. Their house, warm and full of love, complete, with Ben there too.

He feels small, like a child, and he can’t stop himself when he turns, throwing his arms around Tony’s middle. He squeezes his eyes shut tight, feels Tony hesitate for a moment before he wraps his arms around him too, holding him close. Peter buries his face in Tony’s shoulder, trying hard to breathe.

“They’re okay,” Tony whispers. “They’re fine, they’re fine, I promise.”

Peter wants to believe him. He wants to so bad, and he knows they lie and manipulate. The video they force Twelve to watch every single year has one of the worst offenses of it, but now they’re doing it to him. What’s next? May with a bloody nose? Ned in a hospital bed? Peter doesn’t know if he can fucking take it.


Peter nods, slowly pulling away, but Tony keeps an arm around his shoulder as the two of them start back towards the kitchen.

Peter sits in one of the tall chairs at the bar, and hears the TV on low in the other room, Hammer and Janet talking back and forth.

“I’m not good at this,” Tony says, half inside the fridge. “Food. Anything to do with food, but I’m gonna try for you.”

Peter snorts, rubbing at his eyes. “You don’t have to—”

“Sandwich,” Tony says, pulling out a loaf of bread, some cheese, turkey. He shrugs, laying everything out on the counter. “I can manage a sandwich. Not an omelette, omelettes...that’s harder for me than the arena, I think.”

Peter manages a smile, leaning on his fist.

“I, uh—back in the day, in my previous life, I always...I always tried to make omelettes for Pepper. She loved eggs, she loved breakfast, she said she loved me so I always tried to...mix the three together.”

Peter sits up a little bit, hyper-focusing. Tony, talking about his family. To him.

“But I was absolute shit at that, and I’d always—fuck them up somehow. Burn ‘em, completely lose their shape, and she’d always just laugh at me. We wound up cooking together because she was tired of watching me struggle, and that was—that was better. That was nice.” He smiles, spreading some mayo out on one side of a piece of bread.

“Her photo is still up at the census offices,” Peter finds himself saying. “We—we had a field trip there, on career day. And it’s bigger than all the others.”
“She ran that place,” Tony says, tilting his head but still looking down at his work. “I don’t know how the hell they kept on, uh, with—without her.”

There’s a loaded silence, and Peter can tell Tony’s trying to keep it together.

“I know I’m not—the best example, when it comes to...keeping your loved ones safe,” Tony says, carefully arranging Muenster cheese, which Peter has never had before.

“No,” Peter says. “They did that. They—you didn’t do anything to warrant that.”

Tony looks up at him then, raising his eyebrows.

“No,” Peter says again. “No, I don’t care, it wasn’t in the rules that you can’t tear apart the arena walls and—and make a suit.”

“I guess it was implied,” Tony says. “And it’s sure as hell written out now. So you say you’re good at building things, don’t—don’t be like me.”

“Fuck their rules,” Peter says, too loud, in a voice that startles himself. But he means it. “For real. They’re killing us. They’re—putting us in a bubble and making people watch us die, they’re expecting us to fight each other and they’re creating horrible, sadistic things that will make our deaths worse.”

“You know that,” Tony says. “And I know that. But I’m just saying—you won’t make a mistake like I did. Your—May and Ned, they’ll be safe, because you’re—you’re not reckless, like me.”

“You’re not reckless,” Peter says, feeling defeated, sitting back in his seat. “You just—wanted to live.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, curt. “But that’s too much for them.” He clears his throat, finishes off Peter’s sandwich by cutting it in half, and he puts it up on the bar and pushes it towards him. “Listen, I promised your aunt—”

Peter’s brain falters. “You talked to her?”

“Yeah, I—”

“You spoke to May?” Peter asks, his mouth dry.

Tony smiles a little bit. “Yeah, I—I did. At City Hall, before I—boarded the train. She, uh, she made sure she got to talk to me.”

Peter feels a painful little pinch, and he nods, remembering her fierceness, especially when it came to him. “Yeah, that sounds like her.”

“I promised her I’d get you back there,” Tony says, leaning on one hand. “And now I’ve promised myself, too. I’m gonna get you back there, and both she and Ned are gonna be in one piece. Just like you.”

Peter hears the voices in the other room, and goosebumps run up and down his arms. “What about MJ? Michelle?”

Tony looks away from him at the mention of her name. He turns, opens the fridge again, staring down at the bottom two shelves, loaded with beer. “I’ve gotta think about you,” he says, quiet. “That’s—that’s my endgame. I’m not gonna think about anything else.”
Peter stares straight ahead, cracking his jaw. He holds his sandwich, takes a bite, and can’t stop his brain from running over all of this, around and around and around until he’s dizzy and sick of his own thoughts. All these people, and all of them want to be the only one. The only one left. Peter wants to save them all, and himself too. He thinks about what MJ said earlier. If only he could do something. If only he was better than he is. If only he was actually anything like that guy on the poster, standing alongside Iron Man.

“I don’t know about your omelettes,” Peter says, chewing. “But this is a good sandwich.”

Tony smiles at him. “Good,” he says. “I put my all into that.”

~

That night is the first time they go anywhere without their mentors, and Peter feels like he’s being pulled out of Twelve all over again. They’re wearing another version of their training uniform, except Peter has a little spider etched into his sleeve. Courtesy of Sam.

“Just stick together for now,” Tony says, as they hover by the front door, Hammer tapping his foot impatiently. “People might approach you about alliances, but don’t make any decisions yet.”

“What’s the point, anyway?” MJ says. “Of alliances? When we all know what’s gonna happen in the end.”

Peter swallows hard, watches a darkness pass over Janet and Tony’s expressions.

“They’re important,” Janet says. “We’ll discuss it more in the next training session. With just me and you.”

“Just go from station to station and see what you can learn,” Tony says, nodding at Peter. “You’ll get a good idea of what’s in the private session from what’s available here. Keep it all in mind, let me know.”

“C’mon, you two,” Hammer says. “Chop chop, we don’t wanna be late.”

“We’ll have dinner in here later,” Janet says. “Something nice.”

They start to follow, and Peter looks over his shoulder at Tony—for some kind of reassurance, for last words of advice. Anything. But Tony smiles, and reminds Peter that he has this. At least for now. Tony Stark, as a mentor. Tony Stark, as a friend. Not just an idea, a faraway dream of someone he doesn’t know.

~

This training center is on the first floor, at the back of the facility, and there’s a long line of windows from floor to ceiling along the far wall, with three or four floating cameras hovering outside and recording their every move.

Peter stays close to the main door, watching everything unfold. He glances at MJ, sees the fire in her eyes.

“You really don’t want to make alliances?” Peter asks her.

“Just with you,” MJ says, and her gaze softens when she looks at him.

“What if other people want us?” Peter asks. “I mean, I don’t know why they would—well, I don’t
know why they’d want me, but you, you’re—I mean, what if someone wants us, that’s my question.”

“We’ll see,” MJ says.

Peter sighs, and they gravitate into the room. There are all kinds of people here, from teenagers to adults at the very end of reaping age, and it reminds Peter of the year when the tributes were split between the youngest age, twelve, and the oldest age, thirty-five. Twelve of each, and it felt like some horrible twist of fate, some extra layer of torture for the adults expected to compete with those kids. It looks like a pretty even spread this time, people of all ages on the spectrum. The ones from One and Two look experienced, like he was expecting, fighting with each other in the corner, wielding weapons, summoning tech.

“What can you do?” MJ asks. “We gotta show ‘em something.”

They pass by a knot-tying station and Peter thinks of all the knowledge he has that he used to consider useless. Things he learned as a child growing up in Twelve. He can hardly remember his time with his parents, but he does remember his time with Ben. They spent half their days out in the backyard, and they did a lot of running, a lot of shouting and fake gunfire, and Ben—Ben taught him gymnastics.

“I can do flips,” Peter says, looking at her. “Or, I—I could, I used to be able to. I haven’t in a while, but I—I think I remember.”

“Okay, that’s something,” MJ says. She takes his arm, walks him over to a station in the corner that’s all mats and soft walls. She ushers him out into the middle of the space, and he stumbles a bit, looking back at her.

“Just—just do it?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “Don’t fall on your ass.”

He prays that he won’t, because that’s just what he doesn’t need to do in front of these people. Right now, it’s only MJ watching, but he’s sure everyone is aware of everything that’s going on in here. The cameras definitely are.

He sighs, turning around and staring at the space ahead of him. He tries to imagine Ben is here, on the sidelines, guiding him along like he used to. He tries to imagine grass beneath his feet, the old mattress at the end of the line like they used to have it, pressed up against their back fence.

He stretches a little bit, trying to live in his memories. He sucks in a breath, blows it out, and breaks into a run. He jumps up, keeps his head straight, tucks like Ben always told him to, and spins in the air, straightening out and planting his feet on the ground. He wavers, but he doesn’t fall, and he hears MJ gasp behind him.

“Wow,” she says.

He turns to look at her, a stupid smile on his face. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says, her eyes wide. “That was better than I thought it would be.”

“Really? I was scared,” Peter says, breathing hard.

“Don’t say that,” she hisses, giving him a look. “Do it again.”
“Again?” he asks, brows furrowed.

“Yeah!”

So he does it again. Twice. Three times. Forwards, backwards. Then he gets a little braver, and does three in a row like he used to do, only stumbling a bit at the end. He hears MJ laughing and clapping, and he turns around to see that she isn’t the only one watching anymore. There are two more people standing alongside her.

It’s the tall blond guy and the red headed woman. They both look mildly amused, their arms crossed almost identically. The woman leans in, shielding her mouth and whispering something to the man, and he nods. MJ finally turns around when she sees Peter’s expression, narrowing her eyes at the two of them.

“Yeah, that’ll be really useful...wherever they put us,” she says, gesturing towards Peter. “And he can climb, too.”

Peter gapes at her. Sure, he can climb, but how does she know that?

“Not everyone can move like that,” the man says, and he looks strangely proud. “Peter Parker, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, tentatively.

“I’m Steve Rogers, District Seven,” the man says.

“Natasha Romanoff,” the woman says, gesturing towards him with her chin.

“That’s M—that’s Michelle,” Peter says, walking back over closer to them.

“Yeah, nice to meet you,” MJ says, less than impressed.

“You two wanna do some weapons work?” Steve asks, an openness in his expression that Peter didn’t expect to find there.

He can’t say the same for Natasha, though she does seem willing to interact. “They’ve got a good selection,” she says. “Some good setups, simulations.”

Peter looks at MJ and, once again, he can’t read her expression. But she doesn’t exactly look happy.

“I’m not the best with weapons,” Peter says. “Tony and I were gonna—work on that.”

“I’m more of a shield guy, myself,” Steve says, looking over his shoulder. “But Tasha, she’s—she’s basically an expert.”

She shrugs, but doesn’t deny it.

Peter knows these are Thor’s tributes, and Thor is one of the best Victors there is. He was on the defense his whole Games, and refused to make a kill. He played dead, near the end, amongst all the other bodies, and then came the storm. Peter respects him, and these two—he can’t read them yet, but he has a feeling their intentions are good. For now.

“Yeah,” Peter says, nodding at them, nodding at MJ. “Yeah, let’s...look at some knives and stuff.”

He realizes how stupid it sounds as soon as it’s out, but they motion him over to the weapons station anyway.
Tony sits, with all the files open in front of him. He stares down at Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff, and wonders why the hell they volunteered for this. Twenty-eight and twenty-five respectively, they’ve avoided being reaped until now. They had no connection to the people they volunteered for, unlike the situation with Peter and Ned. They aren’t in a career district, where the Games are something people train for, strive for their whole lives, where they fall over each other in attempts to become their District’s tribute. Tony doesn’t understand it.

Peter’s portrait stands out above the rest, and Tony sighs, waiting for him to come back.

“I need to get in contact with my people in Twelve,” Tony says, looking up at Janet. “See what’s really going on with Ned and May.”

“We can try and make that happen,” Janet says, rustling through papers herself.

Tony looks down at One and Two. Quentin Beck, Felicia Hardy, Harry Osborn and a woman that just goes by Hela. They each have a laundry list of training credits, of offenses, and they all volunteered, of course. They look like trouble, and Tony doesn’t like to think about Peter going toe to toe with them. In fact, the more he thinks about Peter in the arena, the heavier his shoulders feel. Like part of him is rotting. Like he’s being buried alive.

“You think I could, uh,” he starts, tapping his pen hard on Beck’s photo. “You think I could maybe — pop into the tube instead of Peter? Go into the arena in his place?”

Janet looks at him like she’s just seen a ghost. “Tony,” she says.

“I mean, no one’s ever tried it,” Tony says, shrugging. “Not that I know of, anyway.”

“The tube scans the tribute to make sure it’s them,” Janet says. “If you did that, they’d find you seconds later with the scan, and probably gas you to death right in front of Peter.” She scoffs at him, her disappointment apparent. “Is that what you want?”

He sits back in his chair, staring off at the far wall, and all the bullshit art pieces they decorate this place with. He doesn’t say anything.

“You’re losing it this time around, Tony,” she says. “And we’re not even a week in. What’s gonna happen, huh? It’s just gonna get worse.”

He always feels his stubborn streak flaring up when anyone challenges him. “What Michelle said earlier worried me a bit,” he says. “About alliances. You think she’ll abandon him?”

“She’s gotta think about herself too,” Janet says.

Tony knows. He rubs at his eyes, and feels like he’s been doing this forever. Like it’s every day instead of once a year, permeating his every step, every breath, every word.

“Is this because he was that kid?” Janet asks. “From the homecoming?”

Tony still doesn’t look at her. “You know what would have happened that day, if it wasn’t for that kid,” he whispers. He’d had a plan. An opening. He wanted that darkness so badly, until—until small arms held onto him, a child’s voice ringing in his ears. You’re a hero, you’re a hero, Iron Man.

“I almost wish she hadn’t told you,” Janet says.
“I’d feel the same even if I didn’t know,” Tony says, finally looking up at her. “You knew, you were right.” His throat goes tight, and he can barely form words that aren’t twisted by his tears. “It’s like he’s got a direct line to my heart. Like I knew him in another life.” He rubs at his eyes again, blurry now, and he remembers Peter hugging him earlier. Unabashed, so trusting. Tony hates himself.

“You need to focus, okay?” Janet asks, her own voice breaking. “I can’t—I can’t lose you too.”

Tony blows out a breath, nodding at her, though he doesn’t make any promises out loud.

“Now, c’mon,” she says. “Let’s send for something good for dinner. You know neither of us can cook for shit.”

“You got that right,” Tony says.

She gets up, kissing him on the top of his head, and walks over to the menu next to the coms box. Tony’s mind is full of impossible thoughts, and he pushes Steve Rogers’ file on top of Quentin Beck’s.
“He’s one to remember,” Tony says, trying to keep from fidgeting, trying not to be distracted by the flute player over by the fish tank. I played the flute, for like, five minutes. “He’s—he’s something, Sif. I don’t know.”

Tony feels like everyone in the restaurant is looking at him. He wouldn’t be surprised. They all want to be involved in the Hunger Games, while everyone in the Districts wants to get as far away from it as possible.

Sif doesn’t doll herself up like the rest of them around here do, and there’s a natural elegance in the way she moves, in how she holds herself. Her gaze is intense but lacking judgement, and he knows she’s actually listening to what he’s saying. She’s one of the few that doesn’t seem like they belong here, purely because she acts like a normal human being and not a walking advertisement for why the upper class needs to be destroyed. She’s the sixth potential sponsor he’s spoken to today, and he saved her for last on purpose. In a place where it’s impossible to do so, she sets him at ease.

“This sounds different,” she says, taking a sip of her champagne. “You do. Different than last year, and Barnes got you pretty dedicated.”

Tony twitches a little bit. Every year, he tries not to fall into it, tries not to get attached, and every year he fails in some way. But this year, he’s failed harder than he has before. He’s had three one-on-ones with Peter now, and he knows essentially everything about him, or everything he’s been willing to tell. Usually Tony balks at personal information, tries to keep it hidden, at bay, but he’s been tucking away every little tidbit the kid decides to tell him. He knows about the fire at Midtown when Peter was new there, how they made the kids stay in the same damaged classrooms for six months afterwards. He knows about the willow tree Peter and Ned planted in Eleven. Knows everything about Ben Parker and what a loss it was for him to go so early, how he took most of May’s soul with him. Peter has told Tony things about Twelve that he should have known, considering he lives there too, and he realizes just how isolated he keeps himself, at the edge of town in his own private mansion.

He’s taught the kid to work with every weapon the Capitol provides in the Games, and although he’s not perfect, he’s a fast learner. Tony has a feeling Peter is hiding the full extent of his intelligence, having lived sixteen years and been forced to repress it every step of the way. Peter would flourish here, in the Capitol, where technology is fifteen years beyond what’s available in the Districts, where things are possible that aren’t possible anywhere else. Peter could see his Uncle again, in the illusions they can make here. Tony’s been close so many times, to creating a space where everyone he’s lost is alive—Pepper, his parents, every single tribute. But even in something false, created by his own hands, he knows they’d look on him with malice. With blame.

Tony looks at Sif, and despite how little she sees him, he’s surprised at how well she can read him. “Things are different,” he says. “I—I think they’re different for more than just me.”

“That’s for sure,” she says. “He’s all anyone can really talk about. I think they’re different for more than just me.”

“That’s for sure,” she says. “He’s all anyone can really talk about. I think it’s that sweet face.”

“He’s a really good kid,” Tony says, feeling a little pang in his heart. “He’s—he’s really good at adapting, although he doesn’t give himself enough credit. He’ll be able to handle whatever they throw at him.” Tony clears his throat. He hopes. He knows he doesn’t need to say things like he’ll put on a good show or he’s a hot commodity to Sif, like he had to say to some of the others. She sees the humanity, not the spectacle.
“You know I’m with you,” she says, leaning forward and taking his hand.

He nods, and he hates how often he’s been on the verge of tears lately. A goddamn mess. “I know you and Thor are close,” he says.

“Yes,” she says. “But I want to throw my support behind someone who needs it. The lion’s share, anyway. And sometimes they work together.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, remembering Thor’s question.

“You’ve got me,” Sif says. “Put me on your list.”

“Thank you,” Tony says, squeezing her hand. “Thank you, thank you.”

~

He meets back up with Janet across the street from the treasury building, clicks his tongue at how fucking fast everyone drives around here. Janet watches him cross, and holds out her hand to help him step up onto the sidewalk.

“Hardly see any cars in Twelve,” she says. “And never that damn fast.”

“Only the fucking peacekeeper trucks,” Tony says, as they start walking, one of the aforementioned trucks bustling along on the east-west street.

“I wanted to tell you before you heard somewhere else,” Janet says. “They’re doing that exchange trip again this year. Like they did three years ago.”

Tony looks at her, the vein in his neck already starting to pop. “What the fuck—three kids from each __”

“I don’t know if they’re doing the same amount from each district, or even if every district is included, but they’re already here, they got here this morning.”

They cross the street at the light and Tony grits his teeth, staring straight ahead. They did this three years ago—selected certain kids from the districts, acted like they won a contest, and sent them to the Capitol for a couple days to view the Hunger Games events. To Tony, it felt sick—kids, whose names will definitely be in the lottery if they weren’t already, observing the ones who were already chosen to die. It was a clear distraction for the tributes, because they kept the selected kids in their dirty district garb, so they’d stand out. They put them in places the tributes would see them, and it was like eyes from the past looking into what could be their own future. Waltzing through the Capitol but forbidden to indulge in anything the Capitol citizens indulged in. They gave them district food, and piled them all together in the Civic Center, in cots hard as cardboard. They bused them around like animals, with about six peacekeepers as their babysitters. Tony hated it.

“I don’t want Peter to know,” Tony says. “Michelle either, honestly. They’ve got their first private sessions today and I just—I’d rather not, you know? It’s hard enough.”

“I’m sure they already know,” Janet says, looking at him sadly. “It’s been on TV all morning.”

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache incoming. He hears something flapping in the wind, and he looks up to see the tribute flags attached to each light pole. Peter, in the Spider-Man outfit.

“He’s up in all the districts,” Janet says, readjusting her bag on her shoulder. “Not just Twelve. All of
them. The spider video has been viewed over a million times. They’re paying to watch it.”

They have very little access to the internet in the higher districts, and most of it is censored. But they’re paying to watch Peter save a spider.

“More of the press pool will probably be giving up keys to talk to him,” Janet says. “Just...get ready.”

Tony rubs at his eyes. “Yeah, I talked to Gary yesterday,” he says. “But I actually like Gary. Well, as much as you can like a Capitol person.”

“At least he’s respectful.”

“Yeah. Very lovey dovey.”

They get back into the City Circle and Tony finds himself feeling sicker and sicker, but he doesn’t want Janet to know. She doesn’t miss much, so he tries to look away from her, and he keeps catching eyes of people passing by. They smile at him, look like they want to approach, and Tony thinks about Peter winning. The best case scenario—winning, becoming a Victor. But being a Victor means becoming a Mentor. Becoming one of their pets, someone they can farm out and use however they want. Tony remembers the stories about Remy LeBeau, what he went through, how they pimped him out for whoever wanted a taste. And for Peter, living with all the death, the memories, the shadows of the people he went into the arena with...especially Michelle.

Tony braces his hand on the wall, rubbing his chest.

“What’s wrong?” Janet asks, grabbing his arm.

Tony squeezes his eyes shut tight. “Nothing.”

She shoves herself closer. “Tony.”

“Nothing, nothing,” Tony says, rubbing the core of his chest to smooth the tightening out. “Just thinking too much, as per usual.”

She looks at him, insistent, and he smiles at her. “You sure?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Tony says. “One hundred percent, a-okay.”

Lose, Peter’s dead. Win, he belongs to them. Like Tony does.

Tony wants another fucking option.

~

Peter, MJ, Tony and Janet walk up to the main door, two peacekeepers posted on either side of it. The TV on the wall is playing footage of the Field Trip Group, and Peter stares at them, how they’re being corralled around like cattle. How the Capitol people look at them, like they can’t get too close. They’re loaded in and out of that bus, moved from place to place. Peter knows everyone would be looking at him like that too, if he wasn’t wearing their clothes, if he wasn’t part of their sick game.

He looks at Tony, and tries to focus. “Are you sure there aren’t any mentors in there?” he asks.

Tony gives him a halfhearted smile. “I’m sure,” he says. “We’re straight up not allowed. You know, I could—I could make an attempt, I think I could blow these two out of the water, but then I’d get in some trouble—”
Peter shakes his head. He sighs, trying not to look at the TV, trying not to listen to Janet and MJ’s private conversation. “How long do you think it’s gonna take?” he asks.

“Shouldn’t be too long,” Tony says. “Sadly enough, we’re last, always and fucking forever, so they gotta go through everybody to get to you two. But good thing is, you get to leave as soon as you’re done. And they’ll alert us, so we’ll be here to walk you back.”

Peter nods at him. He picks at his nail, tries to stop himself from shaking.

Tony takes him by one shoulder, tugs him a little closer. “They’ll have the materials to build the repulsors in there, just like we practiced the other day. Do that, I know you’ve got it in the bag because you did it without me plenty of times, and then punch the seventh aversion simulation into the machine and do that for ‘em. That’s all you need to do. You’ll be perfect.”

“What if someone else builds the repulsor first?” Peter asks.

“They reset every time,” Tony says. “Same materials for everybody.”

Peter feels like he’s about to lose it. He wants to grab Tony, grab MJ, grab Janet, and start running. He wonders how far they would get. Probably not far, considering they’re steps away from guns at just about every angle. He wonders if they would kill him if he stepped out of line, because they need him for their precious Games. He wonders if they would reap someone else, if they killed him. They’d probably bring in Ned.

He straightens up, tries to muster some strength, and he nods again. Tony pulls him into a hug, and Peter goes stiff with shock, considering the only hug they’ve shared was when he was crying and close to collapse.

“I meant to tell you,” Tony whispers. “Found out when I was in the city with the sponsors. Black eye was bullshit. And there’s only one peacekeeper outside your house, only at night.” He pats Peter on the back, and pulls away, smiling at him. “Okay?”

That lifts a load of pressure off Peter’s shoulders and he laughs, rubbing at his eyes. “Thanks,” he says, immediately feeling better, more capable than he did a moment before. Thank God.

“You ready?” Janet asks, looking over at them.

“Guess so,” Peter says, looking at MJ.

“Good luck, guys,” Tony says, nodding at them both. “We’ll see you after.”

“You’ll be great,” Janet says.

Every time they have to leave them feels tied up in danger, and Peter never knows what the hell to expect when Tony isn’t around. But they move towards the door anyway, heading inside when the peacekeepers push it open.

There are two more peacekeepers on the other side, and there are twelve benches set up, eleven of them already occupied. Everyone is wearing their training uniforms, and Peter thinks his is the only one to have something special sewn into it, which worries him and warms his heart at the same time. Not everyone turns around when they walk in, but Steve and Natasha do, as does Shuri and the burly man she’s partnered with. She looks happy to see them, waving, but the man doesn’t do much but sneer.

Natasha raises her eyebrows at them, and the corner of Steve’s mouth pulls up.
The door closes and they sit, and Peter feels like there’s a bubble in his chest, sucking up all the air. He thinks of Ben, and he wishes, so much, that he would have gotten to meet Tony. Peter can see them together, knows they would get along. He closes his eyes, sees a life where he has his parents, has Ben and May, has Tony. MJ and Janet are there too—it feels safe and warm, like a place where he’s guarded from harm, where there’s no Hunger Games or Capitol, or subjugation. Safe. Safe.

“The one from four,” MJ whispers, leaning into him. “Do you know his name?”

Peter looks over at him. “He’s the one that was trying to crack jokes, right?” he asks. “The one that was...making all the ants walk in the little line he built.”

“Yeah,” MJ says.

“I think it’s Scott,” he says. “Scott Lang or something like that.”

“I think he’s the nicest one here,” MJ says. She looks at him then, with that soft expression she gets sometimes, that makes butterflies stir in his stomach. “Well, other than you.”

They get called one by one after that, District by District. Peter and MJ whisper back and forth, strategies, a stray comment about another tribute or mentor. Steve and Natasha keep looking at him, pointedly—they were nice enough in the first group training, but Peter keeps getting a weird feeling, like they’re planning something for him. He hopes they’re not targeting him, or some weird shit, because he doesn’t quite know how to stand against people like them. He’d like them as allies, if MJ would go for it.

Eventually, they’re the only two left in the room. MJ crosses her arms over her chest, and half the time she looks two seconds away from exploding, from tearing everything and everybody apart. He doesn’t blame her. He watches her look back at the peacekeepers by the door, and then they call her name on the PA system.

“MICHELLE JONES, DISTRICT TWELVE.”

“Good luck,” Peter says, reaching out and squeezing her hand.

“Thanks, Spider-Man,” she says, squeezing it right back.

He watches her go, and then he’s alone. Alone in the room that once held twenty-four tributes, and he tries to imagine what it would be like at the end of the Games, when everyone is dead and a winner is called. He’s seen the footage of Tony, of Janet, of Thor, of Strange, of everyone else, and it’s never glorious, like the Capitol would like people to think. It’s always devastation, panic, tear tracks, hands scraping through dirt. Blood, hurt, radical pain, the kind of horror that shouldn’t happen, that these people didn’t deserve. Peter knows he doesn’t deserve it either. There’s no winning the games, no victors, even though they tout that title whenever they can. There are only survivors.

A bit of time goes by, and he wonders how MJ is doing. He knows she’s going to do one of the knife simulations, and he’s sure she’s gonna get one of the higher scores.

“PETER PARKER, DISTRICT TWELVE.”

Peter blows out a breath, gets to his feet. He doesn’t look back at the peacekeepers, just walks down the hallway, which lights up the further into it he gets.
The private session isn’t exactly private. It’s in a similar room to where he’s been training with Tony, and where they had the group all together, but this time there’s a room above everything else, with about fifteen members of the government up there, and half of the Games board. Peter sees Bruce Banner, at the front of them, pretty much the only one that isn’t sitting at a table full of food, or playing a game of pool near the back of the group.

Peter clears his throat, tries to stay strong, tries not to listen to how fast his heart is beating. He sees the table set up, then the simulation machine.

*Remember to introduce yourself* Tony’s voice says, in his head.

Peter stops walking on the mats behind the table, and he clutches his hands in front of him to stop them from shaking. “Uh, Peter Parker, from District Twelve,” he says.

He sees Bruce nod. Then a voice he doesn’t recognize says, “go ahead” over the PA system.

Peter falters, for just a minute, another one of those stark realizations that he’s here, the nightmare is ongoing, this is still fucking happening. But he’s able to collect himself before he completely falls apart, and he does what he’s supposed to do.

He puts the repulsor together in under a minute, which is his best time so far. He quickly selects the aversion simulation that he and Tony chose, and then he takes his place in the middle of the mat. The illusion comes up, in grid form so he can still see the room, and Peter outruns his simulated opponents, dodging and shooting, blasting them to pieces with the repulsor. He doesn’t think, doesn’t pretend they’re real people, he just hides, stays low, sneaks up on them and takes them out. He covers his eyes with his free hand every time he uses the repulsor so he doesn’t get the bright spots, and he does a running flip over the last opponent, taking him down from behind.

He’s breathing hard when it all falls away but pride is seeping through him, making him smile. He knows he did it perfectly, better than he did in training, and he wishes Tony had been here to see it, wonders if he’ll get to watch a recording somewhere. He tries to stay in the moment, not think too hard, and he walks over to the table, putting the repulsor down and staring up at them.

They’re watching. Some of them look mildly impressed, some of them are raising their eyebrows at each other, and Bruce gives him a round of applause all on his own. Peter nods, trying to catch his breath, and he narrows his eyes when he looks away. He doesn’t know what the hell he was expecting, but he’s glad it’s over. The whole thing took about ten minutes, which is better than he was expecting. He blows out a breath and sees the peacekeeper leading him to a door on the far left wall, and he walks over, pushing through it.

He stops, because he’s in a dark room, pitch black, and the door behind him closes.

“Hello?” he asks, his heart picking up the pace again. “Was this the—wrong way to go?”

Someone grabs him from behind, spins him around, and punches him hard in the face. Peter goes down, groaning, and before he can move they’re pulling him up, punching him again for good measure. He stumble, hands pressing into the cold ground, the sting of the punches pulsing. They haul him back to his feet, turn him around, and hold a knife to his throat, sharp, cutting into his skin.

He’s leaning back into them, blood in his eye, and he can feel the peacekeeper chestplate and armor, and he wonders if this is it. He tries to think back, think if he did something wrong, something they could have heard, could have seen. Then the room lights up and they fall into an illusion, like the ones Peter and Tony practiced with.
It’s a field of flowers, except he himself is in the middle of it. Him, MJ, Steve, the guy with the goatee from District One. They’re all fighting, punching and kicking each other, and MJ shoots Peter with an arrow.

“This is what it’ll be like,” the peacekeeper hisses, yanking Peter’s head back, pressing the knife harder.

Peter sees himself struggle back, and then he pulls the arrow out, charging at MJ with it.

“You’ll have to kill them all if you want to win,” the peacekeeper says.

Peter sees himself stab her in the chest with the bloody arrow, and his whole body convulses. He reaches up, grabbing the peacekeeper’s arm, trying to tug him away. Peter’s face is throbbing from where he got hit, and he watches as the guy from one slices at Steve’s arm with a knife.

“Does it scare you? That you’ll be dead within the first day of the Games?” the peacekeeper asks.

“Are you afraid?”

Peter knows how he’s shaking gives him away, the way his heart is slamming against his ribcage. He blinks, gasps, struggles when the guy from One tackles him to the ground in the illusion, brandishing the knife towards him now.

“Does it scare you?” the peacekeeper asks, louder now, and the knife cuts into Peter’s neck. “That you’ll be dead soon?”

“No,” Peter whispers.

“Are you afraid?” he yells.

“No!” Peter yells right back, trying to breathe.

The peacekeeper lets him go, pushes him, and the illusion falls away. Peter breathes hard, uneasy on his feet, and he turns, sees the faceless guard that did all this. One in an army of many, except this one has Peter’s blood on his knuckles.

“You passed,” he says, from behind the black mask. “Congratulations.” He hands Peter a small piece of cardstock. “Hospital pass. Your mentor will know where to go.”

Peter snatches it away, his chest heaving. Everything fucking hurts, and he’s angry, and they’re alone. He’s practiced with knives with Tony. He could get the knife away from him, if he really wanted, the way they’re set up now. He took him by surprise, before. He attacked him in the dark.

But the peacekeeper has a gun, too.

Peter turns, sees the door, and walks through it. He comes out in a long hallway, and he walks straight ahead, no idea where he’s fucking going. He squeezes his hand into a fist, and he hopes against hope that they didn’t do anything like that to MJ. He sees another door at the end of the hall, two peacekeepers guarding it, and Peter wants to run at them, wants to beat them senseless. Instead, he wipes the blood out of his eye again and goes through this door too.

Tony is standing there when it opens, with MJ and Janet, and all of their faces fall when they see him.

“What the fuck?” Tony breathes, approaching him quickly. “What the fuck happened?”
Peter’s anger overwhelms everything else for a moment, and he’s close to screaming, close to grabbing the flower vase next to him and tossing it across the room. But then Tony meets him, takes him gently by the shoulders, bending slightly to look at him. Peter sags, and all the fight goes out of him because Tony’s here, Tony’s in front of him, and MJ isn’t bloody, MJ looks safe. Peter falls forward, into Tony’s shoulder, and he holds up the little card the offending peacekeeper gave him.

“Hospital pass—” Tony says, one arm coming up around Peter’s waist, the other taking the card. “What the hell did you fuckers do to him?” Tony yells, his voice reverberating, loud and firm. “Huh? What the fuck—he’s becoming a goddamn Capitol darling, saving spiders and shit, and you guys beat him up? What the fuck is this?”

“Tony,” Janet’s voice says, and she sounds closer.

“Peter,” MJ says, her hand on his shoulder.

Peter straightens back up, the tears stinging his eyes. “Let’s go to the hospital wing or whatever,” he says, sniffling. “I’ll tell you then.”

~

He only has a cut above his eye, which the doctor stitches up. There’s one on his throat too, but it isn’t big enough for stitches, only a big, embarrassing-looking bandage. He has a burst blood-vessel in his eye, which he keeps looking at in the mirror. A spill of red in a pool of white.

“And he just kept asking me if I was scared, afraid, and I said no, and he let me go and the illusion went away and he said I passed,” Peter says, wincing a little bit as the doctor continues his work.

Tony sits back, and there’s simmering anger on his face, his clenched jaw. He has one hand locked around Peter’s wrist, while MJ is sitting close on Peter’s left, quiet. But he knows she’s working all this through, because she always is.

“They didn’t do that to anyone else,” Janet says. “Not one of them, we saw them come out.”

“The session went well,” Peter says, his voice breaking, and he looks up and meets Tony’s eyes. “I...I did really well. It went perfect.”

“Course it did,” Tony croaks. He looks over at Janet, wavering a little bit, and his movements are robotic, rigid. “I wanna file a complaint.”

“It was clearly ordered,” Janet says. “From...on high.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Tony says.

“A complaint won’t do anything if it was direct from you know who,” Janet says.

Peter raises his eyebrows, and winces again. “Uh, who?”

Janet sighs, looking down at her hands.

“All done,” the doctor says. He grabs something off the counter, and places it in Peter’s free hand. A bottle of pills—six, to be exact. “Take those, between now and midnight. I’ve applied some of our ointment, the cuts will clear up before tomorrow and the stitches will dissolve. Be like it never happened.” He smiles, turns and walks out of the room.

Peter chews on his lower lip. “Let’s go,” he says, hopping off the white bed, wincing a little from
where he fell on his hip. Tony takes his arm, helps him towards the door.

~

They get back to the penthouse, and find a note on the coffee table, arranged with about six spider pins flanking it.

“Jesus,” Tony says, approaching it. “They’re targeting him, Jan.”

“Think so,” Janet says, looking over at Peter.

MJ helps him over to the couch and Peter sits down in a huff. “I haven’t even done anything,” he says.

“Unfortunately,” Hammer says, walking out of the kitchen with a bottle of wine. “The posters have been spotted in the districts. They’re being taken care of, but it isn’t so much...contained, anymore.”

Peter sucks in a big breath, but doesn’t say anything. He thinks about the people that made them, and he knows they’re in danger too. Maybe worse than he is.

“What’s the note say?” MJ asks.

“Uh, they’re apparently allowing us to take you out to a restaurant tonight to celebrate the scores, which are gonna come out in about five minutes, and everyone is paired with another district. We’re paired with...Seven. Thor, Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanoff. And they want us to leave the back way, probably because they don’t want the cameras to see...your face.” Tony crumples the note in his hand.

Peter shifts a little bit, and MJ gives him a look.

“Okay,” Tony says, flicking the balled-up note back down. “Okay. Jan, can I speak to you? Alone?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Janet says, quick.

Tony takes one step, stops, turns and looks at Peter. “Pete, you okay?” he asks.

Peter nods, still clutching the pill bottle in his hand. Both of them know he’s far from okay, but there’s no fixing his hurt feelings, no fixing what happened to his face more than the doctor already did. No fixing the damage that’s been done, the dissent that’s brewing.

“Hammer,” Tony says. “Can you get them both a glass of water? Pretty please?”

Hammer sighs, in the middle of pouring himself a bottle of wine, and he gets back up, heading into the kitchen.

Tony reaches over, squeezing Peter’s shoulder. “Be right back.”

As soon as they close the door in Tony’s bedroom, Peter can hear the yelling. It’s muffled, and he doesn’t catch every word, but he knows Tony’s pissed about what happened, pissed enough to try and follow up. Peter’s pissed too, but he knows there’s not much to do about it. They didn’t specify in the hospital wing, but it sort of felt like they were saying all this came directly from President Stane. Which feels insane to Peter. He hasn’t done anything too out of the ordinary. He didn’t make the posters. What the hell is going on?

Hammer brings them both water, and Peter takes a couple pills.
“I don’t really like that they...did that to you,” Hammer says, gesturing to Peter. “Isn’t right. They’re...gonna put you through enough, I’m sure. Don’t need to knock you around right now.”

Peter stares at him, a little shocked. “Thanks,” he says, tentatively.

“I’m so sorry,” MJ whispers, as Hammer starts gulping down his wine. “This is....they’re the goddamn worst. It’s just because you’re getting attention.”

“Isn’t that what they want?” Peter asks, meeting her eyes.

“Maybe it’s bigger attention,” MJ says. “More than the Games. More than the whole social extravaganza they want it to be. It’s...maybe you’re making some people realize that we’re people out here. People, they’re gonna do this to. And the Capitol doesn’t like that.”

“Why don’t they always know that?” Peter asks, rage rising up in him again, balling his hands into fists. “They should always be able to look at us, at the people—the people that are here and realize they’re being led to slaughter, paraded around like—like—like—” He doesn’t want to say animals, because they treat their animals better here than they treat the tributes.

“Not everyone is like you,” MJ whispers. “They should be, yeah. Some people get desensitized. The people here—they never see it the way they should. But maybe you just being...you...is getting through to people. No one wants to watch you die, Peter.”

Peter’s eyes flick up to Hammer, and Hammer quickly looks away. Peter doesn’t know why they want to watch anyone die. He hates it, he dreads it all year, and now—it’ll be happening all around him. And he can’t lose her. He’s just getting to know her, just finding a wavelength they can both ride on, and he can’t—he can’t lose her. Whether he wins or goes fast after.

The TV blasts to life, with the Grandmaster standing there in bright blue and green robes. Tony and Janet’s conversation is drowned out by the Capitol theme, too loud and impossible to turn down.

“Alright, my lovelies,” the Grandmaster says. “Our beautiful set of tributes had their first private training judgements today, and we’ve got the results live for you right now.”

They go through them then, with their bad graphics and posed images from the chariot procession. They rate the tributes on a scale from one to thirteen, and the ratings come at the beginning and at the end of the Hunger Games lead-up. It’s nearly impossible to get rated a thirteen in both judgements, and the only person that was able to do that is mentoring him now. The only one alive, anyway. No one could ever deny Tony.

All four tributes from One and Two get twelves. Steve gets an eleven, Natasha gets a twelve. That Scott guy gets an eight. Shuri gets a ten.

MJ’s image comes up on the screen, and Peter moves so his leg is pressing against hers.

“Michelle Jones,” the Grandmaster says. “District Twelve. Has received a rating of...eleven.”

“That’s awesome,” Peter says, quickly wrapping her up in a hug. She laughs a little bit, her hands clutching the material of his shirt.

“That’s really good, Michelle,” Hammer says.

“I don’t care what number they give me,” MJ says, pulling back. “But thanks.”

Peter scoffs, rolling his eyes when he sees the shot they air of him.

“Has received a rating of...thirteen.”

Hammer gasps, nearly drops his glass, and Peter’s jaw drops. His whole face hurts still, but now he feels strangely numb, even though it’s like someone’s slapped him.

Tony’s bedroom door opens and both he and Janet stomp out, fast enough to see all the tributes lined up with their ratings underneath them.

Peter is the only one to receive a thirteen. He knows he did well, but everything that came after has been the only thing he’s been able to think about. Was that what got him his score? Did they only test him on purpose? There’s no way he did better than some of them. Rogers? Romanoff? Him against them? He doesn’t think it’s possible.

“Okay,” Peter breathes, looking around at all of them, Tony and Janet looming there. “Uh…”

“Good job, Michelle,” Tony says, stealing a look at Janet.

“Yeah, honey, that’s—”

“Same as Rogers in Seven, and he’s a specimen—”

“That’s a very solid score.”

MJ doesn’t say anything, just looking down at her hands in her lap, twisting her ring back and forth. Both Tony and Janet move to sit down, and the tension is thick around them.

“Pete, a thirteen is phenomenal,” Tony says, sitting next to him. “But it’s also—a target. We’re gonna have to...keep an eye out.”

“For One and Two,” Peter says, touching the bandage on his neck.

“Yeah,” Tony says, fast. “And...anyone else who might wanna see you fail.”

“I wanna train harder,” Peter says, setting his jaw, “from now on.” He thinks of the peacekeeper, thinks of being able to defend himself in those situations. He thinks of what Sam said. He doesn’t want to lose who he is, but he wants people like that to be afraid of what he’s capable of.

Tony eyes him. “We’ll talk about it.” He sighs deeply, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees. “So we can’t exactly do much about the shitty, shitty thing they pulled with you after the judgement. Since they gave you the hospital pass, they’re avoiding all the legal avenues we could have gone through.”

“Tony was—very willing to go through some of the illegal options, but that would only result in repercussions for all of us,” Janet says.

“I don’t want anyone to get in trouble,” Peter says, touching the bandage on his neck again without thinking about it. “It just—it is what it is.”

“No, we’re gonna go to dinner out the goddamn front door,” Tony says, meeting his eyes. “So everyone can see. And if they ask, you’re gonna say what really happened.”

“I can do that?” Peter asks.

“It’s not illegal,” Hammer says, cutting in. “And I think it’s a great idea. It’ll garner a lot of
sympathy.”

“Won’t it look like I couldn’t fight back?” Peter asks.

“People are morons,” Tony says. “But they know the rules here. If we say it’s peacekeepers...they’ll know. Shit, they’ll know anyways, even if we don’t say. And plus, the thirteen you just got? Works in your favor here. Makes you look strong.”

Peter isn’t sure, but he isn’t sure of anything anymore. If they wanna do this, they’ll have to do it now, considering whatever medicine the doctor put on is going to dissolve the cuts and bruises like they were never there to begin with. Tony nods at him, he nods back, and gets extra confirmation from MJ in a look he can finally read. There’s defiance there, and loyalty.

“Let’s go get ready,” Tony says. “We’ll meet Seven in the lobby.”

~

Peter gets a message from Sam on the com in his room, saying he’s working on a new batch of clothes for him, including his looks for the upcoming Grandmaster interviews. Peter wishes he had them now, because Sam’s stuff is a lot more high quality than any of the generic shit they’ve given him. He picks something, throws it on, moves into the bathroom.

He looks at himself in the mirror again, runs his finger over the stitches above his eye. It stings, and he winces, recalling in a flash of horror the things he saw when the peacekeeper was holding the knife to his throat. It scared him more to see himself like that, hurting MJ, with such anger in his eyes. He knows he won’t be like that. He *knows* he won’t. But seeing it—seeing it—

He feels the bile rising up and he rushes over to the toilet, puking his guts out.

*You’ll be dead soon. You’ll be dead within the first day of the Games.*

He throws up again, his whole breakfast and lunch gone, and he sobs, covering his eyes. He’ll be dead soon, he’s gonna be dead soon, they’re gonna kill him, they’re gonna rip him apart.

He hears a knock on the bathroom door.

“I’m okay,” Peter coughs, his throat stinging, his mouth rancid with sick. “I’m fine.”

“Kid,” Tony says.

“I’m fine, I’m good,” Peter says, bracing his hands on the toilet, praying he doesn’t puke again. He can’t stifle the next sob, and he struggles to his feet, moving over to the sink.

“You don’t *sound* good,” Tony says.

Peter runs the water, sticking his mouth under the tap, wincing again when he pulls on the cut on his neck. He splashes his face with water, rubbing at his eyes. “I’m just...really ready for dinner.”

Peter knows it’s pretty much the stupidest thing he could have said, and he sighs, turning off the water.

“Alright, bud,” Tony says. “I’ll be right here.”

~

Thor, Steve and Natasha are waiting for them in the lobby when they get off the elevator. Steve’s
brows furrow when he catches sight of Peter, and a flicker of concern flashes across Natasha’s face before it disappears altogether. He guesses Thor informed them of what happened, from what he heard from Tony, but they didn’t know what to expect.

“I enjoy the stand we’re about to take,” Thor says, nudging Peter in the ribs and grinning at Tony. “How dare they try to make us use the backdoor to hide their own indiscretions?”

“Cowards,” Tony says.

“They did something similar to me,” Thor says, quieter than Peter thought he could speak.

“What?” Peter asks, looking up at him.

“Got into a rough and tumble with a few of the so called peacekeepers the night before my final interview,” Thor says, as they continue to approach the door. “They requested my stylist cake me with makeup to hide the wounds—”

“But he didn’t,” Peter says, his eyes going wide. “I remember. I remember seeing that interview! And wondering what happened to you!”

Thor grins at him. “Don’t take it to heart. No one here will ever love the government the way they love you.”

Peter beams at him, his smile only getting broader when he sees Tony holding the door open for them.

“I was telling him I knew you two would be up there in the rankings,” Natasha says, to MJ. “But he wasn’t so sure.”

“I’m not used to people getting what they deserve,” Steve says. They step outside, and he falls into step with Peter. He looks like he’s seen a lot and has had enough of it, Peter instinctively trusts him, despite his better judgement. He hopes he still can when they get into the arena. At least in the beginning. “Congratulations on your well-earned thirteen,” Steve says. “Following up on Tony’s legacy, creating your own. And I’m sorry they did what they did.”

“Thanks,” Peter says. He looks out at the street outside the front doors—there are cameras everywhere, hovering in the air, crowds stationed behind velvet ropes, cars driving by. Peter steps out into the sun so everyone can see him. “It’s alright. I guess they’re afraid of spiders.”

Steve breaks out into a grin, and Tony hears too, snorting and shaking his head.

“Good one, Pete,” Tony says. “Alright, uh—where’s our ride—”

Peter looks out into the street, at the bus parking at the museum across from the tribute center, and his breath catches in his throat. He takes a couple steps forward, the cameras following his every move, and he grabs Tony’s arm.

“There are those kids,” Peter says. “From the districts.”

“Oh,” Tony says. He stiffens up a little bit, patting Peter’s hand. “Uh, I don’t think they’re supposed to—tour the tribute center—”

Peter watches the next events happen in what feels like slow motion, the crowd’s chattering going quiet even though their mouths are still moving, the cameras frozen in mid-hover. The last kid gets out of the bus, tall, lanky, and young in the face. He’s already out in the road because of the way the
bus parked, and he gapes up at the tribute center just like Peter did when he got here. Except Peter
did it late at night, when the city was essentially shut down because new tributes were being brought
in. The city is alive now, bustling through judgements and events and anticipation, but the kid
doesn’t know it—he just sees something bigger than he’s ever seen before, disappearing into the line
of the clouds like a spectre in the night.

Peter watches the kid take two tentative steps out into the road, away from the bus, still staring up at
the center, and that’s when Peter hears the car. Their engines are loud here, obnoxious, making up
for something that the driver is lacking in life, but the kid in the road is still mesmerized, not used to
the sounds and how fast everything moves here.

Peter rushes past Tony as the world starts spinning again, decisions balanced on the head of a pin
and how fast he’s been running in training lately, and he charges into the street, tackling the kid back
behind the bus just as the car races by. It curves and squeals down the road, and Peter stops his
forward trajectory so he and the kid don’t slam into the Victor statues outside of the museum.

“Oh my God,” the kid says. “Oh my God.”

“Hey, sorry,” Peter says, only just now tuning in to all the chattering and panic that’s going on
behind him. “Sorry, I just—you were in the road, and they really drive fast around here, I didn’t
think you heard the car coming—”

“I...I didn’t,” the kid says, and he laughs, his eyes going wide. “Wow. Wow, you saved me. You
saved my life.”

“No, no,” Peter says, stepping back and crossing his arms over his chest. “No, I just—”

“Pete!” Tony says, calling out to him. Peter turns, sees him jogging across the street.

“Careful,” Peter says, watching him and narrowing his eyes. “Didn’t you just see—”

“Yeah, yeah, you okay?” Tony asks, reaching his side. “You okay?”

“Uh, I’m about to throw up because you’re Tony Stark and Peter Parker, but yeah, I’m okay,” the
kid says. “I mean. I might not be. I might not, if I had—if he hadn’t—”

“Jesus,” Tony says, running a hand over his own face and peering over his shoulder at the
pandemonium.

“I’m Harley Keener,” the kid says, as his peacekeeper babysitters come around the other side of the
bus looking for him. “District Four, and you—Peter Parker, you just—you just saved my life. Thank
you, thank you.”

The peacekeeper takes him by the arm, nodding at Peter and Tony like he’s doing them a favor, and
Peter reaches out, grasping Harley’s hand and shaking it.

“Be careful, okay?” Peter asks, trying not to sound like he’s pleading, and Harley grins again,
nodding at him. The peacekeeper tugs him away, links back up with the rest of the group, and Peter
turns, looking at Tony.

Tony scoffs, tilting his head. “How the hell did you—see that, hear that, be—fast enough to knock
him out of the way?”

“You didn’t hear it?” Peter asks, raising his eyebrows.
“No,” Tony says, sincere. “Nobody did. Nobody but you.”

Peter sighs, his shoulders wilting a little bit. He didn’t think he’d be saving anybody today. He keeps hearing his name in Harley’s voice, paired with Tony like they’ll ever be on the same level at all. His face still hurts, he wants to take more of those pills, and he can’t stop picturing what they showed him in that dark room. You’ll be dead within the first day. He feels like he’s buried under a thousand pounds of sand, and he’s choking on it.

This will never end. There’s no getting off this train. But he wants to. He wants to so badly.

“Can we have dinner in the penthouse?” he asks, trying to keep his voice from breaking. “Please? I wanna go out, just not right now, because of…because of everything, and I feel bad because I’m asking for them to stay here too—uh, maybe you guys can just leave me here, I guess, like, Hammer can stay with me or something—”

“I’ll stay with you,” Tony says, wrapping his arm around Peter’s shoulders. “C’mon. And watch out. People can’t fucking drive around here.”

Peter blows out a half-hearted laugh, and they cross safely. He sees all the cameras following him, their red lights blinking.

~

Tony proposes the idea of staying behind with Peter on his own, because he knows Thor likes to get out to the restaurants when he has a chance, but, strangely enough, Thor, Steve and Natasha all decide to stay back too, joining them for dinner in the penthouse. Tony figures he shouldn’t be too surprised, considering the question of a possible alliance that Thor clearly still wants to discuss.

Michelle doesn’t take much convincing to stay in for dinner, or any at all, and Tony worries that she and Peter could potentially feel like more than friends. That never makes things easy in the arena, and the kid’s gonna have it hard enough.

The footage of Peter saving that Harley kid goes everywhere within moments. Tony knows it’s good press, hyped up his image even more, as someone who looks out for the little guy, who’s capable and caring, but Peter is almost too real. People in the Capitol might look at him and wonder if everyone in the districts is like that, and if they are, why are we torturing them? Their thought processes are so limited that only certain things click, and Peter’s brand of kindness is so visceral that it’s seemingly transcending what they know and what they usually love. They might fight for him. Which the government, and good ole President Stane, won’t be happy to see. Peter is already playing well in all the districts, particularly Twelve and now Four, which can also bode well if kept in check, or mean danger if it gets too big. Love can equal dissent, and the Capitol meets dissent with guns and explosions. The Capitol wipes dissent away in a flash flood.

Tony himself was a symbol, with how much he resisted, but they squashed everything they could in him when they took his parents and Pepper away. There have been a few that have toed the line in years past, but none have started anything that mattered. None broke anything that couldn’t be fixed.

Tony looks at Peter from across the dinner table, and worries.

They keep the conversation as light as they can, over takeout from his favorite shawarma place. And light here isn’t saying much—fighting styles, arena tips, news from each of their districts. Seven is better off than Twelve, but not by much. Peter tells the story about what happened to him after the judgement again, and Tony feels fucking sick hearing it, and he knows the arena itself will be a thousand times worst.
The news cuts in, more than once, to show what happened outside the tribute center with that Harley kid. Tony’s loath to think about what it would have looked like if Peter hadn’t been keyed in, and people are really seeing his heart, now. The tributes get sent to the Hunger Games under the impression they’ll be killing people. Peter, so far, has only been seen as a savior. Going out of his way to do it, too.

Tony steps aside during dessert to search on his tablet, and see how many mentions Peter’s been getting. The Capitol tracks conversations in certain places in the districts, and Peter is running in the third percentile everywhere but Four, Seven and Twelve, where he’s reaching the first. One mention per minute, and the number one topic on the internet stations. The Capitol online presence is a lot larger than the districts overall, and they’re already splicing together all the clips they have of Peter and posting them everywhere they can.

Tony watches the clip of Peter and Harley again. Harley, in rags that look decades old, dirt still on his cheeks. Tony knows the Capitol wants them to look like that. To show the difference between them, in their bright colors and crisp silk, and everyone else, in their squalor.

The video makes it clear Peter will never subscribe to any of that. Peter...he’s the hero.

“Stark,” Thor says, behind him.

Tony nearly jumps but he stops himself, turning around slowly. “Why you always sneaking around, huh? You’re a big guy, it’s always gonna be a struggle for you, pal.”

“You get too lost in your thoughts,” Thor says. “You make it easy.”

Tony shrugs, knows it’s true.

Thor steps a little closer to him, glancing up and around. “Have you...used your talents in here?” he asks. “As you do.”

Tony smiles, knows he’s referring to the sound scrambler that they still have yet to detect. “Oh yeah, they can’t hear shit of what we say. I slipped in a very elaborate conversation about opera and architecture. Don’t worry, you’re very knowledgeable.”

“You work fast,” Thor says, grinning at him. “You have enough of our voices to work with?”

“Oh, I’m always ready,” Tony says, and leaves it at that.

“So we can speak freely,” Thor says, glancing back into the dining room.

“Yeah,” Tony says, clicking his tablet off and slipping it back into his pocket. “Why, you got secrets? Something we can use?”

Thor squares off in front of him, and looks more serious than Tony usually sees him at this stage in the game, especially with two solid tributes. “What we’ve got planned is bigger than you and me, and them, and all of this. It’s the beginning of something that this place has needed for far too long.”

Tony’s eye twitches, and he shakes his head. “What are you talking about?”

“What an escape,” Thor says.

Tony stares at him. He thinks he must have misheard. “A what now?”

“Steve and Natasha are a part of it, that’s why they volunteered. Bruce too—”
“Bruce—Bruce—the gamemaker?” Tony asks, too loud.

“Inspired by your own act of rebellion,” Thor says, nodding towards him. “He’s been working for years towards this moment. There are plants everywhere, Tony, all throughout Panem, and it starts with us. With tearing down the Hunger Games. A whole group of us are a part of it. Getting them out of the arena. Including Carol and both her tributes.”

Tony blinks, his mouth dry. “What?”

“But you know this is a tenuous plan—”

“Oh, you think?”

“—without a face,” Thor says.

“A face?”

“For the rebellion,” Thor says. “Originally, we thought Steve was the perfect candidate for the role. But the people’s heart is captured elsewhere, and the narrative is on his side. Your Peter Parker. It hinges on him. Lives and dies with his participation. We’ve known since the reaction to his reaping, but today it was cemented.”

“Peter,” Tony repeats, feeling insane.

“The districts love him,” Thor says. “And the Capitol adores him. Getting them on our side is near an impossible feat, considering how indoctrinated they all are. But Parker, he—they see him. They really see him. Everyone does.”

Chills run up and down Tony’s arms, and he covers his eyes with his hand.

“We don’t want to coerce him, he needs to be actively involved, so everyone can see he is, when we succeed.”

“When—”

“We’re going to attempt to get everyone out, save for One and Two,” Thor continues. “We can’t even inform them, it’s too big of a risk. But we need to have Parker be a part of the plan. He’s the future, Tony. His friend’s name coming out of that bowl was fate. It was meant to be him.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tony mutters. “Jesus.”

“It would fall apart without him,” Thor says. “And without you. We don’t want to go forward unless we have Parker on board.”

“Could fall apart either way,” Tony says, looking up at him. “Because they all do, don’t they?”

“Tony.”

“How do you know Bruce isn’t playing you?” Tony hisses, trying to keep his voice down. “Someone this entrenched in the Capitol—saying he’s inspired by me? There’s your red flag right there, because no one’s inspired by me.”

“We’ve gone through every channel to confirm he’s on our side,” Thor says. “You wouldn’t believe how deeply prepared we are to do this.”

Tony scoffs, his head pounding. “Even if he is on your side, there’s no fucking way he can tell you
anything about the arena without them finding out,” he says. “That’s their biggest secret, and he’d never be able to spill it.”

“You’re right,” Thor says. “But we’ll know enough. And our people on the outside, they’ll bring it all together. But we need Spider-Man, Tony. We’ll take the girl too, if you say you’re in, but we need Spider-Man. He creates inspiration, and the people will rise up for him.”

“A peacekeeper beat the shit out of him today,” Tony says. “So someone’s still bringing the hammer down.”

“Bruce doesn’t make every decision,” Thor says. “He can’t give himself away. Stane likes to move the chess pieces back and forth, like to assert his power at every turn.”

Tony feels like he’s gonna explode, and his throat is so tight he can barely breathe. “Wasn’t there enough danger entrenched in all this bullshit, without you creating more? And you’re gonna—”

“Aren’t you tired of it?” Thor asks, quiet. “All the death? Doesn’t it keep you up at night, knowing you’ll have to send him into the arena? Into a place where they’re actively hunting him?”

Tony hangs his head—he was not at all fucking ready for this conversation, and if it was that car earlier, it would have plowed right into him, with or without Spider-Man to push him out of the way. He never expected this.

“How long are you gonna do this, after Parker dies?” Thor asks. “How long are you going to let them do it to you? To everyone else? While this child rots, Tony. Because as much as you pray for his winning, it will take a miracle. With this, with us—he has a chance. Without us, he has no chance, and we don’t either. Because if we continue on with our plan without the Spider-Man—people will not follow. It’ll become another bombed out District Thirteen. We need him, and he needs us.”

“I can’t…” Tony trails off, his head hurting worse with every passing second. “I can’t think about this…right now...at the current moment. I’m starting to lose the English language. I’m starting to forget where the fuck I am.”

Thor reaches out, latching onto Tony’s shoulder. “We need you. And we need him. There’s only one way we all get what we want, and that’s this plan, with him at the helm. Spider-Man, leader of the rebellion. He’d have all the support he needed.”

“Okay,” Tony says, wincing.

“Okay?”

“No, no, not—gimme some time, yeah?” Tony asks, looking up at him. “Tiramisu’s still sitting hard in my stomach.”

“We don’t have much time,” Thor says. “We need to know as soon as you’re able. Please tell Janet, when you have a moment to explain.”

“Tell Janet what?” Janet asks, standing in the living room archway.

“That we need some more wine!” Thor announces, not missing a beat. He rocks Tony back and forth a little bit before he lets him go. “I’m never particularly good with all that ordering business, do you think you could—”

“Yeah,” he says, clipped. “Just—looking at the stats, seeing where the, uh, video’s going.”

“Alright, come back,” Janet says, motioning with her head. “Don’t like you standing in here in the dark.”

Tony nods, clearing his throat, following them back into the dining room. He sees Peter smiling at something Steve said, and Tony feels dizzy, close to just collapsing in a broken heap. He’s never, never, been presented with such an option. Never felt such an overwhelming sense of purpose, of horror, of a ticking clock wasting away in his ears. He doesn’t know what to do, what to trust, and he crumples back down into his chair.

“Tony,” Peter says, startling him back to life. “You okay?”

Tony looks at that broken blood vessel in the kid’s eye. The cut with stitches, quickly fading, but burned into Tony’s vision just as it was when he first saw it.

_Doesn’t it keep you up at night, knowing you’ll have to send him into the arena? Into a place where they’re actively hunting him?_

“Uh,” Tony says, his voice wavering. “Maybe. Yeah, maybe. We’re gonna see.”
through the tunnels

Peter stands behind the long billowing curtain on the Grandmaster’s stage, the low red lights shining on him and everyone else. Twelve is last, as always, and MJ is being interviewed right now, the rest of the tributes gathering backstage and preparing for the final group shots once Peter’s interview is done. Sam made him another version of the Spider-Man costume, this one more iron in look, with deeper reds and blues, more vibrant golds.

“Wish they’d let you wear this shit in the arena,” Sam says, brushing off Peter’s shoulder and looking him up and down. “No one could take you out.”

Peter smiles, and the audience lets out a low gasp at something MJ said. “It’s awesome,” Peter says.

“You’re awesome, kid,” Sam says, raising his eyebrows like he’s warning Peter not to disagree.

Peter blows out a breath, looking at the ramp he’ll have to walk up to join the Grandmaster on the stage. He’s been trying to listen to the questions and answers, but they don’t get very good sound back here, and he doesn’t think that’s accidental. He clears his throat, glances at Sam again, and can’t stop himself from bringing up the thing that’s been foremost on his mind since the dinner with Seven three nights ago.

“Uh, you went with Tony to talk to sponsors yesterday, right?” Peter asks.

“Yeah, and it went really well, if he didn’t tell you,” Sam says, standing next to him and crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re racking ‘em up, bud, capturing those hearts and minds. It’s nice to see.”

“Good,” Peter says, rubbing his hands together, trying to stop fidgeting. “Um, do you think Tony’s...maybe acting strange?”

“Isn’t that normal?” Sam asks. He looks at Peter, laughs a bit. “Maybe a little quiet, but he gets real focused around this time of year, so he has those thinking spells. He second guesses every move he makes, but he’s real confident in you, and I am too. I wouldn’t worry too much. Never helps, only makes things harder.”

“Okay,” Peter says, still shifting from foot to foot, and worrying anyway.

“You all ready for this?” Sam asks. “Remember what we talked about?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. “Yeah, just—just be myself.” He’s heard that more often in the last few days than he has his whole life, and he’s starting to not know what it means. He’s overthinking every word he says, every expression on his face, and with every step he feels like he’s moving in the wrong direction.

He hears thunderous applause, and then Sam claps him on the shoulder.

“Okay, got the buzz,” Sam says. “Just walk up the ramp, and the curtain will open—head out there, shake Grandmaster’s hand, sit down, answer his questions.”

“Play to the audience,” Peter whispers, remembering all the things Tony told him.


Peter nods to himself, doesn’t look back, and starts heading up the ramp. The audience is clapping,
and Peter can hear the Grandmaster talking, still muffled, but he thinks he can hear his own name. When Peter gets close the curtain sweeps open, revealing glaring spotlights and a stage that looks like it spans miles. He hesitates for just a second, holding his hand up against the glare, and then the audience bursts into screaming, cheering, leaping to their feet.

“There he is, there he is, there he is,” the Grandmaster’s voice says. “Our amazing Spider-Man!”

The noise is—the noise is deafening, and Peter almost forgets how to walk, how to breathe. He knows his mouth is hanging open and he takes a few tentative steps forward, listening to them chanting Spider-Man, and calling out his name.

“Alright, buddy boy,” the Grandmaster says, and Peter sees him approaching. He quickly reaches out and takes Peter’s right hand, the one he was holding up to block out the light, and he tugs him right into it. “Here we go, here we go.” The Grandmaster leads him over to a plush purple chair, pats him on the arm, and Peter sits down, trying to keep his hands from shaking.

The lights change a little bit, tilt up and dim, and Peter can finally see faces out in the audience. There are so, so many people. Everyone is standing, jubilant, and Peter’s eyes dart around, searching the crowd. He hears a loud whistle and Peter looks for the source, and sees Tony in the third row, right next to Thor and Janet. Tony waves, nodding at him, and Peter lets out a wavering breath, nodding back. He’s more at ease, seeing him there, and he tries to focus on him and not all the other smiling faces in the crowd.

“Alright,” the Grandmaster says, his hands up in the air, fingers wiggling. “Alright, everybody sit down, c’mon, you’re gonna give the kid a big ego! Well, if somebody like him can get an ego at all—either way, sit down, sit down, let’s talk to the spiderling, huh?”

Everyone sits in a big wave, and Peter sees Tony whisper something to Janet. The cameras hovering around like flies catch Peter’s eye, and he remembers watching the interviews with May, with Ned, so many times. His heart aches, knowing they’re watching without him, knowing he’s here, inside the nightmare that always struck them with such horror before. He’ll never stop thinking it. He won’t til he’s dead. Til they’ve killed him, and stopped thoughts all together.

“Peter,” the Grandmaster says, getting his attention again. “Lovely Peter Parker. How are we doing, dear?”

“Fine,” Peter says, fast, his voice coming out in a croak. “Uh, fine, fine.”

“Fine, fine,” the Grandmaster says, grinning, and he looks gaudier up close than he does on the TV, green glitter rimming his eyes, gold flecks in his hair. “How are we liking the Capitol? A lot different than District Twelve, I suspect.”

“Uh, definitely,” Peter says, glancing out at the crowd, finding Tony’s face again. “It’s—it’s much—it’s much cleaner, here. Buildings are a lot bigger, um...the food’s really good.”

“Yes, the food,” the Grandmaster says, folding his hands together in his lap. “Surprised the tributes don’t gain ten pounds each when they’re here, even with all the training.”

Peter nods, smiling a little bit. “I’ve eaten more here than I think I ever have my whole life.”

“What exactly do Spider-Men eat?” the Grandmaster asks, tilting his head to the side. He looks out at the crowd, and they laugh on cue.

Peter tries to mimic it, even though he thinks he’s being made fun of. “Well, this one is partial to cornbread casserole, crown roast, and those lemon cakes they send us? Amazing. I didn’t know food
“This is a hearty spider,” the Grandmaster says. “Well—I see you’re owning it all around, with the...very fashionable looks by Sam Wilson—”

That gets a healthy dose of applause, which Peter adds to himself.

“—yes, yes, wonderful man—but how are you taking to the new moniker, Spider-Man? We all love it, but what about you?”

Peter’s brows furrow, and he chews on the inside of his cheek. “Well, uh—it’s not something I ever expected, for sure, um—that spider wasn’t...it wasn’t scary to me. I just...well, I wanted to make sure that it got out, that no one stomped on it or anything, and, uh—I didn’t want Miss Everhart to be scared either. The whole Spider-Man thing just...happened, afterwards, but um—” He feels like he’s sabotaging himself, because he’s going against what Sam said it was all supposed to mean originally. He knows he needs to fix it. Or try.

“But, um—spiders are fierce, they can hide, they—you never know what they’re gonna do.” He swallows hard, and avoids making eye contact with Tony this time, because it definitely wasn’t a smooth recovery.

“That’s right,” the Grandmaster says, dry. “And this look, tonight, a little different than the original costume during the chariot procession—this reminds me of something,” he says, tapping his finger on his chin. He takes a sly look out at the audience, a demure smile forming on his face. “What do we think, does this—does this bring up some memories?”

Everyone starts cheering, screeching, erupting in a new round of applause. Peter looks at Tony, sees him wink.

“Hopefully they don’t snipe me for this—oh what am I saying, I can say whatever I want—you look like Iron Man tonight, Peter,” the Grandmaster says, reaching out and patting his arm. “Almost an...Iron Spider, am I right?”

“It was an ode to him,” Peter says, nodding in Tony’s direction. “From both me and Sam.” And he says the next phrase without even thinking about it. “Iron Man and Spider-Man stand together.”

Tony looks surprised, and a cold sweat breaks out on Peter’s forehead, the poster flashing in his mind. Shit.

But the Grandmaster doesn’t miss a beat. “How is the great Tony Stark, as a mentor?” he asks. “I know we’ve posed that question before, in previous years, but you two seem to do particularly well together.”

Peter clears his throat, trying to readjust after his previous gaffe. “I’ve, uh, admired Tony my whole life. Always, he’s...he’s always been my favorite Victor, he’s always been...my hero.”

The whole audience starts murmuring, a quiet chorus of aww’s gripping them.

Peter doesn’t look at Tony. “And, uh, being here with him, learning from him, getting to know him is just...a dream come true.” A dream within a nightmare.

“That’s amazing,” the Grandmaster says, leaning on his fist. “That’s wonderful. I do have another question, about another District Twelve resident...Ned Leeds.”

Peter swallows hard, nodding quick. He tries to steel himself.
“Now, we were all very moved by your volunteering for him,” the Grandmaster says, and the audience asserts their agreement. “We all saw it, it touched our hearts, and we’ve heard your side, his side, but I’d like to probe a bit deeper, if I could.”

“Sure,” Peter says, clipped.

“Did you believe Ned wouldn’t make it?” the Grandmaster asks. “Is that why you volunteered, really? Did you find your best friend to be...too weak, for the Games? Unable?”

“No,” Peter says, probably too loud. “No. No, Ned—Ned is one of the strongest people I know,” he says. He finds one of the hovering cameras, chills running down his spine. “Ned—I might have been selfish, in my decision. Because I just couldn’t watch Ned in this situation, I couldn’t—I couldn’t watch Ned go through something so cruel, having to...fight for his life, hurting people, getting hurt—” He’s going off the rails again, saying things he shouldn’t be saying. “I, uh, I love Ned, and I know he—I know he would have done well, I know he would have been able to do it, but I just—I didn’t want him to have to. You never know...as strong as someone may be, you never know...how long they’ll have left.” He finds a few kind faces in the audience. “I don’t know how long I have left.”

The kind faces fall, draped in sadness, and people start whispering to each other.

Peter keeps going. “So—I just. I wanted to give him as much time as I could. I volunteered so he could live.”

“Wow,” the Grandmaster says. “Wow, that’s—that hits home, Peter, my God. Well, I’m sure he’s very grateful, and rooting for you with every breath he takes, since he has you to owe for those breaths.”

Peter winces, and doesn’t like the way that sounds.

“I’d also like to ask about your partner,” the Grandmaster says. “Miss Michelle Jones, who graced us with her...very regal presence right before you came out here.”

Peter nods, looking out at Janet. He really wishes he knew how MJ did. Or what they asked her. He hopes this is almost over, because the lights are killing him. So is his heart, working on overdrive.

“She’s full of fire,” the Grandmaster says. “Full of opinions. I can’t help but think, flashing back to that moment the two of you held hands in the chariot, what a handsome couple you’d make. In different circumstances, of course. But for now, for the time you two have left—what do you think of her? Did you two go to school together? Do you like her?”

Peter’s face immediately goes hot, his ears burning, and he opens his mouth and closes it a few times. The audience reacts accordingly, cooing and clapping, and Peter wishes he had asked Tony or Sam what the hell to say if this ever came up. Because he doesn’t know what he thinks, he doesn’t know, he just knows it’s impossible, because they’re both being thrust into an arena where only one person is allowed to come out. So even if—even if there was something, it wouldn’t matter, because they’re gonna be torn apart either way. Whether one of them wins or not.

He tries to compose himself. “Uh, we—we did go to school together,” he says. “I—unfortunately—I didn’t really get to—get to know her until all this. So...as for your other question...sadly enough, we don’t—we have a lot of luxuries here, but we don’t have the luxury of different circumstances. I don’t want to—it’s hard enough, so I can’t—I won’t—” Horrifyingly enough, he feels tears stinging at his eyes, and he tries to blink them away. So much for composing himself.
“Alright, alright,” the Grandmaster says, and he reaches out, holding Peter’s hand this time, his palm clammy. “I’m sorry. I apologize.”

“It’s okay,” Peter says, swallowing hard.

The Grandmaster pulls his hand back, clicking his tongue a couple times. “I only have one more question, and then you have to leave us until the final interview, one day before the Games.”

Peter nods. Thank God.

“We saw you save that spider. And then, just the other day, we saw you save that poor boy from District Four, that almost got hit by a speeding car. I mean—I thought we were better than that around here, but what do I know? Anyway, my point is—you’re looking a lot like a savior out here, Spider-Man. Fighting for the little guy, preventing death. My question is—how do you think you’ll fare in the arena, when you might have to defend yourself? Take someone’s life, as opposed to saving it? How will you come to terms with that, considering your nature, and how everyone currently sees you?”

Peter presses his lips into a thin line, focusing on a point at the back of the hall, above where everyone else is sitting. “I’ll do whatever I can to make my district proud,” he says. He looks right into a camera then. “To make my family proud, May—Ned, my...Uncle, who’s no longer with us, same for...my parents, I want them all to be proud of me, and my choices. And Tony. I want to make my mentor proud. So I’m...I’m going to do whatever I can in there to stay true to myself. And to stay alive.” He remembers what Tony said, and even though he feels like an idiot, he starts looking at different faces in the audience, trying to play to them.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he says, his voice breaking. “And I—I don’t think you want me to leave, either. With your help, I can—I can be around for a long time.”

“They’ve been calling for you!” the Grandmaster declares, and he leaps to his feet, grabbing Peter’s hand and pulling him up too. “They hear it for Peter Parker, District Twelve, our very own amazing Spider-Man!”

They scream louder than they have before, giving him another standing ovation, and Peter watches Tony whistling, clapping hard. But Thor leans in, whispers something to him, and a strange look forms on Tony’s face, something Peter has seen more than a few times since the dinner with Seven.

They don’t stand them with their district partners for the group photo, and Peter winds up between Shuri and Quentin Beck. Shuri whispers compliments in his ears, since half the audience is still crying when they all come out, and Beck stares at him, not saying a word. Peter gets weird vibes off that guy, and knows he’s going to have to look out for him in the arena.

They lead them all off the stage once the lights go down, and in the crowd of tributes, MJ finds him, threading their fingers together, their shoulders bumping.

“Hi,” she says, softly.

“Hi,” he says back, his heart beating faster.

“Peter!” Hammer’s voice calls, when they’re in the wings with all the tech guys. “Michelle! Over here. Jesus Christ.”

It’s so dark, and Peter can only see him by the shine of his mustard satin jacket. Peter takes the lead,
moving over towards him, still holding onto MJ’s hand. He can feel the material of her dress swishing when they walk.

“Why the fuck are they constantly trying to maim you before the goddamn thing?” Hammer says, taking hold of Peter’s arm. “Could turn into a fucking stampede over here. Great job to both of you, by the way. Real, real good reactions on both sides.”

“Thanks,” Peter says, watching as Hammer elbows a few people out of the way to get to the closest hallway.

“Yeah, thank you,” MJ says.

They walk into the light and Peter can see her now—her dress is long, like a ball gown, black and purple and full of stars, sparkling and shining like nothing he’s ever seen. The sleeves are long, the stars bright and abundant up by her collarbones where the material goes sheer. There’s glitter all around her eyes too, and she smiles when she sees him looking.

“Take a picture,” she says. “It’d last longer.”

“Would if I could,” Peter says, and he’s still holding her hand. “You look—you look really pretty.”


“Stop.”

“Spiderling.”

Peter rolls his eyes, but finds himself smiling too.

“Anthony Stark,” Hammer mutters, still bounding down the hallway. “Where the hell—oh, here we go. Finally.” He stops at a door labeled hospitality and turns, holding his hands out. “Go inside, relax, eat something, watch the polls. I’ll give you a buzz when the cars are here to take you back.”

He pushes the door open and Peter lets MJ go in first, finally letting go of her hand and feeling strangely cold without it. Hammer stops him just as he’s about to walk in.

“For real,” he says. He looks down briefly, clearing his throat, and then he meets Peter’s eyes again. “For real,” he says. “You’re...you’re getting through to them. To...all of them.” He gives Peter a little punch in the arm. “I’m rooting for you, kid.”

“Was that...was that something genuine?” Peter asks, smiling.

Hammer tilts his head to the side. “I have those moments occasionally,” he says. “Tony knows. He just doesn’t wanna admit it.”

He sweeps by him then, and Peter goes inside the room. It’s small, cozy, with a buffet in the corner of course, and Tony is on the long couch with Sam, Janet and MJ standing by the window leaning over a tablet.

Peter walks over, sitting between Tony and Sam. He sighs, rubbing his hands over his face. “I know I messed up a couple times,” he says.

“You did great,” Tony says, his hand on Peter’s back. “They’re all in love with you, Pete.”

“I had some of the tech guys backstage asking me how to send you gifts,” Sam says.
Peter worries he came off soft. He can’t help but think of the peacekeeper who knocked him around, and he doesn’t want to be someone he’s not, but he also wants to be someone they can’t take advantage of.

“You’re number one in all the polls,” Tony whispers, but he’s still got that strange look on his face that Peter is afraid to ask about. “I got six key trade papers tonight, so...you’re gonna be making a couple appearances. I’ll try to make them quick.”

“And I’ve got a whole rack of clothes for you,” Sam says. “And maybe some chain-mail type shit if they approve it for the arena.”

“Awesome,” Peter says. He looks up at Tony. “We’re gonna keep training hard?” he asks.

“If you want to,” Tony says.

“Yeah,” Peter says. “I...I want to.”

~

Tony doesn’t tell him. He doesn’t tell Janet either, doesn’t even consider telling Michelle. He trains Peter, and stews in his own ever-growing panic. They have private sessions every day, and Tony pushes him hard, putting him through every simulation they have available, creating some of his own from memories that are far too clear. They box, and Tony finds himself to be fucking useless because he can’t even pop the kid with gloves on, so he brings in someone he knows will be fair, but firm. Sam. Sam never gets much action, considering his talents and where they’ve stationed him, but he’s able to show Peter some moves that Tony didn’t know, and he’s able to put up an actual fight where Tony was unable.

Peter makes that sticky material he created in school, miles and miles of it, and Sam doesn’t waste time christening it **web fluid**. Tony doubts they’ll be able to get it to pass into the arena, but thinks the materials to make it could be in there already, or sent in by a sponsor. He and Sam create what Sam dubs a **web shooter** for each wrist, and Tony plans to have them be one of the first gifts if Peter can make the web fluid during the Games. He practices with them, and after a few nasty falls, he’s swinging from wall to wall. It’s almost like he can fly.

Peter does interviews, signs autographs, does photoshoots, and Tony’s terror grows. They cross paths with Thor, Steve and Natasha on more than one occasion, and Thor is always giving him this look, full of intention and impatience. Tony lays in bed every night and stares at his whitewash ceiling, full of pockmarks and strange flecks of shine, and thinks about their plan. The Capitol is a fortress, a prison, with rules upon rules and guns upon guns. No one has ever escaped an arena, but if what they say is true—that they have a gamemaker on their side—then things could be possible. Or Stane could know, and he’s planning on fucking them all over live, in front of all of Panem. Anyone who’s involved in the plan.

A week of all this goes by, and Tony feels every minute like a knife. The Games are coming, they’re coming, they’re coming to take something else away from him.

Tony keeps staring at his ceiling at night and feels sick, hopeless, helpless, shackled and broken and left to die. Winning isn’t even surviving, it’s worse, and it feels like hell on earth to think of sending Peter away, where he’ll get hurt, killed, fucking martyred for Thor’s cause, as some terrible plan B if they catch a stroke of luck.

Tony doesn’t have much trust in his heart. Only for Janet, who doesn’t know. Only for Rhodey, who took his last breath in Tony’s own useless arms. Only for Pepper, who’s folded into the fabric of time.
now, her beautiful face frozen by his own mistakes. He used to talk to her so much that her silence felt forceful, for a while, crushing him, laying on his lungs and taking his breath away. But he knew her, knew her backwards and forwards, heart and soul, and sometimes he can hear her now. Hear what she might say.

*Remember the rumors about the tunnels?* she says to him now, the ghost of her sitting on the edge of the bed, her long fingers hovering over the tender spot at the core of his chest. *The men who had to be down there all the time, keeping them up? Whatever happened to Coulson, huh? Did he escape that way? Did they get him out? I’ve heard they go all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. There are other places, baby. Places better than here.*

He looks off towards the moonlit window, and he can almost see her. Her red hair, the wisps that would cling to her cheeks. The line of her jaw, the curve of her neck. He can almost see her, and he reaches out into empty air, wishing her hand would find his like it used to.

“Pep,” he whispers, into his empty room.

*Love him like your own, Tony,* she says. *Save this one. Save Peter Parker.*

He stops staring at his ceiling. He sits up, throws his legs over the side of the bed, and stares at the door, instead. He waits for her to say something else, but she’s fallen back into the deep quiet.

~

He’s sitting in the living room twenty minutes later when Janet finds him. He doesn’t often see her unkempt, or in her pajamas, but currently she’s both, and looking at him like he’s an intruder. He’s got his tablet in his hand, keeping up with Peter’s numbers in one tab, and researching the tunnel workers in the other.

“Tony,” she says, like she can read his mind, like she already knows he’s two steps from falling off the cliff. He wonders if she can see it on his face, because he can feel it there. And everywhere else. The complete and utter panic, indecision. He feels like he’s lost about fifteen pounds in the last week because he’s barely eating. Thinking too much about what’s gonna happen. What could happen. What would help. What wouldn’t.

“Jan?”

“I can tell you’re having a hard time,” she says, walking further into the room.

“Oh yeah,” Tony says, scrolling to the next page on his tablet. “A hard time, that’s what I’m having.”

“Remember what I said, focus. We just have to try and—stay separate—”

“Too late for that,” Tony says, and he feels wild, feral, trying to hold that part of himself in. “Iron Man and Spider-Man stand together, more than one person has said that, Jan, including Spider-Man himself—”

“Tony,” she says, moving to stand over him. “I remember the things you’ve said, you’ve got to—you need to calm down, I know how you can get.”

“I got,” he says, getting to his feet, almost knocking his tablet to the ground. “I’ve gotten. I’ve get—I’m there. I’m there.” He shakes his head, trembling. “I don’t know how you did it. Mentored Hank and Hope, they were your—your family and they took them from you and you’re—I know I say this all the damn time, over and over like a goddamn mantra, but you’re a million times stronger than me,
Janet looks wounded. “Sweetheart,” she says, stepping closer to him. “I know you want to save Peter, and you’re trying so hard—”

“No, I’m gonna,” Tony says. “He’s not dying, it’s—it’s past the point of their rules, all their bullshit, I’ve got two very stupid options, and I’m gonna pick one and I’m gonna make it work.”

She looks at him like she did when he mentioned trying to jump into the tube before Peter could. “What?” she asks. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m done with all this,” he says, throwing his hands up. “This is the last year I’m doing it. The last year I’m one of their puppets. They’re never taking someone from me again.”

“What two stupid options—”

“You need to go back to bed,” Tony says, stepping in front of his tablet, because he doesn’t want to tell her either option, not right now, because despite the fact that he’s officially chosen to do one of the two, he still doesn’t know how to speak about them out loud, and he’s just getting used to thinking about them properly. “It’s too early, you’ve got three interviews later today, it’s gonna be Michelle’s big moment—”

Janet steps into his space and cups his face in her hands, her grip firm. Tears are shining in her eyes. “What did I tell you?” she whispers. “What did I say?”

He reaches up, holding onto her wrists. “Jan.”

“I told you I can’t lose you too,” Janet says, quickly dissolving. “I told you that, didn’t you listen?” She shakes him, and pushes him away. “You mention Hank and Hope, you know what I’ve lost, what I’ve had to endure, and you’re all I have left. You, you, that’s it. And I can’t do this, I can’t watch them string you up, I cannot do it, Tony.”

“They’re not gonna string me up,” Tony says. “They’re not gonna touch me.”

She steps away from him, shaking her head. “You’ve lost your damn mind,” she says. “I’ve been trying to pull you back this year because I could feel you falling, I knew as soon as I saw him, you’d completely break. I know you’ve grown to love the kid, and I know it’s different than all the others, I know you’ve said that, I know who he is, what he is to you, and I can see it in your eyes. I would have done anything—anything—to save Hank and Hope, but it’s just...it’s all too dangerous, Tony. They kill for so little.” She reaches up, wiping at her eyes. “I just can’t—I can’t—”

“It’s gonna work out,” Tony says, desperately.

She shakes her head, backing away. “Just don’t make me watch you die,” she says, and with that she walks out of the room.

He drops back down on the couch, dipping his head into his hands.

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Janet and Michelle go out early, to meet up with their reporters, and Tony and Peter go do three interviews, themselves. They have lunch, and he orders a driving pass, under the impression that he’s going to take Peter to the closest arena remains they can visit, from seven years ago, right on the Capitol outskirts.
But that’s not where he’s planning on going.

“It’s weird, to see you driving,” Peter says, from the passenger seat. “So used to having one of those assholes shuttling us around.”

“No assholes today,” Tony says. He’s gripping the wheel so tight his hands hurt. His heart is beating so fast that it scares him, and he’s used to an irregular heartbeat. The plan is raging behind his teeth.

“Tony,” Peter says. “You’ve—you’ve been acting—are you okay?”


Peter scoffs, moves around in his seat. “You do—you do too, but you’re—I know all this is...how it is, but you’ve seemed...off, since Thor and the others were at dinner.”

Tony’s horror and trauma rolls over him in a petrified wave. All the years, all the death, Peter’s face graffitied at the forefront. Tony doesn’t know what to tell him, what to say, and he turns at the corner, tries not to run anybody over.

“Pete, I—you remember Coulson?” he asks. “Used to be an escort for Twelve, years back?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, tentatively.

“I’m gonna get you out,” Tony says, resolute. “It was always a rumor, that Coulson disappeared by leaving through the tunnels. People said the workers that are always down there, they have ways that can get you right out of Panem. That’s what happened to him, kid. He was smuggled out. I know there’s a goddamn resistance, I know they’ll help us. No one can resist you. That’s where we’re going, we’re going to the old headquarters, I’m gonna get you down there. Gonna go through the tunnels til we find someone that can help.” He blinks, trying to clear up his vision, and he doesn’t look at Peter. This has got to work. It has to.

“Tony,” Peter says. “They—Coulson—they killed Coulson. They killed him in Twelve, after—at the games when Emma won. He was here, he was—not everybody knows, but most people in Twelve know because he was—he came back, because there was a woman who traveled with the orchestra, she lived there, and they—people think he was trying to get her into the Capitol. But he—he didn’t escape.”

Tony narrows his eyes, coming to a stop at a four way circle. He feels like the world is closing in around him. High pitched sounds. “No, no, I—I would have—I would have heard. Janet would have—I would have told me—”

“She must have,” Peter says, gently. “You—I know you have a hard time, in between—I know how hard it is to...key in, to all the awful shit they’re constantly doing. You—I wouldn’t blame you for blocking it out.”

Tony feels cold, his eyes straining, and he keeps driving when it’s his turn to go. He tries to recover. He tries to breathe, but he keeps picturing Coulson dead. Not the image he had before, of him running through the tunnels. He clears his throat. “We’re still gonna—we still need to try,” Tony says, his doubts creeping in, the amount of harebrained this plan is slowly becoming apparent to him. “We have to, we’ve—Jesus, Pete, we’ve gotta.”

“Tony,” Peter says. “I’m—we don’t know if it would work.”

Tony draws in a breath. “It could.”

Tony keeps driving, his eyes filling up with tears. “I can’t goddamn let this happen to you,” he whispers, because he’ll dissolve into full-out crying if he speaks any louder. “I can’t, kid. I can’t. I gotta try to do—something.”

Peter takes his seatbelt off. He reaches over, gently grips Tony’s arm, and leans closer, resting his forehead on Tony’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” he whispers. “We can’t do this, but it’s—it’s okay.”

This plan is asinine. Ridiculous. Tony walled himself off so hard, drowned himself into such a stupor that he didn’t even know they killed Coulson in his goddamn district. Tony was drunk off his ass, almost every day. It’s become a pattern—a lot of the shit Peter mentioned, Tony didn’t remember. And he was definitely around for it. But he concocted this tunnels thing in his head, like a last ditch effort to do things himself, to take charge, to plan something on his own for once. To be in charge of keeping Peter alive, because he can’t trust anybody else. But clearly, he can’t even trust himself. He’s wasted too much of his life drunk.

He pulls over on the side of the road, he turns the car off, and he hugs Peter like he’s betting their lives on it. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“Don’t be.”

“I am,” Tony says, cupping the back of Peter’s head. “Sorry for me, sorry for all of it.” He lingers in the hug for a couple seconds longer, as he makes up his mind. “And I—I have been acting strange, since—since the dinner. Stranger than usual. Our current situation is a good indicator, but I—I’ve got —” He holds onto Peter’s shoulders, pulling back to look him in the eye. “I’ve got something to tell you.”

And Tony goes through all of it, plucks out every little detail from his foggy mind, from the memories tinged-red of the other night, him and Thor in the dark. He focuses on Peter’s face as he lays out the facts, everything Thor said about Peter being the face of the rebellion, the escape from the arena, all of it.

“And I’m sorry, again,” Tony says. “For—for keeping it...for keeping it from you. I should have told you as soon as he told me, but I just—lost my goddamn mind. I dove into the training because I—either way, I need you to be able to protect yourself. Whether we do this or not. So. Yeah, that’s...that’s it.”

There’s a thick silence. Tony sits, waiting for Peter to say something, and after a lengthy moment goes by, a goddamn peacekeeper knocks on the driver’s side door.

Tony groans, rolling down the window. “What?” he asks.

“You can’t park here, Mr. Stark,” the man in the black mask says, bending over to talk to him.

“Fine,” Tony says, feeling venomous. “We’re heading back now.”

“You’re not following through with your pass?” the peacekeeper asks.

“Nah,” Tony says, swiping the pass off the dashboard. “I’ve got some bad gas right now, definitely not in the condition to do any heavy training.” He grins, hoping the asshole will go the fuck away.

“Alright then,” the peacekeeper says, straightening up. “Carry on.”
“Yeah, you carry on,” Tony says, rolling the window back up. He clears his throat, putting the car back into drive, and he pulls back out into the road. He glances over at Peter, and sees that he’s still just sitting there, still not wearing his seatbelt. He looks a few shades paler, his jaw set. “Uh, kid?” Tony asks.

Peter doesn’t say anything.

Tony drives slow on purpose, making a U-turn. “Pete, I know I just dropped—an atomic bomb on you, but I need you to put on your seatbelt. Case in point, our friend Harley.”

Peter nods slowly, reaching over with shaky hands and putting his seatbelt back on. “Uh,” he says, his voice sounding too loud and too quiet at the same time. He clears his throat, the seatbelt finally clicking, and Tony stops to let a group cross the road. He looks over at Peter.

“Uh,” Peter says again. “I need—I know I’m too young, I know—I know I’m a tribute, all that, I know that you’ve—you’ve had problems with it, but I—when we get back to the penthouse, can I—can I have a drink?”

Tony blows out a breath, driving again when the walkway is clear. “Yes,” he says. “Yes, you—you can absolutely have a drink.”

~

Tony realizes he fucked up about six drinks in. Six...seven...maybe ten. Or twelve. Or twenty-seven between them? So many. Most of them are Tony’s. He hopes. They give them the best shit here. Too much of the best shit. Floods of vodka like the flood Rhodey pulled him out of. Oh no. Not that. Not that right now.

Tony knows he fucking fucked up when the kid nearly goes through the coffee table.

“Hey,” Tony says, grabbing Peter by the arm before he can crash through the glass, his own world rocking around him like a ship in a storm. “Hey, hey, no—no breaking shit. No breaking shit.” He blinks, trying to stop himself from toppling over too, Jesus—Jesus—and Peter’s laughing. Just, laughing. Hysterics.

“I wanna break shit,” Peter says, as Tony deposits him on the couch. “Just—destroy shit. Break glass. The glass coffee table, the glass—window—”

“The glass alcohol,” Tony says, collapsing down next to him. He buries his face in his hands, rubs stars and stars and stars. “Need to just. Break it all. Because I’m a bad person.”

Peter latches onto Tony’s arm and shakes him. “No, no. You’re not a bad person you are the best person, okay? Okay? You gotta—you gotta agree or I’m gonna keep shaking you.”

Tony is still holding his hands over his face, and now he sees shooting stars, rocky waters—flood, Rhodey, flood, Rhodey's hands—and he shakes his head. Makes it worse, but he still does it. “Gonna puke on you,” Tony mutters, his voice all kinds of green.

“No puke! No puke! More whiskey!”

Peter’s not shaking him anymore.

Tony pulls his hands back, and the room is just as bright and loud as it was before. “No more whiskey for you. No more, kid, c’mon. C’mon, dammit.”
“Already drank it,” Peter says, sitting back down, slowly tilting to his left.

Tony sighs, hard, and everything hurts. He sinks back into the couch and wishes it would consume him. “Mistake,” Tony says, watching the wall fuzz and glitch. “Goddamnit. I don’t want you to be like me.”

“I wanna be like you,” Peter says, and he leans on Tony’s shoulder. “I know—I know, I know, you don’t want me to—to drink like you, and I won’t, okay? Okay, Okay. Just this—I mean. I could be dead soon, so—this is the first and last time. But it’s...experience. An experience.”

_Dead soon. Dead soon._ The words appear in cursive neon in front of Tony’s eyes. _Peter Parker dead soon. Peter Parker dead soon._


“No,” Tony says, staring at the words and the ceiling and the impeccable lines of this goddamn apartment. “No, they’re. They’re totally...they’re totally right, about you. You’re....like, too precious.”

Peter pushes him like a battering ram.


Tony says, squeezing his eyes shut tight. He needs to staple them shut so he doesn’t see all this shit. “No. For real. You’re such a good person, you’re—your inclinations are always towards the good, the positive, and you’re—fuck, everybody knows you deserve better than this.”

“Everybody is stupid,” Peter says, sliding down to the ground now. He crawls underneath the coffee table, and now there’s glass on top of him. Like a see-through coffin. _“Everybody,”_ Peter says.

“They let this—shit—happen. Perpetually. Forever. Killing, murdering—everybody is stupid. They’re stupid. Everybody but—Janet. You. Thor, Steve, Nat, even though their—their plans, their...their brains are...relying too much on me. Uh, Hammer. Sometimes. He’s better than...expected. And MJ.” He sighs. It sounds wistful.

“That’s Michelle, right?” Tony asks. “You just started...calling her that one day.”

“She told me to,” Peter says. “She’s the best.” He sighs again, and this one is more defeated. Tony’s head is a million pounds.

“It’s okay if you like her,” Tony says. “If we go with their plan—they’ll...they’ll get her out too.”


Tony shoots up like a trick mannequin without thinking about it, and the whole world turns, except it’s always turning, isn’t it? It keeps turning, but they keep dying. Pepper, Rhody, his parents. They keep being dead. Peter’s Uncle Ben. Peter’s parents too.

Tony gets up, steps wide around the kid’s hand, and moves to the other side of the coffee table, hooking his hands under Peter’s arms and hauling him back out. He places him, gently, on the other couch, and sits down next to him. He presses his hand to Peter’s forehead, where there’s a red spot now, and Peter covers his hand with his own.

“I told you this before,” Peter says, his eyes filling with tears, and Tony can see it bigger and more
magnified than ever. “But I don’t wanna die. I don’t want to. I don’t wanna go, I’m—I’m so scared.
I’m so—” He stops abruptly, closing his eyes.

“Drinking helps, sometimes,” Tony says. “Sometimes it buries you in flowers and the world doesn’t
smell so much like shit, but other times it dredges up everything that you’re keeping on the fringe,
everything that—terrifies you. Everything you don’t wanna see and think.” He brushes his hand
through Peter’s hair, and pulls away. “I fucked up, letting this get—so drunk. Massive mistake, and I
owe you.”

Peter shakes his head.

“I told you before,” Tony says, trying to be even slightly sober for two seconds. “You’re not dying.
You’re not. Not allowed. Even more not allowed now, because I care too much, kid, I’m invested in
your life and what you’re gonna do. So. Too bad, death, fuck right off.”

“The plan—” Peter starts.

“Not a drunk conversation,” Tony says, shaking his head, despite the way it shakes up his brain. He
blinks—focus, focus. No more fuzz. The way fuzz buzzes. “Are you still hungry?” Tony asks. “Did
we actually eat all the cheesecake in the fridge or did I hallucinate that?”

“No, we—we did that.”

“Still hungry?”

“So full. Raspberry.” Peter falls over, splays out.

“Okay,” Tony says. He gets up, hover-walks over to the other couch, and snatches up three pillows,
the purple throw blanket. He walks like each leg weighs a thousand pounds each, and what the hell
does a thousand pounds even feel like, anyways? He arranges two pillows behind Peter’s head,
sticks one under his arm, and shakes out the blanket, draping it over him. “Sleep out here,” he says.
“I’ll tell ’em to shut up when they get back.”

“MJ never needs to shut up,” Peter says, eyes wide. “She needs to talk more. Her voice is like—is
like birds singing—or tweeting—whatever birds do—”

Tony snorts, beaming down at him, and he sees red blustering across his vision. Bursts of affection
taking flight. “You’re never drinking again.”

“Nope.”

“But not because you’re gonna die soon,” Tony says, pointing down at him. “You’re gonna escape.
You’re gonna date Mich—MJ. Have kids. A real life, away from all this shit. You’re gonna live til
you’re 3000 years old, got me?”

“Nice number.”

“I thought so,” Tony says. He smiles down at Peter, and the kid from all those years ago leaps out of
Tony’s head, merges with the one he knows now. Something in him, maybe the piece of his brain
still clinging to sobriety, urges him not to speak about the memory, not now, not with both of them
like this. He’s gonna be better, that’s all he knows. That kid, this kid—the same kid—he’s gotta be
better for him. He’s got him now. But, the part of his brain that’s clinging to sobriety is too busy
holding that door closed to stop what he says next.

“Love you, kid.”
It’s like someone else said it, someone in every universe in which they meet—one where he dies from acid burns, one where the kid is dust and one where he isn’t, one where Tony lives but he’s half metal now, half machine, one where they’re safe, unhurt, left alone, and Pepper’s there, Rhodey’s there, a little girl too. One where Peter’s rich, and Tony’s poor. One where they’re stuck in a frozen hell, circling and circling and circling. One where Peter flies through skyscrapers, and Tony flies too, in that Iron suit. Both of them, looking out for the little guy. Freedom, peace. No Capitol, no Hunger Games. In every single one Tony thinks it, feels it, sees this kid like the son he was robbed of, the son he never got to have. In some he’s too afraid to say it, too closed off, too cocky, too Tony Stark, but in others he says it all the time, and it echoes across each universe, rolling through gossamer thin wormhole walls between here and there. There, there, and there too. Peter Parker always finds him, and Tony always wants to give him the world. Wants to be his family.

Tony doesn’t know if he believes in other universes, or if he even believes in this one. The images flash and fade like dreams.

He tunes back in. His face goes hot, considering the last person he said that phrase to is Janet, but Peter just grins at him, still drunk, still admiring, still the best person on the face of the earth. Too genuine.

“Love you too,” Peter says, and his eyes shut, the beginning of one of those deep drunk sleeps that last about four hours before a startling, headachey wake up.

Tony stumbles back to the other couch, everything tilting, tilting, a sinking ship. A ship taking them to another continent. Somewhere that’s free. Safe. Peaceful. Not here Not here. He thinks about the word love, what the fuck it even means, if it’s too strong, if it’s too soon, but he’s drunk and spinning and he looks at the kid, already snoring, and he knows. He feels like...a father. Insane, insanity, but that’s it, that’s the feeling. It’s impossible not to love Peter Parker. Especially as someone who has to think about the possibility of him dying every fucking second. That speeds shit up, if anything does. He can’t close himself off anymore. Not from this kid. Not this kid, who saved him.

Tony sits there, feeling like a giant, and finds that he isn’t the recipient of a deep drunk sleep—no, he’s been given wakeful hours with a splintering mind, and they drank too fucking much so this one is gonna last.

Before he knows it, he’s got his tablet in his hands, and he’s going through one of the many internet backdoors the Capitol never figured out how to shut. He’s one of the smartest people that’s ever set foot in this godforsaken city, though he wouldn’t say it out loud to anyone but Janet, and only to needle her. But even drunk he can hack into their system, their deep web, the things they don’t want anyone to see, and maybe drunk Tony has more drive, more ambition, more recall.

He finds the death certificates for his own parents, and he stares at the phrase resisting arrest and it chokes him, and he purposefully doesn’t look up Pepper because he can’t fucking bear to see that garish lie again on something nobody will ever see. They’re lying to everyone, they’re even lying to their fucking selves. He finds an article Christine Everhart started to do on Pepper’s ‘passing’ before they shot it out of the air, and that gets him thinking, gets the cogs in drunk Tony’s mind working on overdrive.

Everhart.

She said something weird, the day of the spider, the day where the kid made a name for himself. Tony had meant to follow through, but things build here, build new delicate castles ready to topple, and it slipped his mind. But he’s remembering now, while the world still shakes around him, while his vision burns and fuzzes out like he’s in one of those illusions they can create themselves with the right tech.
But now her words ring in his ears, dredged up from under everything else.

*I was wondering how it felt for you to know your parents*—

How does one feel, to know their parents? Howard was cold, calculating, lucky enough to have a job that allowed him to travel, and Tony, to him, was an accessory. Maria was light, too-tight hugs, and kiss marks he could barely rub off. They weren’t meant for Twelve, and it was almost as if the world knew that, granting them opportunities galore whenever the Capitol came calling. But despite Howard’s shortcomings, Tony was glad to know him, and his mother—he misses her every moment, every single second, and he’ll never get that image burned out of his retinas. The two of them, hanging. How do you not *resist* that?

But that’s not what Christine was asking. That wasn’t her full sentence, before the spider marched onto the scene and stole the show.

Their names were in Peter’s file, in that black and white memory that flashes in Tony’s mind’s eye.

He searches their database for Richard and Mary Parker.

Instead of the slew of files he got for his parents, he gets—maybe five results. He sees their birth certificates, looks into their eyes and sees their son. There’s a death certificate for both of them, but there is no cause, and all of the information is redacted except the date.

They lied outright on his parents’ death certificates, but here they’re blocking information out? What the fuck?

He feels a bit more sober now, and he holds the tablet in front of his face in an effort to concentrate.

He finds a write-up, for the pair of them, as a team, and it looks like an employee listing.

Tony’s blood runs cold, and he feels like he’s gonna puke. It has nothing to do with the liquor.


On, and on, and on and on and on. A list as long as his arm.

If you could think of it, up until the year they died, they fucking made it. Everything, every sick, horrifying thing the Capitol sent into the arenas, they were the head scientists and creators. From District Twelve, employed at the Capitol since their early twenties.

And their experiments are still in use. Have been, every year, since they passed.

Tony’s tablet drops into his lap, and he sways, his lower lip trembling.

He glances down at the information again.

Peter was seven years old when they died.

They died on the same day.

Tony feels like an exposed nerve, and he gets up, weaving into the kitchen. He quickly gets a glass of water, like that’s gonna do anything to wash all this away. And maybe he breaks it, he doesn’t know, but all of a sudden his fingers are bleeding, and he sticks them under the water too.

Head scientists. For the Capitol. Creators of all meant to hunt, torture and kill the Hunger Games
tributes. Of which their son is one, now.

Richard and Mary Parker.

Peter snores, unknowing, in the other room.
Peter dreams.

Everything seems heavy, like he’s sinking under a weighted blanket, chasing the tail end of deep sleep. He can see Tony, and someone else, sitting on a park bench, somewhere that looks like Memorial Deep in Twelve. He gets closer, pushing through fog, and sees that Tony is talking to—Ben. Ben, like he was before he got sick, before the mines brought him to his early end. Peter sees them laughing, sees Tony clap Ben on the back. Peter gasps, chills rising on his arms, and he surges forward, trying to meet them. He runs and he runs until he hits an invisible wall—hard, like a window.

A TV screen.

He yells, but he has no voice. They don’t hear him.

*No, Peter!* May’s voice pleads, everywhere. *No, Peter, please!*

“*May?”* Peter asks, spinning around, and the scene in front of him grows smaller, more distant. Tony and Ben are pinpricks now, and as much as Peter runs, he can’t get at them, can’t find May.

He slams his fists on the screen, and he sees all those Capitol faces, laughing, pointing at him.

“*Let me out!”* he screams. “*Let me out, let me out!*”

~

He startles awake, and he winces against the throbbing pain in his head.

“*Jesus Christ,*” Tony’s voice says, from somewhere behind him. “*I was starting to think you were never gonna wake up. Scared the shit out of me, I was ready to throw a bucket of water on you.*”

“*Oh my God,*” Peter groans, covering his face with his hands. “*Too might light. Too much everything.*”

“*Yeah, I already feel like garbage,*” Tony says. “*And Janet hates me. Michelle sat vigil for a little while, so, that should make you feel good.*”

“*Oh my God,*” Peter croaks, again, because his whole head feels like it’s stuck in a vice grip. “*Where are they?*”

“*Training,*” Tony says. “*Janet dragged her out of here.*”

“*What time is it?*” Peter asks.

“*Eleven in the morning,*” Tony says, and Peter hears him getting closer. “*We missed one interview, I rescheduled it, but this afternoon is the goddamn garden party, so we gotta get rid of this hangover asap.*”

“*Shit,*” Peter says, only vaguely remembering seeing that on the schedule. To be fair, he only glanced at it, because it freaked him out so much. “*That’s today?*”

“*Yeah,*” Tony says, and he’s right next to him now, setting what sounds like a plate and some glasses down on the coffee table. Strangely enough, sleeping out here on the couch felt the closest to
sleeping at home. Tony reaches out, pats his wrist, and Peter pulls his hands away from his face, looking at him. “Sorry, sorry,” Tony says, tilting his head, concern in his eyes. “I’m an asshole. Never again. No more drinking for small spiders.”

“Not your fault,” Peter says, groaning as he tries to pull himself into a sitting position. Tony helps, and Peter winces, feeling a bit like he’s gonna hurl. “It was good.”

“No.”

“It was fine.”

“No.”

“Vodka was my favorite.”

Peter watches as Tony straightens up, rolling his eyes. He remembers most of his drunken stupor, and he knows it made him ten times more annoying, and ten times more emotional. He has a surge of guilt, knowing how hard Tony struggles with alcohol, and knowing he’s made him feel guilty for indulging Peter’s request to begin with. Peter’s brain is overloaded with too many things, to the point that he doesn’t want to know anything anymore, and he wipes at his eyes, trying to focus. Tony brought him a plate of breakfast—two blueberry muffins, a banana, and a very good try at an omelette. One big glass of water, and two painkillers on the edge of his plate.

“Hey,” Peter says, looking over his shoulder. “I’ll stop drinking if you stop drinking.”

Tony turns, his eyes narrowed.

Peter tries a different tactic. One he may not believe, one that his headache may be combating, but he pushes through it anyway. “And I mean after the Games,” he says. “When it’s all over. I’ll never drink again and you—you never drink again either.”

Tony looks at him, his eyes a little watery, a sad, lopsided smile forming on his face. He walks back over, and holds out his hand. “Seal the deal?” he asks.

Peter takes his hand without hesitation, and the deal is set. He hasn’t planned for After the Games, hasn’t pictured the line of his life continuing on post his time in the arena, but now, he has a plan.

Which makes him think about the plan.

“Eat up,” Tony says. “That one came out pretty good.” He walks away again, and Peter hears him clear his throat. “So, uh—are you thinking about what I told you?” he asks, proving they’re still on the same wavelength. “What, uh—the whole thing. With Thor.”

Peter’s drunk brain was set in that world. Where he said yes to the plan—and then it played out all the possible scenarios. He died, in a lot of them. And in some of them—very few—things worked out. As well as renegade rebellions can work out.

His sober brain, however, is struck and frozen in fear. The headache doesn’t help. The whole thing seems too big, too out of this world, to ever be fucking real. Who would want him as the face of a rebellion? A rebellion meant to take down an incredibly powerful government, sadistic and willing to do just about everything to remain on top? Everybody knows what they did in the early days, how they blasted Thirteen out of existence with their own weapons, and no one wants that to happen again.

Peter understands the need, the want, to get out from under the Capitol’s thumb. He wants to, so
badly—wants to end this, wants to save everyone locked into the role of Tribute, wants to set all the Victors free, wants to give the Districts the life they deserve. He wants to live. But being the face of the rebellion? He doesn’t know if he’s strong enough. He doesn’t want to let everyone down, in any of the numerous ways in which he could. And if he’s in that position, if he’s that person—May and Ned would be in danger. And he can’t have that. Not them, not Tony, not MJ or Janet or Sam. He has to make sure they’re safe.

“Pete.”

“Yeah,” Peter says, snapping out of his panic. “Uh. I can’t—my brain can’t comprehend it. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“It’s all up to you,” Tony says, walking back into the room and sitting on the other couch.

Peter sighs, scooting onto the floor and sitting closer to the coffee table. He takes a bite of one of the muffins. “ Doesn’t really seem like it,” Peter says. “If I wanna live, I—I need to be with them. Be...what they want me to be.”

“You could...do things normally,” Tony says, not looking at him.

Peter shakes his head. “I don’t—I’m not killing anybody. Not on purpose. And I’m not—if I wasn’t involved, I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t stop them.”

“They’d take you, anyway,” Tony says. “Or try. Can you imagine the backlash if they didn’t? No one would stand with them.”

“I can’t imagine it, because I don’t get it, and I never will,” Peter says, his mouth full of muffin crumbs.

Tony smiles at him, shaking his head. He looks down at his hands, seems to want to say something, before deciding against it.

“I know we should tell them soon,” Peter says, and he takes a sip of water, readying to take the painkillers. “I just...I wanna think...I wanna get it all straight in my head, today. If I...If I could.”

“Of course,” Tony says.

Peter sighs. He downs the painkillers and, even though it’s quiet, he’s lost in the loudness of his own thoughts. He eats a bite of the omelette and thinks about how he got here—here, to a place he never imagined but one that was always looming, on the edge of every day.

He thinks about all the time with Ben, all the time without him, how lost May looked in all the time after. He wonders what she looks like now, what she’s doing, if she’s spending any time with Ned. He misses her, he misses her hugs, the strength she gives him just by being close. He tries to imagine her without him, for the rest of her life. Alone, alone in that house, alone in her thoughts and conversations. And he’d fall to the wayside—they’d all forget about him, forget about the claims of love they tossed his way, and only May would remember. May, Ned, Tony and Janet.

Peter’s heart beats hard against his chest, and he looks up at Tony. “You said before that you...you talked to May,” he says. “At...at City Hall.”

Tony nods, still not meeting his eyes.

“What did, uh—I can imagine, but, uh—what did she say to you?” Peter asks, longing to hear her voice again. Longing to see the two of them together.
Tony seems to go over something in his mind, eyes looking at things Peter can’t see, and then he finally looks at him. “She told me something important,” he says. “She—reminded me of something, that happened, a long...a long time ago, something that was...well, something that was important.”

“What?” Peter asks, tilting his head. “What could May know about you that…”

“I think you might remember,” Tony says, clasping his hands together. “Somewhere in there.”

Peter shakes his head, not understanding.

Tony smiles a little bit. “Uh, May—May reminded me of the moment, uh, my Homecoming. Way back. When they drag out the whole District for the winner, to stand around and cheer that their tribute actually came home. We hadn’t had one since Janet, and the District was...understandably, uh, enthusiastic. But that was right after they killed my parents, killed Pepper, made me look at the goddamn—bodies, and I, uh—I wasn’t what they wanted me to be. I wasn’t shining bright and waving and holding up my hands in victory and—and—”

It comes back. It’s grainy, like old film. “I was—” he gasps. “I was—I was there. I was little.”

“You were four,” Tony says, his smile getting wider.

Peter remembers. Being there before the crowd. Seeing the man—Tony—the one they called Iron Man. He didn’t know much, but he knew they were hurting him. He knew the man looked sad. He knew the man stood tall when they clearly wanted to knock him down.

“You remember?” Tony asks, raising his eyebrows. “I wasn’t sure if you ever would, I mean, I don’t remember shit from when I was four—”

“I called you a hero,” Peter says. “You said you weren’t.”

“Always feel like you should be honest to children.”

Peter shakes his head. “You were. You are.”

Tony looks away, like he knows fighting with Peter won’t do any good. “You were the first person to hug me since...since, uh, Rhodey,” Tony says. “They kept Janet away from me until the train, and she already knew what they’d done, so, she...kept her distance, just kissed me once, on the forehead, but you—this little four year old, that didn’t know me—shit, kid, you...you’re the hero. You saved my damn life and you didn’t even know it. Because if you hadn’t been there, if you hadn’t—given me that moment, I—I don’t think I’d still be here. I really don’t.”

Peter swallows hard, his eyes straining.

“So May reminded me of that,” Tony says, getting to his feet like he’s gonna leave the room. “Because she’s a smart woman. You knocked me out of my stupor back then, and she knew that—bringing that memory back up would knock me out of it again.”

“You’re a hero, Iron Man.” Peter held on tight, because maybe if he did, they wouldn’t hurt the man again. Maybe if he did, the man would be safe. Tony. May said his name was Tony.

“Kid, I’m not—”

“You’re a hero,” Peter said, squeezing his eyes shut tight. He could feel May, close behind him, could hear Ben’s voice, and he knew they’d be telling Mom and Dad when they got home. He got teary, held on tighter.
Iron Man hugged him back.

Peter scrambles to his feet, his fork clattering on the coffee table. He rushes up to Tony before he can take another step, launching himself into a bone-crushing hug, reminiscent of the one they shared all those years ago. The memory’s been hovering in the back of his mind, something he thought he made up, and he can’t believe it’s real. It’s real. It happened, Tony remembers it too. And Peter’s not properly processing everything that’s happening right now, everything that Tony’s implying about what might have happened if Peter hadn’t been there—he just hugs him and doesn’t let go.

“I’ve been a part of this bullshit for way too long,” Tony says, hugging him back. “May—she told me not to let you down, and I’m not going to. So if we don’t like the plan, we’ll figure something else out. Something that might work.”

“Okay,” Peter breathes, holding on tight. For the first time, the future doesn’t bury him, and the past doesn’t tug at his heart. He’s in the present, and he feels hope.

The front door opens but Peter still doesn’t budge.

“Oh, Jesus,” Janet’s voice says. “Don’t tell me you two are drinking again. Don’t tell me that. Wasn’t cleaning out the bar enough?”

“No, we’re not drinking, this is...this is hangover time,” Tony says, patting Peter on the back. “Drinking is, uh...drinking is done, right Pete?”

“Right,” Peter says. He pulls back, wiping at his face. He catches sight of Michelle, wearing her training uniform, her curls falling in her eyes, and maybe he thinks a little too far into the future. Maybe he’s got too much hope.

“C’mere,” Tony says, waving them over. “Group hug. Hammer, you too.”

“Oh wow, really?” Hammer says, dropping his bag by the door. “I won’t make you say it twice.”

All three of them approach, and Peter smiles when MJ narrows her eyes at him.

“This definitely seems like drunk behavior,” she says, exchanging a look with Janet.

“It’s not,” Tony says, tugging Peter in again, scoffing when Hammer plasters himself against Tony’s back. “Sometimes group hugs are therapeutic.”

“I didn’t even know you knew that word,” Janet says, joining them.

“Shit, if anyone needs therapy, it’s us,” Tony says. “Capitol needs to get on that. Make it affordable.”

“As if,” Janet says, leaning in and kissing Tony on the cheek. “It’s just for blue-haired housewives who aren’t happy with the color of their drapes.”

Peter stretches his hand out towards MJ, and she takes it, clearly trying not to smile. They all close in on each other, Hammer clapping Peter on the shoulder, and MJ buries her face in Peter’s neck, making his stomach do flips.

“Whatever happens, we’re a team,” Tony says, with a sigh. “That’s what we are. We’re a goddamn team.”

~

Sam provides them with formal wear that isn’t as costumey as the other event outfits they’ve been
wearing, though Peter still sports a red vest under his jacket. The color scared him in the beginning, felt like a risk, was so opposite of how he used to portray himself, but now it grants him a certain kind of strength, a form of confidence he didn’t think he was capable of.

Hammer leads their group up the cobblestone path to the President’s mansion. Peter’s never seen it before—they’ve only shown certain rooms from Stane’s many addresses to the nation, and Peter feels a lot like he did when he first saw the tribute center, except this time, the anger is deeper. Stane’s mansion is probably larger than the entirety of District Twelve. There are diamonds hanging from the cherry blossom trees like Christmas ornaments, and they haven’t even gotten inside yet, and it’s already beyond grandiose.

Peter shakes his head, glancing at MJ.

“We should snag a couple of these diamonds,” she says, reaching out and flicking one of them. “Bet five or so could set both of our families for life.”

“Wouldn’t think about swiping,” Hammer says, looking back at them. “An escort from Four did that a couple years back. They nearly whipped his back clean.”

Goosebumps run down Peter’s spine, and he shakes his head.

“They’ll be gathering fans at the back fence near the middle of the party,” Hammer says. “It’ll look good on whoever goes to say hello. And of course, I want you two to look good.”

“Just remind us,” Peter says. He looks back at Tony and Janet, and he wonders if he’s told her yet. Peter’s anxiety is spiking, just being this close to MJ and not sharing the plan with her. If he goes through with it, she has to be on board. He won’t get out without her.

“Don’t worry,” Hammer says. “I will.”

~

When they start passing out drinks, Peter makes sure he gets something that isn’t alcoholic.

The inside is more extravagant than he ever could have dreamed, more than the TV ever showed them, and Peter knows, more than ever, that he’s on enemy territory. This is Stane’s house, he’s at a garden party at the President’s house, and he stops every few steps to take a photo with someone, to be introduced to someone’s son, to be given gifts that he may or may not get to use to defend himself when he has to go into the arena at the end of the month. It’s lunacy.

He tries to be outside himself. Tries to be someone else. Tries to be the Peter they see. The Peter the people might believe in. A different version of himself.

He approaches Carol Danvers and says something stupid.

“I know your cat.”

She’s holding a small spinach croissant and stops in the middle of her bite, smiling at him. “I think most people do,” she says, shoving the rest of the croissant in her mouth. “I mean. I talk about her enough.”

“No, I mean—I’ve met—I’ve hung out with your cat.” He clears his throat, looks out the window at the rose garden. He sees Janet out there, talking to Scott Lang.

“Oh yeah?” Carol asks. “I always wonder where she goes. She gets around.”
“I never thought I’d actually meet you,” Peter says. “But I thought it was funny that I, uh, well—I felt pretty cool, that a Victor’s cat liked me.”

She raises her eyebrows at him. “Look at you now.”

“My brother likes cats too,” Shuri says, appearing at Peter’s shoulder. “Too well, probably.”

Peter looks at her, feels warmer beside her sunny disposition, and he swallows hard. “I’d like to be allies,” he says, without thinking. “You, me, MJ—Michelle.”

Shuri looks surprised, exchanging a look with Carol.

“Did you—talk to Tony?” Carol asks.

Peter doesn’t know what to say, and he swallows hard. He needs to learn to keep his emotions in check, especially when they make him say shit before he thinks it through. “Uh—I haven’t—I haven’t asked him yet, I was just thinking about it.”

“Of course,” Shuri says. “M’Baku and I would love to ally with you both. Well, he doesn’t want to ally with anyone, but he can be convinced.”

Peter nods, glancing outside again.

“I’ll talk to Tony, yeah?” Carol asks, kindness in her eyes.

Peter knows she’s in on it too. Their whole group. He nods back, his heart beating too loud in his ears.

He talks to a few more Capitol fans, has a discussion with a sponsor named Mordo about what he might send into the arena for Peter at the first opportunity. He eats too much, walks around like an idiot, worrying any second that he’s going to be within eyesight of Stane. He’s in his house, he’s gotta prepare to actually see him. But the very thought fills him with dread, enough to paralyze him, and he keeps searching around for Tony or MJ.

“You look a little lost,” Natasha says, coming up behind him as he hovers in the library. She holds her glass like a weapon, but he figures anything in her hands could be used that way.

“This place is so big and there are—so many people here,” Peter says. He realizes he still has a deviled egg in his hand and he pops it into his mouth, sighing.

“Oh, you’ve never been to a President’s mansion before?” she asks, smiling. “Clint—my husband—he got to come here once. Renovations on the west wing.”

Peter’s face falls. “I didn’t—I didn’t know you were married.”

“Why would you?” she says, but there’s no harshness in her voice. She gets closer, stands next to him, briefly runs her free hand over a few leather bound volumes that look like dictionaries. “He did archery, in the competitions they used to hold. He had a friend he worked with, her name was Kate—he got reaped a couple years back. I don’t know if you remember.”

“Kate Bishop?” Peter asks.

Natasha nods. “Kamala’s year.” She stares off at the far wall. “Clint didn’t take it well, hurt himself, couldn’t compete anymore. Couldn’t do renovations anymore, either.” She meets Peter’s eyes. “Wanted, more than anything, to come with me.”
Peter knows she volunteered. Both she and Steve. The whole plan. He wonders if her husband has a different part in it, since he wasn’t able to come to the Games. He wonders if she knows he knows, if she knows Tony told him already. If she wants an answer. They can’t talk about it here, there’s not a more dangerous place to talk about it, but there’s something in her eyes. Like she’s used to living on the edge. He’s sure she can handle herself there.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says.

“What are we talking about, over in the corner?” a voice says, and when Peter looks up he sees Quentin Beck approaching them, holding a glass of champagne in both hands. “Doing some light reading? Lots of options. Lots of options I’m sure you two don’t get in your respective districts.”

“Quentin,” Natasha says, and now there’s a harsh cut to her voice that wasn’t there before.

“Natasha,” he says, grinning at her. He looks over the top of his glasses at Peter, like he’s analyzing him. “And our amazing Spider-Man. Here he is, in all his spidery glory.”

“Not very spidery right now,” Peter says. He feels less safe, with this guy around.

“You have been putting on quite the show,” Beck says, still smiling like that. “Amazing, that...that really describes you, Mr. Parker. Wow. Can’t wait to see you in action in the arena. Might be a little distracting, but I think I can—I think I can get through it.”

Peter looks down at his feet, raising his eyebrows.

“And let me just say, I’ve been following Tony Stark’s career, and you’re—well, you’re quite the worthy tribute for him,” Beck says. “Wasn’t really sure about Bucky—”

“Bucky almost won,” Natasha says, taking a sip of her drink.

“Almost,” Beck says, holding up both of his drinks at her. “I’ve been thinking about this, a lot, since I got reaped, but especially today...isn’t it strange, that we’re all dolled up, at a goddamn garden party, of all things, and at the end of the month we’ll all be trying to kill each other? Because I think it’s strange.”

Peter feels a hand on his elbow.

“Yeah,” Tony’s voice says, tugging Peter away. “Pretty strange, huh?”

Peter looks past him, and sees Steve there next to him. Peter watches as they exchange a look, and then Steve takes Peter’s place beside Natasha.

“Thanks,” Peter says, looking at Tony as they walk away. “That guy weirds me out.”

“He’s definitely one we’ve gotta look out for,” Tony says. “Steve’s gonna try and see what he’s planning, if anything. Hopes to get one over on him.”

The silver haired girl looks at Peter with a wry smile from one of the Egyptian couches, and Peter swallows hard. People are laughing, glasses are clinking, and Peter keeps having a terrible feeling like something is about to tip, like there’s an itch he can’t scratch, something tugging at him. Something about to go wrong.

“Sorry I left you alone,” Tony says. “This thing is always a good opportunity to get some face time in, see what the others are saying. Trying to figure out details on what we discussed.”
“I asked Shuri to ally with me and MJ,” Peter says, looking at him as they weave around the buffet table, where the scary-looking woman from Two is holding court with a slew of sponsors.

“That’s okay,” Tony says, nodding at him. “That...probably would have happened anyway.” He clears his throat, and two men in black suits open the glass doors for them, leading them towards the back gate.

“Is it time to go, uh, see the…” He doesn’t like the word fans because it feels false, because they don’t know him, not really.

“Yeah, Hammer was banging on the damn window for me to come and get you,” Tony says, shaking his head as they trudge across the grass. “We’ll just give it a couple minutes, you can sign a few things, answer a few...hopefully...harmless questions, and then we’ll go back inside and eat. We’re all gonna get kicked out in an hour or so, then the day’s free.”

“Okay,” Peter says. He looks off to his right where there’s a long fence, and he sees tons of people smashed up against it, all their gaudy colors brighter than the sun in the sky. The middle of the fence is open, only a red velvet rope cutting them off from racing inside. And two peacekeepers, of course. To keep the peace. There are three or four cameras hovering in the air, a little ways away, poised to capture another Spider-Man moment.

The people start shouting when they see him, waving, celebrating, yelling questions, and the whole thing still settles a pit in Peter’s stomach. He sees Hammer is down there already, smiling proudly and holding his arms out, presenting Peter’s oncoming approach.

Peter feels that itch again, and he glances back at Tony, his eyes narrowed.

“Just a couple minutes,” Tony says, nodding. “Promise.”

Peter nods back, blowing out a breath, and he speed walks down the hill, meeting the clamoring crowd.

It goes well for about ten seconds, and the world slows down again, like it did when he was moments away from meeting Harley Keener. Fingers flutter, purple hair flies in the wind, mouths curve around his name, and Peter looks to his right when he sees the poster rise into the air. This one is smaller than the original that was given to him, clearly smuggled past checkpoints inside a jacket or a coat, but big enough for its message to be seen.

**SPIDER-MAN AND IRON MAN FIGHT FOR YOU**

Right after Peter sees it, the closest peacekeeper does too.

The woman holding it is up against the velvet rope, and the peacekeeper is closer to her than Peter is. Close enough to reach out and backhand her, knocking her into the crowd.

The world starts spinning again and the peacekeeper punches her when she doesn’t go down, splaying her out at his feet.

“No!” Peter yells, slipping out of Tony’s grasp. He sees red, his heart dropping.

Hammer is right next to the action, and he shakes his head, stepping closer. “Hey now, let’s—”

The peacekeeper turns and backhands him too, and Peter doesn’t stop his own forward trajectory, doesn’t think, doesn’t breathe, just sees the girl on the ground, others backing away in fear, Hammer clutching at his face. Peter launches himself at the peacekeeper, hauling off and punching him in the
throat.

The man stumbles back, clearly caught by surprise, and Peter takes the opportunity to punch him in the stomach, too, knowing if he aims for the helmet it won’t do much other than bruise his own knuckles. May’s face flashes in his mind, Ned’s, Ben’s, the slums of Twelve and the opulence of the Capitol. Death, the Games, all their lies. He can’t breathe, he can’t breathe. His hearing goes in and out, screams, gasps, cutting in and out like a bad reception, and he cocks his hand for another punch when he hears Tony yell his name.

“Peter!” Tony says again, and Peter whips around, sees the second peacekeeper, gun up and pointed at Tony’s back. Tony has his hands up, an apology in his eyes, and Peter feels the butt of another gun shoved into the middle of his own back.

“Let’s go, you two,” the peacekeeper who’s holding Tony says. “Inside.”

All Peter’s bluster and strength from the moment before falls away, and a shockwave of fear rolls over him.

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They take them upstairs, shove them into an office, and lock the door behind them. As soon as they’re alone, Tony turns to the kid to try and comfort him, calm him down, but Peter starts stammering before he can make a move.

“I’m s—sorry,” Peter says, shaking, twisting around in his chair to face Tony head on. “I’m so, so sorry,” he says. “I didn’t—I didn’t think, I just—I just lost it, I—I lost it—”

“It’s okay,” Tony says, wrapping his arm around Peter’s shoulders. “It’s fine, it’s fine—”

“It’s not fine, it’s not fine,” Peter says, wringing his hands in his lap. “I just punched a peacekeeper, two times, two times—”

“I’ve done it,” Tony says, squeezing the kid’s shoulder, rubbing his arm up and down, trying to do anything he remembers his mother doing when he was younger. “Thor’s done it, Carol has absolutely done it—”

Peter covers his own eyes, sucking in a breath. “Not while they were tributes,” he says.

“Carol definitely did when she was a tribute,” Tony says, not really knowing if that’s true or not. In reality, inside his own head, he’s panicking too, and if the kid wasn’t here he probably would have puked already. But the kid is here, and he’s the priority. Tony doesn’t want to freak him out more than he already is. “Just relax. They’ll probably just—warn us. Maybe dock the next public dinner or something.” He rubs Peter’s arm again, tugging him a little closer. “I can’t imagine they exactly like the look of the peacekeepers knocking around a Capitol citizen—no, two Capitol citizens, counting Hammer. So this is probably a—one cancels out the other kind of deal.”

Peter is still burying his face in his hands, shaking his head.

“I’m proud of you,” Tony whispers, ruffling Peter’s hair. “I really am.” Tony was this close to joining him, except he heard Janet’s voice in his ears, when he mentioned the tube. What she said, about Peter having to watch him die. He’d never allow that to happen.

He remembers his own time on the upper level of this house, after his Games. His conversations with the higher up’s, his time with Stane himself. That was after Pepper, after his parents, and his anger, his hopelessness made him insane. He wonders if they think they’ve pacified him, after all these
years.

He can still hear Stane’s laughter.

“I wonder if MJ knows,” Peter says, looking up and meeting Tony’s eyes. “You think? Her and Janet know?”

“Janet’s probably throwing a fit down there right now, yeah,” Tony says. “It’ll be fine. It’ll be fine, they just wanna put on a big show, freak us out, knock us back in line. It’s gonna be fine. Nothing’s gonna happen. They need you, bud, remember that. For all this bullshit, they can’t replace you. Especially with how much everybody loves you. It’s about talk, it’s about ratings.”

Peter’s face changes, and it’s almost like more fear crawls into his expression. “What about you?” he asks. “They—they can’t do anything to you, right? Right?”

Tony doesn’t know. He can’t exactly say his position is firm and protected, but they definitely don’t kill Victors willy nilly. It’s a last case scenario.

“No,” Tony says, trying to keep his voice from cracking. “No, we’ll...we’ll both be fine, bud. Just...try and relax.”

They make them wait. They wait and wait and wait, for what feels like forever. There aren’t any windows in this room, so they can’t gauge what time it is, whether or not everyone else is still here. Tony can’t help but get nervous, but he keeps his attention on Peter, his wellbeing. He thinks about his own worst case scenario—a round of guns, a firing squad, anything that puts Peter in imminent danger. He tries to plan on how to get them out, if he has to. If it comes to that.

When he’s working it through, the door in front of them opens on its own.

They sit there, staring at it, when Tony hears a familiar voice.

“Well, come on in!” Obadiah Stane’s voice says.

Tony’s mouth drops open, and he looks at Peter, his eyes wide, his lower lip trembling. Oh, fuck.

Tony tries to build himself up, tries to stay strong, because they’re obviously going for the ultimate intimidation tactic in presenting them to the fucking President himself.

“Okay,” Tony whispers, tugging Peter to his feet. “Just...let me do the talking, alright? It’s fine. It’s gonna be fine.”

Peter stares at him for a few agonizing seconds, and then he sets his jaw, nodding, still shaking. Tony takes the lead, situating Peter behind him, and they walk into the next room.

It isn’t Stane’s normal meeting room, where Tony met with him all those years ago. But it’s just as white, just as pristine, one black desk at the end of the room, and the man himself sitting behind it. There’s one window in here on each wall, and shadows of pink are shining through, signaling the sunset. It’s later than he expected.

He tries not to picture jumping through the window with Peter. He tries not to think that way. It’ll be a quick, intimidating reprimand. That’s it. That’s all. In and out.
“Tony Stark and Peter Parker,” Stane says, grinning. “Like a mythical Butch and Sundance. Well, I doubt either of you know who they are. Another world, another life, but those are the perks of being in charge, huh? I get to remember. What it was like, before all this. Before our wonderful Panem. Our well-oiled machine!”

Tony wants desperately to get this over with. Peter is almost directly behind him, but he can see Stane’s eyes seeking him out. “Sir—” Tony starts.

Stane clears his throat, loudly, cutting him off, and he gets to his feet. “No need, Tony,” he says, walking around the left side of his desk, approaching them. “I saw what happened out there, Peter. Such a moment, such a display.” He grins, revealing those yellow teeth of his, and it nearly turns into a snarl. “I know you’re going to put on a real good show, boy. But don’t start before we get started, huh? That’s just show business. Don’t share what you’ve got, or they’ll learn too fast. They’ll learn you, and then they’ve got time to plan for your moves. Works against you.” He says the last line like a lesson, and he even has the nerve to tsk tsk.

“President Stane,” Tony tries again. “It was a natural mistake. Peter...well, Peter is a gentleman, and seeing that peacekeeper hitting a woman, that—that rubbed him the wrong way.”

Stane nods, and he looms closer. “Yes, that was in bad taste, despite whatever contraband she may have been holding. Sometimes they jump the gun. Get too feisty, too...ahead of themselves. Right, Peter? Is that correct?”

Tony looks over his shoulder, sees the kid swallow hard, nodding.

“Yes, sir,” Peter says.

Stane stares at him, smiling again. The air in this room seems thin, and Tony hates how much taller Stane is than both of them. “Peter,” Stane says. “Did you know that I knew your parents?”

Tony’s breath catches in his throat.

“Uh,” Peter says, voice shaking. “You—you did?”

“That’s right,” Stane says, eyes briefly flicking up to meet Tony’s, to make sure he’s listening. Stane starts to pace. “We recruited them directly out of high school, before you were even a twinkle in their eyes. Well, not too much before. But those two, they didn’t let much stop ‘em. They were smart, like you. I can see where you get it.” He meets Peter’s eyes again, and Tony feels like he’s gonna be sick. “They could make anything, Peter. They were...pioneers of their time. You’ve seen their work and you didn’t even know it! That mutant dog that ripped Miss Darcy apart? That came straight from your mother’s brain. And the bees that paralyze with one sting? That was dear old Dad. Oh, and the acid rain, that choked Danny Rand to his last breath? The two of them together. My goodness, they made a good team. Never a bad idea. Never a bad execution.”

Tony can hear Peter breathing, but he’s too afraid to look at him. He steps closer, though. Anything to offer support, with this goddamn fucking prick unloading the worst kind of information.

“What?” Peter breathes, sounding small and young.

“Oh yes,” Stane says. “They were my lead scientists and my God, did they come up with some sinister things for the Games. It got worse and worse and worse, every year. I was never let down. They were something else, Peter. The Games wouldn’t have been what they are without them. But do you know the best part?”

He waits, even though he doesn’t get an answer. Tony’s vision is spotty, and he feels like his legs are
“The best part,” Stane continues, “is that they hated every moment of it. No, they weren’t villains, like you were picturing in your mind. We had to keep the threats going, and going, and going. We knew you existed, of course, but they kept you under wraps, kept you at a distance. Why, I haven’t thought about you in years—until I was very pleasantly surprised at the reaping. They only went home occasionally, which is why, I’m sure, your memories of them are very dim. Few and far between. Which is quite sad, my boy, I do apologize for monopolizing so much of their time.”

“Sir,” Tony says, voice wavering.

“But I guess it got to them,” Stane says, stopping again, looking down at his feet. “Because they hatched some asinine plan, some...half-baked assassination attempt on my VP at the time. You remember Schmidt, Tony? Never my favorite, so they would have been doing me a favor, if they could have hidden their movements better. Do you remember the last kiss your mother gave you, Peter? Before we had her and your father killed?”

Tony steps further in front of Peter, reaches back and finds his hand. Tries to stop it from trembling.

Stane *tsks* again. “Such a shame,” he says. “A damn shame. I’d like to say they went fast, but—well, it felt poetic to use their own work against them. And do you know what’s wonderful?” he asks, looking up, searching for another answer he’s not going to get. “We still use their creations, their blueprints, everything they laid out. We compound on it, sure, but at its base, it’s all theirs. And, well, this whole Spider-Man thing. It’s just beautiful, because we’ve got some deadly, deadly spider monstrosities that will be *aching* to meet you. Courtesy of Mom and Pop. Talk about poetic.”

Tony is inches from attacking him. Inches from clawing his face off his skeletal head. *Stay calm* he reminds himself. *For Peter.*

“I’ll make sure they find their way into your path,” Stane says, nodding, like he’s in a business meeting. He grins at Peter, tilts his head. “I’ll make sure it’s slow, dramatic, painful. Like you’re being flayed alive. It’ll make for such wonderful television, won’t it, Tony? You know more than anybody else, don’t you? Losing this one will be hard, and it’ll hurt. I’ll make sure it’ll hurt plenty, for you both.”

And that’s when the wall behind his desk opens, revealing shelves, things Tony doesn’t quite place immediately, from behind his horror, his rage.

But then—

Hank’s pocket watch.

Hope’s jacket and hair clips.

Rhodey’s brace.

Tony sees dirty clothing, weapons. Jewelry, sponsor gifts. Fingers in jars, eyeballs, feet, hair, teeth. A tongue.

He sees Bucky’s mechanical arm.

Tony takes a few steps back out of his own volition, squeezing Peter’s hand, hearing the kid gasp, stifle a sob. Tony’s own heart seizes and drops, skips beats, and they have to get the fuck *out of here*, they have to get out, they have to get out.
“Oh, I love to keep my little souvenirs,” Stane says, still smiling, walking closer, and Tony keeps pushing Peter further behind him. “From those tributes that…particularly stood out. I think you see some familiar items, don’t you, Tony? Bucky was a big one, wasn’t he? Wasn’t he special?” Stane is too close now, and Tony doesn’t want to run Peter into the wall, but he wants to keep him away, needs to get away. Stane keeps looking at him, and he’s looking at him now. “You’re very special, too, Peter.”

“Stane,” Tony says, through gritted teeth, full of venom. “Stay away from him.”

Stane meets his eyes, then. “Once he’s dead, I’ll have his head, Tony. I’ll cut it right off his body myself. I’ll keep it in here, with everything else. I’ll let you come and visit it, Tony. I’ll let you watch it rot.”

Tony is shaking. He can’t hear properly, he’s full of violent, uncontrollable anger, and he feels Peter’s hand twisting at the back of his jacket, can feel the fear radiating off of him.

“You’re free to go,” Stane says. “There’s a car waiting in the circle to take you back to the tribute center. Happy Hunger Games, Mr. Parker. I’m very much looking forward to it.”

Tony turns on his heel, keeping hold of Peter’s hand and dragging him out as quick as he fucking can. Peter nearly drops once they’re out of the room, his footsteps scattered, his breathing uneven, and Tony hurries him down the stairs, past peacekeepers, past priceless art and ancient tapestries. He feels like he needs to vomit but he has to get Peter the fuck out of here, and he bites back his own tears, his own terror as they rush out the front door.

“Tony,” Peter gasps, choking on a sob once they’re down the front stairs, hurrying down the tree-lined lane. “Tony, don’t—oh my God, you can’t let him. Tony, God, please, don’t, don’t, don’t let him, please, please—”

“I won’t,” Tony says, his vision going blurry as he holds onto the kid, trying not to think about what Stane said, the horrifying fucking things he said—

But Peter is breaking down, grasping at Tony, his feet nearly crumpling underneath him. “You can’t let him,” Peter sobs, throwing his arms around Tony’s middle and stopping them on cobblestone. “Please, please, please—”

“I won’t,” Tony says, holding him tight, his own heart faltering too many times to be missed. “Never ever, okay? Never fucking ever, Pete.” He rocks him back and forth, catching sight of the car in the distance, out in the street, waiting for them. “I’ve got you. Shh. He’s not gonna touch you, kid, he’s not gonna fucking touch you.”

Tony waits for him to calm down, lets himself cry too, because this is hopelessness, this is bottom of the barrel, this is being trapped. He’s never felt it before, not like this. They surprised him with Pepper, but Stane is actively planning, now. He’s letting Tony know. To hear things like that, to see—to see the sickness of the man in charge, all those things, those things, and Tony thinks of the bare spot on the shelf, at the top, and he knows Stane left it empty on purpose, so Tony could picture it, so he could see it, the future horror he laid out in gruesome detail, and Tony hugs Peter closer.

It isn’t allowed. It can’t happen.

“Come on,” Tony whispers, pulling back, brushing Peter’s hair away from his sweaty forehead. He wipes the kid’s tears, too, keeps an arm securely around him. “Come on, let’s get the fuck out of here.”
Peter isn’t himself on the drive back, and Tony doesn’t blame him. He just sits, staring, plastered against Tony’s side like he’s afraid to be too far from him, and this is what Stane wanted. To break him, to instill fear, to pacify and horrify. Peter knows everything about his parents now. All of it, more than Tony found out last night. Tony doesn’t know if it’s better or worse.

He feels like he’s trying to protect someone that’s already gone. He tries to squash that thought as soon as it enters his head. Peter isn’t theirs. He isn’t anybody’s. He’s his own, and he’s gonna get out. He’s gonna live, he’ll live, if Tony has anything to do with it. And Tony’s got something to do with it, alright.

They pull up alongside the tribute center, and their back door unlocks.

Tony scoots over to get out, but Peter doesn’t move, still staring straight ahead. “C’mon, bud,” Tony says.

Peter tunes back in, eyes focusing on him, and he nods, quickly following.

They walk fast towards the elevator, and once the doors close, Peter clears his throat. He looks like he’s trying to build himself up. Trying to be strong.

“If it happens,” he says, hardly sounding like himself. “I just wish...I just hope it’s...I hope it’s fast.”

Tony shakes his head, vehement. “Not happening,” he says. “What did I tell you?”

Peter’s eyes are red rimmed and he looks at Tony like he’s an idiot. “This is Stane, Tony. If he wants me dead, I’m dead.”

“I don’t care what he wants,” Tony says. “It’s not happening. He doesn’t get to win. He doesn’t get to continue to be a sadistic fuck, he doesn’t—he doesn’t get to—” His throat goes tight and he can’t finish his sentence, picturing it again, picturing what he said, the things he already has, the thing he said he’d take.

The elevator stops and the doors open, and Tony wipes at his eyes. “C’mon,” he says.

They walk a few steps to their front door, and Tony buzzes them in. He feels like he’s inches from a total and complete breakdown, the likes of which he used to have in the beginning, when it was just him and Janet, when he could barely breathe without falling apart.

He closes the door behind Peter, and looks up to see Thor, Steve and Natasha sitting at the dining room table with Michelle and Janet.

Stane’s voice is still in his ears.

I’ll let you watch it rot.

He feels like the last shred of his sanity grinds itself into a fine dust and he stands there, more determined than he’s ever been in his entire life.

“Tony,” Janet says, getting to her feet.

Michelle is already rushing across the room, launching herself into Peter’s arms.

“Thor,” Tony says, voice shaking. “Did you tell them?”

“We’re in,” Tony says. “We’re doing it. We’re in for the plan.” He sucks in a breath, looking around at them, nodding. “Stane doesn’t get this anymore. No fucking more, he’s not taking anyone else from me.” He feels dizzy, but he whips his hand through the air in a cutting gesture, shaking his head. “The asshole himself pulled us aside. Yeah. Had some very particular things to say, some—very particular things to show us, and—and I’m—I’m not doing this anymore. Not one more time, not one more year. I keep saying that, but this is it, last straw, that sick asshole—he did it. If you can believe it, he crossed some...invisible, final line. We’re done, they’re getting out. They’ll be free, that’s it. It’s gotta work, that’s all there is to it.” His eye twitches and he rubs at it, trying to make it stop.

“Right,” Thor says, looking at Natasha with furrowed brows. “Uh—”

“Tony,” Steve says, rising out of his seat. “Are you alright?”

“No,” Janet says, trudging over to him. “No, he’s not.”

“Yeah, no,” Tony says, glancing over at Peter, pulling back from Michelle and looking at him with concern. I’ll let you come and visit it, Tony. I’ll let you watch it rot. “No, I’m not.”

“Tony?” Peter asks, moving towards him.

Tony takes one tentative step, swaying, and everything goes dark as he drops to the ground.
Tony wakes back up to singing. He doesn’t remember what images gripped him in unconsciousness, but he can imagine, and he doesn’t try to recall. He groans, realizes he’s in his own bed, and he turns, sees Peter sitting cross-legged right next to him.

“Here it’s…” Peter keeps singing, but then he stops, his eyes going wide. “Tony, you okay? You’re awake—God, you just—dropped.”

“Sorry,” Tony says, reaching up and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just—had a dramatic moment. Comes with the territory. What was, uh—what was that song?”

“Oh,” Peter says, glancing away, palming the back of his neck. “Uh, a song May used to sing to me. When I was sick.”

Tony’s heart goes warm, and he feels horrible at the same time, because this kid is just—this kid. With all he’s gone through, all he will go through, everything that goddamn Stane just said, enough to taint nightmares forever, and Peter’s here. Sitting by his side, after an incredibly embarrassing bout of swooning. Peter is sitting here, thinking of comfort. Peter is sitting here singing.

Tony reaches out, squeezing the kid’s arm in silent appreciation.

“Is he awake?” Janet’s voice asks, from the other room, and Tony hears the others clamoring too.

“Yeah,” Peter calls, looking off towards the door. He meets Tony’s eyes again. “It’s just been ten minutes.”

“Oh, good,” Tony says. “Better than last time.”

“Two minutes more and we would have had to call someone,” Janet says, as the whole hoard of them walk into the room. “I couldn’t imagine trying to stuff these three in a closet somewhere, because they’re not supposed to be here.”

Tony sits up, feeling like an invalid, and Peter helps him lean against the pillows.

“We saw them drag you away,” Steve says, pulling up a chair and sitting down next to him, leaning his forearms on his legs. “We tried to get out there, but they barred our way—”

“My throat still hurts from screaming,” Janet says. “You didn’t hear us?”

“We didn’t hear shit,” Tony says, watching as Michelle moves to sit next to Peter on the other side of the bed. “Pretty sure the upper levels of that place are entirely sound proof. No windows in the room they had us in, either.”

“I told them,” Peter says, softly. “Everything, uh. Everything he said.”

Goosebumps rise on Tony’s arms and he looks at him, his eye twitching a little bit. “All of it?” he asks.

Peter nods solemnly.
Tony doesn’t like the idea of the kid repeating the final threat out loud, he doesn’t want him to entertain it at all, doesn’t want him to have that fear in the back of his mind. It got to Tony, and he knows it. It’s already haunting him, taking up real estate in his mind, but he doesn’t want the same to happen to Peter. They’ve already got the spiders to worry about now. And the whole thing with his parents. But that final comment—Tony doesn’t want him to think about it. He doesn’t want any of them to mention it to him again.

“Rogers,” Tony says, making eye contact with Steve. “You can see why we’re in.” He swallows hard, glances at Peter again. “And I didn’t ask you, Pete, before I—rushed in here, making declarations and passing the fuck out so nobody could question me, and I’m sorry, but—”

“No, I wanna do it,” Peter says. “Especially now. I...I need to.”

Tony nods to himself, looking at Steve again. Natasha and Thor are standing behind him, and Steve sighs.


“Let them tell you, Tony,” Janet says. She sighs, sitting on the edge of his bed, right next to his feet. “We’d barely gotten into it, when you came in.”

“Unfortunately,” Steve says, glancing up at Thor. “There’s not a whole lot of detail to tell, especially on our end.”

“Wonderful,” Tony says, running his hand through his hair. “Going in blind, as per usual.”


“Okay, go ahead before I pass out again,” Tony says.

“Like he said, we only know a few choice details about the arena,” Thor says, beginning to pace. “As you told me before, Bruce is unable to share that kind of information without endangering us all and the entire rebellion. You cannot look like you know what’s coming, or they’ll simply eliminate you and be on their way. Stane has once again proven himself to be ruthless. And once you’re in the arena, they no longer care about preserving you. That’s what they’ve been saving you for.”

Tony sighs, trying not to look at Peter.

“No one in particular is in charge,” Thor says. “They’ll all be working together. It’ll be the four of them, here—Shuri, M’Baku, and Strange’s tributes, Scott Lang and Sharon Carter. Luke is still attempting to convince his tributes, but we’re going to plan as if we’re getting them out. The only ones we can’t trust are One and Two. Everyone else is aware of what the endgame is. And everyone knows to protect Peter.”

Tony is definitely looking at Peter now, and he knows the kid is feeling mountains of guilt, especially sitting next to Michelle.

“What are your choice details about the arena?” Janet asks.

“The main thing we know is that there will be one very obvious way out,” Thor says.

Tony can’t help but scoff. They all look at him, and he shakes his head, not feeling the slightest bit of shame. “A way out?” he asks. “Since when do they do that? Since never. There are three Victors in this room, how many ways out did we see?”
“This isn’t a typical way out,” Thor says. “It won’t be a door, or a hallway. But when they see it, they’ll know.”

“How will we…” Peter starts, and he’s making eye contact with Steve.

“Bruce says it’ll be obvious,” Steve says. “Clear as day, we’ll know as soon as we see it.”

“You talked to him about this?” Tony asks. “Face to face.”

“Well,” Steve says. “Not face to face.”

“So how do you—”

“I did,” Thor says, and he stops pacing near the foot of the bed. “He’s with us, Tony. He has been for years. You are the only one that doubts yourself, you’re the only one who doesn’t believe anyone can be inspired by you.”

Tony cracks his jaw, glancing away.

“I wouldn’t often say I’m inspired by people,” Natasha says. “But if I were to say that, you might be on that list.”

“Oh, hey,” Tony says, nodding at her. “That’s a resounding recommendation if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Bruce was inspired by your turn in the arena,” Thor says. “And even before him, the resistance was growing. There are sects every four miles in the Capitol. There are plants in the government, in significant positions you wouldn’t ever be able to guess. They’ve been there for years. There are underground headquarters in each of the Districts. Yes, Twelve too.”

Tony narrows his eyes, shaking his head, and he looks at Janet. She raises her eyebrows at him, clearly just as shocked.

“We have hovercrafts at the ready,” Thor says. “We have weapons, we are equipped against another nuclear war—”

“What?” Tony asks, looking back and forth between the three of them. “How the hell is that possible?”

“Thirteen is alive and well,” Natasha says. “All three of us have been there.”

Tony’s brain malfunctions. The whole room changes color. “So—so many things about that sentence. What the—what in the blue fuck—”

“They blasted Thirteen off the face of the earth,” MJ says, scoffing.

“We’ve watched that footage…” Peter trails off. He meets Tony’s eyes. “But they doctor things, don’t they?” he asks.

“They did drop bombs,” Thor says. “But it wasn’t as much of a massacre as they described. Thirteen was prepared to go underground, and that’s exactly what they did.”

Tony blinks, bewildered.

“How did you go there?” Janet asks. “I know you said you have hovercrafts, but we can’t exactly fly rogue hovercrafts around without the wrong kind of someone noticing.”

Natasha narrows her eyes at him, briefly looking at Steve. “Did someone tell you that already?” she asks.

“No,” Tony says, laughing, feeling insane and vindicated. “No, I just...continue.”

“There are certain tunnels that can take you there, but there are only a few opportunities during the year when we can use them,” Steve says. “The underground trains move a lot more during Hunger Games time, so we could never manage to make an attempt when we needed to.”

“Plus, it’s a little obvious,” Natasha says. “Not good for big groups.”

Tony nods, and he sort of wishes he would have gone through with his plan, figured out what tunnel they used, figured out the train schedules. But he would have thrown everything else into jeopardy, and the kid never would have forgiven him for leaving Michelle behind. He can see that now, looking at them together. Knows it, from the way he talks about her. It reminds him of how he used to ramble on about Pepper, in the very beginning.

He clears his throat.

“Once they see us get out, that’s the cue for the plants to strike,” Steve says. “It’ll be enough to take the Districts back, if we do things correctly. People are ready.”

“What about...my aunt,” Peter says. “And...and Ned. And MJ’s family. We need to...we know they won’t be safe, once we make our move. Especially if it works.”

“Our families are taken care of,” Natasha says. “They’ll be safe.”

“How?” Peter asks, loud, louder than he usually is. “Because if I—if I’m the face you’re looking for, like Tony said, I—if I get out, I need them to get out too.”

“Don’t worry,” Steve says. “I promise you, they’ll be safe.”

Tony chews on the inside of his cheek, and feels like there’s something implicitly trustworthy in Steve’s face.

“And we’ll head to Thirteen,” Thor says. “Where you’ll be the face of the revolution, as you said.” He nods in Peter’s direction. “That’s where we’ll begin the fight to take our country back. To stop all this.”

It feels like so much. So much, to put on Peter’s shoulders, especially after being in the Games. Surviving an escape. To be the face of the revolution—they’d constantly be after him. Tony needs to get the fuck out, too, if only to protect him, keep him safe. Tony gets up off the bed, still a little uneasy on his feet, and walks over to the far wall where the window is. There’s only a spray of pink across the sky now, the sun all but gone, and he doesn’t know what the hell to say about all this.

“So we’re just...basing this on...the idea that there will be a very obvious way out?” he asks, turning to face the group again. “Everything is...essentially planned out, after the fact, except it’s all contingent upon you guys getting out of the arena? Alive? Peter, intact, being your poster boy?”

“Yes,” Thor says.

Tony looks at Janet, and he can see the doubts in her eyes too.
“What if there’s more than one obvious exit?” Janet asks.

“Bruce said there would only be one,” Thor says. “And that we would know it as soon as it appeared.”

“What if we don’t know?” MJ asks.

“We’ll know,” Natasha says.

Tony shakes his head, rubbing at his eyes. He still feels way too dizzy, and he can’t stop hearing Stane, can’t stop thinking about the things he said. He wishes he’d never fucking heard it. Any of it.

“Look,” Thor says, and he walks over, getting closer to Tony. “I know it’s difficult, to enter into all this, not knowing what they’ll have to face to get it started. But I have faith they can weather these waters. We managed it.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, his mouth dry. “By the skin of our teeth.”

“We’ll make sure we get you out,” Natasha says, looking over at MJ and Peter. “And then you’ll be safe. We’ll all be safe, we’ll...be alive. Exactly like the Capitol doesn’t want.”

“Peter,” Steve says. “You inspire them. You’re...you’re the best of us. Seeing you get out, seeing you live, seeing you buck against their Games, their rules. Seeing how human you are. They will follow you.”

Tony looks over at Peter, watches him swallow hard. He can imagine what’s going through his head, because the kid thinks about everyone else before he thinks about himself.

“How are Tony and I involved?” Janet asks. “What about you, Thor? What about Carol?”

“We’re all essential pieces,” Thor says. “Once the arena is public knowledge, we’ll find out more from Bruce how things will work. But we’ll help them get out. Then we’ll help ourselves get to Thirteen.”

Tony shakes his head. “Fine,” he says, waving his hand through the air. “Fine. Whatever it is, whatever the fuck it is, just—get them out. Let them live. That’s all I care about.”

“We can do this,” Steve says. “We can.”

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“We can’t do this,” Peter says, later that night, when the team from Seven are gone. MJ and Janet went to bed, and Peter’s standing in Tony’s doorway, trying to make sense of what his life has become. He hates how their plan, if they can call it that, is centered around him. Get out, protect Parker. He’s been surrounded by love growing up, with May, and Ben, and Ned, and the ghosts of two people that he didn’t really know—but the love of the country, enough love to make him an icon, scares him down to his bones. It scares him even more to think it’s already in motion. That people already feel this way. How did the world not fall apart at Tony’s feet? He’s so much more charismatic than Peter is. So much more interesting.

They won’t know what the arena looks like. But Peter doesn’t know how anyone will protect him in there. He doesn’t know how the hell he’s gonna protect himself, and he knows he’s come leagues and leagues from what he was before. It’ll never be enough.

Tony’s sitting on the edge of his bed, with a tablet in his hands. “Yeah, I know how it sounds,” he
says. “But it’s gonna work, because Thor says it’s gonna work, and if we can’t trust Thor, then who can we trust? I don’t want to live in a world where I can’t trust Thor. Just doesn’t feel right.”

Peter scoffs, looking down at his feet.

“Today’s been garbage,” Tony says. “And I just want to—well, I don’t want you to think about it right now, because we’ve thought about it and every other terrible thing enough for the last eight or so hours.”

Peter swallows hard, feeling listless and lost. He leans in the doorway and feels half dead already, trying not to think about Stane’s mansion. Trying not to think about his parents. Trying not to think about spiders. Or his own severed head. “Gonna have to think about it soon,” Peter says, quietly. They don’t have much time left.

“Yeah, and we will,” Tony says, in that way that makes Peter think he can’t help but trust him. He’s gotten to know him ten years’ worth since he met him on the train, and half the time it feels like Tony knows what he’s thinking. “We’re gonna be ready for every scenario, okay? But all of them are gonna end up with you safe and sound and miles away from their bullshit. But right now I’ve managed something and I think it might...well, I think you might like it.”

“That what you’ve been working on in here since they left?” Peter asks.

“Yes,” Tony says. “That’s me, hard, diligent worker. C’mom in here, close the door behind you.”

Peter does, shuffling in and standing by the edge of Tony’s easy chair. He watches as he clicks a couple things on his tablet, and then he projects it on the wall next to the TV screen.

“Okay, this should work,” Tony says. “On a wing and a prayer.”

Peter narrows his eyes at the image, and it looks like—no, it can’t be. He feels frozen in anticipation.

“Hey!” Tony yells, and Peter watches him wave at the new screen, narrowing his eyes. “Anyone in there?”

And then—with a few missed beats of Peter’s heart—May and Ned walk into the shot. They’re bending down, pulling up the dining room table chairs, and Peter gasps, keeping his eyes on them as he wanders over, sitting next to Tony.

“Oh my God,” May says, covering her mouth. “Oh my God.”

“I’m broadcasting through their TV,” Tony says. “So if anyone thinks to take a second look, it’ll just seem like they’re watching an interview. They can see you, it’s a two way call.”

“Wow,” Peter says. “Wow! Wow.” He didn’t know this was possible. Any of it.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Tony says, patting him on the knee.

“No,” Peter says, abruptly, grabbing his wrist as he gets to his feet. “No, no, stay.”

“Yes,” May says. “We wanna talk to you too.”

Tony smiles a little bit, nodding, and he sits back down.

Peter covers his mouth, tears springing to his eyes. They’re both just sitting there, smiling, both intact, safe. Live, directly in front of him, right there, right there. They’re so close.
“Hi, honey,” May says, so much bottled up emotion ready to spill.

“Hey, Peter,” Ned says, grinning.

“Hey guys,” Peter says, tilting a little so his shoulder bumps Tony’s. He feels like he’s gonna explode.

“Tony,” May says. “Just—thank you, honestly. For this, for everything, you’ve been—you’ve been everything everyone ever thought you were. Everything he ever thought you were.”

Tony shrugs, glancing at Peter. “Well, you’ve got a really important kid here. Can’t help but do all I can, I guess.”

“Peter,” Ned says. “You’re actually friends with Tony Stark. I wanna go back in time, like, to any point in your childhood and tell you. You wouldn’t believe it. I can just see your face.”

Peter snorts, face going a little red. He can’t believe this, his heart is doing flips. He rubs at his eyes, trying to memorize their faces. He didn’t think he’d see them again. He wasn’t sure. He hasn’t even truly thought about the possibility since he’s learned about the plan. “I’ve missed you guys so much,” he says.

“We miss you, baby,” May says. “I just wanna give you a big hug.”

“Me too,” Peter says.

“You’re all anyone can talk about around here,” Ned says. “Everyone is rooting for you, people are banding together to become sponsor groups. I mean, everyone saw what happened today, and that’s amped them up even more—”

“You’re alright after that, right?” May asks, leaning forward in her seat. “They cut off as soon as you turned around, saw Tony at gunpoint—”

“Sorry about that,” Tony says. “I normally like to be more, uh, of use—”

“Stop,” Peter says, sighing in his direction. Tony smirks at him, and Peter smiles back, shaking his head. “Uh, yeah, we’re fine.”

“You sure?” May asks.

“Yeah,” Peter says, not thinking about it, not thinking about it. “Yeah, we’re okay.”

“That was so badass, Peter,” Ned says. “I mean, wow. Wow, you really got him. And that poster the girl was holding that started the whole thing, those things are everywhere around here—”

“Be careful with that, Ned,” Peter says, his stomach dipping. “You saw how they freak out about it —”

“Yeah, they’re doing the same thing here,” Ned says, exchanging a look with May. “But we’ve both still got a couple, you know. For posterity.”

Peter can’t help it and he smiles, shaking his head. He knows they can’t say anything about the plan, despite how secure Tony’s connection might be, and he aches to tell them, wants desperately to incite some kind of hope in their hearts that he won’t have to become a killer to make it back to them, that he won’t have to watch others die in order to not die himself.

“I wanted to tell you both that I’m feeling very optimistic,” Tony says, speaking up. “And I’m not
just saying that. Peter is, uh, he’s a winner, and as you can tell, everyone loves him.”

“I knew they would,” May says, pride in her eyes. “There was no way they wouldn’t.”

“He’s gonna make it,” Tony says. “I’m one hundred percent sure.”

“One hundred percent?” May asks.

“One hundred percent,” Tony repeats.

Both May and Ned look like they’re deflating under their relief, smiling and muttering to each other.

“What about, uh, Michelle?” Ned asks, softly.

Peter sucks in a breath, because he knows he can’t say anything. He knows he can’t. It makes him crazy, because even before all this, he knew he wouldn’t have hurt her, would have let her kill him before he looked at her the wrong way. But now he knows her, now it’s….it’s different, and he hates even lying by omission when it comes to her or what’s gonna happen in the arena.

Tony glances at him, and clears his throat. “Uh, Janet, as you well know, is one of the best Victors we’ve ever had. Michelle is in good hands.”

Peter nods, unsure what to say, but desperate words are clawing at his throat. She’s gonna get out. I’m gonna get out. All of us will.

“Peter...thanks for, uh, saying what you said in the interview,” Ned says, quiet.

Peter smiles at him, feeling an overwhelming wash of love. “Of course,” he says. “But you don’t owe anything to me, like he said, I didn’t—I didn’t like that, how it sounded.”

“We know he’s a lunatic,” May says, patting Ned on the knee. “I mean, they all are. I don’t know how you two stand it, or any of the Victors, any of the tributes. Being there, it’s like...torture before torture.” She wipes at her eyes, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I just—I wish you were home.”

“May,” Tony says. “Your boy is gonna come home to you. I promise you that.”

May nods, and she actually seems to believe him. The screen ripples a little bit, fuzzes, and Tony looks down at his tablet.

“Shit,” Tony mutters.

“What?” Peter asks, his heart faltering a little.

“Uh, we’re losing the feed, kid, I’m sorry,” he taps a few things, chewing on his lower lip. “I wasn’t sure how long it was gonna last.”

May and Ned shift closer to the screen, like that’ll do something, and Peter swallows hard. He feels panicky, like there’s too much to say and not enough time.


“Peter,” she says, and she sounds surprised. “That—it’s a long conversation, I don’t—I don’t even know how to start.” The screen flickers a little bit more, and Peter doesn’t know what he’s going for, what he needs to hear. “It’d take days to tell you everything I know, everything I don’t—”
“I know,” he says, quick. “I know, it’s...it’s okay, and whatever you think, whatever—whatever you heard, or didn’t hear, they were—they were heroes, okay? They did what they could, they were stuck, too, but they did what they could. And I know they must have...they must have loved me.” His voice breaks, and he wishes for a life he never got, one the Capitol stole from him.

“They loved you more than anything,” May says, locking eyes with him like she used to when she was trying to get a point across. “Anything, babe, okay? They would do anything to keep something from happening to you. You were the light of their lives.”

Peter nods, his ears going hot. The screen flickers dangerously, and Tony keeps muttering to himself, trying to preserve it.

“I love you, Peter!” Ned yells. “I’m rooting for you, man. We all are. Every single day.”

“Love you, Ned,” Peter says, as the screen goes black and white. “May—”

“I love you, sweetheart,” she says, and she shifts forward, pressing her hand across the screen. “I love you so much.”

Peter scrambles off the bed and moves, pressing his hand against the wall where the screen is projected. Palm to palm. “I love you,” he whispers. “I love you, I love you. I’ll see you again.”

“I’ll see you—” And then the screen cuts out, going full static.


Peter stares at the wall where they were, chills running down his spine. He peels his hand away, and he dreams of the day he can really hold her hand again.

“Fuck’s sake,” Tony says, and Peter can hear him poking at his tablet, louder and louder. Peter turns to look at him, and he has no idea what the expression is on his own face, because Tony winces when he looks up at him. “I’m sorry, kid,” he says, and Peter sees that his fingers are shaking. “I...really meant for that to be longer, after all the dumb shit you’ve been through—”

“Tony,” Peter says. “I—and I know we’re trying to be optimistic here, right now—but I still had that...very real fear that I might not ever see them again, and I just—a second would have been good, but—just—that” He sucks in a breath and sits down next to him again. “Thank you. Thank you, honestly, so, so much. Just...seeing them, for a moment, hearing their voices, it was...it helped so much.”

“Good,” Tony says, blowing out a breath. “Here’s, uh—the second part of my Peter Pick-Me-Up.” He closes a window on his tablet, opens a folder, and types in a few codes, and a final password. Then he pulls up a brief film clip, clear and bright like Peter is watching another live video. He can tell it’s somewhere in Twelve, and then his heart stutters when he sees Ben walk by. Ben, with a small child on his shoulders—a kid that must be Peter himself. Then there’s May, a little younger, and another couple, only slightly familiar. “That’s the Parker family,” Tony says, as they walk by, and out of the frame. He rewinds it, slows it down, and they walk by again. “I was searching for something of Ben, something to remember, but then I found this. I thought it was nice, to...to see all of you together.”

Peter must be about six years old in the clip, and he’s smiling, holding tight to Ben’s shoulders. His mother is craning her neck to look up at him, and his father and May look like they’re deep in conversation. They look like they’re heading home, on the road to May’s place. He stares at it, and feels strangely displaced, because they look so real, and they’re there, and they’re with him. He’s
happy. He’s so happy.

“And now, I may be having second thoughts about how smart it was to show you this—”

“No,” Peter says, still staring at it. It starts over again, and Peter looks at all the details—Ben’s work uniform, the ruffles on his mother’s shirt, the way May wears her hair. How his father is clearly saying the word Peter. “No, I—” He stares at it. He keeps staring. “I just wish...I wish I remembered them better.” He clears his throat, and keeps soaking up every little thing about it. “You...you have this, right? It’s not gonna go away?”


“Good,” Peter says, knowing there’s no possible way he can look at it for long enough.

“Fuck Stane,” Tony says, leaning a little closer. “And you were right. They were heroes. And they loved you, because you were theirs, and there’s no way not to love you, kid.”

Peter thinks about what Stane said. Not the threats, but what he said about his parents. What they tried to do, where they wound up. He finally tears his eyes away, and looks up at Tony. “I’m gonna get out,” he says. “I’m gonna make sure we get out. For them. Because I know if they were here, that’s...that’s what they would want.”

“It is,” Tony says. “One hundred percent.”

Peter has never had this much going on in his whole life, and his head is swimming with all the emotions, all the paranoia, fear, and the inkling of hope that Tony is stoking. Peter sucks in a breath, looking down at the clip again. He reaches out and pauses it, with all four of them in the frame, and seeing it feels like something precious. Something he deserved to see.

He glances up at Tony again, and knows there’s no way he can ever express what all this means. “Thank you,” he says, in a near-whisper, his voice breaking.

Tony shakes his head, and there are tears shining in his eyes too. “Not needed, Pete,” he says. “You’ve got me. Every step of the way.”

Peter sighs, resting his forehead on Tony’s shoulder. He closes his eyes, and he can still see his family on the backs of his eyelids.

Tony’s part of that now, too.

~

Each day is a ticking time bomb, but they tick by without an explosion. Not yet, not yet. Time keeps moving, they keep working, and Stane’s threats sit in the back of Tony’s mind. They’re rancid, acid, burning a hole through his every waking moment. And they come to life at night, so much so that he finds himself gasping back awake, the same nightmare plaguing him, over and over. Trapped in that room, with those things. Trapped, with what Stane said he would take. Watch it rot. The worst case scenario, and it refuses to be banished for more hopeful things.

Tony walks out of Selvig’s favorite coffee shop, up one more sponsor, his list of gifts that Peter might need growing and growing. He walks down the sidewalk and he’s lost inside his own head, imagining what the goddamn arena could be. That would make the plan easier, that would make their lives easier altogether, and he keeps picturing a giant hole at the end of some forest lane—their obvious way out. But it couldn’t be that obvious, could it? There’s no way. They’re not that stupid. It must be obvious in a different way, and Tony hates that he can’t find it inside his imagination, can’t
work out another one of their damn riddles.

Despite how much they’re targeting him, how much issue he’s causing, the Capitol isn’t shying away from using Peter’s image, and Tony walks by a whole wall devoted to Peter’s portion of the first interview. But, of course, they cut out the line *Iron Man and Spider-Man stand together*.

Tony shakes his head, crossing the street.

“Tony!” someone yells, from somewhere to his left. He turns, eyes narrowed, and sees Christine Everhart standing there in the alleyway, something clutched in her hands. She stands stagnant, motioning him over, and for a long second, Tony feels like he’s hallucinating.

“Honey,” he says, slowly walking down the alleyway, “I know you may like me, but this isn’t the best place to make a proposition. I mean, cameras everywhere, right? Shouldn’t you know that better than most?”

“I also know a lot about blind spots,” she says, as he gets closer. “And things that need fixing.”

He cocks his head at her, stopping and crossing his arms over his chest. He glances down at what she’s holding, and sees that it’s a stuffed folder, a small black box strapped to the top of it.

“They can’t hear us,” she says. “Not right here.”

Tony hums to himself, looking up at the camera above his head. He doesn’t wanna say shit, because he doesn’t trust her.

“I tried to ask Peter Parker something about his parents in that first interview,” she says, shifting on her heels. “I’m sure you remember.”

“How could I forget?” he asks.

“Well, they don’t let us trade keys on a tribute more than once,” she says. She glances down at the bundle in her arms, and holds it out to him. “I’ve been working on this for a long time. Since before I knew who he was.”

He doesn’t take what she’s offering. Not yet.

It seems to irritate her, and she shakes her head, stepping closer. “I know you don’t trust me. I know you just think I’m—one of them.”

“Yeah,” Tony says. “You literally, actually are. By blood.”

“All I want is the truth,” she says. “This is bigger than the lines they’ve divided us by.” She still shoves the folder and box towards him. “A lot of this speaks for itself, but there’s some I just—can’t work out. And I know you can.”

“This is a bomb,” he says. “You’re trying to kill me, and then write about my death.”

“Tony.”

He laughs a little bit, glancing over his shoulder. “I’m busy right now, dear. If you didn’t know what time of year it was.”

“Tony, just take it,” she says. “I don’t care when you take a look. Now, when it’s over, I don’t care. I just want you to look at it, and get back to me. It might be important to you.”
He turns back to face her, and she shoves the package so close that it presses into his arm. “Not a bomb?” he asks. “Or a...poisonous gas?”

“No, moron,” she says, giving him a look. She rolls her eyes, because the insult slipped out and she’s asking for something. Almost begging. “Please?”

He sighs, and takes it off her hands. “If you kill me with whatever this is, I will haunt you forever.”

“I wouldn’t risk that,” she says, and turns, walking off in the opposite direction.

He sighs, looking down. The folder is packed to the brim, papers sticking out every which way, and he picks up the box, shaking it. It’s not heavy, and it doesn’t sound like there’s a lot inside it.

“Alright,” he says, vowing to look at it when he’s got a moment. She did mention Peter’s parents, and he figures it’s probably proof of what Stane said. But right now, the goddamn Hunger Games is the priority.

~

He puts Everhart’s package down in his bedroom when he gets back to the penthouse, and hears Peter and Sam talking off in his hallway.

“Hey,” Tony calls, heading that way. “Sorry it took a little longer, had a run-in with a non-friend…”

“Everything alright?” Peter yells back.

“Yes,” Tony says, turning the corner and walking through the open door.

He sees Peter standing there in front of the mirror, Sam beside him. Peter’s wearing a similar Spider-Man outfit to the first one, but this one is sleeker, black accents instead of blue. He looks like the hero the Districts deserve. Like something the Capitol should be afraid of. Tony never doubted him being the face of the revolution—it scared him, sure, but he never doubted it. But right now, with this suit...he can really, really see it.

“Like it?” Sam asks. “The kid helped me design it. Think he might have a future in all this.”

“Looks great,” Tony says, putting his hands on his hips. “You, uh, didn’t wanna back away from all the spider stuff? After—”

“What he said?” Peter asks, turning around. “No,” he says. “I don’t want him to think he’s affected me, or changed anything.”

“That was some bullshit,” Sam says, shaking his head. “What a lunatic.”

So Peter told him too. Tony walks into the room, nodding to himself, glad that Peter isn’t buckling under the pressure Stane is clearly trying to pile on. “Why the hell do you live here, Wilson?” Tony asks, sitting in the chair by the window. “Seriously. You’re not like their ilk, you’re not Capitol typical at all.”

“You think they’d let me leave?” Sam asks, laughing, stitching something on Peter’s arm. “Absolutely not, and I’ve tried before. Kept trying til they tried to cut something off that I particularly wanted to keep.”

Tony catches Peter’s gaze, and knows he wants to let Sam in on the plan. Knows he wants to get him out too, just by the look on his face. Peter loves easy, and falls for kindness, and it worries Tony,
for fear of someone taking advantage of him. Tony feels like Quentin Beck, in particular, has the ability to distract the kid with a simple *I don’t wanna die* speech, and he hopes Peter can differentiate true kindness, like Sam’s, and something twisted, for someone else’s own gain.

He understands the attachment to Sam, though, and he has it too. He tries to plan how to broach the subject with Thor, because he knows Peter might do it himself if Tony doesn’t get there first.

“Think we’re pretty much ready for the interview on Friday,” Sam says, and it reminds Tony how much time has passed. How much time is left. They’ve got tomorrow, the final judgements. Friday, the final interviews. And Saturday, it all starts. The end, and, if he prays and hopes hard enough, a new beginning.

~

Peter begs for as many one-on-one training sessions with Tony as he can get before the private judgement, because he wants to be ready if they pull anything. Tony teaches him the in’s and out’s of the tablets he might find in the arena, and Peter hopes to all hell he finds one, because the tablets have capabilities that would mean the difference between life and death. Peter raises the difficulty level of the simulations they run, and he pushes himself to the brink. He makes good use of evading, and even though they don’t have any specific brands of Capitol creations in the simulations, they have generic monsters that might move in a similar fashion to, say, some kind of killer spider.

He rolls out of a danger zone just in the nick of time, and the clock clicks down to zero.

“Great job, kid,” Tony says, standing a few feet away with his tablet. “That was perfect.”

“Let’s run it again,” Peter says, breathing hard as he gets back to his feet.

“Uh, didn’t you hear me? That was actually perfect. And I mean full marks by the simulation’s standards, not mine. I know I’m biased.”

“I know, I just…” He feels insane, like he’s preparing to walk into his own grave, and he tries to keep telling himself *the plan is gonna work. The plan is gonna work.* He feels like he’s kidding himself. The Games are too close. They’re days away, and he’s terrified.

“Give yourself a break,” Tony says, walking over and patting him on the shoulder. “The thing’s tonight, it’ll go by fast, you know exactly what you’re doing. You’re ready. They’re not gonna try that shit again, it’s...it’s too close to the last interview, too close to the Games. Yeah, their pills and cream got rid of the evidence last time, mostly, but they know you well enough to know you won’t be in hiding between now and tomorrow, especially if they mark you up.”

Peter sighs, nodding. His heart has been beating faster the past couple days, his head hurts more and, as much as he wants to, he has a hard time holding onto the bits of hope the plan should bring him. He wants it to work so desperately, he wants to get everyone in on it, wants a revolution, wants the Capitol to go down. He wants to save people, he wants to *live.* But the whole possibility feels trapped behind a glass wall—he can see it, but he can’t touch it. It doesn’t feel real. He doesn’t think it’ll be real until the moment he breaks out of the arena.

“I, uh,” Peter starts, looking down at his feet. “I just wanna make sure, that—that, uh, if things don’t go, uh, as we want them to—”

“Peter—”

“I just wanna make sure May and Ned are safe,” he says, looking up at Tony. “May has been through—a lot, a *lot,* and I just—I don’t want her to...give up.” He swallows hard.
Tony steps closer to him. “No pessimism,” he says. “Not now. Pete, if shit goes south, I’ll slam up in there my goddamn self and get you out.”

Peter manages a smile, because the image sends a rush of warmth through him. He nods, glancing over his shoulder at the makeshift arena they’d constructed, as well as the second set of web shooters he was able to make today with the new materials. “Sorry, I—sorry I keep doing this. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“No apologies,” Tony says. “Okay? Shit, you talk to Janet, I had about a million breakdowns in the days before my Games. Over and over and over, screaming, losing my shit, throwing things—I don’t know how the hell she dealt with me. But moral of the story, you’re acting completely normal. There’s no wrong way to act, here, okay?”

Peter nods, chewing on his lower lip. The image in his head grows and transforms, and he turns back to look at Tony. “If you slam up in there, you should do it as Iron Man.”

“Shit,” Tony laughs, falling into step with him as they head for the door. “Couldn’t do it any other way, right? I love to make an entrance.”

~

It’s the same.

They sit in the little room, on their numbered benches, divided, just like the Capitol wants them. Except this time Peter looks at the others, the others he knows are in on their plan, and he tries to hold tight to that hope that’s so intent on evading him. He watches as everyone goes in for their session, one by one, and catches a very overt nod from Steve when it’s his time.

They call MJ, and she sighs, reaching over and taking Peter’s hand. “I’m gonna wait for you right outside the door,” she says. “In the hallway. I don’t care what they say.”

Peter appreciates the sentiment, but the whole idea makes his stomach turn. “Just...don’t get hurt,” he says.

“I won’t,” she says, smiling softly. Her eyes trace over his face for a few long seconds, and he feels like, for a moment, that she might do something else. But she just lets out a little puff of breath, squeezes his hand, and gets up, heading into the judgement room.

He holds his hope tighter. He thinks about things he probably shouldn’t, things he could get lost in, like moments of peace, a place beyond here and all this. What he could earn, by living. By being the face that they want. Can he be a symbol of hope? He doesn’t know, he has no idea, but, for some reason, they think he can. He knows there are so many things bigger than himself. So many things that are more important, and maybe, just maybe, he can be a part of them. He can contribute, he can—do something, anything, to make the world better. Make their lives better. Pick apart what the Capitol has built up to hurt everyone that isn’t them.

He sits and thinks in silence, in the almost empty room. Him, and one peacekeeper. Their eternal oppression.

“PETER PARKER, DISTRICT TWELVE.”

Peter blows out a breath, gets to his feet.

The room is the same when he gets into it, save for one thing—the group of people in the viewing area is much larger, and they aren’t paying any attention. Bruce is the only one that isn’t loud, the
only one that’s facing forward, but the rest of them—they’re eating, talking, playing pool, playing darts, huddling in corners and laughing raucously. Peter walks in, his brows furrowed, and even when he stops in the indicated spot, no one turns to look. No one makes a move to pay him any mind.

He makes eye contact with Bruce, and Bruce smiles slightly, nodding. Peter doesn’t know what the hell that means—and there’s no voice from above to tell him to begin, either. Is this purposeful? Is Bruce the only one that’s supposed to be watching? Is this what everyone else had to see, had to deal with? Did they actually ignore Natasha like this? MJ? Everyone they’re sending to their deaths in two days time?

Peter stands there, boiling over, squeezing his hands into fists. He hears Stane’s voice in his ears, hears his taunts, his threats, everything about his parents. There are men about Stane’s age up there, chatting it up, weaving around with wine glasses in their hands. Peter wonders how many of them were a part of what they did, to his parents. How many of them watched, how many of them laughed.

He doesn’t look at Bruce again. His mind goes foggy, like he’s stuck in a deep bog with only a stray bit of light to guide him, and he goes off book. He sees the materials to make the crude webshooters are there, like he and Tony practiced. They aren’t nearly as good as the ones Sam made, but they can do the job, and he gets to work. He puts them together, glancing over the table and the rest of the things they provided, and thankfully, he can make his webs, too. He ignores the tablet, doesn’t even think about the simulations, and he takes up most of his allotted time finishing off the webshooters, and whipping up the webs.

He pulls the sticky material out, testing its strength, and it pulls and twists just like he wanted it to. He’s made it enough in the last couple weeks to feel like an expert, and it’s his, something he created, something he knows and trusts.

They’re all still laughing. No one but Bruce is watching, and he feels stuck between red rage and dropping to his knees to vomit.

Focus, focus.

He loads the webs he’s got into the shooters, and makes sure they’ll shoot straight. There’s a voice at the back of his mind telling him not to do this, a mixture of his own voice, May’s, a little bit of Tony’s. But Ben’s isn’t mixed in there, and that makes him surge forward all the more, half drunk on the idea of getting their attention.

He puts the webshooters on his wrists when he’s ready, and he aims at one of the older men in the corner, one that keeps holding his drink up like an everlasting toast. Peter shoots, and the web flies out, pinning the man’s hand to the wall. Peter’s heart is in his throat, because they’re all looking now, and he shoots again, knocking the angel decoration off the top of their fountain, sticking it to some guy’s chest. He webs up the dart board, and webs the corner of a pool cue to someone’s hand.

There’s silence, now. Dismay floating like something tangible, and Peter tries to keep himself from shaking. He takes off the webshooters, knowing that this may be the last time he gets to use them, and sets them down on the table. He steps back a few steps, and holds his arms out, bowing.

“Thank you for your attention,” he says, swallowing hard.

He can see the ghost of a smile on Bruce’s face.

Peter turns to leave the room, leaving behind the thick and new silence, and he tries to puff himself
up as he approaches that door, tries to stand tall and proud, unwavering. The peacekeeper opens it, and this time when he goes through it’s bright, all the lights on, and there’s one peacekeeper standing directly in front of the following door.

Peter sets his jaw, and he stares at him. He takes a few steps forward, his chin held high, and he doesn’t falter. Be like Iron Man. Be like Iron Man. No...be like Spider-Man. Be the person they think you are. Be the one they’ll look to.

He gets close, close enough that they’d be eye to eye if this guy wasn’t hiding behind a mask. Peter keeps staring, and finally, the peacekeeper steps aside. Peter takes the knob and tries not to move too fast, like he’s running away, and he pushes his way through.

MJ is there waiting for him, a peacekeeper by her side. Her eyes light up when she sees him and she steps forward, the two of them immediately making for the exit at the end of the hall.

“You okay?” she asks, whispers. “Anything happen?”

“Oh, I did something stupid,” he says, coming back to himself again, playing the reel of his judgement in his mind’s eye.

“What?” she asks, harsh.

“I’ll tell you outside,” he says, with a sigh.

He can tell she’s still looking at him as they walk, but he doesn’t look back, afraid of what she’ll say. But, instead, she surprises him. “Whatever it is,” she says. “I’m proud of you.”

He does look, right before they reach the door, and sees her smiling, looking intently at him. He smiles back, reveling in this before he has to face any consequences for his actions, which were, undeniably, stupid. He prays they won’t result in anything too serious.

They walk through the door and Peter sees Tony and Janet standing there, Hammer a couple paces away on a tablet. Tony immediately approaches, and when he’s close enough he takes Peter’s chin in hand, turning his face back and forth.

“Mine went fine,” MJ says, to Janet.

“Yeah?” Janet asks her.

“They didn’t do what they did last time,” Peter says, nodding at Tony.

“So what happened?” Tony asks, narrowing his eyes. “Did it go well?”

“Holy shit,” Hammer says. He turns, walking back over to their group, still holding tight to his tablet. “You didn’t,” he says, looking at Peter.

“I did,” Peter says, feeling a little cold.

“Wait,” Tony says, and he grabs the tablet from Hammer’s hands. His eyes scan over whatever messages are laid out there, and Peter waits anxiously, too many things going through his head. They definitely weren’t hurt, that’s for sure. They were just...webbed. And the webs can easily be cut away with knives, really...sharp knives, so, they should be able to get them off just fine.

He sort of wishes he hadn’t done it, because it was risky and he’s taken too many risks lately. But he just got mad, went into that mode he finds himself in a lot here, where their callousness and blatant
distaste for anyone from the Districts makes him feel like all he wants to do is fight. He needs to keep himself in check. There are only two more days.

But these people, they won’t be in the arena. And his anger likes them best, comes out in full force when they’re involved. The government, the peacekeepers. Stane.

“Jesus,” Janet says, reading over Tony’s shoulder.

“Are we good?” Peter asks. “Am I—am I in trouble, or is somebody gonna come and get me or something? God, they won’t mess with May or Ned because of this, right? I can apologize, I can go back in there right—”

“No,” Tony says, looking up at him. A small smile forms on his face. “No, this—this happened behind closed doors, so they won’t make anything about it public.” He snorts, covering his face with his hand, and there’s no anger or worry in his eyes. “Holy shit is right,” he says, pulling his hand down. “The webs, they were—that strong?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, sheepishly. “I wasn’t planning on all that, I was—I was gonna do exactly what we said to do, but then they were just all—talking and messing around and playing games and drinking and I—I just got mad.”

“Wow, Peter,” MJ says, looking up from the tablet too.

His cheeks go hot, and he looks down at his feet.

“God, I would have given anything to see that,” Tony says, clicking his tongue.

“You sure we’re okay?” Peter asks, raising his eyebrows at him.

“Oh yeah,” Tony says, patting Peter on the shoulder. “More than okay. Might have risked the second thirteen, but who the hell cares about their scores? Bets are already placed.”

“Let’s head back home,” Janet says. “They’re supposedly sending up something special for us to eat while we watch the scores.”

They all head towards the exit, and Peter takes the tablet from Tony, glancing down at the write-up about his judgement before he hands it back to Hammer. Hammer nods at him, slipping it back into his bag.

“You got balls, kid,” Hammer says.

“I just don’t think before I do stuff,” Peter says, blowing out a breath as they follow behind the others. “I, uh, meant to thank you, a while ago.”

“Thank me?” Hammer asks. “For what?”

“For what happened at the garden party,” Peter says. “You tried to help, you got hurt for it, and I—well, thank you.” He glances down at his hands, then back at Hammer again. “You’re better than them, you know.”

“Course I know,” Hammer says. “I’m better than most people I meet. And you’re welcome. Those dickwads need to check themselves.”

Despite some of Hammer’s shortcomings, despite being Capitol through and through on the outside, Peter sees something more in him, after spending time with him. He knows he has his own thoughts,
doesn’t blindly follow their every choice, their every move. He wants to get him out too, but he
doesn’t know how. Doesn’t know what it’s gonna look like on the outside. And he doesn’t know
how the hell Hammer would react to such a thing.

They keep walking, and Peter tries not to think too much.

~

They sit in front of the TV with plates of lobster and crab legs, straight from District Four, and watch
the ratings roll in. Most people don’t change too much, only one or two points either way, and a lot
of them remain the same. Steve goes up to a twelve, Natasha stays there. Still no thirteens, and Peter
figures there won’t be any at all, because he’s definitely gonna lose his. He, surprisingly, makes his
peace with it. He doesn’t think it’ll hurt him much.

“Michelle Jones, District Twelve, our beautiful Black Dahlia,” the Grandmaster says. “Has received
a rating of...twelve.”

The room erupts in various gasps, a little clapping from Tony.

“Michelle, that’s wonderful,” Janet says.

“Great job, girl,” Tony says, grinning over at her.

“You went up,” Peter says, and he’s inclined to hug her like he did before, hold her hand, something,
but all he can manage is a smile.

She shrugs. “Again, I don’t give a shit about what they say. You shouldn’t either.” She cracks a crab
leg.

“She’s right, Pete,” Tony says. “Whatever they say, it doesn’t matter.”

“And last but not least, our amazing Spider-Man, Peter Parker,” the Grandmaster says.

Peter sucks in a breath, bracing himself.

“He has received a rating of...wow, thirteen. Our only thirteen today, and our only double thirteen
across the board. Hope everyone bet accordingly!”

Peter stares, straight ahead, his mouth open but all words stuck somewhere in his throat. There’s
another absurd ringing in his ears.

“Whoa,” MJ says.

“What the fuck…” Peter breathes, trailing off, and he looks at Tony.

Tony is still staring at the TV, and shock lines his expression, too. “Well, uh. Well.”

“Seems like they liked your display,” Janet says. “Or...particularly didn’t like it.”

“It’s a...it’s a target, isn’t it?” Peter asks, goosebumps on his arms.

“I think so,” Janet says, tapping her fork lightly on the edge of her plate. She steals a look at Tony,
and keeps talking. “One and Two are probably going to band together and go after you.”

Peter nods, chewing on the inside of his cheek, and thinks about Beck.
“But we knew that,” Tony says, quick. “We anticipated that.”

Peter wonders if they would have given him a thirteen no matter what he did and he’s glad, at least, that he was able to show them something. Something to startle them.

“It is what it is, it’s fine, it’s good,” Tony says, squeezing Peter’s shoulder. “Eat up, c’mon. This is one of the best meals we’ll get here, and...probably for a while, if things work out the way we want them to.”

Peter sets his jaw and nods, thinking about the After again. He wonders what food is like in Thirteen. He can barely imagine it, because Thirteen wasn’t real in his head a few weeks ago. “It will,” he says. “They will, things—they’re gonna work out the way we want.” He tries to make himself believe it. He’ll be their poster boy if it means the beginning of the end for the Capitol and what they made in Panem. He’ll do it for as long as they need him to.

“That’s right,” Tony says. “They will.”

The Hunger Games are tomorrow. Peter keeps thinking it, over and over again, like the verses to a song he doesn’t want to know. He eats breakfast, the Hunger Games are tomorrow. He does a meet and greet, the Hunger Games are tomorrow. A man named Sinclair asks him questions, the Hunger Games are tomorrow. A little girl whispers in his ear that she hopes he wins, the Hunger Games are tomorrow. Each minute feels stolen, like he’s angry it passed, and he tries to tell himself they’re lucky the last Grandmaster interview is in the afternoon, so they’ll have the night to themselves.

His last night. He would think it’s his last night as a free person, but he hasn’t been free since he got here. Really, they’ve never been free. Peter thinks about all the resistance plants Thor and the others told them about. He walks around on Capitol grounds and thinks about revolution brewing. Thinks that soon, all this will be different. Soon, if things go right, he’ll be a part of it. Fighting, like his parents did, against those that oppressed them, forced them into situations they didn’t want to be a part of.

Peter wants a real life.

He prays and he prays and he prays. He stomps out the Hunger Games are tomorrow with praying. With thoughts about what life will be like, if they ever make it to real freedom. A real life, without all this. He can barely imagine, and he can imagine too much.

He stands in his new Spider-Man costume backstage, Sam at his shoulder, and it’s all too quiet back here. He glances to his side and sees Steve, shoulder to shoulder with Natasha, and he’s in red, white and blue, while she’s in all black. Shuri catches Peter’s gaze and waves at him, and he waves back, not at all missing the sneer M’Baku sends his way.

“Tony messaged that Beck talked about you in his interview,” Sam says.

“What?” Peter asks, eyes narrowed, startled by that news.

“Nothing too strange, just said he’d be looking out for you in the arena,” Sam says. “Kinda seemed like it could go either way, like...looking out for you or...looking out for you, you know.”

Peter sighs.

“You’ll be okay,” Sam says, patting him on the shoulder. “This is a real good one for guilt. Make ’em realize this isn’t okay, that you don’t wanna die. Drive home that humanity. These are more
Games-focused questions, more about family and possibilities of winning, possibilities of, uh, not winning, and you’re real good with them puppy dog eyes.”

Peter smiles, shaking his head. “Isn’t purposeful,” he says.

“Yeah, that’s what makes it even better,” he says. “Hey.”

Peter turns, looks at him.

“Uh, what you’re thinking, what’s in your head, about now, about during, about after, about...what you’ve gotta do, what you’ve got planned—I know about all of it,” he says, and his eyes are sharp, his intentions clear. “And they don’t let me bet, but if I could, I’d bet on you. You know what I’m saying? I’m with you. Okay?”

Peter shivers, and he nods, knows exactly what he’s saying.

“All the stylists are with you,” Sam says. “And most of the escorts. Hammer included. We’re with you.”

“Oh,” Peter breathes, feeling a little dizzy. “Wow, uh.”


“Okay,” Peter breathes. It gives him chills. There are so many of them that he knows of. So many more that he doesn’t.

Sam nods, giving him a crooked smile, and then he looks down at the bracelet on his wrist. “Got the buzz,” he says. He pats him on the shoulder again, gives him another meaningful look. “You got this, Peter. Do what we said, be real, shock them. Tear it all the fuck down. Don’t worry about looking soft. This is it, just do it like we practiced. They already love you. Remind ‘em why.”

Peter nods, and launches at him, hugging him tight. Sam laughs, clapping him on the back, holding the back of his head.

“You’re a great kid,” Sam says, his voice breaking a little bit. He pulls back, nodding at Peter, trying to reassure him. “Go on, before Grandmaster sends out a search party.”

“Oh, okay.” Peter breathes. “Okay, okay.” He turns, and heads up the ramp, ready for the blaring lights. And they are blaring, washing out everything he can see, but he tries not to wince, and starts forward with more confidence than he had the first time around.

The crowd is going wild.

“Here he is, here he is, here he is, ladies and gentlemen!” the Grandmaster says, and the light tilts up so Peter can finally see. It looks more packed with people than it did in the first interview, some of them spilling out into aisles, others half on top of each other, and Peter immediately spots Tony, Janet, Thor and Carol directly in the middle of the crowd, clapping and waving at him.

“Come on down, amazing Spider-Man,” the Grandmaster says, gesturing towards the new chair on his stage, taller than the last, and stark white. “Sit, sit, sit, make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you,” Peter says, smiling at him, sitting in the stiff-backed chair as the clapping subsides. “It’s, uh, nice to see you again.”

“It’s so nice to see you too, sporting a new get-up, I see,” Grandmaster says, and people start
cheering again. “Sam Wilson is just—well, I can’t say enough about him, in all honesty.”

“We really wish I could wear some of his work in the arena,” Peter tries.

“Oh, yes, that would have been something else,” Grandmaster says. “Unfortunately, we go for matchy matchy in the arena, but maybe one day we’ll get to expand on that concept. President Stane, you listening?” he looks up and around, laughing, and some people clap.

“Yeah,” Peter says. “Maybe one day.”

“Yes, yes,” Grandmaster says, clearly thinking about many Hunger Games to come. “Now, Peter, you are the singular tribute this year to receive a rating of thirteen, and in both judgements, at that. How the hell did you do it?”

“I don’t know if I deserve it,” Peter says, looking down at his hands in his lap. “I’m definitely not better than most of these other tributes, especially not Michelle.”

“Well, the board seems to think so,” Grandmaster says. “Though she did get close.”

“I don’t know how I did it,” Peter says, wondering how this is coming off. “I just...I did my best.”

“Look at him, ladies and gentlemen, our boy is so humble.”

A tremendous round of applause follows, and Peter smiles slightly to himself.

“It’s all due to Tony,” Peter says, glancing out at him in the audience. “He taught me everything I know, and he’s—he’s trying his best to keep me alive. He doesn’t want to lose someone else. He wants to save me, help me save myself.”

The audience reacts to that, and the break in Peter’s voice.

“We all want that,” Grandmaster says. “We all do, we all do. God bless Tony Stark.”

Peter nods as the audience yells their agreement, and he sees Tony nodding too, but pointing out at Peter on the stage.

“How prepared do you feel for the arena?” Grandmaster asks. “We all know it’s daunting, to think of going in, especially considering that we know nothing of what you’ll face. The surprise is always so mammoth, every year.”

“I don’t know how anyone can feel prepared, even if they say they are,” Peter says, trying to swallow his fear. “We can’t plan for it, we can just train, try to build ourselves up, but it’s...impossible to be truly prepared, considering we’re going in completely blind. All I keep thinking about is what might happen if...if, well, the worst happens.”

“The worst.”

“My aunt already lost her husband,” Peter says, and the tears that come are real, thankfully. “My uncle. And I just—God, I don’t want...I don’t want to leave her alone. I don’t want her to have to bury me.” He doesn’t even know if the families get to bury the bodies. He’s thinking that’s a big no. He bets they never even get to see them.

The people start muttering, some hollering out things Peter can’t exactly hear, and there’s a lot of movement. The Grandmaster looks shocked, and he reaches out, taking Peter’s hand.

“I said last time, that I don’t want to leave you,” Peter continues, “and I don’t, but I—I don’t know
how many sponsor gifts will be enough. With what the Capitol throws at us, what I’ve seen in past Games—"

He hears someone yell out **NO MORE MUTTS**, and then there’s more muttering, more shifting.

“—I just...well, I don’t feel prepared,” he says. “I don’t think there’s any possible way for any of us to be prepared. It’s like a nightmare. You never know what they’ll do.” He’s on the edge, balancing on the precipice. Every word is a weapon.

The Grandmaster looks caught off guard, which is a rare thing to see, and Peter tries to take advantage of it.

“If you think back, all the years this has been going on, there are just...so many dead,” Peter says, looking out into the audience. “Twenty three, every year, for sixty years. I don’t want to be among them. That’s all I keep thinking about. Dead, gone.”

“No, no, Peter,” the Grandmaster says, and he squeezes Peter’s hand. “You got those thirteens for a reason.”

“I worry that some may consider it a reason to go after me,” Peter says, and some of the audience members shout out again. He sees tablets coming out, and he wonders what they’re doing. “And I get it. They want to live too.”

“But you’re strong,” the Grandmaster says. “You’re capable.”

“We’re all just people,” Peter says. “People that want to stay alive. I don’t wanna kill anybody. I believe I could, I do think, now, that I’m—like you said, capable, but I just—I don’t want to. How could anyone? Can you imagine?”

More muttering, more tablets, and Tony’s watching him intently.

“It’s very difficult,” Grandmaster says. “That’s why all the tributes are built up to be so...so strong, so able, Capitol citizens would...well, they couldn’t...even make an attempt, I’m sure—”

“Like I said before,” Peter says. “I’m going to do everything I can to...to stay alive. But I know everyone else will be doing the same thing, I don’t blame them, and I just—how much death can we deal with? Before the stench of it stays with us, forever?” He shakes his head at the audience, and some of them look horrified, some of them typing away. Peter sees Tony check his own tablet, and he starts scrolling. “We all just want to live. It’s driving us all. We wanna come out the other side.”

“It’s a very difficult thing, that’s for sure,” the Grandmaster says again, clearly eager to steer things a different way. “But I know—I can tell—you will have what you need from these people.”

“I hope so,” Peter says, and he looks down again as soon as the Grandmaster lets go of his hand. “I told you that Tony has been my hero since I was little, and I—I don’t want him to watch me die. I want to live my life and get to know him outside of all this—I want him to know who I really am, without him having to mentor me. I want to—I want to have that.”

The audience is murmuring, some of them wiping their eyes, and Carol leans in to whisper in Tony’s ear.

“And you will,” the Grandmaster says. “I have the utmost faith in you, Peter Parker. Can you imagine what it would be like, to win? To come out of it alive, like you so desperately want?”

“It would be quiet,” Peter says, a tear falling down his cheek. “I wonder how many of you have lost
people. Seen them go. It’s a—hard thing, to come to terms with. Being the person that lives while others don’t.”

“Surely,” the Grandmaster says. “Surely, it is.”

Peter doesn’t know if any of this sounds the way it should, and it practically feels like he’s in a daze, broken and left with his own thoughts, airing them all out where he shouldn’t be. He doesn’t know if it’s making the right impact. He’s talking in code, telling half the story. Because he knows, even in this late hour, that he can’t go too far. Not too far.

“I just want—to be safe,” he says. “I want people to be safe.”

“Absolutely,” the Grandmaster says.

“But saying all that,” Peter says. “No matter what happens, which way this goes, I—I want to be...someone people can remember.” He can hear some crying, some people are taking pictures, even though they’re not supposed to. “I want to be someone people can...look to. I—I never meant to be here, I volunteered without thinking because I love my best friend and I didn’t want to watch him die but I—I don’t want to be lost, like so many others.”

“We could never forget you, Peter,” the Grandmaster says. “We never could.”

He hears some shouts of never! Never! and they gain traction, getting louder.

“I just wish things were different,” Peter says. “But I’m here now.”

“You’re here now.”

“If I win...” he says, trailing off. “Well, if I win, I hope that...we all win. Because I’ll be here for you, and whoever helped me stay alive.”

Some hoots, some hollers.

“I just wish things were different,” Peter says again. He wants to hammer that home. Different. Because if the plan works, everything will be different.

US TOO! US TOO! WE DO TOO!

“Are you thinking about Michelle?” the Grandmaster asks.

“Yes,” Peter says, breathless. “Every day, I think about it. Every time she holds my hand, or looks at me. I think about all of them, all of their faces, everyone this year. And the years past—James Rhodes. Maria Rambeau. Danny Rand. Hank Pym. Hope Van Dyne. There are so many names. I don’t want...any of us to be on that list.” He’s swaying above the abyss. Dangerous. “I just want—I want there to be a light at the end of the tunnel.” A different life, for everyone. No more Hunger Games. He wants to say it. He wants them all to hear him say it.

“But you will defend yourself, right?” the Grandmaster asks. “I asked you something similar before, and you were...tantalizingly vague.”

“I’ll tell you now, I can’t come to terms with it,” Peter says. And then he changes his thinking—does a 180 with who he’s thinking about, who he’s picturing, and he hopes the plants out there are watching, the susceptible Capitol citizens who might be on their side if pushed the right way. He thinks about the government, the Games board, the peacekeepers. Stane. The people he wants to fight. “But I will defend myself. Yes. I’ll do anything I can to defend myself. What will we do, to be
free? Anything. They’ll never see me coming.”

“Wow,” the Grandmaster says. “There he is.”

Peter nods, swallowing hard.

“I know emotions are running high,” the Grandmaster says. “Understandably—”

Then the rumblings in the audience get too loud, and they all start saying the same thing. Chanting it, over and over and over again.

“SAVE PETER PARKER! SAVE PETER PARKER! SAVE PETER PARKER!”

Peter’s jaw drops, and he stares out at them, his eyes wide. His mouth goes dry and chills run up and down his whole body, through the suit.

“You hear that?” the Grandmaster asks, trying to be louder than them. “Put your mind at ease, Mr. Parker. I think they’re with you.”

The Grandmaster grabs his hand, and pulls him to his feet, presenting him to all of them, and they keep chanting, they don’t stop, they don’t stop, and the words don’t sound like words anymore.

Tony, Carol, Thor and Janet are saying it too.

~

They get in the car directly after the tribute group photos, and it’s still sunny outside. A few more hours of daylight.

“It was good,” Tony says, patting Peter’s knee. “It was really good.”

“I was saying what I wanted to say but I still wasn’t saying what I wanted to say,” Peter says. “Half of it came off selfish, some of it came off scared, and the rest was...so close to things I’m not allowed to say. Things they kill and torture for. I already had a target on my back and now I have an even bigger one.”

“You don’t,” Tony says. “It was good, alright? You garnered sympathy. You’re someone everyone relates to. Wanna know what they were doing on their tablets during your segment? Huh?”

“What?” Peter asks. “Talking about me on message boards?”

“No,” Tony says. “Though I’m sure they’re probably doing that now. No, they were signing up to be sponsors. Some of the ones I got, they never go for the lower districts. Ever. And I got twenty seven new sponsors in those ten minutes, kid. You’re real, you’re upfront, you give them hope, you’re making them think things they probably never have before. Sometimes you have to get around the rules of their game to actually get anything done. People have tried before, but it’s...just how you are. You aren’t faking.”

Peter wipes at his eyes, nodding. He looks over at Janet and MJ, and sees MJ looking at him. He always worries she’ll turn from him, because of all the stupid attention he gets, but she never does. She just smiles, and nods at something Janet says to her.

“Pretend it’s not tomorrow,” Tony says, as the car makes a turn. “Pretend it doesn’t exist. Tonight’s our night, our team. Nothing else is happening.”

“I don’t know if I can manage that,” Peter says.
“You totally can,” Tony says. “We’re gonna have three different cornbread casseroles waiting for us in the penthouse, kid. Three.”

Peter smiles to himself. “Okay,” he says. “Well that’s...that’s a start.”

~

“And he just stood in front of the peacekeeper,” Peter says, laughing so hard he can barely breathe, “and he was like—‘I’m sorry, it just...it went all the way over the border. And I know we can’t retrieve it’—”

“Did he go?” MJ asks, grinning.

“Yeah,” Peter laughs, taking another bite of his casserole. “Ben just stood there, he just—rooted himself to the spot, and May was in the back fixing the porch chair just trying not to laugh—”

“This asshole,” Tony says, snorting, “thought your Uncle threw a football five hundred feet? At least?”

“You know they’re dumb as rocks,” Janet says, smiling.

“Oh yeah, this one was,” Peter says, still laughing, remembering Ben’s face. “He just...trudged off into the forest, and he left the backdoor open to the cafe, and the owners were able to give us everything they were trying to make them throw out.”

“Good,” MJ says. “Stupid idiots.”

“Yeah, we passed it out,” Peter says, grinning. “Took the dude about a hundred years to go out there and get the ball. Ben was so happy.”

“I love that,” Tony says, chuckling to himself. “Jan, that reminds me of what you did, around Feast Day—”

“Feast Day,” Janet scoffs. “Meaning, give them all an extra potato day.”

“Wait,” MJ says, leaning forward on her elbows. “Wait, wait, was that you? That time?”

“That was her,” Tony says, proudly. “That was our Janet.”

Janet takes a sip of her cider and raises her eyebrows. “All I had to do was distract three of them, scale a fence, grab three bags full of potatoes from where they were hoarding them—”

“She tossed four at me, from the top of the fence,” Tony says. “Nearly knocked me the fuck out.”

Peter nearly doubles over in laughter, picturing that moment. He remembers when that happened with the potatoes, about three years ago now. Their stomachs were actually full that feast day, unlike most others.

“Hey, catch,” Janet says, and she tosses a dinner roll at Tony.

“Hey, hey,” Tony says, and bats it away, the four of them watching it roll to a stop in the middle of the table.

MJ closes her eyes, smiling to herself. “I’m thinking about if it all works out,” she says. “Thinking about everyone from Twelve migrating to Thirteen. Or somewhere better. Somewhere where they never have to be hungry.”
“Somewhere where we don’t have to steal potatoes,” Janet says.

“Somewhere with no peacekeepers,” Peter breathes.

“It’s gonna work out,” Tony says. “Imagine having a life that’s not under their rules. Getting to sit out in the sun in the fields for as long as you want. Wear what you want, when you want to. Not having to worry about every word that comes out of your mouth. No police state. Just….just…”


“Cornbread casserole whenever you want it,” Tony says, knocking him on the shoulder.

Peter grins, just imagining.

“I can have a garden,” MJ says. “I can read what I want.”

“You can take the classes you want,” Janet says. “Not just want they make you take.”

“May won’t have to worry so much,” Peter says. “Ned can be happy.”

“My sister won't be in danger,” MJ says.

“We can find out what the world was like,” Peter says. “Before all this. Before they came and took it all over.”

“No more killing,” Tony says. “No more death.”

“No more tributes,” Janet says. “No more Games.”

It feels like a weight is lifted from Peter’s shoulders, and for a long moment, it feels possible. It feels like he can breathe, he can imagine all of it, they can make it, they can live.

The TV blares to life on the far wall.

“ATTENTION, CITIZENS. THIS IS A MESSAGE FOR ALL OF PANEM. WATCHING THE HUNGER GAMES IS A MANDATORY EVENT. IT WILL BE AIRED THROUGHOUT THE DISTRICTS AND THROUGHOUT THE CAPITAL. THE GAMES WILL BEGIN TOMORROW AT 3PM SHARP. HAPPY HUNGER GAMES, AND MAY THE ODDS BE EVER IN YOUR FAVOR.”

The sound dies out, and none of them speak, their conversation, hopes and dreams fizzling out like they had never been spoken out loud to begin with.

The Hunger Games are tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Peter might be dead.
Peter sits in the shower, scalding water rolling down his back, and he thinks about where he’ll be tonight, in just a few hours. Somewhere lonely, somewhere far, like a rat in a glass cage. The whole country will be watching his every move—watching him run for his life, watching him make mistakes, watching him sleep. If he even makes it to a first night’s sleep. May and Ned, watching. All of Twelve. Tony and Janet. All of them, filled with dread.

This is the last shower for a while. Maybe ever.

No. Don’t think that way.

He turns his face up and closes his eyes against the water.

He can never be clean of all this.

~

He’s not supposed to change into whatever they want him wearing in the arena until later, and he stares at his closet full of clothes for what feels like forever. They aren’t really his clothes. He doesn’t know why they gave him this many, he’d never be able to wear them all. He wonders what they’d do with them, if he died in the arena. He wonders if Tony would have to deal with it.

No, no. Don’t think that way. He knows he isn’t coming back here, either way. Plan or no plan.

Peter runs his fingers over them like pages in a book.

He picks out something comfortable, gets dressed, and walks over, faceplanting onto his bed. He feels so weird, like time isn’t moving properly, and nothing has ever felt so real and so fake at the same time. He’s had things to do, every single day, and right now there’s nothing. Right now there’s waiting.

If he thinks too hard, the panic will creep into his heart. Hysteria. And he doesn’t need that right now. He has to keep it at bay, he has to keep himself safe, level-headed. But he doesn’t know how he’s gonna look at any of them without bursting into tears. Last, last, last. Final. Ending.

There’s a knock on the door, and even that makes tears spring to his eyes. Not boding well for later.

“Hey, Pete,” Tony’s voice says. “I got breakfast. That Janet and I made together, which means it’s...better than the normal fare.”

Peter sits up, rubbing at his eyes, sniffling and trying to chill out, trying to find some sense of normalcy. “Uh, come in,” he says, his voice squeaky and embarrassing.

The door opens and Tony backs in with a tray, and his brows furrow when he turns around. “Aw, hey, you could have stayed in pajamas for a bit, we don’t, uh...gotta get ready for an hour or so.”

“Oh,” Peter says, watching him come in. He’d already gone through the five stages of grief over his pajamas, knowing he’d never see them again. It’s the stupidest, smallest things.

“Should have told you,” Tony mutters to himself, almost like a curse.

“It’s okay,” Peter says. “I’m still...I’m still comfortable.”
“Good,” Tony says. He walks over, putting the tray down amongst the blankets and comforter, and he pats Peter on the shoulder. “Thought about making you a mimosa before I remembered our pact.”

Peter laughs, looking over the tray. Pancakes, French toast, strawberries, bacon and scrambled eggs. He’s hungry, but his stomach is turning, too. He thinks about how Tony told him to find food in the arena, that some will be in backpacks lying around, if he can find them. He leans in, popping one of the strawberries in his mouth. “Thank you,” he says. “Looks awesome.”

“Got more, too, if you want it,” Tony says, standing there, crossing his arms over his chest. He shifts for a long couple of moments, and Peter can tell he needs to say something he doesn’t want to say.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asks. “Other than...the obvious.”

Tony clicks his tongue, looking at him. “Uh, they said none of the gifts you got ahead of time are allowed into the arena. No sword, none of the clothing, no axe. You’re allowed one token, and this isn’t me being selfish, but I figured you’d want to take the pin Ned gave you.”

“Oh, no, definitely,” Peter says, chewing, trying to think of where he left it when he took it off, when he first got here. He glances at the bedside table, and sees it’s not there. “No webshooters either?”

“No,” Tony says, looking down at his feet. “But not because of the judgement, we can send them in after it starts, and you can make a crude version in the arena, they always have that stuff available. Just hoping you can find what you need to make the webs.”

Peter nods, trying to picture himself there. Except he can’t see anything, because he doesn’t know what it’s gonna look like. Right now, he just sees a void. Himself floating, falling, choking on his own breath. Stuck full of arrows. Hanging from a noose.

“Anyways, just—enjoy your breakfast, relax for now, I’m gonna make sure things are—running smoothly.” Tony looks at him for a second, tilting his head, and then he nods, walking out of the room.

Peter isn’t strong enough to call out to him, to say he wants to spend as much time with him as possible before he can’t anymore. So he sits there, and eats a bite of his French toast.

~

Peter thought he was doing well. Well enough, considering he’s going into a death arena in a few hours. But all it takes is a few fruitless attempts at finding his Iron Man pin to set him off. It’s not fastened onto his reaping outfit, it’s not under the bed, it’s not in any of his drawers, and he falls into a complete panic. He feels like his world is closing in on him, he feels like he did when he was drunk except it’s not fucking fun anymore, and he can hardly breathe, throwing things around with only one intention—finding that damn pin.

He can’t stop shaking.

He doesn’t know how much time he spends looking. It feels like forever, and he knows—he knows it’s coming to an end. His time here, his life outside the arena, and he tells himself this is important, he tells himself he’ll make it, he’ll live, anyway. He’ll get more years, he’ll find more moments. But he’s so aware time is passing, so aware he’s tearing up his room when he could be relaxing, could be spending time with the others.

“Where the hell is it?” he mutters, going through all the product and bullshit they put in his bathroom, half of it still untouched. “It can’t just disappear.”
He stalks back out into his bedroom, looking around at the mess he’s made, and he finally catches sight of the time—he’s only got half an hour before he has to go.

Peter feels like he’s gonna puke.

He walks out into the living room, tears in his eyes, and sees Tony talking to Hammer. Tony’s words die in his mouth when he sees the look on Peter’s face, and he walks over, taking his arm.

“What’s—”

“I can’t find my pin anywhere,” Peter says, shaking his head. “I’ve literally looked everywhere, and I—I need to find it before I go, I need—I need to find it, I need to—”

“It’s okay,” Tony says, gently, calmly, exactly what Peter needs right now. “It’s okay, we’ll find it, alright? We’re gonna find it—”

“Wait, an Iron Man pin?” Hammer asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Have you seen it?” Peter asks, his heart jumping. He sounds so goddamn pathetic.

“Yeah, it was on the carpet in here,” Hammer says, walking over to the TV. “I put it on the TV stand because I know you guys eat dinner on the coffee table sometimes.” Peter watches him move, and sees the pin sitting there before Hammer picks it up, catching the light through the window. Peter watches him grab it, running his thumb over the face. Hammer walks back over, a little faster than he usually moves, and he plops the pin down in Peter’s outstretched hand.

The relief is absolutely palpable, and Peter stares down at it like it’s not really there, getting a flash of Ned, that moment before everything changed, back in Twelve. His shoulders slump, the pain in his chest going a little dull.

“There we go, see?” Tony says, squeezing Peter’s shoulder. “We got it.”

“Thank you,” Peter says, sucking in a stilted breath, and he steps forward and gives Hammer a hug. He closes his eyes tight, trying to chill out, trying to breathe.

“Hey, hey, kid, it’s okay,” Hammer says, awkwardly patting his back. “It’s alright, it’s all good. You got your pin, it’s good, we’re good.”

Peter nods, pulling away and wiping at his eyes, still clutching the pin in his fist.

“What’s wrong?” Janet asks, walking out of the next hallway with MJ. “Well, other than...”

“We’re okay,” Tony says, stepping a little closer to Peter. “It’s all okay.”

Peter blows out a breath, looking up and meeting MJ’s eyes. He sees the same pain in her face that he feels all over, and the plan feels shaky, at best, right now. He can barely think straight, let alone believe he’s gonna be able to escape the goddamn arena.

“Um, the staggered—exits are starting,” Janet says, looking down.

“They called you?” Tony asks, a little loud. “They’re making you go now?”

Janet nods, solemn.

Peter feels dizzy. “Wait, wait,” he says. “I thought we were going together. I thought everyone was going together, all the—all the tributes and mentors, I thought—I thought—”
“All separate, sweetheart,” Janet says, softly. “They try to...break everyone up early on, try to alienate you all from each other, but don’t—don’t let ‘em, alright?”

Peter can’t stop shaking, can’t center himself, and the world tilts. He palms the back of his neck, and tries to remind himself—plan, plan. There’s a plan.

“Gimme a hug, Peter.” Janet says, stepping into his space. He nods, his throat tight, and melts into her when her arms wrap around him. The hug reminds him of May’s hugs, of hugs from when he was small that were warm and loving, hugs that must have been from his mother. Janet’s been such a pillar of strength this whole time, perfectly matched to someone like MJ, and Peter knows he needs to do this for her. For her, and what they’ve taken from her, in her husband and daughter. Peter needs to tear it all down.

She kisses his cheek just before she pulls away, and she clears her throat, looking him up and down one last time.

“Can I,” MJ says, eyes a little wild, “uh, can I—can I talk to you for just...just a minute, Peter?” she asks. “Over, uh, over—in the hallway?”

“Yeah,” Peter croaks, too horrified and panicky to be embarrassed, and he follows her into the main hallway, staring down at the way they fall into step with each other so easily.

Once they’re in the shadows of the hall, he turns to her, tries to figure out something to say that sounds right, but she tackles him in a hug that nearly knocks him flat. He holds onto her, her hair everywhere, and he closes his eyes, breathing her in.

“Don’t freak out,” she says, close to his ear.

“I’m not.”

“You totally are.”

He sighs, running his hand over her shoulder blade. “Yeah, okay, I am.”

“It’ll be okay,” she says, still hugging him. “It’s gonna work. It’s gonna. Don’t think about this like a normal Games, I know you’re—I know you’re thinking about everyone else, everyone that came before us, just—don’t, this is different. This is different, we’re different.”

Peter nods, barely registering what she’s saying over his own fear.

She pulls back, bracing her hands on his shoulders. “No big goodbyes, because I’ll...I’ll see you in there,” she says, nodding, and her eyes flick down before she meets his gaze again.

“Yeah,” he says. He sounds like an idiot, a broken machine.

“Tell me something we’ll do after,” she says, smiling. “After, you know. After.”

“Oh,” Peter says, surprised, and that thought finally gets through. “Um. Um.” He can barely think, because he’s been in a weird, in between mode all morning, but she’s right here in front of him and she’s so close and she’s talking about After. Something they’ll do after. Sounds like something they’ll do together, not something separate.

He wants to know every single thing about her.

“I wanna introduce you to May,” he says. “I think she’d really like you, like, a lot.”
Her smile gets bigger. “Good,” she says, holding her chin a little higher. “Good, I wanna...I wanna meet her.”

“And maybe,” Peter says, a surge of hope rushing through him, “maybe, uh, maybe we can have...dinner sometime. Just us.” Wherever they are. Whatever they’re doing.

She stares at him, long enough for him to wonder if it was the wrong thing to say, even though she’s smiling. “It’s...a date,” she says, nodding.

“Michelle,” Janet calls, while Peter is processing that last phrase. “Just got the buzz, honey.”

“Okay,” MJ says, and Peter looks at her, one last time between Now and Then.

She lets him go.

She says her goodbyes to Hammer, to Tony, and within the next minute, both she and Janet are gone. Peter feels like someone punctured one of his lungs. MJ’s been here, all along, this whole time. Janet too. Part of this—part of this hell. Part of their team. And now they’re gone. Now they’re on the way to the Games, just like he will be. Soon enough.

“Alright,” Hammer says, clapping his hands, disappointment clear on his face. “Time for my escort duties to officially come to a close. They’re gathering all of us together for the first night.”

Peter remembers what Sam said. How Hammer’s in on it. Peter’s stuck between horror that he hasn’t gotten to say goodbye to Sam, and the need to say something to Hammer. But there’s not enough time.

“Do it right, kid,” Hammer says, hugging him again. He pats him on the back. “We’re all rooting for you.”

“I...I’ll try,” Peter says, as they pull away.

“We can do something special, here, with this one,” Hammer says, looking at Tony.

“Always full of surprises,” Tony says.

Hammer raises his eyebrows at him, reaching out and knocking Tony in the arm. “Stay sprightly, Anthony,” he says.

Then he leaves too.

Peter squeezes the pin in his hand until there’s an indentation in his palm. All he can hear is his own heartbeat and the blaring silence of the room, and he feels Tony take his arm again.

“I feel like I’m drunk,” Peter says, and his own voice sounds horribly like he’s underwater.

“Take a couple deep breaths,” Tony says, leading him over to the couch and sitting him down.

Tony sits right next to him and Peter finds himself shuddering, his thoughts a mash of good and bad, horror and hope, and he can barely breathe. He’s seven again, in front of his aunt and uncle, faced with a new life. He’s thirteen and dirty with soot, clutching at Ben’s limp hand. He’s sixteen a month ago, watching Ned be reaped. A dangerous phrase coming out of his own mouth.

“Just try and relax,” Tony says, holding onto Peter’s wrist. “I know it’s hard. I’m so sorry, Pete.”

“It’s okay,” Peter says, even though nothing is.
“I wanna tell you what’s coming next,” Tony says.

Peter nods, shivering. But it’s not cold in here.

“They’re gonna buzz me,” Tony says, leaning down a bit, “then we’re gonna have to go downstairs. There won’t be any fans or anything, so you won’t have to worry about that. There’s a hovercraft pad in the back, so we’ll be going through the south hallway. They’re gonna take us—wherever the hell they’re gonna take us—”

“No one knows at all?” Peter asks, looking up at him. “Not even the location in the country?”

“No,” Tony says. “Not til after.”

“So how are they gonna find me?” Peter asks, breathing harder. “Even if we get out, everything works, how—how will you find me?” He doesn’t even know if Tony will be the one to come, but he hopes he is. He hopes. Or is anybody even coming? Will they have to trek out of the arena on their own, move out into some random part of the country they don’t know? He sways a little bit, closing his eyes tight. “Not just me,” he breathes. “All of us, all—”


Peter nods, chewing on his lower lip.

“You’ll have a tracker in your arm,” Tony says. “They’re gonna put it in on the hovercraft over. So we’ll hack in, track that. And once we scoop you up, someone’ll take it out.”

“Cut it out of my arm,” Peter says. “Got it.” If he even still has a goddamn arm.

“Thor told me we’ve got doctors on board too,” Tony says. “Won’t be any backwoods surgery, it’ll be alright.”

Peter nods, and everything seems dark, and there are too many voices in his head.

“So the hovercraft is gonna take us,” Tony says. “No windows, so we can’t see. And the arena facility will have an underground landing pad, so it’ll take us right under. We’ll get out, they’ll lead us in, send us to our room. Then you’ll change, and we’ll have a couple minutes before you have to get into the tube.”

“Tube?” Peter asks, meeting his eyes again, breathing hard through his mouth. “What’s, what—”

“It brings you up into the arena,” Tony says. Peter can see a flicker of fear in his expression, and it almost sends him over the edge. But then Tony wraps his arm around Peter’s shoulders, rubbing his back. “Just try and relax. Just breathe.”

“Okay,” Peter says, trying to remember how to breathe the right way. “Okay, okay, I—I’m trying.”

~

Peter looks around, taking stock of this place, everything that happened while he lived here, all the words said within these walls. It feels like it’s been longer than a month, feels like he’s lived five lifetimes in anticipation of the day he’s finally living in. Anticipation, dread, the panic that’s rattling his bones right now. His stomach is in knots.

He makes his bed. He stares at the illusions in the window and feels like he could step into that world and live like a ghost here, amongst the rustling trees.
“Peter,” Tony says, from the doorway. “I, uh, I got the buzz.”

Peter feels like smashing the glass, jumping out. But he wouldn’t want Tony to see that.

_Hope. Have hope. Think about After._

“Okay,” Peter says, swallowing hard, heart fluttering. He looks around, feels like he’s sinking, and swallows hard. _Goodbye room._ He runs his hand along the wall as he heads for the door, and he flips the light off, not looking back.

“Got your pin, right?” Tony asks, following alongside him.

“In my pocket,” Peter says, patting it to make sure it’s still there. He looks up and around once they get into the living room, thinks about how, just last night, they were laughing and sharing stories, picturing what it might be like if things worked out the way they want them to. Now it’s quiet, now he’s leaving it behind. Never gonna see it again.

He imagines Tony here next year, with new tributes. But then he remembers Tony’s speech, before he passed out, after the Garden Party. _Not one more time, not one more year. I keep saying that, but this is it, last straw._

Peter prays, and prays, and prays.

“Keep breathing,” Tony reminds him, as they turn off the light in the front hallway.

They walk out and Peter thinks about his reaping outfit, finds it strange that he left something behind that May got for him. His heart beats faster as they head into the elevator, and he stands closer to Tony, his jaw set. He feels minutes from a breakdown, seconds even, but it’s briefly staved off when the elevator doors open and Sam is standing there waiting.

Peter lets out a shuddering breath.

“Thank God,” Tony says, holding the elevator doors open.

“C’mere, kid,” Sam says.

He doesn’t have to ask twice, and Peter rushes forward into a hug. He holds onto him tight, and he was so afraid he wouldn’t get to say goodbye. Sam’s half the reason Peter was able to form any kind of identity here, and he gives him faith.

“I know you’re on a schedule,” Sam says. “But I had to make sure I saw you off.”

“Wish I could wear one of your Spider-Man outfits,” Peter says, through gritted teeth.

“You are Spider-Man, Pete,” Sam says, and he pulls back, lightly touching Peter’s cheek, smiling sadly at him. “You are what these people see, okay? I know you doubt yourself all the damn time, but you’re the hero, the outfit’s not the hero. You are. Okay?”

Peter swallows hard, trying to believe him.

“Move along,” a mechanical voice says, and Peter looks over his shoulder, sees the peacekeeper standing next to Tony.

“He’s saying goodbye to his stylist,” Tony snaps, as Peter turns back around.

“You got this,” Sam says, catching Peter’s eyes again. “Okay?”
“Yeah,” Peter says, and his throat is so tight, he can barely force out words.

“I’m gonna see you again,” Sam says. “Alright?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, stupidly, and he hopes, he hopes, he hopes.

Sam nods, a lot more confident than Peter himself, and he takes Peter’s hand, passing something off to him. “Isn’t much, but I thought you might like something to go along with that Iron Man pin you’ve got.”

Peter looks down, into his palm, and sees a new pin—a small, black spider, against a background of red webbing.

“Don’t press down on it unless you need to,” Sam says, winking at him when Peter looks back up.

Peter breathes hard, wondering what the hell that means. He quickly slips it into his pocket alongside the Iron Man, hoping the peacekeeper isn’t watching too closely. “Thank you,” Peter whispers.

“Time to go,” the peacekeeper says, as if he knew Peter was thinking about him.

“I’ll catch up with you, Sam,” Tony says, and he gently takes Peter’s arm, stepping in between him and the peacekeeper.

“See you then,” Sam says. He points at Peter. “I’m rooting for you, Spider-Man.”

Peter smiles, already a little teary, and he turns as Tony pushes them past the peacekeeper and towards the back exit. “I’m...I’m glad I got to see him,” Peter says, shoulder to shoulder with Tony again. “I was worried.”

“He wouldn’t have let you go without seeing you,” Tony says.

Peter feels half numb as they walk, half broken, falling apart but keeping the facade up that he’s fine, that this is normal, that walking to his possible death is the most regular thing in the world. They don’t show the breakdowns on TV, if anyone ever has them, and Peter wonders if he can keep this one from coming. He feels close to vomiting any second, close to passing out, and he feels like he’s losing time, feels like he’s skipping every other step, every other second.

Tony holds the door open for him, and he sees the hovercraft.

He stutters to a stop, a heavy wave of nausea rolling through him. He’s never been in anything like that. He’s only been on the train. He’s been in a car ten times in his life, and seven of those were here. He’s never been in a hovercraft.

“He.”

Tony takes Peter’s outstretched hand and brings him back to Earth. “Hey, I’m here,” Tony says, quietly. “It’s alright, it’s alright, I’m going with you.”

Peter nods, barely hearing him.

He hears a peacekeeper’s voice. “We need——”
“Just gimme a goddamn second,” Tony hisses.

Peter barely hears, and he can’t move, he can’t make himself move. He feels like pulling back, curling into a ball and trying to hide. He doesn’t know what the hell he is anymore. He doesn’t want to belong to them. He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want them to take him. He can’t do this he can’t do this.

“Pete, I’m not gonna say it’s okay, because it’s not okay,” Tony says, one hand holding Peter’s own, the other gripping his far shoulder. “But I’m going with you, okay? We’re doing this together. Alright? Take these steps with me.”

Peter looks at the ramp that’s laid out for them. The long, sharp wings. The peacekeepers everywhere.

“One at a time, okay?” Tony asks. “I’ve got you. It’s just me and you. Don’t think about where we’re going, we’re just hanging out, alright?”

“Okay,” Peter breathes, without thinking.

“I’ve got a sandwich in my bag, and not one I made. Janet made it, so it’s better than you’re thinking.”

“Okay,” Peter says again, his eyes burning.

“Alright,” Tony says. “We ready to move? Slow and steady.”


The first step is tentative, but he takes it. The next is a little more normal, and then they fall into a stride. Tony lets go of his hand but keeps hold of his shoulder, and they walk up the ramp together. It’s twelve steps, Peter counts. Then the door closes behind him.

There are two men standing inside the craft, and they’re dressed up like peacekeepers, except he can see their faces. There’s no sympathy in their eyes. Tony leads Peter over to a pair of seats in the middle of the right side—there are about twelve seats on either side, and Peter wonders why they only take two of them at a time. Probably for the drama of it all. Tony buckles him in because Peter is too distracted to remember, and he swallows hard, settling back in the seat.


The two guards reach up and brace themselves on straps hanging from the ceiling, and Peter breathes harder. He can’t see the pilots from here, but there’s a bunch of noise, and he clenches his hands in his lap.

“You can always count down,” Tony says. “There’s gonna be a little whooshing sound, we’ll be able to hear it in here, it’s the wings extending—”

“More than they already were?” Peter asks, looking at him.

“Just a little bit,” Tony says, as the sound gets louder. “You’ll hear that noise, then we can count to ten. Real slow. And then that’s takeoff.”

Peter nods, chewing at the sore spot on the inside of his cheek. Then, he hears what he thinks is the
whooshing sound, which sounds like a big waterfall, but more violent. Peter looks at Tony, and Tony holds his hands out.

“Can we count?” Peter asks.

“Yup,” Tony says. “Start.”

They count up to ten, which doesn’t feel like an oncoming explosion like a countdown would, and Peter matches Tony’s pace, softly saying the numbers, holding onto each one before finding another.

“Nine—”

“Nine.”

“Ten—”

“Ten.”

Peter still gasps when the engine rumbles up, when the air changes, and he’s pushed back against his seat as the craft rises up, takes off. His stomach dips, and for a moment, it feels like the new movement is gonna squash him flat.

“It’ll get smoother,” Tony says. “Pop your ears.”

Peter opens his mouth, cracks his jaw. He doesn’t think, he doesn’t focus, he goes outside of himself again. A form of self preservation that he so desperately needs right now, because he can’t be here, can’t be this, can’t be breathing this way. He phases in and out of existence, in and out of consciousness, doesn’t think, doesn’t think. He digs his nails into his palms.

Somewhere in the middle of the flight, Tony hands him a sandwich, and as he eats it, the thinking starts. He remembers the statistics. 22% of Hunger Games Tributes die of starvation. 37% die of exposure. He wishes he could hoard sandwiches. He wouldn’t even care if Tony was the one who made them.

He is a stone, sinking to the bottom of a lake. He’s covered with debris, with sand and webbed feet. He’s covered by ages, by millennia, and he’s cold. He’s forgotten. He’s decomposing.

“Hey,” Tony says, and Peter looks over at him, feels himself trembling. “I’m right here with you, alright?”

Peter nods, but all he can think is not for long.

One of the men moves, no longer stiff like a statue, and walks over to a panel on the wall, snapping it open and pulling something out.

“Okay,” Tony says, as the man starts towards them. “Like I told you—”

“Give me your arm,” the man says.

Peter swallows hard.

“Your tracker,” Tony says, looking at him pointedly.

Peter gives a stuttering nod, and he pulls up his sleeve, holding his arm out. The man takes it, rough, and turns it over, palm up. He reveals the something he’s holding, what looks like a giant version of a needle Peter’s seen at the doctor’s office. He closes his eyes, feels Tony’s hand on his shoulder,
and there’s a big pinch accompanied by a loud snap when the man injects the tracker in. Peter winces, his arm throbbing, and when he opens his eyes again, the man is back by the wall, putting the big needle away.

“They fucked up in my year and gave me two,” Tony says, squeezing Peter’s shoulder before pulling back again.

“Really?” Peter asks, rubbing the spot where they stuck him, and it still feels tender.

“Yeah, they allowed me to dig it the fuck out of my arm because it was screwing things up,” Tony says.

Peter wonders how the hell they communicated that to him, and he blows out a breath. He keeps running his fingers over the new bump on his arm.

He can feel them landing about ten minutes later, and he hates himself for not paying better attention the whole time, for giving in to his hysteria—he could have kept track of how long it took them to get here, what direction they were going in—he knows the geography of Panem, he could have figured it out. He’s angry, and he wipes at his eyes, sweat already sticking to his back.

The hovercraft stops, and Peter is freezing.

“Seatbelt,” Tony says, and when Peter looks at him he’s already got his off, and he’s leaning over, looking to see if Peter can manage it. It’s like Peter’s losing year by year by year, dwindling down to infancy, and his hands keep shaking as he lets himself out. He gets to his feet, and it’s as if there’s something wedged in his throat, choking him.

Tony stays close, and that’s the only consolation. The ramp opens back up and unfolds, and all Peter sees is fluorescent light.

He can’t hear his heartbeat anymore. He wonders if he died during the ride over, and he’s still sitting there. He wonders what Tony would do, if that were true. It would almost feel like sticking it to Stane. He couldn’t get his head, then. Tony wouldn’t let him.

“Head down,” one of the men behind them says. “There’s a peacekeeper waiting for you.”

“Just what we want waiting for us,” Tony says. He looks at Peter, and he waits, doesn’t take a step until Peter does, and the breakdown is incoming, on the verge, tugging at Peter’s ankles and threatening to drag him under.

“I don’t know what to do,” Peter whispers, scared to move again. “I don’t know what to do.”

It could be misconstrued, that he doesn’t know how to proceed, what steps to take, even though Tony told him, even though there’s a clear path.

“C’mon,” Tony says, hand on his shoulder again.

Peter swallows hard, letting himself be led.

“I know what you’re going through,” Tony whispers, as they go down the ramp, and into wherever the fuck they are. “I know all too well. And you’re too damn good for this.”

“I’m trying,” Peter breathes. “I’m—I’m trying—”

“Peter Parker?” a voice asks, from somewhere ahead of them. Peter keeps rubbing his arm, anything
he wanted to say dying and disintegrating in his mouth, and they keep walking down the hallway until they turn and see the peacekeeper standing there. Peter’s fight or flight mode triggers and the anger mingles with his complete and utter hopelessness, his terror, the way the idea of death is twisting around his throat. All he wants to do is knock these assholes sideways, but his vision is still skewed, his head still muddled.

He sees red. Dripping.

“Yes,” Tony says, for him.

“Follow me,” the peacekeeper says, bracing his hand on his gun.

Everything is steel, and their footsteps echo. It feels like a prison, and that’s—that’s exactly what it is. There’s door after door after door, and Peter wonders where MJ is, where Steve and Natasha are. He wonders which one of them was left alone, considering their District only has one mentor. Peter keeps walking, and imagines them building this place, imagines the people they force to build this place, and it hits him.

It hits him, like a freight train, and the world tilts.

They’re under the arena right now. They’re walking underneath it. The place where he’ll be trapped, where he’ll be fighting for his life, they’re right underneath it. They’re so close, they’re so close, and it’s minutes away. Minutes, just minutes.

It feels like they walk forever, and finally they stop, and the peacekeeper opens one door among the many. The hallway still goes on, far as the eye can see, and Peter stares down, looking for someone else.

“Don’t touch him,” Peter hears Tony say, and he turns, sees Tony standing between him and the peacekeeper. Tony meets Peter’s eyes, and motions towards the room.

Peter goes inside, Tony follows, and the door shuts behind them.

This room is dank, tiled walls, the thin lights hanging on the ceiling buzzing and flickering. There’s a door in the corner that’s open, and Peter sees an outfit hanging on a rack inside. A changing room.

Tony peers inside over his shoulder, and they both stare.

A black, short sleeved shirt, with red stripes from the collar to the bottom of each sleeve. Black pants that look like they might be too tight on him, a jacket with two red stripes down the shoulders, and brown boots.

“Alright, I feel like we can rule water out,” Tony says. “Probably cityscape or forest.”

Peter’s heart is like an erupting volcano. It burns. It splinters. He looks at Tony, trying to stay steady on his feet, trying not to drop, trying to stop sweating, take a breath. “They’re listening, right?” he asks.

Tony nods.

Peter swallows, glad he had the presence of mind to ask before he said something stupid, like I wish we’d done the tunnels thing. I wish we’d gotten out when we had the chance.

“We’ve got a good ten minutes—”
“Ten minutes?” Peter says, too loud, his breath coming in little spurts.

Tony’s expression is grave, and he nods. “Change as quick as you can, okay?”

Peter startles, and his mouth is dry as he turns, walking into the changing room and closing the door behind him. He sees himself in the mirror and he stands, stares, because this can’t be him, this can’t be him, here, this can’t be happening. He’s gotta wake up, and he pinches his arm hard. Nothing. *Wake up, wake up*. He does it again, and there’s nothing, and his eyes fill with frustrated tears. *Wake up, wake up, get out, get out*. He wants to do it all over again. He wants to wake up at four years old, when his parents are still alive. Ben too. Before Tony was reaped, before Tony was taken. He did it all wrong, he messed up, he messed up so bad.

He grips his own hair and silently panics, pressing his forehead against the mirror. He feels like he’s gonna pass out, his vision blotchy and tilting, tilting, it’s been tilting all day, and he tries to tell himself he’s wasting time panicking in here alone when he could be spending his last moments with Tony. He’s gonna be alone plenty for however long he’s in the arena, until he finds the others. Until the plan works, until he escapes. Or until he dies some agonizing death set up by the President himself. The fear is so thick in his heart that it forms a giant wall around him, and he’s trapped in his own head, too.

He doesn’t wanna die. He’s only sixteen years old, there’s so much he still needs to do, and he has no faith in his ability to lead a nation, a group of rebels, everyone in the districts that’s been oppressed for so long that they can barely deviate from their daily schedules without overthinking it. How will they follow him? How can he ever make it there? He won’t, if he dies. He’ll never have the opportunity.

He can’t die, he can’t. He can’t because he can’t face something like that, something he’s so terrified of. How could the universe push him in that direction? How?

Peter takes a couple deep breaths, and looks over his shoulder at the outfit they gave him. What he might die in.

~

Tony stands in the murky room and waits. He’s lightheaded, and he’s not doing this right, none of it is right, they’re moving in the wrong direction. He doesn’t know how to be strong for Peter now, here in the end, and he can’t come to terms with the fact that he’s leaving him here. Sending him into the arena. Tony can’t bank on the plan, but it’s his only hope of getting the kid back alive.

His head is a war, and he’s coming off distant. He’s coming off part of this, part of their ‘well-oiled machine’. Leave the tribute center, Peter, get on the hovercraft, Peter, get ready for takeoff, Peter. He’s complicit. He isn’t smart enough. He should have done something, he should have fucking figured something out, but now he’s dragged the kid here. They’re here. It’s here.

He sees, out of the corner of his eye, the small box he’d been wondering about. He sighs, walks over, and takes the bracelet out, smoothing his thumb over the steel. *PETER PARKER* is engraved there, and Tony slips the bracelet onto his wrist, snapping it closed.

Tony looks behind him. Sees the circular platform. Sees the opening on the ceiling, shut for now, shut for the moment. He doesn’t know how much time they have left. The countdown is imminent. His whole body is cramping up, and he sucks in a big breath, letting it out slowly. He isn’t allowed to break. Not now, not yet. Not in front of Peter. Not when the kid needs him most.
The changing room door opens, and Peter comes out. His hair is a mess and he’s holding the jacket gingerly, glancing up fast like he was worried Tony wouldn’t still be there.

*Love him like your own* Pepper’s voice says, again, like the most important thing he’s ever heard, words imprinted in his heart. Tony wonders why it was him, the kid who changed things so long ago, why he had to be a volunteer for almost certain death. But, despite all that, Tony does. Love him like his own. He can’t help it. There’s nothing else.

Tony walks over and takes the jacket from him, hanging it over the back of the nearest wooden chair.

“Tony, I—I’m afraid,” Peter says, his lips forming a thin line as he tries to fight tears. “Somehow it just kept feeling like it’d never come, that we’d avoid it somehow, but we’re here, and I just—I can’t—I can’t breathe—”

Tony’s heart breaks. It’s been breaking, because Peter is *good*, he’s kind and just about the most genuine person Tony has ever met and he’s full of so much pain, so much heartache and bad luck and unavoidable courses and yet still, he keeps on. He thinks of others. Every thought of himself is considered selfish, even when it concerns his own well-being. Tony can see it in his eyes now.

He walks over, and takes both of Peter’s hands in his own. “I haven’t been good enough—no, don’t dispute that, I mean today. I should have been better, I should have been telling them all to fuck off. I know we’re trapped, but I should be doing every damn thing to protect you, to stand by you. Every damn thing.”

“You just being here helps,” Peter says, holding tight to Tony’s hands.

Tony tries not to cry. “You’ve seen how this goes down,” he says, voice breaking. “Stay on the platform until the countdown ends. There will be backpacks everywhere, grab the first one you see. Avoid frays, stay away from big groups. Find a tablet if you can, you can make illusions with those things, you’ve seen how powerful they are and you’re good at it. Soon as you can hook up with your allies, get together and find higher ground. You know how to hide, you know how to keep yourself alive. Find what you need to make the webs, and I’ll get the webshooters to you. Tonight or tomorrow.”

Peter nods, and even though he’s so downcast, his eyes are still so trusting. Hanging on Tony’s every word.

“See this bracelet I’m wearing?” Tony asks, lifting his wrist a bit. Peter nods. “It’s gonna be linked to you as soon as the Games start, so I’ll be able to tell blood pressure, changes in heart rate. I’ll always know what’s going on.”

“You’ll be watching, right?” Peter asks.

“Of *course,*” Tony says. “I’m not even gonna sleep.”

“You’ve gotta sleep.”

“I’ll sleep when you sleep,” Tony says, sniffling. “And this thing is gonna wake me up if something wakes you up. So I’m not gonna miss a thing.”

“Okay,” Peter says, voice small, like he could hardly get the word out.

“The plan.”

“The plan,” Tony says, and his throat hurts like hell from fighting off this panic. “Okay? You come back. You’ll get to do all the things we’ve talked about.”

A tear tracks down Peter’s cheek, and Tony lets go of his hand, reaches up and swipes it away. There’s a crackling announcement. “FIVE MINUTES TO LAUNCH.”

“Oh God,” Peter breathes, his facade crumbling.

“Hey, hey,” Tony says, touching the kid’s face, trying to get his attention back. His own heart is failing, he knows it is, and if he doesn’t have a heart attack by the end of all this, he’ll consider himself lucky. “Hey, c’mere,” Tony says, pulling Peter in. “C’mon, c’mere.”

Peter collapses against him, and he’s shaking so violently that Tony can barely hold him.

“I’m gonna be with you the whole way,” Tony says, squeezing his eyes shut tight because this pain is astronomical, jolting all over him. “You see a camera, you hear a camera, you can look right into it and you’ll be looking at me, okay?”

“Oh God,” Peter stutters. “Tony, I—you really think—you really think I can do it? All of it? Make it—make it through this?” He buries his face in Tony’s shoulder.

“I do,” Tony says. “You’re so brave, kid—”

“I’m not—”

“You are,” Tony says, rubbing Peter’s back. “You’re strong as hell, you react fast, and you’re smart, you’re so damn smart, Pete, okay? Know that. Don’t forget it, you can use all that in there—”

“Oh God,” Peter breathes. “Oh my God. Remember—remember what he said—what he said to us —”

“Don’t,” Tony says. He pulls back, holding onto Peter’s arms. “Don’t think about that fucking asshole, okay? He’s not anything. He’s dirt on your shoe. And he’s gonna see, yeah? He’s gonna see.”

Peter sucks in a trembling breath, and his eyes are bloodshot, fear painted all over him.

Tony shakes his head, and he has to say the right thing. “I was never—I mean, you know, but I—I always wanted a kid. Pepper and I talked about it a lot, we were making plans, and they—they shot those plans out of the air, and I never—I never thought I’d get to have one, because I—I’m never gonna find anyone else. She was the love of my life. But you—Peter, you’re like a son to me. I know you are. I love you like a son, kid, I do, and I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” Tears overtake him and he shakes his head again, looking down at his feet.

“Tony,” Peter says, and he rushes back into another hug.

Tony presses a long kiss to Peter’s temple, and he prays. He prays for strength, prays for luck, prays for Peter’s safety. Prays for that moment when he sees him again. Afterwards. He hasn’t prayed in a long time, not really, not like this. But he’s got to. Something needs to work.

“Stay with Steve,” Tony says, his tears falling freely now. “Stay behind him, all times. You’re too important, okay?”
“Okay,” Peter says, muffled.

“TWO MINUTES TO LAUNCH.”

Peter twists his hand in Tony’s jacket, pushing closer.

“Shh, shh, I’ve got you,” Tony says, and he sways back and forth, brushing Peter’s hair back.

“Can you—keep in contact with—with May?” Peter asks.

“I’m going to, I don’t care about their rules,” Tony says, already planning on doing another stream. He’s got so many things to do, to keep Peter safe. He has to stay active, with all of his sponsors. He has to watch closely, to see what Peter needs.

This is the last time he’s gonna hold the kid. No, goddamnit. The last time he’s gonna see him in person. No, no. The last time he’s gonna hear his voice, not through a TV screen. Please, no. Please no.

He can’t die. He can’t. Not like all the rest of them. I can’t watch him die.

“I just wanna—say thank you,” Peter whispers. “For everything.”

“Hey, no—thank you,” Tony says. “For being you. I’ve gotten drunk with a lot of people and you were by far the most fun.”

Peter laughs, dipping his forehead onto Tony’s shoulder, and it feels like a win, to hear that sound.

“ONE MINUTE TO LAUNCH.”

“Goddamnit,” Tony says, and he wants to will time to stop, wants to freeze it all, everything, and he’d blow up the whole damn country if it meant getting Peter out of this. He wants to go in himself, he wants to go in with him, because it’s hard to find any measure of trust when it comes to anyone else keeping Peter safe.

Peter pulls back, his eyes wide. “My pins,” he says, shaking. “I have them, I’ve gotta, I gotta—”

“Okay, let’s put ‘em on,” Tony says, and he’s terrified, eyes flicking over to the clock on the wall. Every second. Every second. Another one wasted.

Peter reaches a trembling hand into his pocket and he pulls out both pins, the Iron Man from Ned and the Spider-Man from Sam. Tony puts them up by Peter’s collar, fastening them tight so Peter doesn’t have to worry about losing them, and then he reaches over and grabs the jacket off the chair, helping Peter put it on.

There’s a tight band around Tony’s chest, and he can barely breathe.

The tube comes up from the ground, quickly connecting to the opening in the ceiling. Peter reaches out towards Tony, watching it, and Tony takes his hand. The glass door opens up until it’s tall enough for a person to step inside. It waits.

Tony squeezes Peter’s hand, one last moment, one last connection to his kid. Peter squeezes back, and then they let go.

“THIRTY SECONDS TO LAUNCH.”

“Stay on the platform until the countdown stops,” Peter repeats, his breath coming in little short
bursts through his mouth.

Tony doesn’t wanna say why. Because they’ll blow him sky high if he tries for a head start. And they’ll come in here real quick if he doesn’t get into the tube on time.

Tony wants to reach out to him again, wants to hug him again, not let go, wants to drag him through the vents and go somewhere safe, but he can’t, their time is up, nothing is safe anymore, it’s over, and his stomach is a pit, his horror in his throat, and he watches as the kid looks at him with so many questions in his eyes. So much hurt, so much confusion, and Tony can’t fix any of it.

“Okay,” Peter says, nodding, and it sounds like a question anyway.

“Okay,” Tony repeats.

You don’t deserve this. You don’t deserve this. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

Peter is close to hyperventilating, and he moves closer, closer, closer (farther, so much farther), until he steps up into the tube. He turns around, and the door closes, last opportunity fading. And then it seals shut.

Tony nearly loses it, seeing him in there, this nightmare, his goddamn nightmare, and he covers his mouth with his hand to keep himself from begging, screaming for anything but this to happen.

Peter almost looks resigned, his lower lip trembling, and Tony sees the light scan over him and confirm they’re taking the person they want to take. Peter presses his hand to the glass, leans his forehead against it, and Tony rushes forward, placing their hands together, resting his forehead against Peter’s.

This isn’t what fathers do. They don’t let their kids get into this much danger. Richard Parker would beat the shit out of him. Ben Parker too.

“TEN SECONDS TO LAUNCH.”

“I love you, kid,” Tony says, and he doesn’t know if he can hear him, he never knows, because Janet didn’t say anything when Tony was in the tube. Only stood stalwart. “God, come back to me. Please.”

He looks up, and sees Peter mouthing something that looks like I love you too.

Tony counts, and it aches, with every beat of his heart. Then Peter starts moving, the tube taking him up, and up, and up. He bends down, the dismay and alarm warping his expression, and he looks more afraid than Tony’s ever seen him.

“I’m right here,” Tony says, pressing hard to the glass with his hands. “I’m with you, kid, I’m with you.”

Peter mouths the word Tony and then the tube pushes him all the way up.

He’s gone.

Tony stumbles back under the weight of his own failure, and he covers his mouth with both of his hands, stifling a sob. He stares at the tube, wishing, wishing this was a nightmare, wishing him back, please, please God, bring him back, but it’s all in motion now, and Tony moves until his back hits the wall by the main door.
“Oh my God,” he wails, his throat raw, his legs shaking, his agony ripping through him every which way it can. “Oh my God,” he repeats, clawing at his neck, because he’s gone, he’s gone, he’s gone, Peter’s gone.

The bracelet shudders to life, and Tony can feel Peter’s heartbeat. Rapid fire. Tony squeezes his eyes shut tight, holding his wrist against the core of his chest.

“God, Pete, I’m sorry,” he whispers, a prayer, a promise. “I’m so sorry.”

~

“Tony!” Peter yells, bending on uneasy legs as the tube transports him out, and the last he sees of Tony is his hands flat against the glass, saying words Peter can’t read. He’s gone. He’s gone, they’re separated, the moment he’s been having nightmares about since the reaping is here—he’s alone, he’s alone.

Peter’s gonna pass out. He’s gonna pass out, he’s gonna pass out.

The light hits him as he rises out of the tube and into open air, and he can’t see, it’s so bright, and he squints against this new world, high contrast and too much light. He holds his hand up against the sun, or their fake version of the sun, because he’s in their hamster cage now. Everybody’s watching.

His surroundings slowly, slowly come into view.

He’s in the middle of a street that looks like it’s been blown up, debris everywhere, cars overturned, shoes left behind, parts of buildings lying in the way. Some parts of the ground are broken up, sunken in, there are a few small fires, lots of smoke plumes rising in the sky, and there are tall buildings all around him. Cityscape, just like Tony was thinking.

Every other year it’s been a small circle, all the tributes facing each other, a cornucopia in the middle, with things to lure people in, traps to get people killed. But this year is different. Peter’s essentially alone. He can only see one other tribute, at least a couple blocks down the street, and he can’t even tell who it is.

He breathes hard, looking around, and he sees the countdown on a billboard in front of him. Fifty seconds.

Peter braces himself. His heart is beating way too fast. He has to do this. He has to. There’s no way out. He’s terrified, more afraid than he’s ever been, but there’s no way out now. No way to save himself but the plan. He tries to stop himself from trembling, and the clock keeps ticking down.

He looks to his left, and sees the road that he’s standing on becomes like a bridge, running over another horizontal road and wrapping around a large, square building with long windows, an ornate clock and statue on the roof. There’s another building behind it, a skyscraper, larger than the tribute center, and it rises up into the sky like a beacon. It’s strangely shaped, unlike anything Peter has ever seen, and it curves into what looks like a helicopter landing pad before blooming out again above it.

*Get to higher ground* he hears Tony’s voice say, and Peter knows he’s gotta get inside that tower.

His hands are sweaty, and he rubs them on his pants. Trying to breathe, trying to breathe. He glances down the other way again, squints at the closest tribute, and he thinks it might be the girl from Three. He can’t be sure. He can’t wait to see a familiar face.

*Breathe. Breathe.*
I’ll have his head, Tony.

Watch it rot.

At the end of the month we’ll all be trying to kill each other.

I’ll make sure they find their way into your path.

Watch it rot.

Watch it rot.

Peter sways, nearly falls off the platform, and he quickly regains his footing as the countdown reaches 15.

“WELCOME TO THE 60TH ANNUAL HUNGER GAMES,” a voice from above says, echoing everywhere. “THE GAMES ARE ABOUT TO BEGIN. MAY THE ODDS BE EVER IN YOUR FAVOR.”

Peter runs his hands over his face, trying to stop sweating. This is it, this is it, do or die, and he looks off towards the tower again, eyes scanning the ground for a backpack, a tablet, anything. There’s so much shit everywhere, he can’t see straight, but he just knows he’s gotta go that way. There’s gotta be another tribute somewhere close, somewhere off in that direction. He hopes it’s not Beck, or anyone from One and Two.

“TEN. NINE. EIGHT.”

“Oh my God,” Peter whispers, and he really feels like he’s gonna die, right here, right fucking now, but he’s gotta see them again, he’s gotta see them again, he has to stay alive, for them. He’s gotta find MJ. He’s gotta find the others.

“SEVEN. SIX. FIVE.”

His eyes dart around, and he sees a bird fly by, swooping low before gaining altitude. Peter watches it, and for a moment, he’s back in Twelve, before all this. But just for a moment.

“FOUR. THREE.”


“TWO. ONE.”

He hears a gong, and without one more thought, he leaps off the platform, weaving around an overturned yellow car, trying not to trip over his own feet. He doesn’t look back, and he heads for the tower.
Tony stalks down the hallway, his tablet in his hands, eager to get the fuck out of here and back to the tribute center. He stares down at the image on the screen, and Peter’s still trudging towards the tower, looking everywhere for a backpack. Peter’s heart is beating in time with Tony’s own, both of them in some kind of crazed state that definitely isn’t good for their physical health.

He breathes hard, wiping at his eyes.

He opens up the view of the other tributes, and sees that Steve, Natasha and MJ are completely spread out, as far away from each other as they fucking can be. It feels purposeful, and Tony clicks on Beck’s name, and sees that he’s closer to Peter than any of the others.

“Goddamnit,” Tony breathes. He pulls up the map, and sees them both moving in the same direction. Felicia Hardy is with Beck, and Tony wonders if they were planning an alliance, too.

“Tony!” Janet’s voice says, from ahead of him.

Something breaks in his head, hearing her, and he doesn’t even look up. He keeps watching Peter move through the rubble, and he checks inside an abandoned car. Smart. He’ll find a backpack in no time. He’ll be fine, he’ll be fine.

“Hey,” Tony says, barely seeing Janet out of his peripherals, and he keeps walking. He’s held together by string. “So. Looks like a blown out city or something. Kid’s got a good idea, go for the tower, but he’s gotta be careful in there, I’m sure they rigged it up real good.”

“Tony—”

“He’s checking inside cars too, being really thorough, I’m proud of him,” Tony says, watching as Peter checks in an alleyway. The bracelet on Tony’s wrist beats and beats and beats, too fast for a sixteen year old kid.

“Tony, are you—”

He keeps walking, his footsteps loud. “Hopefully Michelle can find him, those two think alike, she’ll probably head for the tower too. Steve and Natasha need to get on their game—”

Janet quickly rushes around so she’s in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. She snatches the tablet from his hands just as Peter looks inside another car.

Tony’s eye twitches.

“Hey!” he says, reaching for it, his own heart lurching. “Jan, come on—”

“Are you alright?” Janet says, stubbornly.

“I’ll be more alright if you give me back the tablet,” Tony says, antsy, desperate to get the damn thing back. “Janet.”

“You’re clearly not dealing with this,” she says.

He wipes at his eyes again before a tear can escape, and he steps closer to her. He’s shaking. “Tablet, please. Please.”
“Only if you’ll talk to me,” she says. “Don’t shut me out. We’re in this together.”

Tony’s eyes cut down to his bracelet, and thank God, the kid’s heart is still beating. Too fast, but still beating. Still alive. Tony remembers all the times past, when he felt the moment they went—that awful, sudden stillness, after so many days of rapid heartbeat. “I’m not gonna be dealing with this,” Tony says, and he flexes his fingers before balling his hands into fists.

“But you need to talk to me—”


Janet gives it back, begrudgingly. “Michelle is probably gonna run into Steve soon, he’s coming her way unless he gets rerouted. The ones from Six are heading to the outer rim, but I don’t know if they’ll make it.”

“Beck and Hardy are already together,” Tony says, looking back down, clicking over to watch the two of them walking, like they’re on the hunt. “Not too thrilled about that.”

“I’m just glad that Hela woman’s on her own,” Janet says. “Imagine if she was with them too?”

Tony shakes his head, and feels like they’re fucking trapped here. He looks up at the ceiling, and his stomach turns, knowing the damn arena is right above them. His kid.

“It looks pretty straightforward, the arena, but it never is when it looks it,” he says, trying not to fall into listlessness.


Tony stares down at the screen, watching Peter look up and around, and the idea that he might be looking for a camera makes Tony’s heart ache. Tony watches him, and he wants to turn back time, twist it in his hands until this is never one of the possible futures. “Jan,” he says, his voice breaking. “I just—” He thinks about Hope, and he shuts his mouth, swallowing hard.

“I know, honey,” she says, rubbing his back. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Tony nods, finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. He wants to get the fuck out of here, wants to start working, but he feels like leaving is leaving Peter behind altogether. He looks up again, shaking his head, and then he looks down at his tablet. He watches Peter run.

He sees an overarching shot of the whole arena, the kind that makes Capitol citizens gasp, and it feels like something that might be redacted in one of their history books. Something familiar. He knows they must have been working on this since the very last body hit the ground last year—the tower itself is a feat they don’t often go for in these things. It’s probably filled with plenty of things the tributes need, and plenty of things they don’t.

On the side, up near the landing pad, is the word STANE in big, boxy letters.

~

Every step Peter takes is loud, and he doesn’t wanna stop moving. He looks in each and every car, because the Capitol would hide something completely out of sight so none of them could find it. He keeps being taken in by the details he runs into, like keys left behind, shopping containers, teddy bears in back seats. It’s like there was a whole population of people here that just up and disappeared. It’s eerie, a new layer to their sick game.

He ducks behind a tree, running low, and he worries he’s gonna get jumped any minute. This is so much different than how they usually start the Games, and Peter wonders if that has anything to do
with Bruce being in charge.

He looks up at the tower again, and hopes he’s closer to it than anyone else. He needs to find MJ and the others, and he wishes this was like any normal situation where he could just start yelling to find them—send up a flare, start a fire, but that’s a sure way to secure the kind of attention he doesn’t need. Never give up your location unless you’re ready for a fight.

There’s a red car upside down, and Peter gets on his knees, crawling through the open back door. His heart leaps when he sees it—a backpack. He crawls closer, gritting his teeth and crunching on glass, and he reaches out, grabs it and drags it towards him. He’s half smashed in the backseat but he’s well hidden, and he unzips the bag and nearly collapses in his relief.

Two bottles of water, sunscreen, a rope, beef jerky, a flashlight and a bow knife. A really good start.

“Thank God,” Peter breathes, zipping it back up. He inches out of the small space, careful not to cut himself, and pulls the backpack out along with him. He straightens back up, pulls his arms through the straps, and keeps heading north. Or what he thinks is north.

His blood runs cold when he hears a cannon. And then another, in quick succession. He runs, crouching behind another car, and his mind is screaming out MJ! MJ! But it can’t be her. It can’t, no way, that just can’t happen. They don’t show the fallen tributes in the sky until nightfall, and Peter can’t help that sickly feeling from working like acid in his blood. It can’t be her. It can’t be. It can’t be Steve or Natasha either, because then what the hell will he do? He can’t pull off their half-formed plan without them. And he definitely hasn’t noticed any obvious way out.

He waits for a long moment, dreading more cannons, but no more go off, and finally, it feels okay to move. He sees a bridge coming up and he has to make a choice, go under or over, and he finally decides to go under, just in case someone already has a high position and wants to try and pick him off. The bridge is good cover, and he thinks back to all the evading simulations he did, and he tries to stay low.

He only saw Tony minutes ago, but he’s already aching to be back where he was. The fear is foremost in his mind, but it’s strangely muted, like he’s pushing it down because he’s gotta survive. He maneuvers around more broken down cars, and he sees a set of doors underneath the bridge, which presumably lead inside the boxy building with the long windows. He doesn’t know how smart it is to go inside this place, because he’s sure he’s gonna run into something soon that the Capitol’s set up for him.

He doesn’t think about spiders.

He feels like he could be safer, moving around in the outskirts of this place, keeping an eye out, but then again he might not be able to find his way out once he’s inside. Peter knows everybody’s watching, the whole damn country is watching him debate and stand around, and he wonders if there’s anything more exciting happening anywhere else.

He winces at that turn of phrase. None of this is fucking exciting, this is goddamn terrifying, it’s morbid and sadistic and brutal and—

Peter hears voices.

Not the type in his head, not Tony cheering him on, May’s soothing calm or Ben’s words of wisdom, but real, absolutely real screaming somewhere off to his right. He covers his mouth, rushes over to hide behind a truck, and the screaming keeps on. Blood curdling.
“Please, please, no!” the voice says. It sort of sounds like the guy from Nine, and Peter doesn’t pop up to find out.

“Aww, I’m sorry, buddy,” a very familiar voice says. “You were just in the wrong place, wrong time, yeah?”

*Of course* he’s this close to Beck.

“Please, please, don’t—”

“Honey,” a woman says. “That’s what this is all about.”

Peter’s heart is beating so loud he’s sure they can hear it, and he moves along the car, towards the back, because he wants to see how close they are. He stays low, and moves slowly, peering over the trunk. He can see them on the right side of the bridge, a little ways down the road, and they’re way, way too close. It’s Felicia Hardy with Beck, the one who’s been looking at him weird, and it is the guy from Nine, splayed out on the ground in front of them. Or it was, because Beck leans in and smashes his head in over and over and over again. Blood splattering.

There’s a cannon, and they laugh.

Peter ducks down, squeezing his eyes shut tight, and he’s gotta get out of here, he’s gotta get out of here before they see him. There’s no Tony anymore to protect him. He’s gotta go, he’s gotta go.

“I’m pretty good at this,” Beck says. “I always thought that I’d be, but I didn’t know it’d be so easy. So much fun.”

“Don’t give yourself too much credit,” Hardy says.

“I know, I know, I know. Just don’t try to kill me yet, we’ve got a good thing going on right now.”

Peter nixes the idea of going into the building at all, knowing Beck could easily corner him in there, especially with Hardy on his side. He doesn’t know if they’re coming this way, and he turns, moves to his left as quickly and quietly as he can, and rushes until he clears the side of the building. And then he runs. And runs and runs and runs.

There are too many details here, but he doesn’t see them, because everything rushes by in a flash. He doesn’t look, he doesn’t see, he’s broken down to his bare instincts, and they’re screaming at him to get as far away from Beck as possible. There are only a few people in here that want to kill genuinely, and he’s racing away from two of them—he figures if he runs into anybody, odds are they’ll be someone he wants to see, someone that’s in on the plan or someone who just wants to live, like he does. It’s all a blur. He just needs to keep breathing.

Everything else about the arena seems too simple. Peter’s waiting to step on a landmine, he’s waiting for killer dogs to come after him, he’s waiting for blood rain, an acid pool, *something*. They don’t normally have a calm before the storm in the Games because it’s all about ratings, it’s about big moments and big deaths. So what the hell is going on?

He feels alone, a deep hole in his heart carving itself out, bigger and bigger until there’s nothing left. No love, no feeling. He feels like he’s losing his own voice, his own thoughts, and he’s gotta find MJ.

Peter only stops running when he realizes he’s moving *away* from the tower.

“Shit,” he breathes. The sky is already getting dark, and he knows time moves differently in here
than it does on the outside, because they can blot out the sun if they want to, they can have a starry night or six days straight of rain. But it’s more dangerous in the dark, and this place is already a blown out ghost city, he can’t imagine what kind of shit he can get himself into after sunset. He has a flashlight, but that’s like a beacon out in the open, screaming *come and get me*. Peter wonders if they’re waiting. If they’re waiting for the dark to let their mutts loose.

He thinks about his parents, shackled to their work, in agony, knowing how much hurt they were causing, how much death. He’s glad they’re not around to see him here, to see how much danger their own creations have put him in.

He looks back towards the tower. He knows he’s gotta get there, knows it in his heart, but he can’t do it tonight. He doesn’t wanna get caught in the dark.

Peter runs across another backpack dangling in a tree—it has a space blanket, some matches, three apples, and some gauze, and he stuffs it all into his backpack and keeps going. He really needs to find a tablet, needs to find the ingredients for the web fluid, and maybe the parts to make a repulsor. He’s sure that shit, the higher level shit, will be in the tower, and he grits his teeth, has to force himself not to go back that way. But he doesn’t want to go too far.

He hears another cannon.

Peter feels it in his chest, crushing him. He squeezes his eyes shut tight and looks up at the sky, pinks and purples and too beautiful to be in here, and he prays it isn’t MJ. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he loses her, and it really, really hits him what she means to him. Now that he’s here, in here, and she’s somewhere in here too. Hopefully somewhere close. It all just seems clear, and he thinks about what they said about After again. They’ve gotta make it to After.

There’s a big building with about a million stairs, two large, stone lions, and columns lining the entrance. It feels like the right place to stop. Peter looks around, listens hard—Tony said there would be indicators if something was about to happen, a subtle click, a low hum, because sometimes they insert these monstrosities, these torture chambers directly into the arena from their operating room. With gleeful, joyful hands, picking out the tribute they want to tear apart.

Peter wonders if Bruce has any influence over keeping him safe, if he could do something like that and go unnoticed, especially since Peter has drawn so much attention to himself in every other regard. It would probably be safer to hurt him a little bit, as to not show favoritism. He can take it. He can grit his teeth, work through it, fight his fear. Spill a little blood. As long as he doesn’t die.

Peter doesn’t think about spiders.

These stairs are rocky with debris, like everything else here, and he jogs up them, heading for the door. He doesn’t know why he’s less afraid of going inside here than he was the other place. Probably because this is farther away from Beck. Definitely why.

It’s beautiful inside, big and spacious and smooth stone, and Peter walks around gaping at it all, but then he startles himself back to life because he’s gotta be looking around, gotta make sure there’s nothing lurking around any corner. He goes up some stairs, moves slowly down hallways, and everything is eerily quiet, like this really was once a world of its own and everyone died in whatever destruction took place here. Everyone. Every last soul. They’re here to water the graveyard. They’re here to dig new graves.

Peter stops in a large room, with beautiful ceilings, paintings of clouds, and a ton of chandeliers. There are lines and lines of tables, and windows spanning as far as his eye can see. This place looks untouched, like whatever happened outside didn’t get in here, and Peter wonders if there’s some kind
of story happening, some kind of commentary he isn’t privy to.

He doesn’t care. Doesn’t care about their bullshit narrative, their show, their spectacle. He just wants out, he just wants to be back with his family. He wants to get these people out of here. He wants the Capitol to be shocked, for once. And he doesn’t want their evil retaliation, either.

He walks down the main aisle, and looks off at what’s lining the walls—bookshelves, with more books than he’s ever seen in his life. But, strangely enough, the more he stares, the more he’s sure there’s a—forcefield in front of them. He sees the brushes of green. He cocks his head to the side, and remembers everything Tony taught him about the forcefields, what they look like, and there’s definitely one there, protecting the books.

Peter doesn’t say it out loud, though he’s tempted to, but he thinks are they dumb enough to put books in here that we aren’t supposed to read?

He walks over, his heart in his throat, and he hones in on the little bruise of green, hovering in front of a book whose spine reads THE KING IN CARCOSA. He moves in between two tables, and reaches out, pressing his trembling hand there.

The shock is enough to send him stumbling back a few steps, but it doesn’t have any lasting effects, no physical marks left behind. Peter sighs, shaking his head, and decides this place is as good as any to settle down in for the night, which is rapidly turning darker and darker through the windows. He picks out one of the wooden chairs, pulls out the blanket, the beef jerky and one water bottle, and positions himself so he can see outside.

Within two minutes of eating, the Capitol theme starts playing, and he can see their logo in the sky. Peter watches as the fallen tributes’ faces are projected there, from one of the many photoshoots before all this started. He holds his breath, trying not to panic. She won’t be there. She won’t be there.

RICHARD RIDER, DISTRICT THREE
TRISH WALKER, DISTRICT SIX
ROBBIE BALDWIN, DISTRICT NINE
NOH VAR, DISTRICT TEN

Peter hates himself for feeling relief, because MJ’s fine, MJ’s alive, and his breath shudders as he lets it out.

Then it hits him. Four dead, already. He knows he heard the cannons, but seeing their faces—his eyes fill with tears, and he shakes his head, looking away. It hurts him every damn year, to watch this bloodbath, and he didn’t know those tributes, not personally. But this is so much more real—it’s happening here, where he is, and he’s been floating in the same circle as those people since this started. They’re gone now, lost in time, and Peter had been hoping against hope they’d be able to get them all, if the plan worked. He feels dejected, and he’s been warping back and forth between thinking it’ll work and mourning his own death. He doesn’t know what he is now.

They break them down to be less than human. They’re pet celebrities. They’re chess pieces. They’re dead. They’re names in the sky. Then they’re nothing. They’re lost.

Peter wipes at his eyes, and his head hurts, pounding at the crown of his skull. He feels a panic attack coming on, rolling through him like a hurricane, and he’s not behind closed doors, even if it looks like he is. There’s no one here to talk softly, no one to hold onto, and he presses his forehead to the table, squeezing his eyes shut tight and nearly ripping his hair out.
Calm down, calm down, calm down.

He gasps, hyperventilating, and he shakes his head, pressing his forehead so hard that it hurts, the wood burning lines into his skin.

“Deep in the meadow,” he starts, his voice shaking. “Under the willow...a bed of grass...a soft green pillow...”

He keeps singing, remembering times past, and despite circumstances, the month in the Capitol was better than this.

~

Peter gets startled awake by the sound of a cannon.

He shoots up in his seat, looking around, and he’s still here, still in this beautiful library stuck in the middle of this hell hole. The sun is streaming in through the window now, and he wonders how long he was asleep for. He wonders if Tony slept while he slept too. He winces, because every cannon while he’s alone is a pang in his heart, a potential major, major loss, and he leans forward, resting his chin on the table and clutching the space blanket against his chest.

He knows he’s gotta go.

The beef jerky sat out all night but thankfully, that doesn’t make beef jerky go bad, and Peter eats a couple more pieces before he puts the rest away, along with the water bottle. He folds up the blanket, puts that back, and takes out one of the apples, quickly biting into it. He doesn’t wanna be distracted by anything, doesn’t wanna die because he was too focused on eating an apple, and he doesn’t leave the room until he finishes the whole thing.

As soon as he’s back outside, he hears an explosion.

Peter glances off in the direction it came from, swallowing hard. It must have been at least five or six blocks away. Too close. He wonders if anyone knows he’s here. He doesn’t know what the hell he should do—he figures there has to be someone over there, either dying or potentially a new target because of all the noise. Peter knows he has a knife, knows he should probably take it out just in case this is Beck fucking around, or one of the other Career tributes looking to add to their kill count. But he just—knows he won’t kill anybody. He told the Grandmaster that he was capable, but he doesn’t think he is, unless they’re literally about to choke the life out of him. Or MJ.

He figures he should at least take it out, to put on the facade that he’d be able to use it. He listens out for more noise, but there isn’t any, and he sighs, rolling his backpack around on one shoulder, reaching inside and pulling out the knife.

He keeps an eye out, and starts heading towards the tower.

It’s strangely difficult to keep something so tall within eyesight when you’re close below it, and Peter feels like his neck is gonna go sore with how much he’s looking up and every which way. He wonders if this is one of the biggest arenas they’ve had so far, and he knows whatever District they’re in, that the locals must have noticed something like this taking up so much space. Or would the Capitol have it cloaked? He has no idea, but he isn’t usually alone this much, and he’s starting to feel crazy.

Crazy enough, that when he sees MJ on the sidewalk up ahead of him, he thinks he’s hallucinating.

So many of the storefronts are blown out all around him, and most of them that look like they have
useful items inside are blocked off by forcefields. MJ is standing in front of one, that patented disgust on her face, and there’s no one else around. Just her. It feels too good to be true, like angels are singing. He stares at her, the sun beating down, and he pinches his arm, expecting to wake up back in the library, but he’s still standing here. And she’s still standing there, too.

He puts the knife away, because he doesn’t wanna be holding it when she first sees him.

Peter tries to say her name, but it only comes out in a croak, and doesn’t sound like a word at all. He starts rushing towards her, his footsteps too loud, his breathing too fast, and she turns around quick—her eyes go wide when she sees him, and she holds out her hands.

“Peter!” she yells. “Peter, stop!”

“Why?” he asks, still moving, pure elation running through him.

“Stop, stop!”

“Okay, okay,” Peter says, stuttering to a halt, close to a couple squashed mailboxes and overturned street signs. “Why? What’s happening, what—”

“There’s a pod,” she says, pointing down frantically at a space just a few feet in front of him. “Right there, so just—I gotta help you around it.”

“A pod?” he asks, looking down. “I don’t see anything, I don’t—”

“See the split in the ground?” she says, pointing towards the edge of a car’s tire. “It’s barely there, but I’ve—I’ve been going around looking for them.”

Peter narrows his eyes, and when he looks harder he can almost see it—but he doesn’t really care right now, even though he should.

“Here, here, it’s...they’re about eight feet across, so...here—” She moves around, close to the wall, and reaches out for him with both hands. “Just...take little steps towards me.”

He does. Stupid, little steps, and when he’s close enough to her, she reaches out and takes his hands in hers. She pulls him towards the shop she was sneering at, slowly, and while she’s looking down at the road, he’s looking at her. Staring at her like he’s never seen her before, and maybe he never has, not like this. She keeps pulling him backwards, and his eyes trace over her face, her eyelashes, her eyebrows, the curve of her nose, the few freckles she has.

“Okay, here we go,” she says, moving them over towards the front stoop of the shop whose windows are blown out. “There we go.”

“We good?” he asks. “Out of—pod?”

“Out of pod,” she says, smiling.

He rushes forward, hugging her like he wanted to moments before. He clutches at her so tight and he knows he’s never held anyone like this before, but no one has been like her before. He doesn’t know when it started, he doesn’t know what the hell he’s feeling, or why she’s different. She just is.

“Every time I heard a cannon my heart dropped,” he says, into her hair.

“Me too, I just felt sick—”

“Me too, I prayed it wasn’t you—”
“I saw their faces in the sky and I felt so bad—”

“—but I was just so glad it wasn’t you up there,” Peter says. She laughs, and it’s just about the best sound in the world, and he’s gotta pull back and look at her again. She sighs, smiling at him still, and he doesn’t feel so alone anymore. “Was that you, a few minutes ago, the—the explosion?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m trying to get rid of as many of these things as I can, you know, just—just in case.”

“Good thinking,” Peter says. “I’ve just—I don’t even know what I’ve been doing. I don’t know what I’m doing, at all. This is so crazy.”

“I know,” she says. “I figured we should head for the tower.”

“Me too,” Peter says, fast. “I mean, it could be dangerous—”

“Probably is—”

“But there’s probably stuff in there we need,” Peter says.

“Like stuff to build your webs,” MJ says. “And high ground.”

“Right,” Peter says. God, it feels good to be talking to her. He’s so happy she’s not dead he can’t even properly express it, can’t see straight, can’t breathe right. He wishes they were anywhere but here, but he gets a surge of hope just by looking at her.

“You haven’t seen the others yet?” she asks.

“Not yet,” Peter says. “But oh! Oh! I found a couple backpacks—”

“Yeah, I see that,” she says, craning her neck.

“You want an apple?” he asks. He pulls his backpack onto one shoulder with clumsy hands, fumbling to unzip it like he’s never touched a single thing in his life. “I have an apple, I have—I have two apples—”

She laughs, her smile getting wider. “I’ll take one, let’s save the other,” she says.

“Okay,” he says, placing one in her open palm.

She takes it, knowing how valuable finding food in here is. He feels like a million bucks. “Thank you,” she says.

“Of course,” he says, nodding, putting his backpack on again.

She takes a bite, narrowing her eyes at something just past him. “Let’s get rid of this stupid thing before we go,” she says. “I was looking for something to throw at it before you showed up—”

“Don’t throw the apple,” he says.

She snorts, shaking her head at him. “How about me and you lift this mailbox thing together?”

“Solid plan,” Peter says, looking over at it. They both maneuver around on either side of it, and swing it back and forth as high as they can muster, counting to three. They let it go and MJ drags Peter back before it hits the ground, and they stumble away from the explosion, loud and fire and sending rocks everywhere like rain. The mailbox lands hard on a roof across the street.
“And now we run,” MJ says, taking another bite of her apple. “Just in case any psychos are nearby.”

“Okay,” Peter says. “West towards the tower.”

They start rushing, and after a moment or two, she reaches over and takes his hand. It seems to make things easier.

They finally stutter to a stop a few minutes later, and Peter looks over his shoulder to make sure nobody’s following them. He feels more keyed in now that he’s with her, less likely to delve into depressive episodes, less likely to doubt himself. He can’t, because he has to be on his game when he’s with her, just in case something happens.

She lets go of his hand, and he admits to himself that he wishes she hadn’t.

“So have you seen anything...obvious?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

Peter makes sure they’re going the right way, trying to keep track of the streets and where the tower is. “Not yet,” he says, knowing exactly what she’s referring to. “Hopefully Steve and Nat are in a better position to, uh—see something.”

“I wonder if they’re up there already,” MJ says, taking a few more bites. She sighs, her eyes scanning the ground, probably still looking for the pods. “I know it’s probably stupid to be blowing up the pods, because it makes so much noise, but I feel like, if we can avoid someone else dying like that, you know—”

“No, I know,” Peter says. “It’s actually a really selfless thing to do—”

“I just—I feel like it’s underhanded,” she says. “You can barely see them, I only know because I saw what happened to Richard.”

Peter looks at her. “He—he stepped on one—”

“Yeah,” MJ says, shaking her head. “That’s how I figured out what they look like. The lines on the ground.”

Peter’s chest feels tight, and he shakes his head. “I saw Beck and Felicia Hardy killing Robbie Baldwin,” he says, quietly. “I just—I just ran.”

“I’m glad you did,” she says.

There’s an ominous rumbling from above, and they both look up. Peter sees the new clouds swirling, almost cartoonish in how sinister they look, drawing in darkness.

“You think that’s just regular rain?” MJ asks, a little anxiously. She finishes off her apple and tosses the core into a trash bin.

They’ve seen a lot of shit in the past Games when it came to rain, and Peter isn’t eager to find out. “Dunno,” he says. “But you should go over there under that overhang while I—”

“Oh no,” she says, shaking her head.

He sighs, glancing up again. “MJ—”

“No, no, if you’re standing out here in the rain, I’m standing out here with you.”

He does want her to get hurt, and he’s about to argue when the rain starts coming down in
droves. It doesn’t burn, it isn’t blood, it’s just—rain.

“Well now we know,” MJ says, already getting wet.

Peter ushers her under the overhang anyway. “It feels like they’re holding back,” he says, when they’re both out of the weather. His stomach turns, because he’s thinking too much. “It just feels like...too easy. Like something bad is coming.”

“I wanna say that I hope you’re wrong, but I know you’re almost definitely right, so...”

She sighs, and he sighs too, the two of them continuing to walk on, trying to stay out of the rain. Peter keeps being shocked back to life, back into the moment, back into the fact that they’re actually here. This isn’t real life, this isn’t a real damn place, it’s what he’s been afraid of all these years. It’s hell.

He looks at MJ so he’ll stop thinking.

“It’s weird,” she says, when they turn onto a new street. “Not...not having them with us. Janet and Tony.”

Peter walks up to the closest car, peeking inside. No backpacks, no supplies, and somehow, it feels like a personal affront. “I know,” he says. It hasn’t been long, but he misses Tony more than he could have ever imagined, and he knew it would be bad.

There isn’t an overhang anymore, so they’re just walking in the rain, and thunder rumbles overhead. He worries about them getting hit by lightning. He worries, he worries, he can’t stop himself worrying. It’s under his skin, making roots. He needs to stay focused. He needs to keep her safe.

“They’re watching right now,” MJ says, clearly trying to comfort him.

It sort of makes him feel worse, and he can’t settle on hopeful or pessimistic, he can’t come to terms with any of this, none of it makes sense, none of it, none of it—

“Hey,” she says, touching his shoulder, and they stop walking. He gets rain in his eyes and he keeps blinking. He’s on the edge—so much for less likely to dive into depressive episodes. He should have known better. One mention of Tony out loud and he feels like he’s spiraling. Who knows what the hell would happen if someone mentioned May.

“Sorry,” he says, shaking his head. “Sorry, I just—”

“No, no, I know—”

“I’m all over the place,” Peter says, feeling hot, horrifying embarrassment, and he glances away. “Sorry, I just—I need to be better—”

She leans in, kissing him fast on the cheek. He goes completely stiff with shock, watches as she pulls back, wet tendrils of hair hanging in front of her eyes. “You just...need to be you,” she says, nodding. And then she starts walking without him.

He stands there, watching her. His brain was breaking before, but it’s definitely broken now. Everything feels electrified.

He’s startled out of his reverie by a cannon. He swallows hard, and watches as MJ turns around, as if she’s checking that he’s still there. He feels the boom in his bones, and they really need to find the others.
“Peter,” MJ says. She’s got a weird look on her face.

“Let’s go,” Peter says, marching up to meet her. “We really, really need to hook up with Steve and Nat, I hate hearing the cannons and knowing they’re—”

“Peter,” a different voice says. And his blood runs cold.

Peter turns around, slow, slower than he’s ever fucking moved, even at the reaping. And he thinks maybe he isn’t gonna see what he thinks he’s gonna see. This place is a nightmare, but it’s not that much of a nightmare.

Except it is.

Tony’s here. Tony, on his knees, with a noose around his neck. A noose, attached to a lamp post, his hands behind his back. He has a black eye and there’s blood around his mouth, and he’s wheezing, like he can’t breathe. Peter has never seen him look so afraid.


“Peter, this can’t be real,” MJ says, from behind him.

Peter can barely hear her. He can’t hear the rain. He can only hear his own fear, howling in his ears. Tremors run through him, and the world is tilting. Threatening to toss him off.

“Pete, I need your help, bud,” Tony says, his eyes teary, and he struggles, but he can’t get his hands free. “You gotta get me the hell out of here, kid, they’re gonna kill me—”

“Peter—” MJ starts.

But Peter is single minded, because they’ve stooped this low, they did this, they fucking put Tony in here too, again, to torture him—

“I’m coming,” Peter croaks, rushing over to him, not knowing what the fuck to do, because everything’s different now. They’re changing the rules. His hope is ashes in his mouth.

As soon as Peter reaches him, Tony disappears. Into thin air. Like he was never there to begin with.

The rain stops falling almost automatically, and Peter feels like he’s gonna throw up.

“What’s going on?” Peter pleads. “MJ…”

“Someone has a tablet,” MJ says, reaching Peter’s side and grabbing onto his arm. “They have to.”

Peter looks around, drops of rain still sliding off rooftops, an array of pops everywhere. The sky doesn’t clear up, still cast in doom and gloom, and Peter feels uneasy on his feet. Ready to drop. He swipes his hand through the air where Tony was a moment before. They could be hiding him. They could be trying to make this difficult. “Are you—are—”

“Peter, help me!” Tony’s voice calls, amplified and everywhere, struck with horror.

“Tony?” Peter calls back, and he tries to step forward but MJ holds tight to his arm. He looks at her, feeling hysterical. “MJ, he’s—”

“He’s not here,” she says. “We were just saying that, remember? Someone has a tablet, Peter,
someone’s doing this—"

Peter blinks, his whole equilibrium feeling off, and he still hears the echo of Tony’s voice. “But I can’t—I need to—I need to make sure, I can’t—I can’t risk losing—”

And then darkness falls, like a shroud draping over them, and everything changes. There’s no more street, no more cityscape, only a dank and dripping corridor, narrow and dreary black, full of—corpses.

Now he knows. Now he’s sure.

“Shit,” Peter breathes. He turns on the spot, trying to see if they can go backwards, but there are corpses there too, piles and piles of moldering bodies, missing limbs, half skeletons, maggots and flies and Peter is gonna fucking throw up.

“None of it is real, Peter,” MJ says, but she steps closer to him all the same. “None of it. They’re not there. They’re not there.”

“I know,” Peter breathes, kicking himself for falling for it, for trapping them in it. “I know now.”

“We gotta be careful,” MJ says, taking a tentative step backwards. “We’re still in the same place, and there are still pods we haven’t found yet—”

“Y’KNOW, I ALWAYS WONDERED WHAT THEY DO WITH THE BODIES,” Beck’s voice says, echoing Peter’s own horrific speculation. He doesn’t sound close, but he doesn’t sound far, either, and Peter figures the illusion allows him to distort his voice, too. So he doesn’t reveal his location. “I MEAN, THOSE DIPSHTS ARE STILL LAYING OUT THERE, RIGHT WHERE THEY DIED. CAN YOU PICTURE THE CLEANUP CREW, COMING IN TO DRAG EVERYBODY OUT? I ALWAYS IMAGINED SOMETHING LIKE THIS BEING THE FINAL RESTING PLACE. THE CAPITOL WOULD, WOULDN’T THEY?

“Beck,” Peter says, clearing his throat. “You don’t have to do this.”

“PETEY-PIE, YOU’RE THE CASH COW, THE GOLDEN CHICKEN, OF COURSE I HAVE TO DO THIS. BUT I FIGURED I COULD DO IT WITH A LITTLE RAZZ MATAZZ.”

“Let’s go,” Peter breathes, tugging on MJ’s hand. “Let’s go, run.”

He turns on his heel, holding onto her, and they start racing back the way they came. He closes his eyes as he runs through the bodies, because he knows they’re not there, not really, not really, and he tries to remember where the hell the cars were that were in the street. He holds his hand out, feels a bumper and moves to his right, feels an open door and shoves away again. He can almost sense where things are, can almost weave through it like he’s wearing a blindfold in an obstacle course.

But then something lands hard at his feet, and he stumbles, toppling to the ground. MJ’s hand slips from his, and then suddenly, she’s gone.

The scene around him shuffles away like a deck of cards and forms into something new. Peter scrambles to his feet, new panic in his bones.

“MJ?” he screams, looking all around, but she’s not there, she’s not there. “MJ, where are you? Where are you?”

“LOOK AT THOSE PUPPY EYES,” Beck’s voice says. “SO SWEET. SO SAD. LET’S TAKE MORE PEOPLE AWAY FROM PETER PARKER.”
He’s in a graveyard. It spans wide and far, a gothic church cutting into the skyline, which is devoid of stars and any kind of peace. The graveyard itself isn’t well maintained, left to be swallowed by the elements, vines twisting around on their own accord, patches of dead grass sinking into the earth.

“MJ, say something,” Peter says, watching the graves rise out of the ground, which is wet and moving like some sort of entity. He knows she’s nearby, he knows Beck must have just trapped her in another illusion or kicked her out of this one, but she should be able to see him, she should be able to—

He’s ready for Tony’s grave. May’s, Ben’s, his parents—but the one that presents itself in front of him is...his own. Moldering, crumbling, no epithets or words of love, no verses or quotes. He stares at it, with today’s date etched in stone, and the dirt in front of it is open, empty.

Waiting.

Something pushes him in, and starts piling earth on top of him.

He coughs, holding his hands up, and it’s not supposed to work this way, it’s not supposed to work like this, the illusions can’t touch you, they can’t touch you—

He’s sinking like quicksand, dirt splattering, getting in his mouth, choking him—

A hand grabs him and pulls him backwards, out of the grave. He’s ready to throw a punch, but he stops himself just in time, because it’s MJ, tugging him close.

“Oh my God,” she breathes. “Oh my God.”

“Thank God,” Peter says, holding onto her tight.

The grave beckons for him, like a gaping maw ready to swallow him whole.

The scene changes, douses them in new darkness, and suddenly, they’re back in the penthouse. Exactly the way it was before they left, all the good memories clinging there despite the horror of their situation. But—off by the coffee table, with a renewed rash of horror, Peter sees them. Tony and Janet, dead on the ground. They’re beaten all to hell, clothes torn, limbs twisted, and Peter winces away. He can’t look, he can’t look, he can’t see this. His resolve ebbs away.

MJ takes a couple steps towards them.

He’s gotta spare her, she can’t see that either, she doesn’t deserve it. “MJ—”

“I know,” she says, sounding echoey, and it’s freaking Peter the hell out to be back here again, even if he isn’t exactly here. “It’s just—God, Peter, it makes me sick, they look so real—”

“Those tablets know everything about us,” Peter says, and he doesn’t wanna look, he doesn’t wanna see Tony like that, he can’t. He’s afraid of what else the tablet lists—a photograph of May? Information on Ned? His whole, thorny history with the Capitol, tracing all the way back to his parents?

The lights go dark, and they’re still in the penthouse, but it’s like they’ve lost power. Peter walks up closer, takes MJ’s hand, and purposefully doesn’t look down.

He hears someone breathing.

“Peter,” May’s voice says, like his own fear of this moment brought it to pass. She sounds distorted,
and far away. “I—God, I love you, baby. I’m so sorry. I don’t know how I’m gonna live without you. I don’t know if I can. They didn’t—God, they didn’t even let me see your body”—

“Stop,” Peter says, closing his eyes against it. “Stop.”

“You were never good enough, Peter,” Tony’s voice says. “You’re a disappointment. You can’t save yourself. You’re already lost. You’re already dead.”

“You can’t trick me, Beck!” Peter yells, getting angrier now. “You can’t trick me anymore! I know what this is, and it’s not real!”

“You were always in his shadow, Michelle,” Janet’s voice says. “No one ever noticed you while he was anywhere near—”

“Shut up, moron, Janet would never say that!” MJ yells.

Peter still hears breathing. Close, on the back of his neck. Hot breath.

He shivers. It’s so dark, and Peter glances at the bodies, his stomach turning. He can’t see May like that. He can’t. He has to stop this before Beck tries it. He tugs MJ towards him, and they both turn, and he breaks into another run, hand outstretched like it was before. He moves towards his own back hallway, and he steps up onto what he thinks is the sidewalk outside of the illusion. He moves faster.

Then he hears the skittering.

They come out of his own room in horrifying, clustered clumps, and Peter scrambles back—spiders, spiders everywhere. Big, small, mutant, and Peter gasps as they come at him, ready to climb up his ankles.

MJ grabs him, and slaps a hand over his eyes.

“Don’t look,” she says. “Don’t, don’t—they’re not there. They’re not there.”

“Okay,” Peter says, even though he still hears them moving. “Okay, okay.”

She turns him around, and he latches onto her wrist, slowly peeling her hand away. He still hears them, but he doesn’t look. He sees them, in his peripherals, moving at his feet. But they’re not real, they’re not real.

“You’re dead, Peter,” Tony’s voice says. “You’re already dead.”

The illusion shudders again, starts to change, and for a moment, just a brief, shining moment, Peter is able to see outside it. The street, the city, the debris—and Beck. Beck, standing at the end of the street, orchestrating it all.

Then they’re on the very top of a high rise. The top of the tribute center.

They’re right at the edge, and there’s wind whipping MJ’s hair around, accompanied by a rush of cold that sends chills up and down Peter’s body. He looks over his shoulder, and sees a peacekeeper firing squad there, stepping closer, closer. Guns aimed.

Peter turns back, looking down, at the street, at the people that look like little ants from up here. Everything is so small, so far away, and a fall like this would kill them.

But this isn’t real.
He breathes the way Tony told him to when the panic attacks got to be too much, in through his nose and out through his mouth, and he remembers all of this is life and death. No room for error. Beck is playing with them, he’s making them vulnerable, he’s distracting them so he can kill them.

Tony’s watching. May and Ned are too. And he’s not gonna make them watch him die. He’s not gonna screw up the plan because of Beck.

He breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth, and he tries to clear his mind of all the obstacles piling up and over each other, tries to knock out all the fear and doubt, if only just for this moment.

He lets go of MJ’s hand.

“What are you doing?” she asks, swaying a little bit.

“Just trust me,” he says. “And I may—I may need a little help, I think you’ll be able to tell, otherwise just—stay safe.”

“Stay safe, what—Peter—”

Peter rushes ahead, and takes a giant leap. For a moment, he feels like he’s falling, and the wind tries to emulate falling, too, but then he starts walking on air, running, sprinting, remembering the moment before when the illusion broke, and he points himself in the direction Beck was in and moves faster, faster.

He runs right into him, and tackles him to the ground.

The illusion immediately drops, and they both land hard in a pothole full of water. Beck’s tablet clatters to the pavement and Peter punches him once before Beck tosses him off, trying to make for the tablet. But Peter grabs onto his ankle, yanking him back so he falls to the ground again.

“Can’t you die in peace, Parker?” Beck barks, and he crawls over to him, grabbing him by his shirt and slamming his head into the ground.

Peter sees stars and he winces as Beck does it again, and Peter kicks up, hitting him right between his legs. Beck crumples, and Peter scrambles to his feet, motioning for MJ to follow him. She rushes around Beck, punching him in the side of the head for good measure, knocking him flat. They both break into a run.

“There’s no way he’s gonna leave us alone,” MJ says.

And with that, Peter hears hard footsteps pursuing them. He pushes MJ out of the way just in time, and Beck grabs him, tossing him in the opposite direction. He backs Peter up until he hits the brick building at the edge of the road, and he holds him there. He starts hitting him, over and over and over again. Peter’s head bounces against the building, new pain blooming in his skull.

“Goddamn, kid, you’re not a winner, okay?” Beck says, punching him square in the nose, and Peter gasps, can hardly breathe. He tastes blood, metal. “You’re just—you’re not the type, you’re real cute, but you can’t do shit when it comes down to it.” He punches him again, and Peter’s vision goes fuzzy. “Let’s mess up that cute face of yours. Then the people won’t like you too much, will they? Capitol’s real shallow. Let’s bloody you up.”

MJ rushes up behind but Beck seems to know, and he reaches back, grabbing her by the throat with his free hand. She scratches at him, drawing blood, and he screams, squeezing.
Peter sees red.

“Get the fuck off her,” Peter says, knocking Beck’s arm off of him, punching him in the stomach. Beck doubles over and lets go, but he’s able to swipe Peter’s feet out from under him, and Peter hits the ground hard again.

MJ coughs, and picks up a fallen stop sign, slamming Beck over the head with it, twice in a row. He stumbles, wavering with the impact, and he turns around, throwing her to the ground too. Peter gets back to his feet, his whole body screaming out in pain, and he grabs Beck by the shoulders, pushing him once, twice, as many times as it takes to get him the hell away from MJ. It feels like alarm bells are going off. Panic, horror, and Peter tries to swallow it all. He doesn’t know how to get this guy to stop.

“God, you two are a pain in the ass,” Beck says, trying to stay upright, but Peter stays vigilant, knows he’s gotta stay on top of him. Beck paws at his own jacket, hands wavering. “Stop—fucking —”

“I don’t wanna kill you,” Peter says, still pushing him. He’s got a bad feeling he can’t shake, but it’s probably because this is about the worst thing that’s ever happened to him. He tries to rise above his pain. “Okay? I don’t—”

Beck catches Peter’s hand, and pulls him in close. “It’s all about killing, buddy boy, it’s about making a scene. You’re never gonna get out of here if you can’t kill people. Well, you’re not gonna get out, anyway. Bye bye, cutie pie.”

Alarm bells. Alarm bells. Time slowing down.

“Peter, he’s got a knife!” MJ yells, and Peter sees her rushing towards them. Slow motion.

Peter sees it, the hand that isn’t holding him, the hand that was fluttering around Beck’s jacket, trying to find a pocket. Peter leaps out of the way, but the knife swipes his arm—he cries out in pain, and flashes back to training with Tony. Remembers the hand to hand combat with Sam. How much Sam liked kicking the shit out of the punching bags, until they went flying off their chains.

Peter pushes Beck, then winds up and kicks him in the stomach as hard as he can. Beck slips, stumbles, trying to keep his footing, still clutching the knife in his hand.

He flounders to a stop, almost looking at Peter with a kind of admiration.

And then he explodes.

The blast sends Peter back a couple feet, the fire scorching the air, and Peter sees Beck land on the hood of yet another abandoned car.


Peter rushes over without thinking, and his chest hurts, his heart hurts, his everything hurts, his arm throbbing where the knife got him. Peter reaches Beck’s side and he’s charred to a crisp, half his face gone, his leg blown in half. Peter’s in shock, and he just stares down at him, shaking his head. He can’t find words. None of them are right.

Beck gives him a sickening grin, wheezing. “Now that’s...how you make a scene.”

His eyes glaze over, and his body jolts, and then he stops moving altogether.
There’s a cannon, and this one belongs to Beck.

Peter stares. And stares. And falls into a deep abyss that’s like another illusion, except this is real, and it’s all around him. Beck’s dead, and Peter killed him. He’s dead, he’s dead, right here, right in front of him, and Peter did that. He did that. He massacred him. Everyone saw it.

“Peter!” MJ says, loud, close to him now, enunciating the word like she’s said his name more than once. But he didn’t hear. There’s a loud ringing in his ears and everything is like pinpricks, his breath toxic.

He never would have been a killer if he didn’t get caught up in all this.

“Peter, we gotta go,” MJ says. “I got his tablet. We’ve got a tablet now.”

Peter nods, hardly keyed in at all. She takes his hand, drags him away, but he still sees him. Sees him, on the back of his eyelids. Torn apart. Dead, dead, dead.

MJ breaks back in after a few minutes of silence.

“Peter, he was gonna kill us,” she says, tentatively.

“I know,” Peter says, deadpan. He can’t think straight. He can’t stop seeing him, how he moved, the way it happened. How Peter made it happen.

“We just got rid of one of our biggest threats,” she says. “Someone who could have—jeopardized everything. All of it.”

“I killed him,” Peter says, his eyes straining with tears he’s trying to keep back. His heart can’t take it. This isn’t him. He tries to wipe some of the blood from his face, but he feels stained with it.

“He stepped on a pod,” MJ says.

“Because I pushed him,” Peter says.

“Look what he did to you,” MJ says, and she tips his face towards him. It hurts, to look at her, being who he is now, someone who’s capable of taking a life, someone who’s done it. Right in front of her. Yeah, Beck was an asshole, yeah, he would have killed them. But Peter would have rather—he would rather things weren’t this way. That nothing would have led to anything like this. But that’s the root of the damn problem.

She leans in, pressing her forehead to his, and it’s like, for a moment, he can breathe.

“Didn’t happen to have any antibiotics in that backpack, did you?” she asks, smoothing her hand over his shoulder.

“Gauze,” he says. “That’s it.”

She nods, lingering there for a moment longer, and then she walks behind him. He hears her unzip the bag, grab something, put something else in, and then she zips it back again. She pushes up his jacket sleeve, quickly wrapping up the new wound. Peter sighs, looking up, and they’re close. Maybe just a street away. It feels like they’re never gonna make it.

“I’m sure Tony’s getting ready to send some medicine in right now,” MJ says. “I put the tablet in your bag, okay?”

Tony saw him kill someone. Tony saw him kill someone.
“Look, I get it,” MJ says. “I do. I know how you are. I know how...how hard this is.”

Peter swallows hard. There’s no talking about it. It’s the kind of guilt that’s gonna live inside him forever. However much time he has left. “Let’s keep going,” he says. “We’re almost there.”

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Not at all,” Peter says. Physically, emotionally, neither one is good, right now. “But that’s what they want, right? This is exactly what they want.”

“Don’t give them what they want,” she says, firm. “Okay? You don’t belong to them.”

He swallows hard, glancing at her, and he nods. He needs her to keep reminding him of that. It feels like they’re sucking him up, locking him in. He needs to break free.

They have to traverse two more streets and then they see it. But it isn’t the feeling Peter thought he’d have, when they finally reached the tower. All the main doors are open, in what would otherwise seem welcoming, but inside there’s a steady, raging fire.

“Dammit,” Peter says, hanging his head. His arm hurts, his face hurts, he’s already done with all this.

“Maybe there’s another way in?” MJ asks. “Maybe we should both go one way around the building —”

“No,” Peter says. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Fine,” she says. “Let’s walk around together.”

And they do. The fire crackles as they pass it by, and there’s a higher level office park connected to the tower on the right side, with overturned tables, twisted chairs, but no leftover food to spare. They walk all the way around and only find one other door, welded shut. Of course.

The place is huge, and it takes them forever to get around to the spot where they were to start with. When they get back, the fire is still burning.

“There’s gotta be a way around it,” MJ says.

Peter is about to say something when he hears a pounding—it sounds pretty far away, but directly up ahead. He looks all around, and finally sees where it’s coming from, and his heart jolts.

Shuri and Steve. Up in the window of the tower, at least three floors up.

“Look!” Peter says.

“God,” MJ says. “Well that’s good.”

“They got in there somehow,” Peter says.

“Maybe the fire started afterwards?” she asks.

Peter stares up at them. They’re both making movements, making circles with their fingers. Shuri holds one hand flat, tracing a finger around it.

“I don’t think so...” Peter says, watching them. They’re both mouthing words, and Peter squints up, trying to concentrate.
“Go around?” Peter says. He looks at the front doors, at the fire, and looks back up at Steve and Shuri. They’re making what looks like legs with two fingers, easing around the edge of their hands. “Go around. Go—okay. It looks like they’re saying we can...stick close to the walls, maybe there’s a door we can go through without getting burned.”

MJ blows out a breath. Peter holds his thumbs up to Steve and Shuri, who both nod. He swallows hard—they’re finally here, they made it to the damn tower, he had to kill someone to get to this moment, and of course there’s one more thing. He doesn’t even know if being here is the right thing, but at least Steve and Shuri are up there to meet up with, hopefully Natasha and M’Baku too. They can regroup. Try to figure things out.

Peter and MJ approach the entrance, where the fire just gets louder. There are five doors, the ones in the middle completely engulfed, but there’s a small window of opportunity in the door farthest to the right. They get closer, and see that there’s a small ledge along the wall in the lobby, which ends in another set of five doors leading into the rest of the building. There isn’t much space at all, and they’ve gotta be careful.

“Okay,” Peter says, swinging his backpack around so he can hang it under his arm. “I’ll go first, we’ll just—we’ll, uh—”

“Nothing to do but wing it,” MJ says.

“Yup,” Peter says, his throat going tight. He nods. “Yeah, that’s...that’s it.”

The heat of the fire reminds him of the explosion that killed Beck, and he tries not to sink inside his own head, tries to be clear-minded. He goes first, carefully maneuvering into the room and up onto the ledge. The backpack is bulky and it’s hard to keep it under his arm without tipping forward, and he tries to smash it up a little bit without somehow stabbing himself with his own knife.

He watches as MJ moves in behind him, and the flames lick up into the air, moving dangerously close to where they are. There isn’t much in this room, just three slowly deteriorating tables, a bunch of papers, and there’s no fucking reason for there to be a fire in here and here only. Just more Capitol bullshit.

Peter coughs, grimacing, and he tries to move as quick as he can. The smoke is getting to him. This room is pretty small, and they’re already halfway there, but the ledge is small too, and it’s hard to balance with the boots they’re wearing. He’s too afraid to look back at MJ. He’s too afraid, period. The fire roars, reaching the ceiling, and Peter grits his teeth.

“Almost there,” he mutters, coughing again.

He’s inches, inches from the doorway when he loses his footing, tilting dangerously, and his backpack slips down his arm, pulling him further in the wrong direction. He pushes himself backwards, flat against the wall, but the fire flares up right at the wrong time, grasping at his already injured arm.

“Shit,” he gasps, the pain sharp and stinging.

“Peter—”

“It’s fine,” Peter says, clinging to the backpack, sweat racing down his forehead.
Three more small steps and he’s able to jump through the closest doorway, out of the way of the flames, and he reaches out, takes MJ’s hand, and pulls her through, too. Once she’s safe, he pushes up his jacket sleeve, hissing—the stupid fire burned right through it, and there’s a new, blistered burn on his forearm just below the knife cut.

He groans, turning around in a circle, and he’s clearly showing everyone that they can’t look up to him, because he’s fallible and broken and a massive idiot. He looks at MJ, managing a stilted smile. “I, obviously, should be dead already.”

“No you shouldn’t,” she says. “Don’t say that.”

He sighs, turning around and looking at their new surroundings, trying to ignore the pulpy, beating pain all over him.

A bunch of dark windows, that they clearly didn’t attach to the outer walls for their whole fire set-up. Plants, plushy chairs, sleek white tile floors. Two sets of stairs, one like the moving stairway the tribute center had. Chandeleirs. Tall, wooden doors. A long desk with a bunch of different computers.

“Hey!” a familiar voice calls, from above them.

Peter looks up, and sees Natasha descending the moving stairway, which is still right now. The relief of seeing her too is palpable.

“We all okay?” she asks. “Goddamn assholes with their stupid fire. Steve got burned.”

“Oh, good,” Peter says. “That makes me feel better.”

“You too?” she asks, looking over the railing.

“Just a bit.” Peter says. MJ gives him a look, and the pain flares up in that moment to tell him no, it’s a little more than just a bit. But he already feels half useless, and he doesn’t want to whine and cry about his many injuries sustained in the last couple of hours. If that.

“Beck is gone,” MJ says, as Natasha finally comes into full view, hurrying down the stagnant steps. They start forward to meet her, and Peter’s heart feels worse for wear at the mention of Beck’s name. A rancid, soul deep connection he’ll have forever now, however much longer forever is. To a dead man. A dead man that he killed.

“It was an accident,” MJ says.

“You two had something to do with it?” Natasha asks, as they come to a halt in front of each other.

“He attacked us,” MJ says. “Put us in an illusion—”

“And I pushed him into a pod,” Peter says, swallowing hard.

Natasha’s brows furrow, and Peter worries, for a minute, that he’ll be met with judgment. “Good,” she says. “He would’ve been one of the biggest obstacles.” She looks at him hard, and for the plan is implied. Just like MJ said. “Was he still with Hardy?”

“No,” Peter says, exchanging a look with MJ. “We didn’t see her.”

“She’ll probably be teaming up with Osborn or Hela next,” Natasha says. “We got away from Hela once, but it was close. Walker didn’t make it. It was a, uh—close call. She put up a good fight.”
“I saw her in the sky,” Peter says.

“You got pretty banged up,” Natasha says. “C’mon. I’m sure there’s a drone incoming right now.” She turns around, starts heading back towards the stairs.

Peter blinks, glancing at MJ before looking at Natasha again. “Uh, drone?” he stutters, following her. “What do you mean?”

“Sponsor gifts,” Natasha says, already starting to climb. “They’re sending ’em in with drones this year. Can bet they’ll get in the tower through the main entrance, the damn fire will part for them.”

“That’s good, though,” Peter says, wincing, bracing his hand on the railing.

“Hypocritical,” MJ says. “But that’s them in a nutshell.”

Peter raises his eyebrows. They follow Natasha up and up and up, and Peter’s thighs are screaming out for him to stop and rest. He feels like he should have been prepared, physically, for all this, considering all the training he’s done, but he thinks it’s a shock to his system to actually be in it, actually experiencing it for real instead of a simulation. And after all that shit with Beck—he can’t even think about it, really. He sees him, aiming his punches. Knocking Peter’s brain around in his head. Trying to choke MJ. And then—in pieces.

Peter peers over the edge of the railing and looks up—he can see the whole building from here, or most of it, anyway, the stairs winding all the way up. His skin crawls, thinking about what might be waiting for them up there. It’s too quiet, water dripping like rogue drops of rain, and it gets darker and darker the higher they go.

“Have you guys, uh, had to deal with anything in here yet?” Peter asks. “Like—Capitol related—mutt stuff—”

“Not yet,” Natasha says. “But we’ve heard rumblings coming from up higher. We’re only on the third floor, we didn’t want to go too high without you.”

“Maybe we don’t need to go higher,” MJ says. “Maybe the third floor is good enough.”

“We’re gonna have to see,” Natasha says, with a sigh, and from the tone of her voice, Peter is pretty positive they haven’t come across any obvious way out yet, either. “Good thing is, there’s a fully-stocked lab on the third floor. So Peter, you can make your webs. The stronger kind, not the five minute funnies.”

That makes Peter perk up. “Oh, awesome,” he says, thankful for that bit of hope. He always feels more useful when he’s working.

They reach the landing of the third floor, and that’s when Peter hears the buzzing. He’s trying to catch his breath, and he glances over at Natasha.

“Is that a drone or something we’ve gotta worry about?” he asks.

“Drone,” she says, looking over her shoulder. “Don’t know what one sounds like?”

“Don’t get a lot of drone sightings in Twelve,” Peter says.

“None, to be exact,” MJ says.

The buzzing gets louder until the thing itself is upon them. It almost looks like a mini hovercraft,
except there are four wings and they’re spinning, creating the buzzing sound. It’s carrying a rather large package, and it goes over their heads, depositing the package at Peter’s feet. It then takes off faster than it came in, buzzing out in a flash.

Peter bends down, tearing the box open. There’s a note from Tony on the top.

*How about you stop giving me heart attacks, huh? Here’s everything you should need right now, and grub for the team. Best the Capitol would let me send.*

*Stay safe, keep breathing. I’m so proud of you.*

- T

It means so much to even see that written out.

“Antibiotics, bandages,” Peter says, picking up the bottles and boxes. “Burn cream, my webshooters! And soup! Bread! Water bottles!” He laughs, hugging a piece of bread to his chest, tears in his eyes.

“Hey guys!” Natasha calls. “Looks like we’re having a meal, courtesy of Stark!”

Peter looks up and around, searching for a camera. He sees a slight glint on the lowest point of the ceiling, and he stares into it, hoping it’s actually a camera and not something else. “Thank you, thank you,” he whispers, nodding.

“Oh there you all are,” Shuri’s voice says. “Thank God. See, I told you they’d make it.”

“I had considerable doubt,” M’Baku replies, and Peter glances back to see them standing next to each other.

“Well, stop doubting Peter Parker!” Shuri says. “You know who he is, you know what this is.”

M’Baku huffs, and Peter’s cheeks go red.

“Tony really came through,” MJ says, kneeling next to him. “Got you good sponsors.”

Peter blows out a breath, nodding.

“You and me look like we fared about the same,” Steve’s voice says. Peter looks up and back and sees Steve standing there—he’s got a burn on his arm in about the same place Peter’s is in, and he’s got new, sickly bruises on his cheekbone, a cut swiped across his eyebrow.

“I can share,” Peter says. He gestures towards the box. “I’ve got—plenty of antibiotics here for both of us.”

Steve holds his hand out, and helps Peter back to his feet. “Let’s get you fixed up first,” he says. “Or else I can imagine Tony won’t be very happy.”

Peter laughs a little bit, and knows that’s definitely true.

~

MJ insists on patching Peter up herself, and does a surprisingly good job of it, not that he doubted her at all. The burn cream seems to work almost immediately, and the relief is overwhelming, like he can finally catch his breath.

They set up in the lab, which is smaller than Peter anticipated, but suited well enough to his needs,
considering how he’s had to make his webs up until now. There are six workspaces, cabinets full of
supplies, and all the ingredients he needs. The lighting is shit—no windows, one blue bulb in the
middle of the ceiling that keeps threatening to burn out, but he knows he’s gotta work with the
circumstances he has. He never expected an actual lab. It makes him horribly nostalgic for science
classes with Ned.

Steve ladles out the soup while Peter works, adding the activator to the mixture and rubbing his eyes.
He feels exhausted, and he slides down the main counter until he’s sitting on the ground. He
wonders what the hell time it is, and remembers that there isn’t really real time in here. Just what time
they want it to be.

Steve walks over, handing him one of the plastic bowls. Peter takes it, relishing the warmth in his
hands, and he’s surprised when Steve slides down and sits next to him.

Peter sips out of the bowl, eyeing him.

“How’s all this doing?” Steve asks, gesturing to Peter’s face.

Peter nods, swallowing. “Uh, good,” he says. “A lot better.”

“Michelle told us what happened,” Steve says. He looks like he barely fits in this space, his knees
tucked up to his chest, his arms locked around them. “It’s hard to come to terms with. Despite what
kind of person he was, what he was trying to do.”

Peter takes another sip of soup, to distract himself. He hears the timer he set for the webs ticking, and
he’s got about twenty more minutes until he needs to start heating. He doesn’t think about Beck. He
doesn’t think about Beck.

“You’re a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for,” Steve says. “He could have easily killed
you both.” He sighs, looks down at the ground. “You remember Dugan last year?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, almost too fast. He tries to remember all the tributes, for as long as he can.

Steve smiles fondly. “He was—one of my best pals. We had a great time together working down at
the docks, he liked to drink a lot more than I did but it was...it was a trip, listening to the stories he
could tell.”

Peter remembers liking him. He remembers that he and Bucky were allies, before Dugan was killed.

Steve meets his eyes. “I’m sure you remember what happened with him and Vanko,” he says.

“Yeah,” Peter says, remembering how charred Vanko’s body looked, afterwards. “But he was...he
was defending himself.”

“You were too,” Steve says. “As soon as she told us what happened, I thought of Dugan, I thought
of that, the way his face looked afterwards. And you know, I—never got to talk to him again, but if I
had, I would have told him the same thing. Some people, they train their whole lives for this, they’re
ready to kill, and most of the rest of us, we just wanna survive. Vanko was one of those people who
wouldn’t stop. Beck was too.”

Peter blows out a breath, nodding. He wouldn’t have thought of comparing his situation to Dugan’s.
But he does remember.

“I don’t like bullies,” Steve says. “And that’s what this is about, at its core. Oppression. Keeping the
districts down.”
“They were part of that,” Peter says. “The ones who...use the Games.”

“Exactly,” Steve says. “Sometimes, they just won’t let you save them. Even if you want to.” Peter can tell there’s a lot he wants to say that he can’t, because of where they are, because everyone is listening. “You’re the kind of person that’s in history books, kid. The kind that doesn’t think about making it there but finds his way in all the same.”

Peter shakes his head, looking away.

“See?” Steve asks. “Right there, that’s my point.”

Peter doesn’t really like the attention being on him. “Do you still work at the docks?” he asks, quietly.

“Well, right now I’ve got this tribute job,” Steve says, smiling just a bit. “Not nearly as good. But I’m meeting some great people.”

“Oh, good,” Peter laughs.

“Look, they’re sharing a very nice laugh over there,” M’Baku says, gesturing over to them. “Keeping everyone else in the dark, with their secrets.”

“Hush, please,” Shuri says, shaking her head.

“No secrets, no secrets,” Peter says. He takes another sip of his soup, and groans back to his feet, checking on the webbing.

There’s a loud crackling outside that Peter would have written off as lightning, but then it gets louder and louder, and a shockwave whips through the room.

“That,” Natasha says, moving towards the door, “was something.”

Peter’s heart is in his throat again as he sits his soup down, all of them clamoring to their feet. They move out onto the landing, where they’ve got windows aplenty to try and check it out.

“I can’t see anything,” Steve says. “One of us should go down and—”

Peter turns and rushes for the stairwell without another word.

“Peter!” Steve yells. “Not you!”

“Put the web fluid on the hot plate when the timer goes off!” Peter yells.

“I’ll take care of it!” Shuri yells back.

He rushes down the stairs, all three flights, and he had been preparing himself to contend with the fire, but when he gets to the main lobby, it’s out already, like it had never been raging to begin with. He grits his teeth in anger but he keeps going, and he runs back outside, looking around. It’s not quite dark yet. No storm, no clouds, and he keeps backing up, glancing down to make sure he doesn’t blow himself up. He looks around, and he starts to believe it was some sort of trick when—

“Peter,” MJ says, coming to a halt at his side, breathing hard. “Can you not do that—”

But Peter barely hears her.

There’s a hole ripped in the sky, surrounded by wisps of black and blue, and it’s directly above the
“Oh my God,” MJ whispers, following his line of sight.

“Back inside,” Peter says, grabbing her by the shoulder. “Before they start another fire and trap us out here.”

They rush back through the lobby, and when they get back inside Natasha is standing there waiting for them.

“Don’t do that again, Parker,” she says, shaking her head. “You know you’re—”

“There’s something very obvious outside,” Peter says, quick. “Right above the tower. A hole. In the sky. And there are things flying out of it which, I’m sure aren’t good.”

She stares at him. “A hole in the sky,” she says. “Right above the tower.”

“Yeah,” he says, sucking in a breath. “That.”

She fights a smile, and nods. “Okay,” she says. “Okay.” She turns around and rushes up the stairs, moving way differently than he’s seen her so far, with a lot less poise, but somehow, more determination.

Peter looks at MJ, and he chews on his lower lip. “It’s gonna be hard,” he says. “Those things, whatever they are, I bet they’re—I bet they’re bad.”

“Yeah,” she says, and she looks a little worried.

“But that—”

“I know,” she says.

“That’s it.” He nods, his chest swelling with a new kind of hope. One he can see, one that’s right in front of him—no more void, no more choking on false possibilities. It’s a potential hell on earth, but he can see them at the end of it. He can see the After.

He steps forward, pulling her into his arms. “We can do this,” he whispers. “We can do this.”

The TV shot pulls back to reveal the rip in the sky, and Tony’s brief grasp of hope is nearly wrenched away from him when he sees what’s coming out of it. Flying aliens, with sharp teeth and claws displayed in a sickening close up, some with weapons, some the size of whole buildings, with hard outer shells that look impenetrable. He watches as Peter and Michelle hug, watches as Natasha runs up to tell the others. Hela, Osborn and Hardy see it from about ten blocks over, and Sharon leaves her church sanctuary to gape up at the new arrivals. She still hasn’t found Scott.

Thor and Carol start clamoring, and Tony buries his head in his hands.

“They’re not gonna be able to sleep, tonight,” he says, to Janet, or whoever’s listening. “Those things are gonna start seeking them out—Peter needs to sleep, he barely slept last night, he’s has a shit day—”

“Maybe they can end it fast, now,” Janet says.

“How the hell are they gonna get up there?” Carol asks. “Steal one of the things the aliens are flying
“Maybe so,” Thor says.

Tony looks up, and sees Thor sending encrypted messages. “They’re gonna let it all loose, now,” Tony says, his heart rattling in his chest. He’s been on the edge since he left Peter there, barely eating, not sleeping, just holding onto his bracelet for dear life, like his only tether left to the world. Peter’s heartbeat hasn’t been within normal range once. Not one time.

Tony twists his hand around the bracelet, the beat steady and strong.

“All they need to do is traverse the tower,” Thor says. “Get to the very top.”

“And then what?” Tony says, getting irritated. “Flip out into the air, launch themselves into the hole in the sky? Jesus, Thor—” He stops talking when they switch to another shot of the rip in the sky, showcasing it from all angles. The aliens are coming down in a straight line, and Tony gets up, walking closer to the TV.

“What d’you see, shellhead?” Carol asks, close behind him.

Tony tilts his head. He catches the slight glare. The hint of green, in a couple different places. “They’re coming down along a forcefield,” Tony says. “I can see it. See? Right here.” He runs his finger along it to point it out. “Peter’s webs can stick to that.”

“Won’t they get shocked?” Carol asks.

“Bruce would’ve taken care of it,” Thor says. “I know it. This is it. They can use the webs, Peter can pull them out, one by one. This is the endgame, this is it.”

Tony stares, as the image switches back to Peter, meeting up with the rest, continuing to work on his webs. He and Shuri stand side by side, and he can tell the kid is trying to fight a smile. They’re not supposed to look happy about this, and they know it.

But there is hope. It’s there, and it’s obvious.

“I’m activating the plants,” Thor says. “I’m setting it in motion.”

Tony’s first instinct is to slow him down, just in case things go awry, but he wants to believe this is gonna work. Once and for all, the end of it. Peter safe. Peter alive.

He walks back over to Janet, who’s standing now, her hands on her hips. “I need to get him some armor, or something,” he says. “I could try for Michelle, too, if you don’t have the leverage.”

“Oh, she says. She takes him by the shoulders, and when he looks up at her he sees the tears in her eyes, a sad smile on her face. “This is it,” she says. “Finally, we’re gonna—we’re gonna get some kind of retribution. For all of them. And our kids, they’re—they’re gonna get out.”

Tony nods, pulling her into a hug.

Beck almost killed Peter. And Stane’s threats haven’t come to fruition yet, and Tony knows how much he loves his theatrics. There’s a window, a way out, but Stane won’t make it easy. And he put a target on Peter’s back.

Tony’s afraid. He’s so, so afraid.
Everything gets more complicated now that the aliens are here. As if things weren’t already complicated. But that’s the Capitol, through and through. All for the show.

They hole up inside the lab so Peter can finish his webs, and they hear the aliens get into the tower, smashing through the windows and tearing shit up. Peter doesn’t know if they’re aware of where the people are, or if they’re just mindless, intent on destroying anything in their path. He knows there’s supposed to be a Victor at the end of all this, so they can’t all die at once. He tries to imagine who else is out there, and how they’re faring.

Their group stays quiet. Listens to the insanity while Peter’s webs cool down, preparing to be purified. He sort of regrets taking the longer path, but he knows they’ll be stronger this way, more purposeful, and he’ll have more to work with. He doesn’t wanna run out when he needs them most.

They hear two more cannons over a two hour period, and Peter’s heart aches. No one is safe out there, and it absolutely kills him.

MJ speaks up about it before he can.

“Shouldn’t we go out there?” she asks, looking around at them. “I know three fourths of One and Two are probably still standing, but there are others left, shouldn’t we—try to—get them in our alliance? It sounds insane out there.”

“We need to,” Natasha says, eyes cutting over to Steve. “Or at least try to set something up so they can get in here with us.”

“That could make it so One and Two get in here with us,” M’Baku says. “Or the aliens themselves.”

“They’re already in here,” Shuri says, gesturing towards the door.

“Not with us,” M’Baku counters.

“They will be,” Steve says, getting up. He cracks his neck, glancing around. “I’m gonna go search for whoever’s left. They all deserve a chance.”

Peter stares over in his direction.

“Steve,” Natasha says, walking over to stand in front of him. “It’s already dark. You know what happens when it’s dark here, especially with all that insanity going on—”

“I’m going with you,” Shuri says, standing up too.

“The hell you are,” M’Baku says, and now he’s standing. They all are but MJ, and she looks over at Peter like she started something she shouldn’t have.

Peter widens his eyes, and keeps working on his webs. He doesn’t want anybody to go, but he understands the need. He wishes he could, but he knows it would be a whole big thing, and he’d have to literally sneak out if he wanted to get anything done. They all freaked out when he went outside earlier, and nothing was even happening yet.

He sighs to himself. There are still innocent people out there, who might not have shelter. Someone needs to go, if he can’t. As long as that someone isn’t MJ.
“You know I can protect myself,” Shuri says, looking at M’Baku. “I’ve always been able to protect myself, you know this.”

“I’m not your brother’s biggest fan but I promised him I’d keep you safe til my dying breath—”

“I’ll keep her safe—” Steve starts.

“I’ll keep myself safe,” Shuri says.

“No dying breaths,” Natasha says, shaking her head. “On...any count.”

“Take the knife I have,” Peter says, pointing over at his backpack. He knows it isn’t much, but it’s something.

“We’ll just go for a couple hours,” Steve says, as Shuri retrieves the knife. “Be right back.”

“Steve, there are so many of those things,” Natasha says. “They’re everywhere, they’re in groups, they have weapons, you’re two people with one knife.”

“We’ll be fine,” Steve says, smiling at her. “We’ll come back with others, so stay close. If you have to go, don’t go too far.”

They don’t allow much more of a fight, and they’re heading out a moment later, pushing aside the steel cabinet they’d used to block the door. There’s a strange feeling once they’re gone, once Natasha has moved the cabinet back into place. Peter can’t place it, but there’s a heavy strain in his chest, and he tries not to focus on it. There’s all kinds of noise coming from above them, and they all know they’ve gotta climb higher. They can’t talk about it out loud. They can only communicate in looks, in gestures, and it’s too damn hard go through with a plan without being able to discuss the plan. This would be a real good time for mind reading.

Peter focuses on his webs. They’re almost done.

“Parker, why does this take so long?” M’Baku says, pacing back and forth right behind Peter. He’s a lot more active now that Shuri is gone, moving around anxiously. “What are they for? How did you come up with them?”

“Uh,” Peter says, starting the filtering process. “Well, this is the longer process. I need them to be real sticky and strong, we can use them to web people up, web ‘em to walls, uh, web ‘em together—”

“Web, web, web,” M’Baku says. “You really are a spider.”

“He can swing through the air with ‘em too,” MJ says, leaning on the counter, chin in her hand. M’Baku huffs.

“I came up with them in science class,” Peter says. “I was just...messing around.”

“Well, hopefully they’ll do some good,” M’Baku says.

“We should get some sleep pretty quick, here,” Natasha says, cutting in. “I’ll stay up, keep watch.”

“I’ll stay up with you,” M’Baku says, walking over to her and glancing at the door. “Let the children get some shut-eye. If we leave when day breaks, they’ll need as much energy as they can get.”

Peter doesn’t think he can sleep, knowing what’s going on outside, knowing there’s an exit they need to get to up in the sky, if they can only figure out how. But last night’s sleep was fleeting, and
today was...a lot. Now Steve and Shuri are gone, and who knows what the hell they’re gonna go through out there. Whether they’ll be back with new people, back alone, or not back at all.

The danger of it makes Peter’s hands shake.

“Lemme just finish these,” he says.

It takes another twenty minutes, but then he’s got enough webbing to last him a couple days, more than he’s ever made at one time. He loads it into the web shooters, and puts them on, just in case.

He hears rattling somewhere above them. Crashes. It sounds like the world is falling apart, and he doesn’t know how they’re gonna get through this.

He spreads out the space blanket and he and MJ lay down next to each other, which scares him half to death. They both face the wall, her in front of him, and his eyes follow every curl of her hair. The way her shoulder moves with her breathing.

He closes his eyes because he’s being a creep, and Natasha clicks off the light.

“Did you see anybody else before you found me?” MJ whispers. “Other than Beck and Hardy?”

“No,” Peter says. “Did you?”

“Just Richard,” she says. He hears her hiccup a little bit. “I was sorta following him, I didn’t know if—we’d uh, gotten him in on our—alliance or not—”

“I don’t know,” Peter says. “I don’t think so.” He glances over his shoulder, and sees that Natasha and M’Baku are whispering amongst themselves. Not listening.

“I think I might have heard a click before he stepped on the pod,” she says, her voice harsh, and horrifyingly enough, he thinks she might be crying. “I don’t know, I thought I did. I just—I mean, either way, I could have said something, you know?”

Peter scoots closer, wrapping his hand around her shoulder. “You would have told me earlier if you heard a click,” he says. “This is just—you thinking about it over and over. Thinking about how you could have changed it.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she says, sniffling.

“You couldn’t have,” Peter says, his throat hurting. He tells himself that too, about Beck. He remembers what Steve said. Beck never would have let them save him. He would have sabotaged the plan. He would have killed them all and tried to do it on his own. No icon for the revolution.

“Peter,” MJ whispers. “I—can—I’m sorry, this is so stupid, I hate being like this—”

“No, no, you’re fine,” Peter says, feeling like he’s screwing this all up. “What is it?”

“Do you think you—you think you can hold me? Just for—just for now? Just while we sleep?”

Peter’s heart flutters in his chest, and he questions whether she really did say it, really did ask, and his breath catches in his throat. “Of course,” he says, like he’s been punched in the gut, and he moves even closer so their bodies are touching, and wraps his arm around her waist. She immediately puts her hand on top of his, heaving a sigh.

Now he really doesn’t know how he’s gonna sleep, but he closes his eyes anyway.
In his dreams he sees Beck’s face, sees the brightness and flame of the explosions. Sees Tony’s dead body, sees him with that noose around his neck. Peter rushes through the darkness and he’s trapped in another illusion, one he can’t free himself from. He’ll be here forever. He’ll haunt these grounds.

He wakes up to the sound of buzzing outside their door. He doesn’t move, because MJ is still sleeping soundly, and he hears Natasha and M’Baku pushing aside the cabinet, trying to be quiet. He still hears rumbling up above, all around, and he wonders if there are more aliens in here than there were when he fell asleep. He wonders about Steve and Shuri. He feels like he would have heard another cannon. They tend to wake him up.

“It’s for Peter,” Natasha whispers.

“Stark stole up all the sponsors,” M’Baku says.

Natasha scoffs.

“Should we open it?” M’Baku asks.

“Let’s wait,” Natasha says. “We’ll wake them up in another hour or so. I think we’re gonna need to move. It’s getting too hairy out there.”

Peter’s heart slams up against his chest, and he closes his eyes again, holding MJ tight.

He drifts. He goes in and out of sleep, the kind of rest that isn’t really rest, hours that feel like seconds.

There’s a crash, and Peter’s eyes snap open. He sits up on one elbow, looking over his shoulder, and he hears it again. Both M’Baku and Natasha are leaning hard against the cabinet, pressing it against the door. It rattles behind them in another slam, and Natasha catches his eye.

“Oh, good,” she says, out of breath. “Yeah, it’s just about that time. Sorry for the wakeup alarms.”

“They’re trying to get in?” Peter asks, chills running down his spine. MJ stirs beside him.

“Yeah,” Natasha says. “We’re gonna have to make a break for it.”

“Open your present,” M’Baku says, gesturing towards it with his chin. “Hopefully Mr. Stark provided us with some machine guns.”

MJ groans, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“Did you hear?” Peter whispers, looking at her.

“Yes,” she says. “Perfect. Exactly what we need.”

Peter rubs the sleep from his eyes and pushes himself up, moving to the package. He aches all over, and the panic in his bones over the constant, heavy hits against the door feels like it’s slowing him down. He wonders where the hell the cameras are in here, and tries to imagine Tony watching. Coaching him through this.

Peter rips the package open. There are two vest looking things that are hard to the touch, a pair of spiky brass knuckles, another knife, and a note.

*Keep a level head. I know you know what those forcefields look like. Think you might see one in an obvious place? Really proud of those webs. They look really sticky. Might stick to things that’ll surprise you.*
Brass knuckles for Natasha. Knife for M’Baku. Stay behind them, use your webs. Carol and Thor are working with their sponsors now for more. Vests are for you and MJ, should help keep you safe against the aliens.

Sam says a group of aliens might be a good time to showcase that pin he gave you.

Stay safe. Keep going higher. I’ll see you soon.

- T

“Okay, those look like they’ll help a bit,” M’Baku says. “A bit.”

Peter stands up, bringing the note over to Natasha. He wonders if the Capitol people read this stuff before it comes to him—they must, they have to, they have to be the ones that put the boxes together, with how fast they arrive sometimes.

Peter almost blurts out something dumb, and one of these times, he isn’t gonna stop himself. He just holds the paper out towards her, insistent, and she takes it. She looks at him after she scans it through, and he nods at her, hoping they’re on the same page.

There’s another hard slam on the door, jolting the cabinet. M’Baku growls.


“Okay,” Peter says. He pictures himself making nets of webbing all the way up the forcefield to the rip in the sky, almost like a ladder. He wonders if it’s like a tube, or just on one side. He’s gotta try to see how they come down.

“Put those things on,” Natasha says. “We gotta get the hell out of here.”

Peter scrambles. The slamming outside just gets louder and more frequent, and the fear of it is a pocket of air in his chest. He puts his vest on under his shirt, hands MJ hers, and makes sure they have everything while she puts hers on too. He takes what he needs for more webbing, just in case, hoping he’ll be able to make a fire somewhere if he needs to. His backpack is getting pretty full.

They all stand in front of the door. It feels strange to be moving without Steve and Shuri, and Peter prays they’re still close by. Still unharmed. No cannons. No cannons yet.

He unclips his Spider-Man pin, rolling it between his fingers. It gives him such heavy flashbacks to when Sam handed it over, to when Peter was leaving, coming here. Makes him feel sick.

“What do you think that thing does?” Natasha asks, narrowing her eyes at it.

The slamming is too loud now, over and over, not even seconds in between.

“No idea,” Peter croaks.

“Group of aliens…” Natasha trails off.

“Oh, we’ve absolutely got one of those,” M’Baku says.

“Well, when we get out there, point it at ‘em and hopefully it’s better than I’m imagining,” Natasha says.

“What’s the plan?” MJ asks, close to Peter’s shoulder. “Just run?”
“Go towards the stairs,” Natasha says. “I wanna go up at least three floors. Just try and stay together. Hopefully we can find somewhere better to hole up. Access to a window so we can see outside, keep an eye out for the others.”

“Just keep running,” M’Baku says, pushing back against the cabinet with a grunt. “Don’t let them get you.”

“Goes without saying,” Natasha says.

“Alright, alright.”

They both nod then, and start pushing the cabinet away from the door. Peter’s heart is in his throat, and as soon as the door is free, the aliens bust through. They almost pin them in, rabid, clawing, slashing at whatever they can, but the four of them shove through, rushing out the doorway.

“Go!” Natasha shouts, once they stumble onto the landing.

They run, everything a blur, and Peter can hear the aliens crashing along behind them. One of them shoots something that looks like a laser beam, and Peter cuts to his left to get away from it.

He grits his teeth, twisting around and holding his pin out in their direction. They’re gross, and he winces in the face of them, all hard shells, beady eyes, sharp everything, and he presses on the pin hard as he can.

It explodes, but not with fire—a burst of webbing that projects itself out, rolling them all up and stopping them directly.

“Holy shit,” Peter exclaims, nearly tripping over his own feet as he watches them struggle.

“Good one, Parker,” M’Baku says.

“More are still coming,” MJ yells, running alongside them.

Peter looks—they’re a lot further back, but they’re coming, a mass of hissing and weapons ready to aim. Natasha pulls him around the corner and he grabs MJ’s wrist as they start up the stairs, skipping from step to every other step.

There are more on the landing of the fourth floor, and they lunge for them, slashing at Natasha’s arm. She throws two hard punches, the brass knuckles doing their job, and the alien makes horrible squashing noises when she hits it, toppling back into the rest of the group. Peter kicks one, webs another, and MJ nearly tackles one to the ground, slamming it against the wall. Then she does the best thing he could have imagined—she latches onto one of their weapons, and wrenches it away from them.

“Oh my God,” she breathes.

“Shoot it at them!” M’Baku yells, stabbing one of them in the face.

MJ does, as they weave around, making for the next stairwell. Peter keeps glancing back, shooting webs, and the ones he made are strong, nailing the aliens to the floor, to the pillars, to each other. The four of them race up the stairs, and when they get to the fifth floor there’s...silence.

It’s almost scarier.

Peter looks down, and the aliens are forming a big, raging mob at the base of the stairs, and there’s
no way they’re going back down, now. But the aliens aren’t coming up. On purpose.

“Why the hell are they hanging out down there?” MJ asks, breathing hard beside him.

“Who cares,” M’Baku says. “There’s no rhyme or reason to what the Capitol mutts do. They’re here to hurt us, confuse us, make us afraid.”

Peter thinks about his parents again. Thinks about them locked in a lab, under threat of death, creating things like this. Constant fear and guilt, regret. It makes him ache, makes him desperate to tear it all down even more than he already was. It’d be like saving them, even in death.

He has another one of those horrible feelings, that eat at him, make him sweaty and cold at the same time. It’s like every bit of his body is screaming out, warning him that he needs to get out of here before it’s too late. But they’ve only got one option, and there’s too much between here and there. Peter doesn’t even know how the hell Steve and Shuri are gonna get up here, past what they just ran through.

Everything feels insurmountable. There’s a way out, but it’s not within reach. It’s there to taunt them. Too obvious. Too far.

Peter glances back, out the window, and the aliens are swarming around everywhere. He sees one of the big ones go by, eclipsing the entire length of the floor.

Peter’s gut is turning.

“Okay,” Natasha says, as Peter tries to get out of his own head. “Let’s stop standing around, we’ve gotta—”

She stops talking, and in the silence, he hears it. It sounds like something is powering up, and Peter glances down the long landing, towards where the sound is coming from.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” M’Baku says.

Before anyone else can comment, the source of the noise comes flying out from one of the back corridors, and Peter nearly passes out on the spot.

A whole fleet of flying Iron Man suits, fire coming from their hands and feet. They’re all different shapes, sizes, colors, and they’re rocketing right towards him and the rest of the group. Peter’s heart is stuttering, his horror in his mouth, and he barely budges when the others start to push him, trying to make him retreat.

His faltering costs him.

One of the smaller suits, red and gold like Tony’s original, slams directly into him. They rocket through the air with the force of it, and then they bust right through the window.

Peter screams as the suit lets him go, and he falls towards the broken street below.

~

“Jesus, Jesus,” Tony says, standing in front of the TV, gripping his chest with one hand and the bracelet with the other. “Goddamnit, this is the worst possible—they’re mocking us, they’re using me against him. Janet, if they kill him this way—if they—” He watches as Peter falls, the glass all around him, the Iron Man suit cascading out into the air amongst the aliens. Tony feels sick, his vision spotty. “God, Jan, his heart—”
“Look, look,” Janet says, at his side.

They watch as Peter aims at the building, and he shoots a web, which latches onto the wall. The line goes taut and he swings like he did in the training room, gracefully, shooting another one and diving down into an alleyway.

“Thor,” Tony yells, still staring at the screen. “This is getting worse and worse.”

“It’s the Hunger Games—”

“Yeah, but now they’ve got me flying around in there,” Tony snaps, turning around, pointing wildly at him. “They’re using something that inspires the kid to scare him, they’re taking something important to him—”

“We can use them,” Thor says, getting closer. “They can use them to get up to the wormhole.”

“Wormhole?”

“Yes,” Thor says. “That’s what we’re calling it.”

Tony hears a couple explosions, and he turns back around, watches as the Iron Man suit follows Peter, shooting at him, the ground exploding as he runs. Tony has to reach out, latch onto Janet’s arm so he doesn’t fall over, and this is just a never ending nightmare. They’re making it as bad as it can be.

The shot switches over to Steve and Shuri, with the only tribute they were able to find, Misty Knight. They’re only a few blocks away from the tower, locked in hand to hand combat with a group of aliens.

Hela and Osborn are closing in on Peter’s location. Hardy is trying to scale the tower on the outside. The other suits are shooting repulsor shots at the group that’s still in the tower, and MJ is in near hysteric over Peter. It almost seems like she might leap out the window after him.

Tony looks down at his feet, breathing hard through his nose. “I need to go into town,” he says. “I gotta—I gotta go get him something good. I don’t know. I could potentially—open up a shelter somewhere, while he’s making his way back to the tower—Carol’s still out there, right?”

“Yes,” Thor says.

Tony nods, and watches as the suits stream all over the city, wreaking havoc. He shakes his head, anger surging through him. “I’m surprised they waited so long to do something like this,” he says. “Guess they thought Peter was the perfect time.”

The red and gold one bears down on him, sending Tony’s heart into his throat, and Peter shoots web after web after web at it. Then a hand grabs him and pulls him away, clear out of the shot.

“Who was that?” Tony asks, his voice cracking. “Where’s the damn map?”

~

Peter pushes back against the person that grabbed him, but the man immediately puts his hands up. They’re in a dark nook, but Peter can see his eyes, and recognizes him right away.

“Hey, little buddy,” Scott Lang says. “It’s a damn mess out there, huh? Or out here, I guess. We’re still technically...out here.”
“Oh my God,” Peter breathes, reaching out and touching Scott’s shoulder to make sure he’s real. “God, you scared me.”

“Sorry about that,” Scott says, patting Peter’s hand. “I’m a real big fan of sneaking around, you know, making myself small, and a bunch of these walls have cuts in ‘em, isn’t that weird? Like mini hallways, makes it real easy to hide.”

Peter looks out, sees a brigade of aliens fly by, and a few suits too. None of them even look this way.

“See that?” Scott says. “I’ve only been out in the open in little spurts—I’ve been trying to find Sharon. Have you seen her? I know Cassie’s gonna be pissed if I don’t find her.”

“I haven’t seen—who’s Cassie?”

“Oh, my daughter,” Scott says. He’s always been very genial, in the few instances Peter’s gotten to interact with him, but his expression breaks a bit when he mentions Cassie. “Uh, Sharon was her karate instructor. Reaping day...bad day for Cassie.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter says, chewing on his lower lip. More families torn apart. More children left behind.

“Hey, not your fault,” he says, patting Peter on the shoulder. There are a few nearby explosions, the aliens hissing, and Peter knows he’s gotta get back into the tower. “But I’m with you, Spider-Man, alright? You know what I mean?” He winks in the most exaggerated way he can, and Peter couldn’t not know what he means.

“Good,” Peter says, smiling. “So stick with me.”

“Oh yeah, I’m on you like spiders on a web,” Scott says, grinning. “That’s a little—on the nose—whatever, those were some sick moves, you can really fly, kid.”

“I’m still a little bad at it,” Peter says, cracking his wrists and running his hand over the right webshooter. “I didn’t get to practice enough.” He really wishes he would have been able to just vault himself back into the tower. But then he wouldn’t have found Scott.

“Looked real good,” Scott says.

They both glance up when more suits fly by, and Peter thinks they might be looking for him. He looks down at his feet, trying not to think about them. He reaches up and touches his Iron Man pin, remembering when he was little and watched the footage. He remembers Tony’s strength, his resilience. Ingenuity. That’s the Iron Man Peter knows. Not what they’re trying to do to him.

“Don’t let all that crap out there get in your head,” Scott says. “They’re doing it to mess with you. Shows you got to ‘em. It’s too obvious.”

“Yeah,” Peter says, knowing he’s right.

“Let’s start heading back towards the tower, huh?” Scott says. “I was hoping I’d find one of you guys, but uh, not flying through a glass window and being pursued—yeah, but you’re here now. Let’s forget how it happened.”

“And I have a tablet,” Peter says, reaching back and patting his backpack, glad it’s still in one piece after the whole fall. “Maybe we can—help ourselves hide or something. Or project ourselves on our way over, distract them.”
“Perfect,” Scott says. “I know those Ones and Twos are around here somewhere.”

He starts down the dark pathway, and Peter’s breath gets caught in his throat. “You saw them?” he asks, following.

“No,” Scott says, looking over his shoulder. “But I’m having a bad feeling. Or maybe that’s just...this whole thing. This whole thing gives me a bad feeling.”

“Uh, one of them’s gone, as far as I know,” Peter says, running his hand along the brick wall as they move. “Beck.”

“Good,” Scott says. “He was a mess. He was a threat. He had those crazy eyes.”

Peter doesn’t wanna think about Beck or his eyes or the way they glazed over after that final, biting line. Peter forgets sometimes that they’re on a TV show. A TV event. And Beck knew that, played to it, tried to make it exciting. Death and destruction. Excitement. A wall separating Them and Everyone else. This is the zoo. They’re lions jumping through hoops.

Peter wonders if Beck was just trying to survive, too. In his own way.

He doesn’t wanna think anymore.

They reach the end of the dark corridor, and Scott peeks out, looks both ways. It sounds like a war zone out there, and there aren’t nearly enough tributes for this many aliens. Peter wonders what the hell they’re doing, if they’re messing up the city even more than it’s already destroyed.

One of the suits zips by, and Scott scoots back. Peter can tell he’s a father by the way he holds out his arm to keep Peter back, as if he’s got that automatic instinct to keep him out of harm’s way.

Peter peers around his shoulder, watching the suit shoot up high, setting off rockets at one of the larger buildings. They fly up so high, nearly high enough to match the rip in the sky, and Peter wonders if he could hack into one with the tablet. Or more. That might be a good backup plan, just in case the webbing isn’t foolproof. They could fly them up there.

They’re still so close to the tower. Peter can see it, two streets over. They could get there, if they moved fast. Peter wonders if there are more of these little nooks and crannies, and how easy Scott can find them, especially under duress.

“What’d I tell you?” Scott whispers, backing them up a little bit more.

Peter looks around the corner, and sees that Osborn and Hela are there, making their way down the street. The alliance looks tepid at best, and Peter figures Hela isn’t the kind of woman that plays well with others.

There’s a cannon in the distance, and the two of them stop, glancing around.

“Great,” Scott breathes.

Peter gets that same fear broiling in his gut, because he’s away from MJ again and he doesn’t know if she’s safe. The cannon is like a knife tearing his skin away, and he’s gotta get back to her and the others.

“Let’s wait until they pass, and then we’ll make a break for it,” Peter whispers.

They stay low, hopefully steeped in darkness, and Osborn and Hela pass by, both at a run, because a
group of aliens is pursuing them. Peter wonders if they’d still go for the kill if they caught sight of them, despite everything else that’s going on.

“Okay,” Scott says, still trying to keep Peter back. “I think that might be a safe distance between murderers and us, potential...murderees?” He hums to himself.

Peter gets a bad feeling, and he rubs at the core of his chest. He swings his backpack around, fishing the tablet out and zipping it back up again. He powers it up, and sees the main menu screen, the quadrant they’re standing in. It’s just like the tablets he practiced with in training, and he tries to ignore the list of commands Beck used on him and MJ.

He creates an illusion that’ll replicate the road as it looks now, so no one will be able to see them passing. He sets it to execute, and he sees the watery edge of it as it springs to life.

“Good lookin’ out, kid,” Scott says.

“Thanks,” Peter says, smiling at him. He quickly puts the tablet away, and hopes the illusion will hold up for a bit.

They step out into the road, and when Peter glances down the way Osborn and Hela came from, he sees it. A thick cloud of fog rolling in, consuming everything in its path. The aliens are racing away from it, and they don’t even try to fire or start shit with Peter and Scott when they fly by.

“Not what I was hoping to see,” Scott says, with a heavy sigh.

“I’ve got a length of rope,” Peter says, reaching around for his bag again, his hands shaking as the fog keeps coming for them. “We can use it to stay together—”

Before he can finish his sentence, the fog rolls over them, and then he can’t breathe. It’s in his throat, clouding his vision until there’s nothing else, and he coughs, trying to get the air in. But it’s only fog, now, and it’s like it’s in his pores, too, every wisp of it a hundred pounds and dragging him under. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe.

He feels Scott reach out, grabbing his wrist. They’re both coughing, hacking up lungs, but they’re running now, trying to outrun it, and there’s one cannon, then another. Peter’s throat is closing, his breaths ragged, and he nearly falls, only staying upright because of Scott holding onto him.

The fog is deep white, but the darkness is surrounding him. He can’t even cough anymore, he can only gag, making inhuman noises as he tries to claw at the last vestiges of life. There’s a cannon with his name on it, readying in the distance. May, May—Tony—

There’s breaking glass, a jump, and then he sucks in a gulping breath. Clean air.

He opens his eyes, and sees Scott bent over beside him, heaving.

“Holy shit,” Scott coughs, patting his own self on the back. “God, I hate—I hate these guys.”

Peter breathes hard, hand at his throat, his vision clearing up. He looks around. They’re in a small shop that looks like it’s been looted, most of its shelves broken and empty, posters ripped off walls, the main register torn apart. Peter looks outside, through the newly broken window, and sees the fog still drifting through. It isn’t coming in here. His throat is burning.

“Sometimes I feel like they’re trying to kill all of us,” Scott says. “Just—knock ‘em all off, get rid of ‘em all.”
“You saved my life,” Peter says, still trying to catch his breath. “Thank—thank you.”

“Course,” Scott says. “We need you, ya know. “

Peter shakes his head, and sits down on the spot. He doesn’t know how the hell long this is gonna take to move through, and it feels like the ground is shaking underneath them. “Nobody really needs me,” he says. “Not...not really.” More unspoken meanings, but he hopes Scott gets it. Face of the revolution...it could be anybody. The Capitol victimizes so many people, and Peter’s just one among them.

“Nah uh,” Scott says, shaking his head. He sits down too. “More than you know, okay? Let’s just say, uh, your alliance is very exclusive. Everyone wanted to be in on it.”

“Except One and Two,” Peter says.

Scott waves him away. “But they’re crazy. I mean, who dedicates their life to this? Who actually plans to volunteer for this? Crazy people, Peter. Crazy people.”

Peter nods. He wants to feel normal. He wants to find out what that means, in the middle of all this. He’s never known, and he worries it’s too late. “Tell me about Cassie,” he says.

A sad, proud smile splits across Scott’s face. “The smartest, best little jack rabbit you ever did see,” he says. “Red belt in karate, they almost barred her from classes because she was getting too good. Had to feign a broken ankle for a bit to slow her down. Loves writing stories, loves to sew—there’s this big meadow by our house, she plants daisies around the whole outside of it, and runs through ‘em like an obstacle course.” He laughs to himself.

“She sounds amazing,” Peter says, his heart straining as he thinks about his own family, left behind.

“She’d like you,” Scott says. “She’d probably have a crush on you. She’s always falling for her swim teachers, too much for dear old dad to handle. She likes to put me through the ringer. She’s only seven! I’m not ready.”

Peter snorts. “Well, that’s what kids are for,” he says. The ground feels like it’s rumbling again, and Peter looks down, concerned.

“Yeah, I feel it too,” Scott says. “You know, I knew they were gonna keep us on our toes, but if I knew it was gonna be like this, shit—I would have taken pointe classes. Yeah, Cassie did that too. Jack of all trades.”

Peter smiles. He looks over his shoulder, and watches as the fog slowly disappears. It dies in the air, and suddenly it’s all clear, the sun shining again.

Peter recalls that two cannons went off when he was choking to death, and he sighs, his stomach in knots.

“So what d’you think it’ll feel like?” Scott asks, when Peter looks back at him. “To win?”

Peter stares, because the question catches him off guard. Scott obviously knows about the plan, and Peter figures he’s probably trying to throw them off. But he still doesn’t know what to say.

“I don’t know,” Peter says, stupidly. “But Cassie’s gonna be happy to see you when you get home.”

There’s surprise in his eyes, like Peter revealed something, and he seems to try and play along. “Ah, breaking my heart,” Scott says. He gets to his feet, and holds his hand out for Peter to take. “You’re
the winner, Mr. Double Thirteens.”

“You never know,” Peter says, and he’s so glad he found him. Scott has to get out, he has to get back to Cassie.

Scott gives him a knowing look. “Alright,” he says. “Let’s head back out and see what other delightful things they have in store for us.”

Peter nods, and they walk over, climbing out through the broken window.

As soon as they’re back in open air, an axe flies past Peter’s head. His heart leaps, and he catches sight of Hela and Osborn, standing side by side.

“You should have let me do it,” Hela says, glaring at Harry.

“Go!” Peter says. “Run!”

They start rushing into the nearest alleyway, in the direction of the tower, but Hela is faster, and she bowls them both over like they’re nothing. Peter lands on his back, and before he can make another move, Harry Osborn is on him. He’s skinnier up close, almost sickly looking, and his smile is warped.

“There’s the golden boy,” Osborn says, and he makes to wrap his hands around Peter’s throat. But Peter knocks him off and scrambles to his feet.

He sees Hela laying into Scott and Peter rushes over, tackling her off of him. They land a few feet away, and she grins up at him.

“Oh Peter, don’t worry,” she says, blowing her dark hair out of her eyes. “You’re next.”

Peter feels a hand haul him back up and away from her—thankfully, it’s Scott, and Peter slips away just before she’s able to wind her fingers around his ankle.

They aren’t able to take one more step before the ground opens up. Peter’s seen sinkholes before, and that’s the only thing he can think of as he slip slides away into the gaping rift. That was the rumbling, the oncoming storm. Their next trick.

“No, no,” Hela gasps, because her angle is worse.

Peter struggles, tries to hold onto anything, tries to hold onto Scott, and the whole street all the way across keeps breaking, just beyond where their sanctuary shop was. There’s a dark hole at the base of it all, and a mailbox falls in, disappearing in the nothingness.

Peter glances over his shoulder to see an overturned truck topple into the hole, and it makes two big rolls, heading straight for Hela.

“No, no,” Hela gasps, because her angle is worse.

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“No, goddamnit—!”

It lands right on top of her. And almost immediately, a cannon.

Peter strains as he sinks lower, and Scott skids down the street, further into the broken earth.

“No!” Peter yells, and he reaches down, grabs onto Scott’s forearm.

The truck topples into the black void, taking Hela’s crushed body with it. Peter’s holding on for dear life, and then he gets an idea. He lets go of the jagged piece of ground he had a hold on, and as soon
as they both start sliding, he shoots a web. It sticks to a lamppost, just far enough away to not be dragged in by all this, and it holds tight.

“Grab onto me,” Peter says, gritting his teeth. “I’m gonna pull us out.”

“Okay,” Scott says, doing just that, holding tight to Peter’s shoulder and the backpack. “I apologize in advance, I’m not at my most modest weight—”

Peter grabs onto the web with both hands and pulls. They barely move and he feels like he’s gonna break his teeth with the way he’s gritting them, but he keeps trying, all the veins in his arms standing out. He’s got that horrible feeling again, the kind that stops time and binds around his heart like a cord, and he’s come to resent it, like a warning alarm come too late. But he works and he works, skinnig his thigh on the road through his pants, and finally, he pulls them onto more solid ground.

He reaches around, taking Scott’s arm, and he tugs them both back to their feet, his heart beating loud in his ears. They take a few tentative steps away from the sinkhole, and Peter lets go of him.

“Jesus,” Scott says, shaking his head. “On our toes, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter says. “And now we gotta find—”

Scott’s eyes go wide, and he shoves Peter out of the way. Peter stumbles, nearly falls, and when he looks back, he sees Osborn. With a knife plunged into Scott’s gut.

Peter’s frozen. He can’t even cry out in anger like he wants to, and Osborn looks disgusted, withdrawing the knife with a sickening twist and shoving Scott aside. He lands hard, in a heap.

“I wasn’t going for you,” he says, and he turns to face Peter.

Peter sees red. He doesn’t let him make the first move. He grabs him by the shoulders, throws him up against the wall. The knife clatters to the ground, and Peter shoots as many webs at Osborn as he can. They stick him there, build up until he looks like he’s in a cocoon, and he struggles, wild-eyed and angry.

“No, no!” Osborn yells. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!”

Peter grabs the knife, shaking, shaking, brandishing it high by his ear.

“I was supposed to make my father proud,” Harry wails, and he’s actually got tears in his eyes. “This is—this is all he wanted, all he wanted was for me to win—”

Peter stares, horrified, the knife trembling in his hand. He drops it, breathing hard, his chest one big ache.

“Just kill me,” Harry insists. “Kill me.”

Peter steps closer, and punches him hard. His head hits the wall behind him, and then hangs still. Enough to knock him out.

Peter rushes over to Scott. He’s still breathing.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Peter says, sitting down next to him. “Hey, look at me.”

Scott’s eyes are already glassy, but he finds Peter’s gaze, managing a small smile. “Hey, buddy,” he whispers.
“Hey,” Peter says. He nearly tosses his backpack off, fumbling with the zipper, and he yanks the space blanket out. He balls it up, and gently puts it underneath Scott’s head.

“Thanks,” Scott breathes, and a line of blood runs out of the corner of his mouth. Peter quickly wipes it away. “What’d I tell you, huh?” Scott asks. “It’s—it’s you. It’s—it was meant to be you.”

“No, no,” Peter croaks, shaking his head. “No, it’s fine. It’s gonna be fine.”

He has to do something. He has to do something. He’s gotta drag him the rest of the way to the tower, they can search through it, there’s gotta be more supplies in there, the aliens look like they’re giving it a rest for the time being, maybe they’ve cleared out of the lower levels—he’s gotta do something, he’s gotta do something—

Scott’s breath rattles, and it hits Peter. A stifling wave. He can’t do anything. He can’t do anything but try and make it easier.

He grabs for the tablet, and prays he has enough time.

“Scott,” he breathes, typing fast, selecting what he needs. “Scott, hey.”

“Peter—”

“Scott, look,” Peter says, as he executes the illusion.

The meadow grows up all around them until there’s no more street, no more sinkhole, no more death. The daisies sway in a soft breeze, and Cassie skips by, wearing a karate uniform. A version of Scott himself follows her, and he scoops her up, swinging her through the air. Her laughter carries, like she’s really here. Like they’re really there. Together. Safe.

“See that,” Peter whispers, his voice breaking. He reaches out, squeezing Scott’s hand. “You see?”

Scott watches as father and daughter laugh, and Cassie twirls a daisy between her fingers. A small smile lingers on his face, and he watches intently, a glimmer in his eyes. Then, after a moment, it fades, and his face goes slack.

There’s a cannon.

“Scott,” Peter says, fear coursing through him. His hand is limp in Peter’s own. “Scott,” Peter says again, voice breaking, and the tears flood into his eyes as he shakes his head. “No,” he whimpers, sounding six instead of sixteen. “No, no, no, no.” He gasps, sucking in a breath, and he leans down, resting his forehead on Scott’s chest.

He can still hear the grass. Their footsteps, their laughter, their happiness. Scott will never see his daughter again. Because Peter couldn’t save him. Because he took a knife that should have gotten Peter instead. He’s wearing a vest. He’s wearing a vest, he’s wearing a vest. Scott didn’t know. He didn’t know.

Peter sobs, clutching at him. “I’m so—so sorry,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

~

Peter pulls Scott’s body off into the dark conclaves in the walls, sits him up, tries to arrange him so he looks peaceful. He doesn’t want them to find him easily, he doesn’t want Stane to come in here and loot his body, picking and choosing what he can put aside in his hidden shelf of horrors. Scott deserves better than that. His daughter—Cassie—she...she deserves to—
Peter kneels there, by Scott’s body, and can’t bring himself to leave him. The aliens are back at it, flying around out in the open and shooting shit up, and Scott—Scott shouldn’t be dead. Peter didn’t need that protection, he didn’t—the vest probably would have stopped the knife, he would have—he would have been safe, but Scott...didn’t hesitate, he just—he just stepped in front of him, without even thinking—and it isn’t fair, it isn’t fair, now, because Cassie doesn’t have a father. Cassie’s father is dead.

Peter clears his throat, takes one last look, his tears marring his vision. He’s apologized a hundred times, but it’s not enough. He takes Scott’s hand and squeezes it, swallowing hard.

“Sorry,” he whispers, broken, one more time.

He gets up, wiping at his eyes, and it takes all he has not to look back, not to drag Scott’s body along with him because he should be able to make it home, too. What’s left of him. Peter wonders if Sharon is still out there somewhere. If she’s still looking.

The illusion is still going out in the street, and the aliens fly through it. The memory, the vision of something that’ll never happen again.

Peter sucks in a breath and runs past. His rage is fueling him, his utter and complete sadness pushing him through every step. The aliens catch sight of him again and it’s not fear inside him, that makes him move faster, it’s need—he has to get back to the others, again, he has to make sure that not one more single person dies. He’ll even come back for Osborn, if he’s still there. They’re all getting out.

He shoots two webs over his shoulder, and the group of aliens tumbles down like bowling pins. Some of them shoot their weapons at him and he dodges just in time, and he runs onto the street with the tower, except opposite of the way he came upon it the first time. He’s closer to the upraised office park area, with all the tables, and the door that was welded shut before is wide open, inviting.

Peter looks over his shoulder again and sees a whole new group of them coming, including one of the giant worm-looking ones that’s bigger than both buildings on either side of him. He breathes hard, glancing off down the street, to the bend that leads to the front doors of the tower. He sees more aliens there, piled up together, and four Iron Man suits coming his way. They look charred, pieces falling off, but it doesn’t stop them, and they weave through the air menacingly.

Open door it is. He has a feeling it’s a trap, but he’s gonna have to deal with it, considering what’s coming after him from all angles. He’s gotta get back, however he can, whichever way makes the most sense, and he runs, the ground crunching beneath his feet.

He can feel his heart, like it’s on fire, like it’s burning a hole right through him. He doesn’t think about Beck, or Scott, or Osborn, or any of the rest of them. He doesn’t think about home, or memories, or the way the sun felt on his face when he’d sit on his front porch with Ben. He doesn’t think about Ned polishing his glasses. He doesn’t think about how MJ’s hair moves in the wind. He doesn’t think about how carefree Tony looks when he smiles, how rare it is for him to look like that, how it feels like a gift every time. Peter doesn’t think of the way May would hug him if she ever saw him again, doesn’t think about her laughter in his ears, her smothering kisses or how safe he feels in her arms.

He doesn’t think about anything. Not the clawing, clamoring behind him, the fire from the nightmare suits, the aliens rabid and shooting. He thinks about here, now, and that door.

He races up the steps, keeping himself from stumbling, and he sprints, can feel them on his heels. He reaches out for the knob, only a prayer in his eyes, and he grabs onto it, shoving himself inside. He pulls the door closed, and then there’s darkness.
Peter leans against the door, gulping for breath, and he can hear them slamming around outside, trying to follow him in. He rubs his hand over his face, reaching around and patting the backpack to make sure they didn’t rip into it. It feels intact, and he sighs, nodding to himself.

“Okay,” he whispers, blinking. Darkness. He can do this. It almost reminds him of when the peacekeeper jumped him, after the judgement, and he wonders if this’ll be something similar, to dredge up those feelings of fear and anger. He does best when he’s thinking about targeting them, so he hopes.

The lights come on, fast, almost like it was planned that way, and not triggered by any kind of movement.

And there’s the fear.

There’s the frozen, unabashed fear he was trying to swallow, because—spiders. Spiders. Tons—tons of them, around the entire—the entire room, the edges—too many small ones, red, black, green, glowing, others as big as dogs, others as big as cars and Peter feels them behind him, skittering, and he’s gotta—he’s gotta move, he’s gotta move, this is it, this is it, this is Stane—

The room is oblong, from what he can see, and they’re coming at him, they’re moving fast, and he rushes to his left, doesn’t even know if that’s the right way to go, but they’re everywhere, they’re everywhere, they’re surrounding him—

He stumbles, he’s on his back, no, no, they’re on him—

And this can’t happen, it can’t, he kicks them off, kicks a big one and watches it fly, feels the hairy legs, and he slips and scoots backwards, trying to get back up, trying to regain his footing—

He glances over his shoulder, and he sees a door there, a door, and they might cut it off if he’s too slow—

They’re on him they’re on him, and he shoots webs, knocks more groups away, but there are so many, and the small ones all move together, shining and glittering in the light, and Peter’s heart is screaming out for this to stop—he scrambles to his feet, nearly falls again but he doesn’t—they hiss, make horrible noises, and the door, the door, he needs to get to the door—

His head is pounding and he can’t take his eyes off them, they keep getting on him, and he can’t let them, he can’t let them, and he takes a few huge steps backwards as they converge, and they’re moving so fast, so damn fast, and he shoots more webs, knocking more away, his trembling hand feeling around for the door knob behind him—

He’s just gotta get to the next room—they’re moving up the walls, the big ones are coming, they’re coming—they’re moving up the walls—

He turns the knob, and falls backwards into the new room, kicking the door closed.

Peter breathes hard, looking around frantically, but he doesn’t see any in here. He quickly backs away from the door, and knocks over a tall thing of shelving in front of it. Hopefully they can’t get in underneath.

He turns around, waves of relief going through him. Stane threw it all at him, and Peter survived. Barely, but he did it, he did it. He laughs a little bit, glancing around for another exit. Tony must be so proud right now. Peter wishes he could see his face.

I’m coming home he thinks. He’s just gotta keep going.
Then he feels it. A sharp pain.

He sways a little on his feet, and looks down. He pushes his jacket sleeve up, and sees it. A small, red spider. Peter brushes it off, fast, and he doesn’t see where it goes. He only sees the mark on his arm, black tendrils branching out from the bite.

Chills run through him. Cold. He sways again, stumbling back, trying—trying to keep his footing. He shoulders his backpack off, because sweat is breaking out all over his back. Pangs of pain, all—all over. Everywhere. He tries to—he tries to catch a breath, but his throat feels raw, stripped.

He’s never felt his heart like this.

Terror.

Peter looks up. Sees, on the wall. A small glint.

A camera.

~

Tony is in the city.

He’d been negotiating with Lensher for some kind of pop-up shelter Peter could create, at least for the time being. Then Scott happened.

And now. And now.

There are at least a hundred people here, probably more, and they turned off the fountain so everyone would be able to hear the Games better on the big screen.

And now.

And now Peter’s face.

Tony’s been standing for ten minutes, getting closer and closer. His heart was in his throat, watching Peter suffer like that. And now.

Peter is shaking, quickly losing his color, going completely pale. His heartbeat is off the rails. His lower lip trembles, and he takes two uneasy steps towards the camera. Because he’s noticed it. He keeps looking down at his arm, and another shot shows the bite. It’s red, enflamed, the black tendrils crawling up his skin. It looks like death.

The square is deadly quiet, and Tony can’t breathe.

This can’t be happening.

Peter looks up again, a little more clear-eyed, like he’s determined to focus, and two tears roll down his cheeks. He shakes his head, his brows furrowing, his mouth opening and closing, and he looks so young. Confused. Scared.

“Tony,” he says, his voice echoing.

Tony trudges towards the screen, and the crowd parts for him.

“Tony,” Peter pleads, and he drops to the ground. The camera follows him, and Tony clutches at the bracelet. His heart. Peter twists his neck back, and lets out an agonizing wail, clutching at his
stomach. He breathes hard through his mouth, and he looks up at the camera again. It falls down to his level. It follows him.

“Tony, help me,” Peter begs, his voice breaking with his tears. “Tony, please, I’m—oh God, I think—I can’t, no—no, no, I can’t be—”

Tony covers his mouth with one trembling hand. “Kid,” he breathes.

Peter screams again, and it’s agony, the sound ripping right through Tony, trying to break him. He doesn’t know what to do, he doesn’t know what to do. There isn’t enough time. Someone’s gotta come, one of them—and he looks at the other shots, lined up on some of the smaller screens. Michelle is stuck under the rubble with Hardy’s body, unable to free herself. M’Baku is still knocked out. Natasha is hanging by her wrist, surely broken now, trying to get back inside the tower. Shuri, Steve, Misty and the other girl are still fighting, and they’re bogged down.

No one can come for him.

Peter writhes, crying out again, pure anguish and terror, and Tony doesn’t know what to do. This can’t be happening, it can’t be, it can’t. It’ll be over soon, he’ll be fine. He’ll be fine, it’ll just—it’ll hurt, but he’ll just pass out. He’ll be fine, he’ll be fine.

“Tony, help me,” Peter wails, reaching out for the camera, his fingers shaking. “Please, please, help me, please, I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna go, please, please, help me, help—help—God, God—”

“Oh my God,” Tony breathes. “Oh my God, no.”

Something changes in Peter’s eyes, and his whole face is going red, like they’re choking the life out of him. Tears stream down his cheeks and he shakes his head, clawing at his neck. “Don’t let him,” he croaks. “Please don’t—don’t let him, please, please—don’t let him—don’t let him—take—” His eyes clamp closed in another wave of pain, and Tony feels like he’s gonna pass out.

“Tony,” Peter says, still clutching at his throat. “I can’t—I can’t—”

His heartbeat goes wild. Then slows. Then stops.

Silence.

He’s not moving. He’s not moving.

It’s abrupt, and Tony stands there, looking down at his wrist. He looks up at the image again. The kid’s eyes are open, and he’s still. He’s quiet. No more heartbeat. Tony had already become so used to the feeling of it, contained there, pressing against his own pulse point. Too fast, but a reminder that Peter was still alive. And now. And now it’s still, just like every year before this one. No amount of love could keep it going.

There’s a cannon.

They mark Peter’s name off the board.

They move it over to the faded section, with the fallen tributes, who no longer have odds attributed to them.

Tony starts walking closer to the screen, his whole body numb. “No,” he whispers, as they hold the shot. “No, there’s—no, no, there’s—there’s a mistake, no, he can’t—he can’t, he—” His voice breaks and he shakes his head, stopping, his mouth trembling with the sentiments he can’t find,
because Peter is dead. He’s dead.

Tony’s eyes are so wide and straining that it feels like they’re gonna pop out of his head, and everything is blurry, his whole face hot, on fire, with horror, with pain, with the worst thing he’s ever seen in his life and he’s seen things, he’s seen terrible, awful things and this—this—this—

They hold the shot. They hold the shot.

“No, he can’t,” Tony stutters. “He can’t be. No.”

He can hear crying, all around him. His chest aches, like he’s tied tight to something, like someone is beating him. Torturing him. He tries to gasp for breath but it won’t come.

Peter’s dead. He’s dead. They killed him. Stane killed him. After everything. After all that. All the promises Tony made to himself. All the promises he made to Peter.

It happened so fast.

Tony drops to his knees without meaning to, the stone hard, sending ripples of pain through him. But it’s no pain like the pain Peter just felt, and Tony could feel every bit of it, could see it all over him. He did that. It’s his fault. He failed him. He failed him and he had to watch him die. That was his punishment. It’s on the backs of his eyelids, now. It’ll always be there.

The shot switches over to Steve and the others, and that’s when Tony breaks.

“No, no,” he howls, quivering hands clutching at his head. “No, no, no, he can’t—they can’t—oh God, he can’t be. He can’t be, they can’t—they can’t take him from me, they can’t, they can’t—”

He breathes hard, he can’t see him anymore, he can’t see him. He’s not there, he’s not there. His body, his—Stane, no, he’s gonna, he’s gonna—he can’t, he can’t—Tony promised, Tony promised, he told Peter never ever and he can’t stop him, he can’t stop him, he can’t—

He can’t protect Peter. He can’t protect him. Even in death. He can’t keep him safe. He can’t keep him safe. That room, those things, his souvenirs, and now Stane will have him, he’ll have him, and Tony’s stomach turns—

A sob rips through him, opens him up, and there’s nothing left of him now, no more, only ashes and dust, wretched pain, no more hope or happiness or future. He digs his fingernails into his forehead and another sob tears itself from his throat, his whole body trembling with it.

“No, I—I loved him,” he cries, shaking his head. “I loved him, he—he—he can’t—he can’t go, he can’t—”

He feels hands on him and he doesn’t care. They can take him away, they can kill him, he doesn’t care, it doesn’t matter. There are more than two hands, more than four, more than six, arms wrapping around him, and he glances up to look and they’re—the Capitol people, they’re—they’re gathering around him in a group, in—in a hug, everyone is holding each other, everyone is crying, and it spans out, it keeps gaining, more and more and more join, the absolute despair permeating the walls around them, sinking.

Peter is dead.

Peter is dead, and Tony slumps. His lip keeps trembling and he shakes his head, letting the tears fall in waves, crying unlike he’s cried in years. Since Pepper.
He’s not allowed to love anything. And he shouldn’t. He puts them in danger, when he loves them. They were too good, too important to be loved by him. Now look where they are. His parents, Pepper, Rhodey, Peter. All of them dead. Because of him. How the hell is he gonna face May? She’ll kill him. She’ll have every right to.

He never should have imagined anything other than this. This was always the only outcome, because the Capitol always wins. He was kidding himself—they had too much hope. And now it hurts more—it hurts so much more, because they were planning. Peter deserves—deserved—deserved to go on. To live. He was meant to have a life, to have happiness.

His life was precious.

There’s yelling. Crashing. Glass breaking. He glances up over the hill of people still crouching in their grief and sees a mob, growing. More Capitol people, and they’re—they’re tearing the square apart. Overturning tables, breaking windows, knocking over statues. They throw food at the screens. They wail and they scream and they look like rebels in costume. Like they’re not who they are. They’re chanting about Spider-Man.

Tony clamors to his feet, and breaks out of the group of mourners all around him. They didn’t know him, they didn’t know Peter, they just thought they did—they didn’t know him, didn’t know how kind and gentle he was, how brave, how selfless, how—vibrant, how alive—and Tony storms towards the tribute center, his grief mutating into something aflame, something sharp and painful.

His Peter. His kid.

Tony can’t fucking fathom it.

He’s gone. A shadow. An empty space. Just like he was afraid of. This empty space is so big, bigger than Tony could have ever imagined. A massive void, taking up half his vision, his whole world, drawing him in, and he can’t live with it. Can’t work around it. His life has been shredded, and it’s full of darkness, and this is it. This is the nightmare Tony’s been having since it all started, since he opened up his heart, since a shining light of hope from the past was put in his severely incapable hands—he squandered it. Squandered his chance to save him. And he had to watch Peter die. Like that. Agony. Like being flayed alive. Just like Stane said. Just like Stane wanted.

Tony can hear him laughing.

Tony wasn’t there. Peter was looking into the camera, reaching for him, pleading with him, terrified, in the last moments of his life. And Tony wasn’t there. He was useless, standing here, useless. Like always. May never should have trusted him. Peter was the hero. Not Tony.

Now Stane—he’ll do what he said. Tony can’t think the words, can’t let them form, but the images grow on their own in his addled mind, becoming more horrific with every anguished beat of his heart. He pictures himself strapped to a chair in that office. Drunk on his own pain. Trying not to look, but looking all the same. Begging Peter for forgiveness. Begging for time to turn back. To when they were standing there together. They were afraid, but they were alive. Peter was alive.

Watch it rot.

It’s real now.

He can’t stop him. Tony can’t stop Stane from doing it. And Peter was so afraid, of that very thing, and now. And now.
There are riots everywhere. People are setting fires to cars, destroying shops, and there’s gunfire. The goddamn peacekeepers. Tony catches sight of someone with a tablet, crouching in a corner, and they’re watching footage from one of the Districts. Tony can’t tell which one. But it’s madness there, too.

It’s all starting. Either way, Peter did this. He was the savior all along. And now he’s their martyr.

Tony starts running. He has to get back to the tribute center. None of this matters, and he doesn’t care if they kill him.

He’ll see Janet one more time. And then he’ll jump out of the window.
Tony sees Peter everywhere. It’s like someone hacked into every screen that isn’t playing the Games, because all of them are projecting Peter’s face. Some of the images are their manufactured bullshit, airbrushed and standing in front of some fake battlefield, with a look they coached out of him, nothing natural about it. But some others—they look candid. Moving from place to place in the Capitol. Shoulder to shoulder with Tony himself. Smiling. Photos neither of them knew were being taken. Shots of Peter backstage next to MJ, holding her hand. Gazing at the girl that he’ll never see again. Potential snuffed out.

Tony can barely look. Every part of him is an open wound. He keeps touching the bracelet, to make sure. Maybe it was all—a trick.

But there’s no more heartbeat. Only stillness, quiet. The loudest kind.

He’s never seen the Capitol like this. The sun is setting, burning like fire in the sky, and no one is sitting around, sipping champagne. No one is leaning over betting tables, no one is cheering, no one is excited about the Games anymore. Tony hadn’t really considered it getting like this—he hadn’t considered Peter dying, not really, and he definitely didn’t think about the actual aftermath of his death—these people, acting like this. They usually drop their dead tributes like rotten eggs, move on to the next best thing, the next possible winner, but this—Tony has never fucking seen anything like this.

He doesn’t want to believe they actually loved him. He doesn’t think most of them are capable of real love, but they sure are showing—something, here. Tony wonders how much of this is the rebel plants Thor was talking about. Whether they stoked the fire to begin with. Tony never knew about the backup plans, just in case they lost Peter before they got out. Tony didn’t want to know, because he didn’t want to live in that world. That world didn’t make sense.

He shoulders around a crowd of chanting Capitol people, covers his face when they seem to recognize him. There’s still gunfire in the distance, but only a few of them are running scared. They’re all people possessed, single-minded, and Tony wonders what the peacekeepers’ orders are. Whether they’re shooting to kill Stane’s own Capitol citizens. Tony remembers the woman, outside of the mansion. They didn’t mind beating the shit out of her, but this is more than one person. This is nearly all of them. This is a domino effect of dormant hatred, a glass ceiling finally shattering. He doesn’t know what to make of it. Doesn’t know how far it’ll take them, if it’ll result in the same end Thor and the others were working towards. Revolution. Or if it’ll be subdued by morning light. Back to normal programming.

He’s about a mile away from the tribute center when he feels trembling hands grab onto him.

Tony turns, ready to lash out, and he quickly gets an armful of Justin Hammer. And he’s crying.

“Tony,” Justin gasps, holding onto him like a lifeline.

“Okay, alright,” Tony breathes, not at all prepared for this right now.

“God, I’m so sorry,” Justin sobs, clutching onto him tighter. He pulls back, and Tony knows he’s never seen him cry before. He tries to decide if he believes him, but nothing seems real anymore. His own headache is threatening to split his skull in two, and he wishes it would. Justin keeps on. “That kid, he was—he was so good, such a good kid, he was—well, you see what’s happening—everyone’s losing their shit—”
“Yeah,” Tony says, his throat tight as he looks down at his feet. “Right on time, huh?”

Justin gives him a wary look. “I never thought I’d see this place...look like this,” he says.

Tony shakes his head. “Hammer, I gotta—I gotta split, alright?” He has to get away. He only wants to see Janet, and just for a moment. Just for a goodbye. His bones are aching to be broken. He needs to end it. He might finally have a real moment. They don’t care about him anymore. They probably want him gone anyway.

“Tony,” Justin says, too serious. “I know—I know you loved that kid—”

“Yeah,” Tony snaps, looking back up at him. “Yeah, I did. And I’m not fucking ready to have a conversation about it.”

Justin nods, and he looks guilty, an emotion Tony’s all too familiar with. “Do you know what’s happening? With—everything? With what—I mean, he’s gone, but somehow, I mean, it’s bigger, I don’t know, look at this—”

“I don’t know,” Tony says. “I have—I’ve got no idea.” He doesn’t know what the hell to think, and he hates himself, because he doesn’t care. Panem deserves to get out from under the Capitol’s thumb, but Tony doesn’t think he can feel anything anymore. And he’s no use to anybody. Peter’s dead. That was all he was good for—keeping him alive. And he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t do it. “Hammer, I’ve gotta—”

Hammer’s all up close to him again, and he sniffles, still crying. “He wouldn’t want you to give up, Tony,” he says. “Peter wouldn’t want—”

“Peter doesn’t want anything anymore,” Tony says, pushing back, away from him. “Okay? He doesn’t want shit. He’s gone. Peter’s gone.” His eyes fill with tears again, and he turns away, because fucking Hammer has seen him cry too many times in his life.

“Tony,” Hammer calls after him, in the middle of a mob of Capitol assholes who would pounce on him if they noticed he was near, especially in this goddamn situation. “Tony, please don’t—please don’t do anything crazy—he would want you to be safe—”

Tony swallows hard and keeps going, not looking back at him.

~

He doesn’t think about what Peter would have wanted. Because Peter wanted him to stop drinking. Peter wanted him to be clear-headed, happy, safe. Peter’s admiration was always projecting positivity, for so long that Tony had found hope again.

Which makes the comedown so much worse.

He has to go the back way up to the penthouse, because the elevators are down, and when he finally gets there, his legs are nearly gelatinous. But, somehow, the pain fuels him, stokes his anger. No one’s here anymore, and he wonders where the fuck they are, what they’re doing, and he tries to remember what the last thing any of them said to him was.

He can’t remember. All he can hear is Tony help me. Tony, please.

He wanted to say goodbye to Janet, but she’s not here. The one person he had left, and she’s not here.
The Games are still playing on the TV, and he knows he can’t turn them off. He tries to break the thing, but the image only warps a little bit, and keeps playing. They know what the fuck they’re doing, in that respect. He sees Steve’s bloody face, sees him trying to keep the women safe. They look like they don’t need his chivalry. Shuri cuts an alien’s head off.

Tony breaks again. Splits down the middle, and becomes something else. Something feral.

He tears at the walls. He goes wild, he can barely think, can’t stop himself. His vision blots. He breaks the coffee table. He destroys pillows, rips the couch apart, hits the dining room chairs against the walls until the legs fall off. He pulls the fridge out of the wall and tips it over, he trashes all of the cabinets. Things smash, break, stain. Glass everywhere. He knocks everything off the counter in Peter’s bathroom because they were always trying to change him, always trying to make him theirs, when he was exactly what he should have been to begin with.

Peter’s room is still a wreck from when he left, when he was trying to find the Iron Man pin, and Tony sees his reaping outfit on the floor beside his bed. Tony remembers him, that day. How afraid he was. It was different than the fear he saw today. New, unsure. Tony was fucking terrible to him, trying to be distant. It didn’t last for long.

Tony picks up the shirt and twists it in his hands, the tears coming in anew. He can’t destroy anything in here, his heart can’t take it, so he heads to his own bedroom and starts tearing it apart, too. The Games are also on in there, projected on the wall, and there’s no getting away from it. He smashes his dresser, knocking shit off of it, rips at his clothes, punches his mirror until it splinters around his fist, blood and the broken vestige of what his soul must look like.

He steps back, trips over something, kicks the aforementioned whatever it is until he crumples to the ground. He grasps at the end of his bed, closing his eyes against the pain, the echo of Peter’s death rumbling in his ears, in the core of his chest. He tries to remember previous years, and there was definitely more booze involved, every other time. He thinks he might have smashed most of their stash here, in his stupor. He knows he’s blacked out a couple times during all this, and maybe he’s finally dying of a broken heart. Maybe this is the last and final break.

He sobs, imagining seeing them all again. He closes his eyes and bends his forehead into the edge of the comforter, and he wants to smother himself.

Tony can almost imagine Pepper’s hands on him. Smoothing across his shoulders.


He can’t hear his father. He doesn’t know if he’d be met with pride or disappointment. Even in the afterlife, Howard would be Howard. An enigma. His mother, less so, decent to a fault and eager to soothe his corroded mind. She’d hold him and remind him what it felt like not to be in charge of anything. What it felt like when his life was simple. Or their version of simple.

Rhodey. Warm. Inviting, strong and steadfast. He’d be happy to see him. His smile would be just as it was, all those years, through that fence between Eleven and Twelve.

But Peter. Peter is rotting. Peter is full of holes, decomposing. Peter is forever in agony.

“Help me,” he wails, even though he’s beyond help.

Tony shakes himself out of the waking nightmare, his eyes still burning with tears. He doesn’t want any more of this. Janet’s the only one that’ll miss him. The only one. And he knows it’ll hurt her, he knows, to lose someone else. She’s lost so damn much. But he’s fucking weak. There’s only so
much he can take, and they’ve stolen it all. He remembers Pepper’s body, hanging. His parents, splayed out at his feet. Rhodey, bleeding out in his arms. And now Peter. Trapped behind a TV screen. Begging. In agony.

Tony couldn’t even try to comfort him. Rhodey was the only one, out of all of them, he got a moment with. He doesn’t know what’s worse. What’s more painful. He has too much to pick from.

He sees the thing he kicked, his heart giving a little jump. Everhart’s package. Feels like she gave it to him ages ago. Before all this. He wonders where she is now. How she’s handling all this. If the package even means anything to her anymore.

Tony stares at it. The papers are scattered across the carpet, and the black box is knocked open. Inside, there’s a tablet flash drive.

He keeps staring, almost like he’s unsure it’s actually there. None of it makes a difference anymore, his kid is gone—no matter what Everhart found, she can’t change that. But Tony sighs, rolling his eyes, and he scoots over, snatching it off the ground. He pushes himself up again, every part of him hurting. But he wants to make it worse. He wants to go out and target a peacekeeper. He wants them to beat him to a pulp.

He can’t figure out the best way to die.

He sits on the edge of the bed, grabbing his tablet, trying to ignore the Games on the wall. It looks like they’re all gonna die soon—plan be damned, hope be damned, and it’ll probably be that little shit Osborn, that Peter webbed to the wall. Safe from the fray. Last one standing.

Tony shakes his head. He plugs in the flash drive on the third try, and finds the encryptions putting up roadblocks. He doesn’t have the heart for this, not right now, but he runs on autopilot, taking back doors, putting in codes, knocking down firewalls. He doesn’t know what the hell this is and why it’s so locked up, and he wants nothing more than to just cast it aside. But he keeps working, battling with every new pop-up and blue screen, and finally, he overrides one more failsafe.

A video takes up the screen.

He sees her immediately. Recognizes her from all his searching, when he was trying to give Peter some peace of mind, some peace if not anything else. Mary Parker, sitting in front of a camera, a frantic look in her eyes. She looks like she’s in a lab somewhere, and Tony sees her husband moving around behind her.

“Ben, May, if you’re watching this, a lot of different things would have had to happen to—to get you to the moment that—you’re watching this.” She shakes her head, and her voice is trembling. “If you’re watching this, we’re gone. If you’re watching this, Peter—Peter—” Her voice breaks, and she looks away, looks back at Richard. He stops, briefly, whatever it is he’s doing, and he nods at her, trying to transfer some sort of strength. “Peter’s in the Games.”

She nods, looking down at her hands, and Tony almost wants to stop watching. Peter isn’t in the Games anymore. Peter’s body is in the arena. Peter’s dead. Tony is looking into the eyes of a woman he failed, the mother whose child he couldn’t save.

He looks away, and she starts talking again.

“I’m so sorry we’re not there,” she says. “I—well. We always—we know there’s—we know there’s a chance—”

“Mary,” Richard says, looking over at her.
“It’s hard to talk like this,” she says, looking back at him. “Like—like we’re gonna fail. Like they’re watching from a future where we failed, where he’s—where he’s—”

“This is just in case,” Richard says. “Just in case it all goes bad. Alright? We have to plan ahead. Like we have been.”

“Oh,” she says, rubbing her eyes. “Okay.”

Tony can’t look, knowing that they didn’t make it. Knowing that in that moment, nothing was set in stone yet. Nothing had happened. Back then, they were alive. Peter was safe.

Mary starts again. “You know what we’ve done,” she says. “You don’t—we’ve kept the details in check, but I’m sure you’ve heard—the rumors. And you know what we’ve shared with you. It’s been hell, it’s been—it’s been torture, for both of us. But—God, Richard, I don’t know how—I don’t know how to say it. It sounds awful, it sounds like we were experimenting on him.”

Tony looks up, his brows furrowed, and he sees Richard walk over, placing a hand on her shoulder. He leans down so he’s in the frame.

“We did what we had to do,” he says. “Whatever we put out there, whatever comes at him—we made—we made him immune. It won’t kill him. Whenever we were there, whenever we were with him, we—we brought samples, we—we knew what we were doing. We can’t stop the pain, or his—his suffering, but he won’t die. We won’t let these things we’ve been forced to make kill our son.”

Tony’s heart rattles. He doesn’t know what the hell he’s feeling, a red hot combination of shock and anger.

“Hopefully this never happens,” Mary says, as a blue light comes on in the background. “Hopefully this video just—stays encrypted, never gets opened—”

“But if it does, if you’re—if you’re watching him in the arena right now, just—they can’t kill him. Not with what we’ve done, not what the Capitol is using against us, against them, the...the tributes,” Richard says. “I don’t know what Victors we have, when you are, but both Janet and Tony—we can trust them. I know they’ll prepare him for everything else. But the mutts—we’ve gone to lengths to make sure none of them, nothing we’ve created will kill our Peter.”

Tony makes a little protest noise without meaning to, hearing Peter’s father talk about him and trust in the same sentence. After what he’s done. What he hasn’t done. What he let happen.

“And Frank, if you’re there,” Mary says. “Just—keep them safe. Keep him safe, when he gets home. Because he’ll get home.”

An alarm goes off where they are, and they both look frantically at the camera.

“We love you,” Mary says.

“We love you both.”

“And Peter,” Mary says. “Peter, we’re so sorry—”

“But we love—”

Something fumbles behind them, and the image goes out. Tony stares at the black screen, and shoves the tablet away from him.
The way they talked to Peter, in the end. Like they were so, so sure what they did would save him. Keep him alive. That he’d be able to see this video, when he made it back from the Games. Tony’s heart is going wild and he gets to his feet, starting to pace.

“Well you were wrong,” he breathes, hands on his hips as he moves back and forth, the sounds of Steve’s fight to get back to the tower going on behind him. “You were wrong. They killed him. They killed him, you couldn’t stop it. No one could, much as they—might have fucking wanted to. He died, he’s—he’s—” Tony stops walking, bracing his hand over his eyes as another round of tears comes.

They all tried, so hard. They planned ahead. Tony put his all, his everything, into saving Peter Parker. Everyone did. And yet.

“Goddamnit, kid,” Tony whispers. He shakes his head, choking through a sob. “Goddamnit.” He misses him, his brightness, despite everything else. That blind trust that scared Tony to death, that he was desperate to be worthy of.

He wipes his eyes, sucking in a breath, and walks over to the window. He yanks the curtain aside and looks down at the Capitol, in flames. Peter did that. Peter stole their hearts, for once, for real. He made them see. He opened their minds, brought home the hell that the Hunger Games really are. They loved him. They really loved him, despite their flaws, their emptiness. And the Districts too. Tony can only imagine what it looks like there. Peter was hope. He was a spark of hope that all this could end. And now it’s all falling apart. Tony doesn’t know how it’ll work, without Peter, with just his memory, the martyrdom. The anger is there, but the coordination is gone. The icon is gone. The face. The glue holding it all together.

He knows the window is locked. He’s tried to knock it out before, in years past. He only got to six or seven hits with one of the hard dining room chairs before Janet stopped him. But she isn’t here right now. He won’t get to see her again.

He hears Hammer’s idiot voice in his head. He wouldn’t want you to give up, Tony.

He’s always pictured Pepper watching. Following his ever changing moods, rearing away from death or diving towards it. He can imagine her quiet disappointment. But Peter—Peter would be angry. Peter would be hurt, by the things in Tony’s mind. Peter would haunt him.

But that’s what Tony wants. Tony wants to hold onto him however he can. Even the guilt that comes with him—everything he didn’t get to do. Seeing him is like a blistering boil, like someone carving out his eyes, but Tony needs it. He’s not ready to be without him yet.

Love him like your own. If this is that, Tony knows he was never meant to have kids. Because he can’t keep them alive. Peter was like his son, he told him that. And what did he let happen? What did he watch happen? Parents shouldn’t have to bury their kids, and Tony won’t even get that luxury.

He rests his forehead on the window and watches the world burn for Peter Parker.

The bracelet buzzes.

The world melts away to just that feeling, nothing else, nothing else but that. Tony seizes with the shock, pulling back and looking down at it. He stares at it accusingly, pure anger surging through his veins. They can’t take these godforsaken things off until the end of it all, carrying their pain and loss around with them until a Victor is crowned, but they’re not supposed to malfunction. Tony can’t take it, if this thing is gonna start fucking up.
He stares at it, glaring. There’s only stillness now, again, and he shakes his head, but then—a heartbeat. Weak, slow. But it’s there.

“What the fuck,” Tony breathes, his throat going tight, because he can’t handle this. He can’t do this. He knows these Games aren’t gonna go on for much longer, considering all the havoc they’ve wreaking, but even a second of this, of false hope and a reminder of what he’s lost, is too much for his heart.

He grasps at the bracelet, trying to get the latch to release, but the heartbeat only gets stronger. Tony feels like he’s gonna pass out, and he looks back at the screen without meaning to. There’s no hope left, he knows that. There’s no hope. His kid is gone. He’s gone, like all of them before him.

The shots on the TV go manic for a second. They move from Steve, to Michelle, still trapped. They focus on Hardy, dead. They go back to Scott, still in the dark, still unmoving. They show Osborn, struggling to get out of Peter’s webs. They show Beck, still in the same spot, looking a lot worse for wear, gathering flies.

Then they cut to Peter.

Tony makes a noise out of his own volition, and turns away. They cut out the commentary in recent years because they thought it took away from the drama of the moment, so there’s no voices chattering on over the shot of dead Peter Parker. No one to miraculously claim that he’s still breathing after they declared him dead, after they all watched him die.

Tony has to hear it himself.

And of course, he thinks he’s imagining it, he thinks he’s wishing for it so hard that it’s manifesting itself, only to go quiet when he needs it most. But he hears it—a labored, wheezing breath, one that wasn’t meant to meet the air but finds it all the same.

Tony turns, half paralyzed, and watches as Peter shudders back to life. And Tony is terrified, for a moment, that they’re doing this, that they’re using Peter’s body somehow to torture him into submission. But then the kid presses his hand to the floor, hard, and looks up, into the camera.

That’s him. His eyes. Peter. He’s alive. He’s alive, again, somehow. Tony must be dreaming. This can’t actually be happening.

“Kid,” Tony breathes, still holding tight to the bracelet.

Peter’s eyes are wild, and he’s breathing hard, his heartbeat too fast, way too fast. Tony’s in a fantasy world, he must be, but he moves towards the screen all the same, nearly tripping over his own feet.

“I’m going insane,” Tony whispers. “I’m finally fucking losing it. This—this can’t—”

Peter tries to pick up his hand, but it’s almost as if he’s stuck there. He pulls, and with a little bit of strength, he’s able to move, and he looks at his palm like he’s never seen it before. He pushes up his jacket sleeve, and the bite—is only a small red mark, now.

Tony can’t believe it. He can’t believe it, he can’t believe it. He’s never been given anything, ever, but this—he stares, and stares, and keeps staring, and it might be—it might actually—it’s actually happening. It’s actually, really happening.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony says, dizzy. He thinks about the video he just saw, two souls watching from behind the grave. “They did it,” he whispers. “They did it.” That has to be what this is, what’s happening here.
Peter’s parents saved him.

The amount of relief Tony feels is bigger than anything he’s ever known, and he wraps his hand around the bracelet and holds it against his chest. He doesn’t know how to believe it, he doesn’t know if he should, but Peter is moving on the screen, wavering to his feet with new life, and it’s the most beautiful thing Tony’s ever seen. He’s alive, he’s breathing, his heart is beating. Despite being trapped by the Capitol for so many years, Peter’s parents made a failsafe. One that worked. How could they not, when given the opportunity? Who wouldn’t want to protect him with their lives? That’s all Tony wants to do. That’s the only thing that matters. But they did it. They did it, they did it.

Tony laughs, covering his face with his hands. He looks back again, and Peter is still there, it’s still happening.

Peter is alive. He’s alive he’s alive.

Tony’s gratefulness is beyond all understanding, and he can’t think straight. He knows they’re all in more trouble now, because of this, because this is insurmountable, this is never before seen—to the Capitol, this is trouble. This is resurrection. Peter is more powerful now than he ever was before. His very being is a weapon. But all Tony can think is that he can still make it, now. He still has a chance. That amazing, wonderful human being might still come back home. Tony could still be the father figure he wants to be. Somewhere far away from here.

Tony is too busy staring at him, thanking his lucky stars, to hear the window breaking in the next room.

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Peter gasps awake.

The terror of knowing death was consuming him has still got him all locked up, and he can barely move. His fear is astronomical, and that’s got him frozen too, because he died. He knows he did. He felt every inch of it—the agonizing pain, the complete and utter helplessness, all his love and memories flooding him, trying to make him stay. He felt like a child, and all he wanted was for Tony to swoop in and save him, make him safe, and Peter knew he was watching. Knew May and Ned were too, and that only made him more afraid. His own heart was breaking, and he could feel theirs, too, like they were all linked together by the amount of love between them.

Peter could hear Stane, too. What he wanted to do, what he would do, because Peter was dying, because Peter would be dead any second. And Peter was struck with that image, eating him up, and all he wanted to do was stop it, stop this, stay alive. But he felt his heart slow anyway. He felt his air go. It all went quiet.

But now he’s awake. And things—are not the same.

He feels more keyed-in. Like he can hear everything, miles away. His vision is clearer, his hearing sharp, and when he presses his hand to the ground, he sticks there. Like there’s glue on his skin. He pulls himself free after a long moment, and he looks at his hand—everything looks the same, but he knows it’s not.

Peter can feel the new strength surging through him. It’s like his body is warped, like someone stretched him, bulked him up, imbued him with a new force that’s ready and burning to be put to use. His mind is a mess, worse than normal—everything piling on top of everything else, voices entwining with other voices, the way the ground moves, the way the wind is blowing outside, how
the alien vehicles make the buildings shake. He can feel everything, all of it, he can’t even catalogue or name everything he can feel now, everything he knows and shouldn’t know. That warning system that clenches around his heart feels upgraded now, like he knows what’s coming, where it’s coming from, why it’s coming, what it’s intentions are.

He feels crazy.

Peter doesn’t know who he is, what he is, what brain is in his head. He doesn’t know what the hell happened to him, and he knows they didn’t plan for this, didn’t want to turn him into—whatever he is now. Part of him feels like he’s going to crumble under the weight of new responsibility. The rest of him wants to tear their world to shreds. Because now, he thinks that he can. It’s untested, whatever it is that’s running through his veins, whatever it is that spider did to him. But he feels it. He knows.

He looks into the camera and breathes hard. He knows everyone is seeing this. But he knows who matters.

There’s a time clock on, now. Because this isn’t normal, and they’ll be out for blood. Stane will.

Peter knows it’s all danger out there, and when he listens hard enough, he can hear her. He can hear MJ, calling for help. He can hear whatever it is that’s pinning her in, crumbling, shifting, but not enough for her to escape, and not enough to crush her either. Not yet. He hears other pleas too, and he knows—he knows there’s not much time.

He’s been a mess his whole life. And his head is jumbled now with so much more than he’s ever had in there before, but somehow—he finds he can focus.

None of it feels impossible anymore.

He swallows hard, and when he grabs the door knob, he lifts the whole door off its hinges.

“Holy shit,” he breathes, staring at it. He casts it aside, his hands trying to stick to that, too. He can hear MJ, he can pinpoint her location, he knows she’s on the fifth floor. But there’s a group of aliens waiting for him, every stop along the way.

He grabs his backpack, careful not to crush it in his hands, and he gets going. He runs on pure adrenaline, because he could stay, languishing in one spot, lamenting and crying and trying to deal with this. All his horrible, conflicting feelings. But he knows, he knows they need him. He remembers thinking of home, right before he saw the last spider. He’s gotta get home. They’ve all gotta get home.

The aliens rush at him as soon as he leaves the room.

He shoots a web and swings through the main landing, shooting more as he goes. He lands on the ceiling and sticks there, much to his shock, and he jumps back down, right into the middle of the fray. They rush him, but Peter dodges each blow, each punch, and flips out of the way when one of them tries to shoot one of their laser guns at him.

He actually. Flips. Without even thinking about it. Every damn flip he’s ever done in his life takes buildup and panic and a whole life rehash, but here, in the middle of a war zone, he’s able to do one without thinking about it.

He dodges out of the way again, and throws a punch. The alien in question flies back like it was hit with a semi-truck. Peter moves away as the next one tries to get at him, and he tosses him aside, picking him up like he doesn’t weigh a thing. They all try to converge at the same time, and Peter
shoots another web, running and jumping into a swing as he makes for the stairwells.

The swinging isn’t awkward and heavy anymore, and even though he’s still breathing and panicking like he always did, he’s able to land the shots he didn’t think he’d make, he’s able to maneuver around obstacles he would have otherwise run into. His brain, though more focused than he was previously capable of, keeps telling him no, no, no, you won’t make it. But he does. Almost every time.

He feels new strength in his fists, in every part of his body when he falls into fights along the way to MJ. He tosses the aliens around like they’re nothing, he can outrun them, and when one of the suits comes in to join on the third floor, Peter shoots a web, flips over it, and lands on top of it. It tries to shake him off, going higher, but he punches right through it, clear through, sparks everywhere. He’s able to leap off before it crashes, landing on the stairway to the fourth floor.

Everything is happening so much.

He crashes through more aliens, tearing them apart with his bare hands, and he wraps them up with his webs, swinging around them until they’re all bundled together. He tosses himself from wall to wall, breathing hard, and he’s even starting to stick through his shoes, too. He’s able to move like a damn spider. That mutt did this to him. That spider. It killed him, brought him back, and made him different. Gave him...powers.

Did his parents do this? Was this because of them? He doesn’t have time to think it through, but his heart leaps at the prospect.

He swings up to the fifth floor, and all the warning signs are going off. Everything in him is leading him towards her.

He can see that the roof caved in here, a few burned out blasts darkening the walls and simmering in the rubble. He sees a hand sticking out, but he knows it’s not her, has gotten too used to her hands to know—but he knows she’s here, she’s under there somewhere. He grabs the hand, and can’t find a pulse. It might be Hardy. He thinks it could be her. Whoever it is, they’re already gone. He can’t help them.

“MJ!” he yells, glancing around. This is the spot, this is it, and he starts throwing rocks aside, looking for her.

“Peter!” she groans.

Only a few feet away. Under one of the biggest pieces of rubble.

It’s pure concrete, nearly in one piece and under bits of statue and pillar from the floor above. Peter rushes over, hears her breathing.

“Hold on,” he says. “Hold on, hold on.”

He grabs onto the concrete at the edges, bending his knees. He grits his teeth and pushes, pushes with all of this newfound might and the pure need to save her. His arms and legs strain with all he puts into it, but he shoves forward, continuing to lift with every new ache in his bones. This shit must weigh two or three tons, probably more with everything that’s lying on top of it, but he’s moving it. He’s pushing it off of her.

There was a small piece of pillar underneath that kept it from crushing her entirely, thank God, and when she’s got enough room to move she scrambles out, moving quick as she can. He drops the slab of concrete when she’s clear, and it slams back to the ground, knocking up dust. He shakes out his
arms, and they should be nearly fucking destroyed after all that, but it just feels like. Chopping wood. Carrying books. Not tons of concrete.

He turns, helping her back to her feet. She’s breathing hard and he holds onto her arms, eyes quickly scanning over her face to make sure there’s no big cuts or injuries.

“Are you okay?” he whispers.

“How the hell did you do that?” she asks, voice clipped and stripped from yelling. “That was—that landed on Hardy and killed her, it almost killed me, it only didn’t because I was under that pillar, and it was—it was breaking, it was gonna break—how the hell did you do that?” She’s breathing hard, shaking her head at him. “You shouldn’t have been able to do that.”

“Uh,” Peter says. A lot of things have changed, but his ability to be cool in front of her is not one of them. He knows the time clock is still ticking, that things are really, really dangerous now. But he’s just standing there with his mouth open like an idiot.

“Peter.”

“I died,” he says, fast. “And now I’m back. And I’m stronger somehow. I don’t know. I’ve got no idea. For real. But we’ve—I know Nat needs my help over here, out—” He vaguely points to his right. “—out there, somewhere that way, I can tell, and M’Baku is close, and—and Steve, and Shuri, and a couple others, they’re—outside, somewhere around the side of the tower, they—they need help too, we’ve gotta go—”

He takes her hand and starts running, and she holds onto him tight. She feels his bicep, his shoulder, and he knows she must be feeling the differences. Because he’s different. And embarrassed. He knows he shouldn’t be, because it’s good, and it’s also not his fault, but his face burns scarlet anyway. He wishes this would have come at a time when he was able to catalogue it all, because he needs a moment to sit down, he just—he just needs a moment. But he’s not gonna get one.


“We’ll talk about it later!” he says, rushing forward, that feeling getting stronger, alarms and sweat and panic driving him to a certain point. Natasha needs him. He knows it’s her. He can hear her.

“You died?” MJ yells. “You died? How do you—wait, no. No. You were dead?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m pretty sure!” Peter says, chills running through him as he thinks about it, and he doesn’t want to. “It, uh, it definitely felt like it!”

They skid to a stop in front of the broken window, and he knows Natasha is right outside it somewhere. It’s like he’s got an invisible map in his head, with red spots pulsing where people need help. Like that feeling he’s had, all along, but bigger, stronger, more focused, more sure of what it’s telling him.

He’s going insane.

“Peter,” MJ stammers, holding tight to his arm, leaning into his space. “I did—God, I’ve been so worried, since you—and I heard so many cannons, and I was so afraid that one of them was—but now you’re saying—now you’re—”

He turns to her, his heart going crazy for too many different reasons. There’s so much, there’s too much, there’s way too much. He doesn’t have time for everything he needs time for. “Can I kiss you?” he asks. “Just—real fast—”
She leans in and does it for him, without another passing second. He cups the side of her face and
never thought his first kiss would be like this, here, with someone as incredible as her, and he didn’t
think he’d have his own blood and someone else’s on him when it happened either, but this world
has taught him that not everything can be perfect. Her lips are soft and it’s full of urgency, and he
can’t enjoy it because he knows he has to get to the rest of them. The sense of responsibility is too
heady, too strong, pointing him exactly where he needs to go.

He pulls back, brushing her hair from her face without thinking. “Yeah, one of them was for me. I
know it, I’m—a hundred percent sure. I’m sorry, I’m sorry it happened, I’m sorry all of this is
happening so fast, but a spider bit me and I think it was supposed to kill me but it—it changed me,
instead. I feel really crazy, like, in every way someone can feel crazy. And now this is gonna be
harder, but I’ve—I’m way more capable than I was before. I don’t know why. I do not know why."

“Peter,” she says, sadness and confusion in her eyes. “I’m not—I’m not getting—”

“I’m sorry,” he says again, and he feels like he needs to say it a million times. He knows what he
would feel like if this was her, if their roles were reversed. He leans in and kisses her on the cheek,
and she leans into him. It makes him shiver, and he tries to focus. He pulls back, looking her in the
eye. “Gimme just a second. Plan still in action, it’s still in action, I just gotta—get everybody back.”

He pulls away, nodding at her, and starts walking backwards. “Just gimme a second, okay? I’ll be
right back, I gotta go get Natasha.”

MJ shakes her head. “What? Where—”

He can’t explain anymore, and he shakes his head back at her, hoping she can wait, for just a
moment. He turns from her, and jumps out the window.

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Tony keeps staring at the TV as Peter wavers to his feet, still in that dark room where he stopped
moving, where it looked like he’d stay until Stane himself came in and did his dirty work. But now
—now he’s standing back up, and it’s only been moments since Tony’s world changed again, but
he’s already praying. The only person he’s truly prayed for in the last twenty years is this kid, and
he’s doing it again, praying he stays alive. Praying this isn’t a trick, or some horror story of Capitol
origins.

Peter slowly moves over to the door, and with one, tentative touch, rips the entire thing off its hinges.

Tony’s brows furrow. “Holy shit,” he says, at the exact same time as Peter does.

Then, his bedroom door opens with a slam, hitting the back wall. Tony whips around, seeing the
masked figure, and his immediate thought is peacekeeper, his immediate thought is to fight, because
he doesn’t wanna die anymore, not anymore, not while the kid is still breathing. He won’t make
Peter come back to a world where he’s gone, not after everything he’s been through.

He rushes at the figure and tackles them back out into the hallway. They hit the wall hard and it
cracks under the masked man’s elbows, and he quickly pushes Tony off, holding his hands up.

“I’m not in the mood, asshole,” Tony says, cocking his fists and readying for a fight. He doesn’t
know if this is someone the Capitol sent to take him out, covertly, without the presence of
peacekeepers, or if it’s some moron who broke in for a story, for a moment with Tony Stark after the
death of his tribute. With all this going on, he could see them being so bold. “I’ll knock you three
ways to kingdom come—”
“Let’s not,” a familiar voice says, and Tony stumbles back into the wall when Bucky goddamn Barnes peels his mask off and steps into the light. “I’m a little rusty in the hand to hand work. Still getting used to the new hand. New...arm.”

Tony stares. His heart stutters, stops, starts again. Between Peter and this, he feels like someone slipped something into his drink. Whenever the hell his last drink was. With Lensher? Is Erik trying to fuck him over? Make him see things? It’s working. His whole world is shuddering. He’s messed up. This isn’t happening. Another thing that isn’t happening.

“Yeah, old man, I’m really here,” Bucky says. He approaches like Tony’s a horse he doesn’t wanna spook, and he lays a tentative hand on Tony’s forearm. Not with the metal hand, but the flesh and blood one. The one Tony held between both of his own before Bucky got in the tube. Tony looks down at it, and sees the same scars.

He sucks in a big breath, and blows it back out. He’s chilly all over, and he’s shaking. There’s a dead man in front of him.

“You in there?” Bucky asks, warmly. He wasn’t always warm, while they knew each other. He was angry, an anger Tony knew and understood. One he fed when he shouldn’t have. One that might have gotten Bucky killed. But, apparently, dead doesn’t exactly mean the same thing anymore.

“What’s happening?” Tony asks, choosing the logic before emotion even though all his walls are threatening to come down. He needs comfort, he needs it, but he never allows it for himself, almost like he doesn’t deserve it. He definitely doesn’t. “What the hell is going on? How are you in front of me? How do I know this isn’t—”

“Strawberry ice cream,” Bucky says, and Tony’s heart leaps. “Yeah. No one else knows that. Nothing got that on video. So you know it’s me. Not a trick.”

Tony wouldn’t forget that. He never would. Janet wasn’t there for that. And there was so much of it, everywhere, all over the damn place. It was one of the first times he heard Bucky laugh. Genuinely. His face goes all hot and he shakes his head, feels like he’s gonna pass out. It still doesn’t feel real, like something he’s concocted in his own head, and he shuffles forward, wrapping his arms around Bucky and holding him close. Emotion now. No more logic. Was there ever any to begin with?


“Nice to see you too, finally,” Bucky says, patting Tony’s back.

Tony’s never seen a tribute again. Not after he sent them away, not after watching them fight for their lives. Not after watching them die. Bucky’s death was notorious—a one-shot-kill in the final hour, when there were only four of them left. Wagner snuck up on him, and shot him with a poison dart. Game over. It never felt right, it never sat right, and Tony went catatonic for a few hours after, pure confusion and horror sending him back inside his own head.

But the point stands. Tributes don’t come back. Not his, anyways. He’s been the only one to come back in Twelve, after Janet. And that was a big enough surprise to her. He’d been praying, with Peter, and as of a few moments ago, hope was reignited. But it’s been over a year, since he’s seen Bucky. Since he watched him die. He saw Bucky’s arm in the office, where Stane was lording over them. Bucky was special, wasn’t he? But now Bucky is here. Tony’s brain can’t wrap around it, but he’s here—he’s hugging him, he’s here.
“Really, how the hell is this happening?” Tony asks, still holding onto him. He needs facts. Maybe some logic. Because the world isn’t making sense. He needs words, he needs explanations. Then he probably needs to pass out. Everything—everything—hurts. His head is throbbing.

“I’ll tell you on the way—”

“You the way to where?” Tony asks. “What’s going on? Seriously. Seriously. On the way to the plan? We still on the plan? Get them out? Were you always part of it? Jesus—”

“Youmon,” Bucky says, and when Tony pulls back he can see him looking at the TV in the bedroom. “Jesus, okay—it happened, this is—”

Tony looks over his shoulder, watching Peter slam through the tower and the aliens like it’s not anything to him, like he’s playing a game.

“Youmon,” Bucky says, grabbing Tony’s shoulder. “This is good. We’re on track, but he’s uh—Jesus, what’s up with him?”

“Oh, you know, newly revived, I bet you can understand,” Tony says, gesturing towards the TV. Then he really sees what he’s looking at. Peter is knocking them down with one hit. Peter is—sticking to walls and ceilings. Peter is moving unlike he ever has. Tony breathes hard, cocking his head, and he feels like he’s gonna wake up any second. He doesn’t know when he’s gonna wake up, but hopefully it’s after all this. When Peter is back and safe and they’re in Thirteen. Whatever Thirteen is now. It’s better than here. This place is a fucking wreck.

“Youmon,” Bucky says. “Seriously. I get the, uh, questions, but we’re on a time clock here. Youmon.” He grabs Tony’s shoulder.

“Wait, wait,” Tony says. He rushes over and grabs his tablet, flash drive still plugged in, and shoves it inside one of his bags. He’s gotta keep an eye on the kid, wherever the hell they’re going.

Wherever the hell he’s going. With Bucky. Who’s dead. He has to keep an eye on Peter. Who’s dead too. Are they following the plan? Is the plan dead too? He has no idea what the hell is going on.

“Here,” Bucky says, handing him a mask similar to his own. “And uh, this. Don’t know how many people we’ll see.” A dark jacket. Tony dons them both, and he feels insane. He is insane. They didn’t talk to him about any dead tributes when they talked about the plan, about getting Peter and the rest out. He feels like they should have mentioned it. It feels like they wanted to set him up for failure.

He follows Bucky out, watches as he pulls out his own tablet, executing commands that are more complicated than anything he’s ever come up with himself, and he’s done some intense tablet work in the last twelve years. A watery wall comes up around them as they walk, and they move through the pandemonium in the hallway like ghosts.

“Masks and jackets are just in case,” Bucky says. “We’re going up.”

Tony still can’t stop staring at him. He doesn’t know what it fills him with—fear, gratefulness, love, shock—but more than anything, hope. Hope, that they can make it through this. If Bucky did—after death—what looked like death—then why can't the rest of them?

They take the back stairwell, and head up to the roof. There’s still steady gunfire when they reach
open air, and Tony wonders again if Stane is actually having them kill Capitol people. That’ll just make them angrier. Turn them on him faster. Tony doesn’t know if he’d risk it. That guy’s out of his fucking mind, but he’d do anything to hold onto his power. He has. They all know about his past, poisoning his rivals, sending them on trips they never come back from. He’s ruthless.

“Over here,” Bucky says, tugging on him. It’s pitch black out and Tony can barely keep his footing, with all this bullshit happening all around him. “Here. Step up.”

Tony narrows his eyes at him. They’re near the edge of the roof, and there’s literally nothing to step up onto. He’s talking to an apparition, he’s still pretty sure of that, and maybe he’s about to jump off the fucking tribute center anyway. Maybe that’s what this is. The last firings of his nerve endings, in the moments right before death. Reliving his mistakes.

“We’re cloaked,” Bucky says. “C’mon, stop making that face, don’t make me laugh at you in such a serious moment. I always try to be respectful.”

Tony scoffs. “You? Sure. And you can’t even see my face, I’m wearing a mask.”

“I know you’re making a face. I know it, I can feel it.”

Tony feels like he’s been punched in the gut. “Jesus, it is you.”

Bucky steps up onto nothing. “See?”

Tony watches, nodding his head. “Okay,” Tony says. “Though I’m sure if I do that I’m gonna fall to my goddamn death—”

“Nope, won’t let you,” Bucky says, holding out his hand. “Our new and apparently powered Spider-Man wouldn’t be too thrilled, I’d bet.”

Tony shakes his head, and takes his hand. Bucky pulls him up, and they walk into the empty sky.

The hovercraft slowly reveals itself as they move further inside it, until it’s completely visible and the platform is closing. It’s larger than the one that took them to the arena, but he can see the cockpit, one man piloting and glancing back when they enter. There are a few compartments, a small door they’d have to bend to get through just beyond the left set of stairs, and another one above them, leading to a different area he can’t see. There are two other men standing there waiting, and they both look serious.


“Everyone is in place,” Bucky says. “All the Victors. Janet we grabbed earlier, she’s on the way to get the families with Nebula.”

“Neb—Nebula?” Tony stutters. His heart summersaults again. “She’s—she’s alive?”

“She is,” Bucky says, leading him over to the other two men. Bucky pulls off his mask, and Tony follows suit.

“Can I take off?” the pilot asks. “I thought we were on a time clock here.”

“Sam and Hammer,” Tony spits out, because—nothing—makes sense, and he’s gotta hold onto any facts still hanging around in his head before they disappear altogether.

“They’re good,” one of the men says, gruff. “They’re in place too. Grabbed Hammer right after you
ran into him. Was still cryin’.”

Both men are dressed for combat. Bucky is too.


The pilot takes off but Tony barely feels it, and they all stay steady on their feet. He keeps wondering if this is a trap, but the way Bucky looks at him—it’s just the same as it was. Ever the same. He doesn’t think they could manage that, to find that look in his eye that he didn’t show in public. It took a lot to get through to Bucky. Not everyone could.

Tony grabs his tablet out of his bag and checks in on Peter. He’s lifting part of the goddamn wall off of Michelle. And that’s—that’s not something any of them can do easily. Not even Bucky, with his metal arm. Those walls were pure cement. Tons and tons.

“All right, I’m gonna need some answers I should have already gotten,” Tony says, looking up at them. “Whoever you guys are, whatever the hell is happening—why are Bucky and Nebula alive, what in the hell happened to my kid—”

“I’m Happy Hogan, Tony!” the pilot yells, waving back at him over his shoulder. “Big, big fan.”

“Matt Murdock,” the skinnier man says. He’s wearing dark glasses, and Tony wonders why the hell they’ve got a blind guy on their covert mission.

“Frank Castle,” the bulky guy says.

Tony remembers that name coming out of Mary’s mouth in the video.

“Doctor Helen Cho is on the next level, preparing to treat whatever injuries they come in with,” the man continues.

“They’ve been planning this shit for years, Tony,” Bucky says, turning to him. “There are tributes in Thirteen that you wouldn’t believe.”

“A lot of it was set up, purposeful,” Murdock says. “We—all of them couldn’t be saved. And sometimes it just worked out that certain setups saved certain people. We wanted to save them all, but we just—we couldn’t. We weren’t strong enough yet, to make such a stand.”

“You’re from Thirteen?” Tony asks, anxiety twisting in his bones.


“I grew up in Seven,” Frank says. “But I was under contract with the Capitol. So I spent most of my time there.”

Tony nods, his movements stilted. “So—they saved you,” he says, looking at Bucky. “The dart was —”

“Something they concocted,” Bucky says. “To make me look dead.”

“And Stane took your arm?” Tony asks. “Were you awake for that?”

“No,” Bucky says, looking away. “I woke up after.”

“I helped ‘dispose’ of the bodies,” Murdock says. “But Stane, he—he came through, sometimes, before we supposedly got rid of them. Before we woke the ones up that weren’t actually dead.”
“Jesus,” Tony says, looking down. He glances at the tablet, still in his hands, and sees Peter freeing Natasha from where she was stuck outside. He’s fucking *sticking* to the building. His hands and feet.

“There were only certain ways we could save them,” Murdock says. “Things like the dart Bucky took. If a mutt was too wild, not—coded a certain way, we couldn’t stop it from tearing them apart. It was—it’s been a hard journey.”

“Yeah, picking and choosing who gets to live and who gets to die,” Tony says, bitterness in his mouth.

“They were saving people who would have died otherwise,” Bucky says. “They were risking their lives to do it.”

“Yeah,” Tony says.

*Your* kid,” Frank says. “I knew his parents. I worked with them. I—they trusted me enough to let me in on who they really were. How they didn’t want to be doing one goddamn inch of what he was making them do. It was killing them. And I was the only one who knew what they did. To Peter.”

Tony’s blood goes cold.

“After they died, I disappeared. Found my way to Murdock, here, found my way to Thirteen. I was never gonna seek the kid out. Never. Never planned on it. I wanted him to avoid all this bullshit, at all costs, and if we ever made it, if we ever—figured out a plan that was big enough, to take the whole damn system down, I figured we could just go—we could just go pick him up. Take him to Thirteen too, with all the refugees.”

Tony looks up. Meets his eyes.

“But then he volunteered,” Frank says. “And I’d had contact with Bruce. I heard the rumblings of what they were planning, how they were finally ready to try something, with Rogers being the face, but I’d been keeping an eye on Peter—he was a good kid, he—there’s something about him. I guess you get it, huh? So I told Bruce. Told him what they’d done, how they’d protected him. And Stane got his damn panties in a twist, wanted to take it all out on the kid, and he was stupid enough to use the spiders the Parkers made themselves. Thought it’d be a real good knife twist, to use his parents’ creations against him. Didn’t that bite him in the ass?”

Tony stares at him. “Did you—did you know it’d kill him? Did you and Bruce—did you know that?”

“He wasn’t dead,” Frank says. “Not really. He was—he was basically dead. But not all the way. We knew how that’d look, to everyone. Shit, all the kid had to do was be himself and they fell for him. His death kickstarted the revolution. It was exactly what we needed. We knew he’d come back. What we didn’t know, is, uh—” He reaches out, taps on Tony’s tablet. Peter is swinging through the air with Natasha, flipping back into the building. He picks up a giant stone statue like it’s *nothing*, and hurls it at the aliens Michelle is fighting against.

Frank chuckles a little bit. “We didn’t know he’d come back a goddamn superhero. I don’t know if they even knew that. His parents. It makes things—it makes things more difficult in the sense that we’ve gotta get there, fast. They’re gonna retaliate, they’re not gonna know what the fuck to do. But with him, like this—phoenix rising, phoenix rising *with powers*...he’s our icon, through and through. Death elevated it, this elevated it even more.”

Tony’s whole face is hot. He slowly, surely, puts the tablet away, still playing, still showing what
exactly Peter can do. Tony’s trembling hard, his anger burgeoning.

“Tony—” Bucky starts.

“So was that first spider you?” Tony asks, trying to keep his tone straight. “With—with Everhart?”

Frank glances over at Murdock. “Nah,” he says. “That was just a very well-timed moment. Coincidence, I guess. That wound up meaning everything, huh?”

Tony rushes forward, grabbing Frank by the collar and shoving him back against the side of the craft. Tony hears them all exclaiming, finds Murdock and Bucky at his sides, but Frank’s eyes are boring into his. “So you used him?” Tony says, through gritted teeth. “You knew he’d suffer like that, and you fucking allowed it to happen? You and Bruce, you could have stopped it, could have—altered his path, kept him away from the spiders, whatever the fuck, but you let it happen? You let him die? Because it’d be better for your story?”

“He didn’t die, Stark—”

“Sure looked like it.” Tony says. “Sure fucking sounded like it. Sure felt like it. Because I’m wearing one of these godforsaken bracelets and I felt his heart stop.”

“It was weak,” Frank says. “Bracelet couldn’t pick it up. Yours doesn’t even have a tracker in it, Bruce did that special, it’s not like the rest—”

“And we needed a genuine reaction from you,” Murdock says. “Let’s just say it. They care about your connection too, they’d follow your lead. Everyone saw you react. They aired it everywhere.”

Tony doesn’t care if Murdock is blind. He wants to knock their heads together. He pushes against Frank and steps back, moving closer to Bucky.

“I understand how you feel, alright, Stark?” Frank says, behind him. “I get it. We’ve all seen death. We wanna keep our people alive, and you’ve been stuck with these Capitol assholes for years now. I know what that’s like. They killed your girl, your parents—and I wasn’t sure at first, because I—I knew Peter’s parents, so I felt like I was—on their side, I guess. So I wasn’t sure if you were genuine, with him. Or just playing the part. But I know you are. I know what a father looks like. I used to be one.”

Tony turns around and looks at him, his throat tight.

“He suffered, yeah. He did. But we knew he’d come back. We were sure. He was strong before. And by some...fucking miracle, he’s stronger now. And we’ve gotta go get him. You’re up for it, right? You’re with us, yeah? Because they told us you’d be with us. They told us you’d do anything to get the kid back.”

“Of course I am,” Tony says. “Of course I will.”

“Okay then,” Frank says. He sits down in one of the seats, heaving a sigh, and Tony thinks he might have expected some of his vitriol. Murdock sits next to him.

Tony looks at Bucky. Still shocked at seeing him there. He mentioned other tributes, and Tony’s gotta know. “Uh, what you said before, about—other tributes, uh—Hank, or...or Hope? Rhodey?” His voice trembles, anticipating the answer.

Bucky shakes his head. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Everything came after you. Bruce wasn’t kidding, when he said it was you that inspired him. You were the spark, Tony. And Peter’s...he’s carrying it
Tony rubs at his eyes. He feels sick. He feels tired, so tired that he knows he’s not in good enough shape for this. He needs to be better. “What’s the plan?” he asks.

“It’s supposed to be simple,” Bucky says. “We’re gonna fly over the arena, and once they’re out of the wormhole, we’re gonna smash through the top of the dome and get them out. Worst case scenario, we’ve gotta go in. But that’s worst case. We can stay cloaked until we’re right on top of them, so hopefully we line up well. We gotta keep watching.”

“And no one’s on our tails?” Tony asks, looking up at him.

“No,” Bucky says. “Not right now.”

Not right now could mean any minute. Tony sighs, chewing on the inside of his cheek, and he pulls out his tablet again, checking on Peter. He’s tossing the aliens left and right, punching them right into walls. He dodges like nothing. He flips away with Michelle in his arms.

Tony shakes his head and looks up at Bucky. “I’m, uh. I’m really glad you’re alive.” He tries to keep his voice from breaking. The sentiment doesn’t sound good enough. He doesn’t know how to say it in the way that means something. He still just...can’t believe it.

“Me too,” Bucky says, nodding. “I’m just—I’m so happy to see you.”

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Peter runs. He was able to get Natasha, he was able to wake M’Baku up, and now they’re rushing away from the aliens, who seem to multiply in number with every passing second. They’re on the sixth floor, and he knows he’s gotta go back down and get Steve and the others.

“This way,” he yells, ushering MJ, M’Baku and Natasha to his right, to an open door. He remembers what happened the last time he ran into the first open door he saw, and he grits his teeth as they run inside, shooting webs everywhere. But it’s just a broom closet. No mutts in sight. A brief respite. Peter feels like he’s gonna explode.

He pulls the door closed fast once they’re all inside, and he holds onto the handle, praying he doesn’t break it. But he can hold it firm, and they can’t get in.

The other three stare warily at him, huddled against the back wall.

“What the hell happened to you?” Natasha asks, her eyes wide.

“Uh,” Peter says, the door rattling behind him. “I don’t know. I’m pretty sure I died.” He hates saying it. It sounds so stupid. It doesn’t reveal the kind of fear the moment dredged up. The kind of pain he was feeling, then.

“What?” M’Baku exclaims, leaning hard against the wall by Natasha’s shoulder. “Come again?”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Peter says, shaking his head. “I—I don’t—” His head almost hurts with all the focused panicking about Steve, and he knows he’s gotta get out there, go get him and the others so they can keep going higher. They don’t have much time. He doesn’t know why he knows that, but he does. “Listen, let’s talk about it later, okay?”

“Later?” Natasha asks, exchanging a look with MJ. “Later? Like, over lunch?”
“Later!” Peter says. “Because there’s definitely gonna be a later because we’re doing real good!”

“Peter, you can’t go out there,” MJ says, shaking her head frantically. “It’s too crazy, it’s too crazy.”

“I gotta,” Peter says. “I’m just gonna go get them, him and uh, whoever he’s with, and then I’m gonna fly ‘em back up here and then we’re just gonna keep going. We gotta...keep going.” He doesn’t wanna think about them closing the rip in the sky. He doesn’t want to think about them sending more mutts in. They’ll know he’s different, they’ll know, and they’ll try to stop him.

“Peter!” MJ yells. “You can’t—”

“Be right back,” he says. “Promise, promise. I’m gonna web the doors closed so they can’t get in. You’ll be safe.”

He quickly moves back outside before they can ask him anything else, and turns his back on the aliens, webbing the door shut.

He flips out of their clawing, slashing group, shooting webs at them too, and he wishes he had a damn weapon. He should have asked M’Baku if he still had the knife. He didn’t see Natasha with the brass knuckles. He rushes away from the aliens, sprinting, moving as fast as he can, and he outruns them. He’s really fast now, and it scares him half to death. He leaps out the window.

He shoots a web, hitting the building, and soon as he starts his swing, the sun sets, like drapes being pulled closed. Complete, pitch darkness.

Then, thunder. It rumbles through the whole arena, and the sky shudders with lightning. A whole new clan of aliens comes out of the rip in the sky, more and more and more, and when Peter looks down, he sees it. Fire, rising out of the ground. And there’s a cannon.

“Shit,” Peter breathes. “Steve, I’m coming! I’m coming!”
Peter knows exactly where Steve is, even in the new darkness. Even with the storm gaining strength. But he has to get there before the fire catches, before it spreads. So much is happening, all at one time. It seems impossible.

But everything’s impossible. Until it isn’t.

He feels like he’s inches from breaking down, inches from falling into a panic and ruining everything, but he keeps going, he swings just as lightning touches down on the street below, electrocuting about ten different aliens and making them fall to the ground. Peter knew he wasn’t gonna get away with flying around here with powers for very long. He knew retaliation would be coming, but it seems like it’s coming swiftly, and in droves.

The rip in the sky just needs to stay open. It has to stay open. They can work around the aliens, and everything else. It just has to stay open.

He runs along the side of the building, flips off into another swing, and then he sees them. Still locked in combat with a group of aliens, right at the edge of the tower. Peter knows he’s gotta get them one by one, that’s the only way this will work. The fire is racing down the street, and it’s coming for them.

He hears another cannon in the distance, and he thinks it might be Harry. Harry, who he left defenseless. It could be him, because Peter doesn’t know who the hell is left out there, and now there’s been two cannons in the past two minutes. Probably because of the fire.

“Goddamnit,” he breathes, because he told himself he didn’t want to lose anybody else, no matter who they are. That was before all this insanity, but he should be more capable now. More capable of saving them—he’s got this strength, these—these new abilities, and he should be saving people. They shouldn’t be dying while he’s like this.

He shoots a longer web, latching higher up on the building and he swings low, swooping down and aiming for whoever he can get his hands on. He sees it’s gonna be Shuri when he flies closer, and he grabs onto her as he swings by. She yelps, hitting him on the side of the head, and then she yelps again when she realizes what’s actually happening. She clings to him, and he holds on.

“What in the world?” she yells, the wind whipping by as he rounds the corner.

He shoots another web, pulling up his legs and trying to go higher. He wants to drop them all off on the fifth floor, where he came out.

“You flying now?” Shuri asks, clutching at his shoulders. “This— whoa— this is really something—”

“Yeah,” Peter says, gritting his teeth. “We’ll talk about it later!” That’s gonna be his new catchphrase.

“Later?” she yells, yelping again when he shoots another web.

“Later!” he yells. He sees the fifth floor coming, and he tries to wind up properly, make them horizontal, and they both fly through the window. He tries to curl around her so she doesn’t land hard, and they roll to a stop.

The aliens immediately converge on them, and Peter shoots as many webs as he can, knocking them...
back. He doesn’t want to waste the webs, he knows he needs them, for this, for leaving, and he hopes to God he made enough. He kicks an alien away, and Shuri quickly backs him up, grabbing onto its weapon. This weapon isn’t one of the laser shooters like he saw before, but it buzzes at the end, like a taser.

Shuri puts it to good use. “Go!” she yells, shocking them, knocking them away. “Get the rest of them!”

“Okay!” Peter yells, hoping she can hold them off. He considers unwebbing the door where the others are, but he runs with such force and forward motion that he barrels right past it, leaping out the window before he can even think about it.

The sky rumbles angrily, lightning striking all over in the distance.

He repeats the same action three more times, and watches as the fire rises, trying to overtake them before Peter gets to them. They get themselves up higher, standing on top of trucks, climbing the walls of the adjacent building, but Peter flies down there and picks them off one by one. Neither one of the women introduce themselves, just latch on once they realize what’s happening, and he deposits them into the middle of the fray on the fifth floor that Shuri is swiftly taking care of.

Peter thought picking up Steve would be more difficult, for obvious reasons, but he’s still able to do it no problem, like nothing, this giant, broad-shouldered dude, and Peter somehow manages to carry him one-armed like he’s a sack of potatoes.

“Um,” Steve says, as they’re swinging up to the fifth floor.

“Hey, man,” Peter says. He expected to be completely knocked out, after doing this four times, against a rising pack of flames and a thundering storm hitting all around them. But he’s only now beginning to be out of breath.

“How are you managing this?” Steve asks, holding onto him and looking at him like he’s grown a second head.

Peter shoots another web, makes sure he gets the swing trajectory that he needs to get them back where they need to go. Steve is heavier than the girls were, so they’re flying different.

“Well, I could always do this,” Peter says, squinting as another rumble of thunder moves through them.

“Oh, you mean the carrying you thing?” Peter asks, shooting another web and flinging them higher into the air. Almost there.

“Yeah,” Steve says, fast with their movement, like someone punched him in the chest. “Yeah. That.”

“Long story,” Peter says, watching as their window comes into view. “Here we go—”

“Here we—”

Steve’s eyes go wide when Peter launches them towards the window, and he’s gotten better at the rolling them in business since this is the fourth time he’s done it. He’s still smaller than Steve, despite the new changes, so he’s not exactly able to curl around him like he did the women, but he holds Steve’s head to his chest as they hit the ground so he doesn’t get knocked around.
He doesn’t hear the normal loud battle noises that were present on all his other hard landings, and he’s glad he’s done with that, because he felt like he was rattling his brain around. He pulls back from Steve, helps him to his feet, and Steve is still looking back at him incredulously as the three women rush at them.

“Are we going up?” the new, younger girl asks. Peter hasn’t gotten her name yet, though he thinks it might be something Williams. She looks like she’s around his age. “Like, heading up, right?”

“The others, where are they?” Steve asks, grabbing Peter’s arm.

“This way,” he says, and starts running. “I webbed ‘em up inside a broom closet or something—”

“Let’s regroup!” Steve says. “Go in there, regroup, just a minute or two—”

Peter blows out a breath. He just wants to get going. The fire, the darkness, the storm, the new aliens, they’re going hard to get him, and he doesn’t even know if they’re trying to leave one of them alive at this point. They’re all grouped together, everyone down below is gone now, he knows it, he can feel it, and they’ve gotta go, they’ve gotta go. They need to be able to talk about this shit out loud, but he can’t sabotage them at this late date—the arena technicians are gonna find out what they’re doing soon enough. Hopefully Bruce has their backs. Hopefully he can protect them long enough to get them out. But, by the state of things—Peter isn’t so sure.

“Okay, regroup,” Peter says, and he rushes them over to the broom closet door. There are a bunch of alien bodies left around, and he hears more rumbling below them. They’re coming.

He reaches the door and rips the webbing off, and the five of them push their way inside. He pulls it shut, sees M’Baku standing in front of MJ and Natasha like he was preparing to fight. But they all three wilt when they see who it really is.

“Thank God,” Natasha and M’Baku say, in unison.

“We’re regrouping,” Peter says, leaning hard against the door, holding it closed. He notices that Shuri is still holding the alien weapon she grabbed off one of them, and it buzzes in her hand.

“I’m Misty Knight,” the taller woman says, brushing her curly hair out of her eyes. “Sorry it took us so long to find you all. I...lost Greg pretty early.”

They nod at her, everyone too exhausted to say much. Peter thinks he remembers Greg. The one some fans kept calling Gravity. He keeps staring at MJ, and he worries that she’s looking at him differently.

“Uh, I’m Riri. Riri Williams. Sorry, shit, this whole thing is absolutely ridiculous and I’m—I’m tired of it. I’m real tired of it.”

“We’re on the same page,” Natasha says.

“I have no idea what happened to Robbie,” Riri says. She shakes her head. “I never even got to see him.”


“Oh,” Riri says, looking at him. “Oh...alright.” She sounds like she wants to say more, but she keeps it to herself.
“I need to know what’s going on with you,” Steve says, turning to Peter. “I—” He looks at the others, and Peter really looks at him, sees the cuts and bruises all over his arms, a long slash across his cheek. “I—he picked me up. Like he picked you up two, but it was—I mean—he shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“We don’t have time,” Peter breathes, shaking his head and closing his eyes. “We don’t. We’ve gotta—we’ve gotta keep going.”

“Say it in thirty seconds,” MJ says, staring at him. “Because I need to know.”

“You already know,” he says, anxiously, holding out his free hand. “I told you, I said it.”

“Share with the class,” Natasha says, staring at him too.

Peter sighs, looking at Misty and Riri, who really have no idea what the hell is going on. He cracks his knuckles against his hip, shaking his head. “I was—I was with Scott Lang, when he got killed. And after that I—I got back to the tower as quick as I could. I was ambushed by this huge group of spiders, I was able to get away from them—but, uh, one stayed on me. It—it bit me, and I—I knew I was dying, I could feel my body shutting down, and it hurt so goddamn bad, it was—it was terrifying and I—everything went dark. I was—I was gone.”

They’re all watching him, gaping.

He looks down at his feet, tearing up, and he angrily scrubs at his eyes. “But then I woke up. I don’t know how long it was. But I—I was different. I was stronger. I ripped a door off its hinges. I was running through these aliens like they were nothing. I punched right through one of the Iron Man suits. I can swing like—it’s like I can fly. It’s not clunky anymore. I’m fast, I’m really fast, and I—I had this weird thing before, where it felt like I could tell when something bad was gonna happen, but now it—it’s ten times bigger. I can tell where danger is, I can run from it, run towards it, feel how bad it is, I’m just—I don’t know why it happened. I don’t know. But it did. I’m different, I’m different, but I’m—I’m alive.”

They look like someone put them on pause. There are tears in MJ’s eyes.

“What’s that—danger alert doing now?” M’Baku asks, slowly.

Peter blows out a breath. “Going crazy. And it’s everywhere. It’s everywhere. We’re—we’re the only ones left.” His guilt is outrageous. A thick sludge in his throat.

There’s a deep sort of silence after that, like they’re all taking it in. Peter thinks about getting out, thinks about the plan, and he wishes he would have been able to get a better look at the rip in the sky, see exactly where the forcefield stops, how close it is to being directly on top of the tower. He has no idea how they’re gonna get up there, it seems so damn far, and he thinks about webbing their way up there, how hard it’ll be. He knows he can carry them, and he imagines carrying all of them at once. He thinks he can probably do it. But the goddamn logistics—he blows out a breath, shaking his head, and his anxiety spiked significantly when he came back, along with everything else.

He thinks about the suits carrying them up there. He knows he can probably take them over with the tablet, and he gasps—all his previous activity, flying around, falling around, landing over and over and over—he did all that, like an idiot, with the backpack on.

He swings it around, quickly unzipping it. He grabs for the tablet, and thankfully, it’s half buried in the space blanket, and not smashed.

“What are you doing?” Steve asks.
Peter’s fingers are shaking, and he drops the backpack to the floor, holding onto the tablet. “I wanna see if we can hack the suits,” he says. “Take ‘em over so they don’t attack us. And maybe, we can, uh, use them.” He glances up at Steve, meets his eyes, and he doesn’t know if he’s saying enough, too much, and he just wishes they could speak freely. His heart is beating so fast, and he realizes he’s not holding the damn door anymore. He reaches back, grabbing onto the handle, and he closes his eyes, trying to breathe.

“Let me,” Shuri says, leaning the weapon against the wall. “Here—”

“Yeah, take it,” Riri says. “Peter, looks like you’re, uh—breaking the corner with your thumb, a little bit.”

Peter’s eyes snap open and he looks, nearly dropping it when he sees the crack. “Dammit,” he whispers, and he pushes it in Shuri’s direction. She takes it, and she and Riri lean over it, getting to work. Peter hears them quietly introduce themselves, and then M’Baku sighs in a heavy rush of breath.

“Well,” M’Baku says. “I don’t know. I believe him. And I’m willing to follow the only one who’s seen beyond the veil of death in this room.”

“Finally,” Shuri says, glancing up at him.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Steve says, putting his hand on Peter’s shoulder. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I thought they were targeting you,” Misty says. “There’s...a lot of Capitol presence, in Five. There were a lot of rumblings about you. I think they’re afraid. And now they definitely must be.”

Peter knows District Five is responsible for powering the entirety of Panem. If they took District Five, they could take the damn Capitol.

“They are,” Natasha pipes in. “They’re afraid of you.”

“And they should be,” Steve says, squeezing his shoulder. He makes a face, like he’s surprised by what he feels under his hand. “Kid, you are different. And I know it must be—a lot.”

“Who would have expected this?” Natasha asks, and there’s softness in her eyes that wasn’t there before. “But you’ve got us.”

“All of us,” Shuri says, looking up from the tablet.

“Hell yeah,” Riri says, giving him a smile. “You’ve got some moves, Parker.”

Peter nods. He doesn’t know if he knows what he’s doing, or if he can control whatever this is that’s been given to him under extreme duress. He doesn’t want to hurt any of them in the final hour, when they’re so close to getting out. He doesn’t want to hurt them by accident. Or screw anything up.

“We’re with you,” Steve says, letting him go.

Peter’s eyes dart over to MJ. She hasn’t said much, and it worries him. Worries him, that she’s looking at him differently, that it all scares her too much. He looks down at his feet, and sees her get up. She smooths her hands over his shoulders and tugs him towards her, hugging him close and tight. It’s strangely intimate, enough to make him blush that she’s holding him like this in front of the rest of them, but life and death speeds things up. He holds her back, tangling his hands in her hair, and he tries to be gentle, because there’s different stuff in his veins now than there was before. And he never
wants to hurt her. Never ever.

He can feel her press a long kiss to his cheek.

“I’m with you,” she whispers, her lips brushing against the shell of his ear. “I’m with you all the way.”

Chills run up and down his spine and he nods, hand tracing down the curve of her back. She pulls away and meets his eyes, still holding onto his shoulders.

“Okay,” Riri says. “I think we’ve—I think we’ve got something here.”

MJ smiles, moving to stand by his side.

“We’ve got ‘em,” Riri says. “Well, they’re waiting for us.”

“Waiting for us?” Natasha asks, walking over to look at the tablet.

“Can’t get them to come inside here,” Shuri says, looking up, furrowing her brows at M’Baku’s narrowed gaze. “It’s all blocked off, when we go a couple layers deep. But they’re waiting for us. On the roof. Three of them.”

“That’ll work,” Peter says, and he knows that, if they don’t already, the Capitol will realize they’re trying something. He hopes to God Bruce is protecting them.

There’s a loud crash of lightning outside, and he sort of doubts it.

“You hold onto the tablet,” Peter says, looking at Shuri. “I don’t wanna break it.”

“Gotcha,” she says, and slips it into her inside jacket pocket.

“Whenever you’re ready, Spider-Man,” Steve says, nodding at him.

Peter bends to get the backpack, tries to find some sense of peace. He doesn’t know where to look, doesn’t know how to grasp it, doesn’t know how to live anywhere near it. But he knows what love feels like. He knows what it sounds like. How it makes him feel.

_I love you, honey. But you’re not gonna die. You’re not gonna die._

*Always be you, buddy. No matter what. Standing out here, standing up there. Always be you._

*I’m rooting for you, man. We all are. Every single day._

*They would do anything to keep something from happening to you. You were the light of their lives._

*But you—Peter, you’re like a son to me. I know you are. I love you like a son, kid, I do, and I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry._

And the way MJ is looking at him now, how her breath felt on the side of his face, how she was holding him just a moment before. He doesn’t know what peace is, he’s never truly felt it, not even in the early days. But these people, some gone, some still here, they’re the reason why he has to keep going. It’s for them. He doesn’t want that love to disappear. He’s felt death, he’s tried to run from it, tried to beg for mercy in the grips of it, and he doesn’t want that love to go with him. Not again. He can’t let it turn into pain. Not anymore. He needs to live _for them._

“Okay,” he breathes. “Let’s go.”
The fire is rising.

They have to outrun it, along with the new legion of aliens, and they watch as it takes over floor after floor, wild and raging and eating up everything in its path. The storm continues to rage outside in the pitch dark, and the lightning only lights things up every time it hits close, and when it does, Peter almost thinks he feels the tower shake. The storm and the fire eradicate all the aliens in their path, shock through the windows and take them down in droves, and Peter can’t tell whether or not they were actually sent by Bruce, or if they were some half-baked, last ditch effort to kill the remaining tributes. He’s just about sure they aren’t even trying for a Victor anymore, and they’re just desperate to end it. With grueling death.

They trip up every set of stairs, shooting and stabbing and knocking aliens back until his bones ache. He runs through them sometimes, hobbling them, and he can hardly stop himself when he starts to get too fast. He doesn’t pull his punches, doesn’t know how to, and he obliterates their faces, kicks through them, and he can hear their bones breaking. He tries to remind himself that they aren’t real, that they’re created for the Games with no thoughts or feelings, but he doesn’t like how it feels, running through them so easily. He’s afraid of how he looks, to his family on the outside. He doesn’t want them to be afraid of him, the way he’s afraid of himself.

It’s the same bullshit, over and over again on every floor, and Peter keeps looking up, over the railings to see how far they’ve got to go. He could web up there, easily, he knows it, but he can’t leave the rest of them behind. He just makes sure MJ stays by his side. He makes sure she stays close, and he keeps counting.

On the 18th floor the ground starts crumbling beneath their feet as they run, and Peter grabs MJ’s arm, shoving her forward. His heart is skipping beats, because if they fall, they fall into the fire.

“Shit, shit,” Riri yells, behind him.

They’re close to the stairwell, so close, but not close enough, the ground just collapsing as they go, and Peter pushes MJ up onto the stairs, hearing the crashing and aliens wailing as the ground comes down on them, as the fire eats them alive.

They all make it, they all leap onto the stairwell as the floor disappears—except Shuri. She’s a little too far behind, and Peter hears M’Baku exclaim behind him as they watch her fall, the ground crumbling under her final steps. The fire is still rising, and it’s coming, coming to collect her.

Peter feels like he’s gonna be sick, he feels like he’s gonna be fucking sick, and he has to do something.

He throws himself down at the edge of the stairs, half hanging into the new empty space, and he shoots a web, his heart in his throat. It latches onto her wrist and she stops falling, abruptly, and he watches as the fire ignites, swallowing the wayward aliens below and getting higher, higher. She’s still holding onto the alien weapon with her free hand, and she looks down at what’s coming,breathing hard.

“Hold onto his feet!” Steve yells, and Peter feels them all leap at him, holding him firmly in place.

He grits his teeth and yanks at the web, tugging her back up as fast as he can. He can hear them all silently praying behind him, whispered c’mon c’mon’s, and Shuri groans, looking up at him with wild eyes as he keeps pulling and pulling and pulling. Finally, she gets her arms around his shoulders, nearly knocking him in the head with the weapon, and the rest of them haul him to his
feet. He nearly falls over, trying to regain his footing on the stairs, and all of their hands are on them, steadying them again.

Shuri pulls back, looks like she’s gonna say something, but M’Baku pulls her towards him.

“Never again, girl,” he says, urging her up the stairs in front of him. “Never again.”

“Okay, okay,” she mutters. “Thank you, Peter!”

“Uh huh, uh huh,” Peter says, motioning for them all to keep going. The fire’s coming. It’s too damn close. He doesn’t know if it’ll even stop for them on the goddamn roof. He hopes so, he really hopes so. He has to hold onto hope.

They stay in a huddled group after that, and there are more aliens waiting for them on the next floor. This is never-ending, it’s never-ending, and one of the aliens is able to knock him across the face while he’s distracted by his own panic. He reacts in kind, elbowing it backwards, too much anger in his movements.

“How many damn floors is this thing?” MJ yells, ducking out of the way when one of them tries to get at her.

Peter kicks it away, knocking three more down in the process.


Peter feels the heat of the fire rising through the ground, and he’s nervous the floor is gonna collapse again. They reach the stairwell and he looks up, and it looks like—there’s only one more. “One more!” he yells, voice shrill and panicky but laced with a new kind of excitement and nervousness. “One more, one more!”

He picks up the pace after that, but tries not to leave them in the dust. He goes too fast now, way too fast, and he can hardly put on the brakes. They all slam up the stairs, loud and hard, and Peter races onto the landing, ready for a fight.

There’s nothing. Nothing.

Once they’re all past the stairs Peter peers over the railing and watches the aliens trying to run after them get consumed by the fire. He stumbles back, his heart in his throat, but the fire—stops. Rages and rages, right near the top of the stairs. But it doesn’t climb any higher.

Then the stairs themselves sink, right into the ground, and the fire disappears from view as the floor molds over itself, like there was never a set of stairs there to begin with. Peter breathes hard, staring down at the space, and he doesn’t know what the hell this means.

“Hope we didn’t need anything down there,” M’Baku says.

“There it is, look,” Steve says. Peter looks back at him, follows his line of sight, and sees a door, at the end of the landing. It’s labeled ROOF ACCESS. The walls are pure windows all the way around, and instead of little enclaves and doors and hallways, glass rooms and everything else to simulate this is a real, working building in some world somewhere, the top floor landing is empty, like one of the many large, echoing factory buildings that were abandoned along the edges of Twelve. It reminds Peter of all the time he and Ned spent in there as kids, huddled together in a makeshift tent, howling and chirping and listening to how their noises bounced off the walls.

He’s so close to being with his family again. So close he can feel it.
He can see the storm raging outside, lightning striking all around them, the thunder following. Peter still thinks he feels the tower sway, and he wonders if, right in the end, the whole thing could fall down.

“Okay, let’s...let’s keep it at a jog,” MJ says, breathing hard, and they’re all huffing and puffing like that, nodding in agreement. Peter nods too, although he’s barely out of breath. It almost seems unfair.

That’s when he hears it.

Soft, at first. Far away.

Peter’s heart beats fast, and he feels exposed. Alone. “Does anyone else hear that?” he whispers. He feels like he should be running. There’s too much danger here for this new full brain and body alert system to be doing its job properly, but since he woke back up, it’s really been able to pinpoint—moving him from place to place. Towards someone that needs help, or away from potential danger.

This feels like everywhere.

“Hear what?” MJ asks, by his side.

“I don’t hear anything…” Steve trails off. “Do you have super hearing now, too? With everything else?”

Peter doesn’t answer him, because he’s starting to make out the words. The voice.

“Peter!” May screams. “Peter—oh god, help me!” She wails, and it’s agonizing.

Peter takes a stilted step forward, his heart clenching. He knows it’s not real, he knows it’s not. It can’t be.

“I hear it,” MJ says, and she takes his hand. “Peter, it’s not—”

“MJ, PLEASE! PLEASE, DON’T LET THEM HURT ME—”

MJ stops in her tracks, her face falling. It was a young girl’s voice, and he has to assume that it was her sister. The voice mixes with May’s in the air, and they both get louder.


“Tasha, please make them stop. Please, baby, please, it hurts too much—”

Natasha looks shaken too, stealing a quick look at Steve.

“Let’s go,” Peter says. The voices get louder, and more start speaking, all laced with pain and suffering. It sounds like they’re being tortured. They’re begging for help. “Let’s go, let’s go.”

As soon as they break into a run, the voices are put on blast—men, women, children, all screaming, calling out familiar names, crying out in anguish.

“Shuri, stay back, don’t touch her—”

“M’Baku, please, please—”

“Misty, I can’t breathe, I can’t—I can’t move—”

“Steve, help me. God, it hurts.”
Each voice is like knives, all over him, and their group is screaming too, wincing against it. There’s something about it that’s visceral, like every time they blink it’s happening behind their eyes, the torture of their loved ones, something tearing them apart, something electrocuting them, something, some shadowy something choking them to death.

The screaming only gains volume as they run, and Peter can hear May’s voice, Ned’s voice, Tony’s and it’s agonizing, agonizing pain. He plugs up his ears, pressing the heels of his palms down hard to try and drown it all out, and he yells out loud, anything, anything to stifle it, stifle the voices, all the hurt, and it sounds so goddamn real. Peter feels like he’s gonna throw up, feels like he’s gonna collapse, because they’re hurting them, they’re fucking hurting them, he knows it, he can feel it, he can hear it, every goddamn excruciating moment—

He means to pull his hands away from his ears when he reaches the door, he really does, but instead he slams forward and blows right through it, stumbling into a smaller room with a winding stairwell.

He hits the wall, the door crumbling beside him, dented in the middle where Peter hit it. The screaming threatens to follow them, and Peter ushers everyone else by him, huddling against the wall and wincing. Tony screams in agony, and Peter rushes up the stairs behind Steve, hoping to get away. He just needs to get away.

They all slam up the stairs, which are short, rusty, slippery, everything to try and hurt them right here at the end. Natasha goes through the door to the roof first, and they all quickly follow. Once they’re out in the darkness, in the night, Peter shoves the door closed, shutting all the voices out.

He’s finally able to breathe. He leans over, bracing his hands on his knees.

“Jesus,” Riri says. “I’m never—gonna stop hearing that.”

He hears her breathing, and then he hears her gasp. He looks up, and sees her staring at the three suits—hovering there and waiting for them.

It hits Peter. Makes him realize where he is. Where they all are. He looks up, and sees the forcefield where the aliens are still coming down, but not so much in droves anymore, just one here and there. The forcefield itself shoots down from the rip in the sky, stopping just above their heads. Maybe twenty or so feet away. He watches as the aliens follow the watery green line, so obvious to him now that he knows where it is, and they rush out of it where it ends, flying off into the distance. The whole thing might as well be highlighted. It’s the length of the rip, forcefields on both sides. That’s it. That’s how they gotta get out.

Peter looks around. There are none of them up here—there are a few, blinking blue beacons at the far edge of the roof, which really helps in all this darkness. He moves over towards the edge and looks over the railing—the fire is high, exactly where it stopped inside. It’s consuming the whole damn world. There are no stars overhead, just splintering lightning, looming clouds, and the purple gray dusk of the rip, to differentiate it from the sky itself.

Lightning hits again a little ways off, and the thunder rolls through ominously.

The Capitol theme starts playing, startling him, and their logo shows up in the sky.

“Wait a minute,” MJ says, stepping closer to Peter, entwining her hand with his. “Wait. Wait. Are you—are you gonna be in the sky?” she asks, her voice shaking. “Because I can’t. I can’t see that.”

“I’m right here,” he whispers, squeezing her hand. “Okay? It doesn’t matter.”

MJ shakes her head, breathing harder, and their group shifts closer together as another lightning
strike hits, this time, closer to the tower. Peter braces himself, doesn’t know if he’s gonna see his own face or not, and he remembers what it was like to see his own grave in Beck’s illusion. Maybe this’ll be like that.

Instead of the fallen tributes, Stane’s face is projected in the sky instead.

Peter feels like the air gets knocked out of him.

“Why, hello, to my remaining tributes,” Stane says, grinning, tilting his head at them. “You’ve come so far, gone through so much. Some more than others.”

He seems to look directly at Peter, and he’s got that same glint in his eye that he had in the office. Peter feels transported back to that moment, except now he’s not protected. He doesn’t have Tony shielding him.

“Alliances don’t usually last this long,” Stane says, shaking his head, and from his background, it looks like he’s in his mansion. Not in arena headquarters, making decisions. So they should be safe. He might not know yet. He might not know. “But the fire is rising slowly,” Stane keeps on. “A lot slower now, than it was before. Agonizing, wasn’t it? That’ll kill anybody. Anybody can burn to death.”

Peter looks over, and catches Steve’s eye. He looks wary. This is sort of unprecedented, they both know it. But a lot of things about these Games are unprecedented.

“I’ve seen it up close,” Stane says, nodding to himself. “Recently. Just a few minutes ago, in fact. Your own dear Mentors. Yes, we gathered them all up, set the flames loose, and it was—well, the stench, it was...it was particularly bad. Particularly bad.”

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Peter feels cold, and he sways, his heart in his throat. He loses focus, can’t—can’t look at him anymore. Can’t listen to what he’s saying. Not if he’s saying things like this.

“Tony screamed the most, Mr. Parker,” Stane says. “Just thought you should know that. Suffered the most, out of all of them. Janet, she almost—she almost seemed to welcome it, but Thor and Carol fought a lot. That’s to be expected.”

Peter almost gags, and he’s trembling, blinking back tears. His brain runs on autopilot, and he can’t hear another word, he can’t hear one more. He stalks over to Shuri, and meets her eyes, sees all the pain shining there.

“Shuri,” he croaks. “Can I have that thing? That alien weapon thing?”

Her mouth opens but she doesn’t say anything, and she looks down at it like she forgot she was gripping it so tightly. She holds it out to him, and he takes it, nodding at her. It buzzes, vibrating with power.

Another round of lightning sparks, shooting across Stane’s face.

“So, whichever one of you comes back,” Stane says. “It’ll be to a new world. A new generation of Victors—”

He keeps talking, but Peter can’t hear. His anger is screaming at him, blaring in his ears like bloody static. He positions himself at the edge of the roof, and he can see the fire. He can feel the flames, and imagines what Stane said. He has to be lying. He has to be lying.

Another lightning strike.
Peter aims the weapon, and watches as it buzzes and sparks at the pointy end. He reels back, putting his all into it, all his new strength and focus, and he vaults the weapon up into the sky. He doesn’t know how far the edge of the dome is from where they are, but they’re high up, so they’ve gotta be pretty close.

A moment later it hits, just as another storm cloud spits out two strings of lightning. The weapon was loaded with electricity, and when it makes contact with the dome, it explodes, something massive and loud and too bright, making all of them stumble back, shielding their eyes. Stane’s face blips out, and Peter hears what sounds like powering down, everywhere, all over the place. He looks back up and the rip stays open, but the forcefield shudders. No more aliens come. The ones that were still flying around go down, ricocheting off each other and exploding down in the fire. The dome buzzes with electricity in the spot where the weapon hit, revealing a curved grid that shows itself before quickly covering up with sky again.

“Jesus Christ,” Steve says. “I think you took the network down.”

“I didn’t think it would hit,” M’Baku says, gaping up at the sky. “I didn’t—well, I should have known better. You’re Spider-Man.”

Peter breathes hard, blinking away his tears.

“We’ve still got the suits,” Riri says, pointing up at them. “They’re still there, they’re still up.”

“Peter, he was lying,” Steve says. “He was lying.”

“I think the cameras are down,” Natasha says. “I don’t think they’re seeing us.”

“How do you know?” Misty asks her.

Their conversation dies out in Peter’s ears like Stane’s monologuing did a moment before, and he’s so dizzy, he feels like he’s gonna pass out. He keeps picturing Tony burning. In horrific pain. He bends over again, bracing his hands on his knees.

“Peter,” MJ says. She’s close to him on one side, and Steve is on the other, a hand on his shoulder.

“He’s lying,” Steve says again. “He’s trying to break us apart, right here at the end. He didn’t know our plan, he thinks we’ll turn on each other right here. He’s trying to make us go crazy. But we won’t, right? We won’t let him do that to us.”

“Don’t talk...about the plan out loud,” Peter breathes, squeezing his eyes shut tight.

“The network is down, Peter,” Shuri calls. “I can see it, on the tablet. All the cameras are down. The dome is weak, we’ve—we’ve gotta go now, while we have a chance.”

“He’s not dead,” MJ whispers. “He’s not. None of them are. He just wants to scare us, but he can’t scare us, right?”

Peter swallows hard, trying to gear himself up. He keeps falling into those hard moments—the reaping, Stane’s office, that room, with the spider. His panic tries to place him there, tries to paralyze him. But he tries to listen to MJ and Steve. Tony’s not dead. He’s not dead.

There’s a rumbling that has nothing to do with the storm. They all look up—it sounds like a crash, coming from above. Crash, crash, crash.

“I think that’s them,” Natasha says. “Us. Our people. We’ve gotta go. We’ve gotta get up there.”
MJ rubs Peter’s back, fast, and he nods to himself. *He’s not dead, he’s not dead, he’s not dead.*

“Okay,” Peter says, straightening up, ignoring how fast his heart is beating. “Uh, Shuri, Riri, can you—give the suits trajectories? Can you tell them to go up there?”

“Think so,” Riri says, and she and Shuri lean over the tablet again. “Yeah, look—there we go. Okay, yeah. We’ve got it.”

Peter looks up. The forcefields are still holding strong, and Peter follows them up to the rip. He has no idea what’s up there, once they go through. But Bruce knows what he’s doing. Peter has to believe that.

There’s another crash that shakes the whole dome.

“I’ll swing up first, with MJ,” Peter says. “You guys follow behind me once I’m in between the forcefields.”

He doesn’t know how to build himself up to this. He doesn’t know how to take these final steps, that they’ve been leading up to since the moment they got out of those tubes.

He thinks about Ben. All those years that he had him. He was stalwart, he was supportive, he never, ever gave up on Peter. No matter what he was trying to do. No matter who he was trying to be.

*Who are you, buddy? Who are you!? You’re Peter Parker, that’s who! Parkers can do anything. You can do anything you set your mind to.*

He touches his Iron Man pin, and tries to find some strength.

“Okay,” Peter whispers, trying to calm his heart. “Okay, okay. MJ?”

“Right here,” she says, close to him.

He wraps his arm around her middle and tugs her against him, hoping against hope he can keep his hold on the way up. “Just hold onto me,” he says, nodding at her. “Tight as you can.”

“Okay,” she says, eyes wide, pressing her lips together in a thin line.

He looks over at the others, as Riri sets commands on the tablet to bring the suits down closer.

“I’m really glad the network’s down and Tony isn’t watching this,” she says, as she climbs onto one of the slimmer suits, wrapping its right arm around her. “Not how I wanted him to notice me.”

She’s talking about him like he’s alive. *Because he is Because he is.*

Peter focuses. Aims. He shoots his web, takes a running jump and pulls himself and MJ up, up, and for a horrifying moment he doesn’t think he’ll make it, that they’ll fall short, the web will break, they’ll fall and fall until the fire consumes them. But he hears Ben’s voice in his ears, Tony’s, May’s, Ned’s, feels MJ’s own trusting grip on his shoulders, and he pushes himself farther than he thought he could go. He pulls his legs back, and launches them up there, until he sticks directly to one of the inside walls of the forcefield. Peter breathes hard, and he was afraid there would be a shock, they
hadn’t really been able to discuss it, but there’s nothing—it’s just like touching a strange, invisible wall. Bruce took care of it.

He’s in the middle of the sky. The night’s all around him.

“Oh God,” MJ breathes, clutching at him.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he says, trying to calm her down and himself too. “I’ve got you, I’ve got you.”

He shoots another web, a little higher this time on the other side, and leaps over, pulling himself up. He sticks there too. He looks over his shoulder, breathing hard, and sees them coming up with the suits, slowly and surely—Nat and Steve tucked under the arms of the bulkier one, M’Baku and Shuri with the red and gold one that was chasing Peter earlier, and Misty and Riri with an all gold one with longer arms.

Peter tries to focus, and he feels crazy, displaced, like he’s not really inhabiting his own body right now, like this isn’t him, he isn’t here. He looks up at the gaping maw in the sky and it’s all deep and dark inside, and he’s afraid. Afraid to breach that darkness, afraid to let it touch him, because this could still be a trick. This could still fail.

But it’s all they have. And that banging—he still hears it. Loud, over and over, above them. They’re getting closer to it. That’s them. The people coming to get them out.

He holds tight to MJ’s waist, and crawls up the side of the forcefield as easily as he can. It’s fucking unnerving, the darkness all around him, how he’s essentially climbing up nothing midair. He focuses on the ripples, the green spots, remembers Tony teaching him about the forcefields, and tries to live in that moment, tries to let it fuel him.

He shoots another web towards the opposite side, and keeps going. He’s so afraid, so damn scared, and he can barely breathe. He has to be strong for MJ. He can’t let her see. He wonders what would happen if he shot a web directly into the rip in the sky, where it would go, what it would latch onto. It feels like this is going on forever, and he tries to get into a groove, swinging back and forth, back and forth, until he feels MJ’s hands digging into his shoulders tighter.

“You okay?” he asks, stopping for a moment on the left forcefield. He looks over his shoulder again, and the other six are still coming.

“Are we close?” she asks, pressing her forehead to his temple.

He looks up again, and whenever he does that the gravity of all this hits him, distracts him, nearly makes him let go. The storm clouds are all around them, and the edges of the rip in the sky are shimmering and purple, tendrils moving in and out around the circumference. Peter shivers.

“Yes,” he says, though he can’t really tell. He doesn’t want her to be afraid.

His heart rattles, skips beats, and he shoots more webs along the side he’s on, climbing like he’s on a ladder. His left boot slips and he shutsters a little bit, slipping, and MJ yelps, burying her face in his shoulder.

“Shit, shit,” Peter mutters, regaining his footing. “Sorry, sorry. I’ve been sticking through my shoes but sometimes it’s a little off.”

“It’s okay,” she says, but she doesn’t look up. “Just get up there.”

“I think we’re almost there!” Shuri calls, from close behind. “Keep going.”
The banging is moving the whole world now, and the rip is getting bigger as they get closer. He’s stronger now, faster, different, but his arms and legs are straining, and he’s not used to the sticking to shit thing, so he keeps doubting it. They’re about twenty feet from the rip now, and he stares up at it, and he can hear the suits hovering close behind.

“Peter?” Steve calls.

Peter doesn’t answer. He just aims his webshooter up at the rip, and lets the web fly. He breathes hard through his mouth, watching it, and then he feels it go taut. Feels it latch.


“Oh God,” MJ groans.

She takes a tighter grip, wrapping her legs around his middle. Peter pushes off the forcefield, letting them hover there in midair, only held up by the single web he’s holding onto. He tentatively lets go of her, when he’s sure she’s not gonna fall, and he reaches up with his other hand and starts to pull them up. He doesn’t have enough room to launch them up, with the forcefield the way it is, and he pulls and he pulls, like he used to with the ropes in physical education, way back when. One hand after the other, one hand after the other.

The darkness of the rip closes in, and he feels like he hears a rushing sound, in tune with the ever-present banging coming from above. He sucks in a breath as they get closer, closer, and he closes his eyes as they delve into the rip, moving right through it. He doesn’t know what he was expecting, thick void, the world turning on its head, but it consumes them, and then—he pulls them right up into somewhere different.

He opens his eyes and quickly regrets it, because of all the brightness, all the white. It looks like the rafters of a large warehouse, and the web itself is attached to the curved top of the dome. There’s another hard hit from above and it makes them move on the web, and he pulls them up a little bit more, swaying them forward so he can step down on hard linoleum.

“Whoa,” he says, holding onto MJ again, who is still in a fetal position, wrapped around him.

“Are we on solid ground?” she asks. “Are we—”

There’s another hard crash above, and when he looks up, he sees the dome is cracking. He really hopes Natasha is right, and whoever’s up there is a good guy. “We are,” he whispers, touching her side. She quickly gets down, rubbing her eyes, and he doesn’t have time to check on her how he wants to. He takes the few steps towards the edge of the rip, just in time for the suit carrying Misty and Riri to shoot through the hole.

It flies up and hits the top of the dome, and both of them fall off, crashing down hard. Peter and MJ rush over, and both women look up incredulously, blinking at the new brightness.

“What the hell?” Misty says, looking all around.

“I’ll help them,” MJ says, touching Peter’s arm. “Go over and make sure the rest of them get up here.”

“Okay,” Peter breathes, glancing up to see the Iron Man suit still hovering there above them.

There’s another crash above as he rushes over, and a beam falls down, collapsing a few feet away from them. Peter stumbles with the shock of it, and he nearly trips back into the goddamn hole. Shuri and M’Baku come through next, and their landing is a little bit better—only M’Baku falls off, and
Shuri is able to touch down gracefully as the second suit joins the first. Peter looks at them, worried they’re going to turn on them again.

Steve and Nat are a little further behind, and Peter watches, breathing hard through his mouth. Another hard hit, and three more beams fall, the crack in the dome getting wider.

Peter watches, horrified, as the lights on Steve and Nat’s suit go out, the whole thing shutting down. They start to fall as it careens down away from them, and Peter throws himself down at the edge of the rip, shooting a web with each hand. Nat catches hers but the second one flies through Steve’s hands, and Peter quickly shoots another, his heart dropping. There’s another hit to the dome and he hears what sounds like—a hovercraft. And shooting.

The second web latches onto Steve’s chest, stopping his fall abruptly.

“Hold onto his feet, like before!” MJ yells.

“Let’s pull him backwards,” M’Baku says, as Peter grits his teeth, pulling and pulling, drawing Steve and Natasha up. He feels M’Baku, MJ, Misty and Riri all grab onto him, and they haul him to his feet, all groaning and cursing as one. Peter’s arms shake as they pull him up, and they drag him backwards, farther and farther as he keeps pulling.

Finally finally Steve and Natasha come into view, latching onto the edge of the rip just as there’s another hard hit from outside.

That’s definitely shooting, and the sound of a hovercraft’s engine.

Everyone rushes over, pulling Natasha and Steve up, tugging them away from the hole.

“Sorry about that,” Steve says, breathing hard.

“’s okay,” Peter says, ripping the web away from Steve’s chest.

That’s when the top of the dome breaks, splitting open. They all take cover in a huddled group together as the rest of the beams topple down, part of the dome itself dropping down and landing with a hard thud. There’s a hovercraft there, and its ramp platform door slams open. Someone else is absolutely shooting at the craft, and they’re shooting back, barely fitting in the small opening they made.

Peter knows they’re here to save them. If they weren’t, he’d feel it, and they would have already blasted them to kingdom come. He blinks up, worrying about how far they are—it isn’t much, he knows he could jump it, but the rest of them wouldn’t be able to.

He stops thinking entirely when Bucky goddamn Barnes sticks his head out of the opening and tosses down a rope.

He feels like he’s hallucinating, and they all stare. Bucky’s dead. Bucky’s dead, Bucky’s dead, they all watched him die. The whole country watched him die. He yells something but they can’t hear him over all the shooting and engine sounds, and he still has his metal arm. He motions with it, for them to come closer, and Peter feels like he’s gonna pass out. He saw that arm in Stane’s office, but—he’s—he’s right here—

Peter died. He knows he did. So something—something’s going on. There’s a reason for this. All of it.

He tries to key back in.
“Go!” Peter yells, pushing the group forward. He’ll get them all up there first. Then he’ll go, once they’re all safe.

The shooting rumbles through the rafters, the hovercraft striking back, from somewhere they can’t see. The whole thing shakes. The hovercraft rams into the hole it made in the dome, trying to make it bigger, and their group moves forward. Shuri goes first, grabbing onto the rope, and Bucky pulls her up to safety, quick and efficient. Riri is next, then Misty, and they repeat the action until MJ and Peter are the only ones left.

“Go,” he says, hand on her lower back, urging her forward. He’s annoyed she even waited this long, if only to stay with him.

Her brows furrow as she looks at him, worry in her eyes, and he gives her another light push. She grabs onto the newly lowered rope, and Peter watches as Bucky tugs her up like all the rest.

Peter’s about to shoot a web, get himself up there on his own, when something hits the hovercraft, hard, pushing it further into the space and rocking the whole dome. Peter stumbles back, two steps too far, and before he even knows it he’s toppling backwards, directly into the rip in the sky.

He hasn’t felt fear quite like this before, and his horror overtakes him for a second too long—he lets himself fall, rocketing through darkness and back into the stormy world he’s trying so hard to escape. Then he finds his focus, breathing hard through his mouth, and he shoots a web, aiming at the ramp of the hovercraft, getting farther away with every second. He watches it fly in slow motion, and he isn’t sure it’s gonna catch, he didn’t aim right, he isn’t gonna make it—

Tony rushes out of the inside of the craft, leaning down and grabbing onto the web before it misses its target. It goes taut and Peter holds on for dear life, pure relief and elation running through him because Tony is here, Tony’s alive, all of the rest of them are holding onto him as he pulls Peter to safety. Peter closes his eyes for just a moment, letting himself be drawn in, two tears streaming down his face, and he sucks in a wavering breath, opening them to find that Tony is actually there. He’s there, he’s there, he’s still there. He’s saving him.

Peter reaches up to pull too, climbing up the web as they draw him in, and Tony reaches for him with his free hand when he gets close. Peter reaches back, and he’s almost there, he’s almost there, inches from the edge of the ramp—

An explosion hits, fire and debris and parts of the dome falling everywhere, and the hovercraft tilts, veering dangerously.

Peter tries to hold on, and he barely brushes Tony’s fingertips with his own before something hits him in the head. Darkness overtakes him.

~

He wakes up to quiet. Someone talking softly. A hand holding his own. He doesn’t wanna open his eyes yet, because his head is pounding, and even the smallest bit of light is too much, blaring like fire. He’s seen enough fire to last him a lifetime. No more fire ever.

Peter groans, wincing. Everything fucking hurts, especially his head and his arm. And he has no idea where he is.

“Peter,” MJ says, and she squeezes his hand tighter. He can feel her touching his face, cupping his cheek. It feels nice. He doesn’t really get moments like this, and he wonders what’s coming to screw it up.
“Is Bucky actually alive?” Peter croaks, scrunching up his nose. “Or am I dead again?”

“He’s alive,” MJ says. “We’re with him, and, uh, three other men, from District Thirteen. We’re heading there, but we had to go the long way so the Capitol couldn’t—take down the cloaking from their stations in the Districts. We’re over the ocean now, I don’t—I don’t know how long it’ll be. They took all the trackers out of our arms. We got away, Peter. We got away. We got out of the arena.”

He opens his eyes.

They’re—they’re on the hovercraft. It’s all metal and hard, no windows, like before, but it looks like they’re on an upper level that’s more spacious than the one that brought Peter over to the arena.

His heart goes cold, and he looks around. MJ, right next to him, holding his hand, brushing his hair back. Natasha, Misty and Riri on a cot a few feet away. Steve and M’Baku, sitting in two seats attached to the wall. Shuri, with a tablet close to a door, on the other wall.

There’s someone missing.

“Where’s Tony?” Peter asks, grimacing as he sits up.

MJ looks nervous.

“MJ, where’s Tony?” Peter asks, getting too loud. He knew he was there. He knew he was. He was saving him, he was there to get him out.

Peter looks around when she doesn’t answer, and he clamors to his feet. There’s a white bandage wrapped around a spot on his arm, and he rubs at it absentmindedly. His tracker. They got them out. Bucky’s alive. Where’s Tony?

“Peter,” Shuri says, putting her tablet aside and standing up. “He—in the explosion—”

Peter’s eyes immediately fill with tears and he shakes his head. “Where is he?” he asks. “Where is he?”

“He’s alive,” Steve says, standing up too. “He’s alive, he’s just—”

“He’s just what?” Peter asks, barely able to latch onto he’s alive while there’s a caveat, and he looks around wildly at all of them, staring at him with strange sympathy.

MJ touches him again and he jumps, but she takes his hand all the same. “In here,” she says, softly, and she leads him towards the far door. His heart is hammering against his chest, a pure panic, and he has to bend a little bit to get inside. MJ doesn’t follow, and Peter’s world narrows down when he sees what’s inside.

Tony’s laying on a cot, eyes closed, and there’s something—in his chest. Something small, circular, connected up to what looks like a large battery sitting on a table beside him. There are rags and rags of blood in a nearby trash bin, nearly overflowing. There’s a doctor there, a tall, elegant-looking woman who turns when Peter walks in, and her face immediately softens when she sees it’s him, as if she’s been warned of his reaction to all this.

“Peter,” she says, quiet.

“What—what happened?” Peter asks, and he sounds like a child. He’s afraid to get closer, but he approaches all the same. There’s an actual hole in Tony’s goddamn chest where the round thing is.
hole. In his chest. Peter feels like he’s withering away. Like he’s broken inside. This can’t be happening. Not to Tony. Peter can’t take it.

“*In the explosion,*” the woman starts, “*Tony got hit. There was a lot of shrapnel, I removed as much as I could, but there’s still a lot left, heading into his atrial septum. What I did here—this is an electromagnet, hooked up to a car battery. It’s keeping the shrapnel from entering his heart. It’s all I could come up with on short notice, but when we get back to Thirteen, we’ll be able to manage it. I promise.*”

Peter sucks in a trembling breath and nods, his throat tight and painful. He feels like there’s too much darkness at the edges of his eyes, trying to sink its claws into him. There’s a chair beside the cot and he tugs it over, listening to the way it drags against the metal ground. He sits down, takes Tony’s hand in his both of his own, and wills him to wake up. He needs him to sit up, right now. Say something. Hold Peter close. Yell at him, chastise him, anything. Anything but lay there, like he is.

Peter closes his eyes, bracing his forehead on his knuckles.

He knows Tony got hurt pulling him into the hovercraft. He knows it. This is his fault. The two of them took the brunt of the explosion—*explosions,* because there were probably more—but Peter’s got powers now. He’s—different. He’s barely got a scratch on him. Tony must have known. He had to have seen. And yet, still. He put his life on the line for him. He put himself in danger. And now look what’s happened.

Peter’s mind is moving a mile a minute, too many things to focus on, too many things to sort.

Tony’s hurt, he’s hurt *really fucking bad,* and he’s not awake. He’s not waking up.

If they escaped, everyone is in danger.

Everyone.

The districts—the families. May, Ned. Everyone in Twelve.

What will Stane do? He’s clearly aware they’re out, considering the goddamn explosions and fighting back. Will he be able to find them? Will be able to take Thirteen down again? What will he do with them when he gets his hands on them? Will he cut Peter’s head off while he’s alive? Torture the others first, make him watch?

Peter’s fear is drowning him.

He feels someone come up behind him, and he knows it’s not the woman. He just knows it’s MJ, from the way she moves. She smooths her hand over his shoulder, and it makes tears spring to his eyes again. Everything is gonna set him off.

“Um,” he says, voice breaking, and he doesn’t look at her. “Uh, do you know if—our families, uh—do you know if—anyone, uh—”

“Janet went off with a team to Twelve,” MJ says. “A few others went to the other Districts, but Bucky said they...they lost contact with them before they grabbed us. So we’re just gonna have to...wait it out, and see when we get to Thirteen.” She clears her throat, and he knows she knows that’s just worse news compounded on top of everything.

May could be gone. Ned too. He could have lost them already and he doesn’t even know it. They escaped the arena, all eight of them, and that kind of moment—Peter thought he would be celebrating. He thought they’d be popping bottles of champagne, screaming from the rooftops. They
made it, they’re out, but everything hangs in the balance unlike he ever expected.

He didn’t think about it hard enough, before. He was naive, stupid. He deserved to stay dead in that fucking arena.

He bows his head, pressing his forehead to the back of Tony’s hand. He needs his guidance right now. He needs him.

“Wake up, please,” Peter whispers. “Please wake up.”
Peter waits for more explosions that don’t come. He waits for them to crash, waits for the hovercraft to fail. But none of it happens. They’ve all got the same mark on their arms from when Doctor Cho took out the trackers, but when Peter finally checks under the bandage, his is all but gone. The few stray scratches he had on his face are fading too, and he thinks some kind of advanced healing must go along with...everything else he’s got going on, now.

He stares at Tony. Watches that thing in his chest, wondering if it hinders his breathing. He’s wearing an oxygen mask now, Doctor Cho thought it’d be best. It just felt like another defeat to Peter. He holds onto his hand and tries to transfer his life force, tries to give him some of his excess strength. Doctor Cho seems optimistic, but Peter can’t find any optimism within him. Tony was always talking, even when he didn’t want to. And now he’s not. Now he’s lying here, with an electromagnet in his chest. He’s so pale. He looks like he’s dead.

Peter finds out the arena was built in District Two, near the water, and after six long hours of flying, they arrive in District Thirteen. The hovercraft goes deep underground, deeper than they did when they arrived at the arena, and he holds onto Tony’s hand like a lifeline, terror running through his veins. They still haven’t heard from the rescue leaders, including Janet, and if Peter has to hear that May’s dead, after all this, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to make it through it.

Peter feels them land. Feels the engine stop. He takes a quick look at MJ, and feels panic taking hold within him. He knows they’re gonna take Tony, and he knows he’s not gonna be able to go with him—they’re gonna do surgery, they’re gonna try to make things better than they are now, and they don’t need any distractions. Peter is afraid of what he’ll do, because he thinks he might cling, break down, freak out. He’s on the edge, he’s on the precipice of something awful, because so many things are happening at once and he has no fucking clue how to approach it all.

He’s sixteen years old. He doesn’t wanna do this anymore.

The door opens, and Bucky walks inside, another man pushing a gurney behind him. Peter feels crazy every time he looks at Bucky, and from what he’s heard, he’s gonna feel even crazier once they start to mix with the population of Thirteen.

Peter squeezes Tony’s hand between both of his own. He blows out a wavering breath, his heart beating faster. MJ stands behind him, and she puts a calming hand on his shoulder. He tries to feed off that energy, but he’s having a hard time when he sees the look on Bucky’s face.

Peter knows Bucky and Tony know each other, or—knew each other, and were close last year. He looks like he’s hurting over what’s happening to Tony too. “We’re gonna take him, kid. He’ll be in our hospital wing, fifth floor, and once he’s out of surgery we’ll come find you.”

Peter swallows hard, nodding. But he hasn’t let go of Tony’s hand yet. He approaches him, tries not to look at the thing in his chest, and he blinks away tears. Tony’s face shouldn’t be slack like this, still. “Just—just wake up,” Peter croaks. “Okay? I need you to wake up.” He nods, trying to convince himself that Tony can hear him.

Then he lets go.
He falls into himself after that, like he’s watching from deep inside the recesses of his own head. MJ holds his hand, leans her head on his shoulder, and they load Tony onto the gurney and take him away, Doctor Cho following in his wake. MJ leads Peter out of the room, and if she wasn’t pulling him along, he wouldn’t be walking at all.

He barely looks at the others when they meet back up in the main area of the hovercraft, and the other men—Happy, Matt, and Frank—it seems like they’re all looking at him, each one radiating with something different. Peter’s pretty sure Matt is blind, considering the glasses, but Peter believes he’s more aware of where things are than anyone might think. He wouldn’t be here otherwise.

Happy is the only one to approach him, as they start walking down the ramp and out of the hovercraft.

“Hey,” he says, patting Peter on the arm. “I’m kind of a big deal around here, so if you ever need any help navigating any of it, contact me. I’ll help you out.”

Peter looks over his shoulder, briefly nodding. No offense to Happy, but he wants Tony and May to help him navigate. That’s who he really wants. He wants to discover it with them, be lost with them. Build a new life with them.

He looks up once they’re out of the craft—they’re in a giant warehouse that looks like something out of a military base, and there are all kinds of different jets, weaponry, glass-windowed offices with more technology than Peter ever saw in the Capitol. He stares up as they walk through it all, and he catches sight of someone leading them at the front of their group, walking with purpose. Happy shoulders around everyone else and rushes up to meet the person, muttering something in his ear.

The man turns around, looking at them. “This way,” he says, and he makes a sharp turn into a hallway. “Just follow me, please.”

MJ squeezes Peter’s hand. He keeps following, and he wonders if Janet got back safe with May and Ned. He wonders where they took Tony. He can’t find normal. He can’t find it. He doesn’t even know if it exists, like some foreign concept his mind can’t latch onto. He wants to know what’s happening out in the world, what happened after they escaped the arena, how the Districts reacted, how the Capitol retaliated. But he’s afraid to find out.

They move into a spacious hallway, and even though everything here is metal and steel, it feels warmer than the Capitol or the arena.

Happy turns and looks back at them, smiling. “We’re gonna take you straight to your new quarters, unless anyone wants to be checked out again in the hospital wing? Cho’s incredible, and we’ve got another doctor named Yinsen—”

“I think we’re all okay, yeah?” Steve asks, looking around at them. Peter checks under his bandage again, and there’s not even a mark there anymore.

“Is there anything we need to know?” Natasha asks, and it’s rare to see panic in her eyes. He knows she’s wondering about her husband.

“We’re on radio silence right now so they can’t track our frequency,” Happy says, looking over his shoulder again. “Once everything calms back down we’ll be able to go back up. But there’s too much activity right now and we don’t want any interceptions.”

“Did you get anything else before we arrived?” Riri asks. “Anything about our family and friends? I know you were with us, but—” She makes eyes at the other man beside Happy, like he’s the one to
ask.

Happy looks at him, and he shakes his head. Peter’s heart sinks. “Listen, we’ve got three different landing stations, and everything’s a little insane right now. They could already be here and the news might not have traveled down this way.”

A heavy sense of concern is cocooning around their group, and Peter dives deeper into his own head. Falling into a yawning abyss, kicking and thrashing and screaming. But he has no voice.

They approach two sets of double doors, and Happy and the other man open one set of them. The group moves into a vast space that looks like a hub, or common center. Peter can’t take in any of it, because there are—people everywhere. People, standing in what look like shops, what looks like the Hob from back home. People, standing at the edges of tables, stationed by food carts and book bins. People, up and up and up, far as the eye can see, in every circular layer of this place. They’re at the edge of every railing, peering down. They’re all looking at them with a sort of wonder in their eyes, and that feeling floats in the air like a flower caught in the wind, delicate. The quiet is reverent.

Happy looks back, seems like he’s gonna say something.

But then someone starts clapping.

It’s one person at first, somewhere up high, and then someone else joins them, two people clapping in time. Then another, and another, and a whole slew of them, and then, in a flash, it’s everyone. All of them. They’re clapping with a might and determination that Peter never saw in the Capitol, tears in their eyes, tears flowing and being allowed to flow without shame.

The people start to cheer, yelling out in happiness, and it’s the strangest Peter has felt in his entire life. Everything upon all the rest, and he’s a shell of himself, something wrapped up in something else, and all of it is innocuous, all of it is generic, he’s back at the start. He’s nothing, an amoeba. But they’re cheering. They’re through the moon. For him, for the group of tributes he’s a part of, for what they were able to accomplish.

It hits him. They got out. They got out of the arena. There was no Victor of the 60th Hunger Games, because eight tributes escaped. The rebels declared war.

More doors open to their right, just beyond what looks like a market set-up.

Peter’s breath catches, and his world slows down.

He sees Janet, Thor, Carol, Strange. Luke, Jessica, all the other Victors. They’re leading a large group, a group that splinters and starts to knock them aside when they realize who’s in front of them.

“Clint!” Natasha yells, and Peter watches her rush away from them, colliding with a man with light hair, who lifts her clear off her feet.

“Oh my God, Tasha,” Clint says, twirling her. “Oh my God.”

Riri breaks with the group too, then Misty, Shuri, MJ—

“Peter!”

Everyone is still clapping, but his hearing goes muted, like he’s deep underwater. He sees her, amongst the reuniting families, and it’s not through a TV screen, it’s not a memory, and before he even takes two steps forward May is there, right in front of him, wrapping him up in her arms.
“Oh my God, baby,” she cries, clutching at him, holding the back of his head. “My baby, my baby, Peter. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

He’s stiff at first, frozen in shock, and when he finds a grip on her shoulder he realizes she’s actually here. She’s actually with him, she’s actually here, it isn’t a trick, it isn’t some illusion in the arena. They’re together, they’re together.

She pulls back, cupping his face in her hands, and he crumples, dissolving into tears.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers, leaning in and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Honey, you’re okay. You’re okay, you’re safe. You’re safe.” She kisses his cheek again, kisses his forehead. He sees her take his arm, turn it over, and for a moment he thinks she’s looking at the bandage—but he sees she’s seeking out the spot where the spider bit him. There’s only the smallest mark there now, hardly anything at all, and she presses a kiss there, one of her tears running down his skin.

“May,” he says, voice full of tremors. Thank God. Thank God.

“Here’s Ned, honey,” she says, looking behind her as she cups Peter’s cheek. “Here he is, here—Ned—” She reaches behind her, glancing around amongst the reunions, and then Peter sees him too, as May latches onto his wrist and tugs him forward.

“Oh my God,” Ned sobs, and he’s already crying. He reaches for Peter, draws him in, and Peter buries his face in Ned’s shoulder. His crying only gets worse. “God, Peter, we were—we were so afraid—”

“Me too,” Peter whispers, holding him tight. He’s still afraid. Of everything. He feels May kiss his temple, and there’s so much crying all around them. Laughing and hugging and kissing.

They’re here. They’re actually here.

Ned pulls away, wipes at his eyes, and takes a look at May before focusing on Peter again. “You threw that thing into the sky and just—everything went black,” Ned says. “We didn’t know what happened. And then—Janet Van Dyne showed up at May’s door.”

“We were both nearly hysterical,” May says, shaking her head. “It was hard for her to smuggle us out without a scene.”

“Your family too, right?” Peter asks, looking at Ned.


Peter just stares at them. They’re amazing, they’re incredible, he can’t believe they’re here. They’re with him. He covers his face with his hand and feels like he’s gonna collapse.

“You’re a superhero,” Ned says, gripping his arm. “You’re really a superhero.”

Peter shakes his head. He doesn’t want to call himself that. He feels sick, he wants to be happier but he just feels sick, and he can’t control his breathing. There’s too much going on. Too much to think about.

But they’re alive. They’re alive.

Someone touches his shoulder, and Peter turns to see Frank Castle standing there. He tunes back in, sniffling a little bit, and the clapping has stopped, but there’s a lot more muttering and excited talking going on around him. A lot more crying, and laughter too.
“Can you come with me, please?” Frank asks, so quiet that Peter barely hears him.

Peter instinctively moves closer to May. “Not without them,” he says. “I need—”

“Frank?” May asks. She’s holding onto Peter’s arm, tight, like she’s worried he’ll be taken from her again.

Frank nods, and there’s a softness in his eyes that seems out of character for him. “Mrs. Parker,” he says.

“Jesus, I thought you were…” May starts, and her eyes cut over to Peter. She doesn’t finish her sentence. That’s weird. Why would she know him?

“They can come, Peter,” Frank says. “We gotta—do a sort of…debriefing. I don’t know if that’s the right word.” He looks down at his feet. “The president of Thirteen wants to meet with you. Go over some things.”

Peter swallows hard. He hears President, he thinks Stane. But he’s not there anymore. He’s here, he’s in Thirteen. Stane can’t get him. He can’t. He can’t.

“Can you follow me?” Frank asks.

Peter looks back at where MJ is. She’s still wrapped around her sister and her mother, holding them close. Peter doesn’t want to leave her, but he doesn’t want to disturb her either.

Quietly, he goes, May and Ned following behind.

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He realizes, as Frank leads them through the labyrinth of Thirteen, that it’s way bigger than he could have imagined. He’s a little weirded out that May knows Frank, and he keeps gravitating into her space, afraid she’s gonna disappear. Ned’s looking at him strangely, and Peter doesn’t know what to say to him. He just keeps staring at him, because seeing him grounds him. Makes him feel real.

As they’re walking, Ned reaches over and pushes Peter’s jacket collar aside, revealing his Iron Man pin. Peter looks down, touching it briefly.

“I was afraid the whole time you were gonna lose it,” Ned says, concern creasing his forehead. “You went through so much crap, I just—I don’t know how it stayed on.”

“Tony put it on tight,” Peter says, his voice breaking on the name. He clears his throat, glancing at Ned. “You have yours, right?”

“Yeah,” Ned says. He pulls his own jacket aside, and his Wasp pin is there. The same as it ever was. “What, uh—where’s Tony? Where is he, is he...off doing something important?”

The question is like a belt squeezing around his heart. “Uh, he—he was on the hovercraft, getting us out. He—he got hurt.” Peter’s voice breaks, and he looks away.

“Peter,” Ned says, a hand on his back. “I’m—I’m sorry.”

Peter shakes his head. “It’s gonna be fine,” he says. “It’ll...it’ll definitely be fine.”

“Of course it will,” Ned says. “I mean, he’s Tony Stark.”

Peter knows who Tony Stark is now, and knows he’s not made of iron, as much as one may wish he
is. He’s full of hurt that chips at him every day. He’s a target for powerful people. And now he’s broken.

Peter blows out a breath, and looks up to see Frank and May in deep conversation. For some reason, it unnerves him. Finally, after a couple more long moments, they turn down a dead-end hallway, and stop at the final door.

“Here we go,” Frank says. He bends down so something on the wall scans his face, and then the door opens. He goes in first, holding out his arm for May.

The man Peter assumes is the President is standing inside. He’s tall, imposing, wearing an eye patch, and he’s got a table full of papers in front of him, as well as about ten different screens that are all showing some kind of violence. When he gets closer, Peter realizes that they’re live, and happening in the Districts. And...the Capitol. He stares, his brows furrowed, and finally he notices that Frank is holding out a chair for him.

“Peter,” Frank says. “Mrs. Parker, Mr. Leeds—this is President Fury.”

“Been looking forward to this meeting,” Fury says, fast, not looking up at them. “Frank, get it over with. Stark had the video, correct?”

“Correct,” Frank says. He reaches into the bag he’s carrying, and Fury seems to continue on with what he was doing, like they’re not even there. “May, this was, uh. Originally for you. But Christine Everhart, one of our refugees, she’d been doing research for years on Capitol corruption, and she unearthed this and brought it to Tony. I knew about it. I was the only one they told.”

It feels like someone is cutting off Peter’s air supply, and he glances at May, sees all the concern and emotion in her eyes. She and Ned are surrounding him like his own mini forcefield, and Frank opens up a tablet, pushing it over in front of Peter with a black video screen. He presses play.

His mother appears on the screen.

In the next few moments, something Peter had wondered is proven true. He watches as his parents struggle to reveal their biggest secret, and despite the horror boiling in his core, it’s the closest to peace he’s ever really felt since all this started. They protected him. They did it on purpose.

“And Peter, we’re so sorry.”

“But we love—”

The video ends, and they sit in stunned silence.

“They didn’t know he’d get powers, though, did they?” Fury asks, before Frank can say anything else.

“No,” Frank says. “I don’t think so.” He sighs heavily, and his eyes are seeking May’s. “Stark was already—really pissed at me, because we allowed Peter to—die, allowed him to suffer, but we knew the Capitol—”

“No,” May says, firm. “No matter what you say about the damn Capitol, Tony and I are on the same page here.”

“We were watching too,” Ned says, quietly. “People who love him. We—we all saw it.”

Peter sighs, touching Ned’s arm.
“That’s what made it powerful,” Fury says. He stands up, straightening out his jacket, and crosses his
arms over his chest. “The love people feel for you, Peter, it’s—Jesus, it’s massive. It’s all over the
damn place. It’s unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. And that shit’s powerful. That shit moves
mountains. We knew what it would be like, if they had to watch you die. But it wasn’t just about you
dying. It was about you coming back. And we knew you’d come back.”

Peter doesn’t know what to say. He feels like May is gonna be mad if he says anything, because
he...gets it.

“But powers? Nobody was prepared for that, Spider-Man. Jesus.” Fury scoffs at him, like it was his
choice.

“I don’t want you using him like they used him,” May says, shifting in her seat. “The Capitol. His
parents did this so he could live, and he’s alive because of them—”

“He’s also alive because we had a plan,” Fury says, hands on his hips now. “Because we sent in our
best to save him. Because Tony Stark threw himself into the line of fire.”

Peter closes his eyes tight, running his hand over his face. He sinks lower into his chair.

“What happened to Tony?” May asks, looking at Fury, then Peter.

“He got hit,” Peter says, looking down at his hands in his lap. “Pulling me into the hovercraft. He’s
alive, but he’s—not good.”

May nods, blowing out a measured breath. Fury paces a few times, and there’s a lot of tension in his
shoulders. Peter knows he’s got a lot to think about, being in charge of something like this.

“We’re not gonna use him, Mrs. Parker,” Fury says. “It’s all up to him. But he captured hearts and
minds for a reason. There have never been riots in the Capitol. Not over anybody. Not until now.
And we’ve got a burgeoning revolution here, that Peter pulled himself into so this one here didn’t
dhave to deal with the arena and all the rest of their bullshit.” He gestures wildly to Ned.

“I’m gonna do whatever you guys need me to do,” Peter says, trying to sound measured and adult,
even though he’s anything but that. “I just—I need to wait for Tony to wake up—"

“You don’t need to,” Fury says, and Peter doesn’t know whether to look at the patch or the eye
when he’s facing him head on. “We don’t play by that mentor shit here. You don’t need someone
babysitting you.”

Peter shakes his head, and feels dizzy. “No, no, I want to—"

“President Fury,” May says. “I understand all this, as much as it may be—insanity, all of it. I do
understand it. I’ve always known who Peter was, before the world fell in love with him. I understand
the storyline. I understand what his parents did, what happened that they didn’t anticipate that—riled
everyone up more.” Her eyes cut over to Peter, and she tilts her head, like she’s trying to get a better
look. He’s drawing strength from just having her here.

She keeps on, looking at Fury again. “But my boy needs a moment,” she says. “What he just went
through is more than anybody can take. He was in the Hunger Games. He was forced to do things
that no one should be forced to do, especially someone like him. And then he—he—"

“May,” Peter says, leaning towards her.

“He—he died. And it—it looked—it sounded—” She sucks in a trembling breath. “You know. You
saw. We all felt it, and I can’t even imagine. That experience—it’s his. His and his alone. Singular. And now Tony, his mentor, his hero—is hurt? In a situation in which he was involved? I know my boy. And after all that horror—he needs a break. He deserves one. Anyone would.”

She ends her speech with a shuddering sigh, and Peter leans his head on her shoulder, squeezing his eyes shut tight.

When he opens them, he sees a different expression on Fury’s face.

“He’ll have it,” Fury says.

Peter straightens back up, looking at him quizzically.

“I’ve been living underground my whole damn life,” Fury says. “It’s been sixty-one years since they dropped the bombs. I was two years old. I don’t remember anything of all that, I don’t remember my parents because they died in the blast. This place raised me, this community, and I’ve only seen the sky a handful of times in my life. I only know war, kid, or waiting for it, preparing for it, so I get needing a rest. I get it. You just got back, that’s fine. We’ve got some nice spots you can go.”

Peter stares at him. He worries that it’s a trick.

“Frank,” Fury says, and he jerks his head to the left. “Can you take him down to the lower levels?”

“Sure,” Frank says, getting up.

“Uh,” Peter says, getting up too, preemptively. “How will you—uh, how can I tell you when—”

“We’ll find you,” Fury says, “and when the time comes, we’ll need you to be yourself on the national stage again, Spider-Man. I know you can do it, because I see that same sense of responsibility resting on your shoulders that’s weighing on mine.” Then he sits back down, directing his attention to the screens again, switching angles, reading through a slew of messages.

Peter’s heart is in his throat and he nods, the three of them following Frank out.

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Peter is sure Frank Castle isn’t inclined to be anybody’s errand boy. He’s built like a soldier and he acts like one too, but there’s a sadness and sympathy in his eyes, especially now that May is here. Peter wants to ask him questions, wants to see what he knows, but something holds him back. He’s been with them, since the hovercraft. But he’s obviously had some sort of communication with Fury. Peter knows there’s a lot of politics here, that run deep, and he’s barely scratched the surface.

Frank lets them into a room three more levels down, and as soon as they walk inside, he disappears back down the hallway.

“Peter!” MJ’s voice calls.

He barely gets a look at the room before he’s got an armful of her, nuzzling into his neck. She holds onto him like she hadn’t expected to see him again, and she pulls back, cupping his cheek. “You were just gone, dammit,” she says, breathing hard. “You were there, and then—and then—” She notices that he’s not alone, her eyes finding May and Ned behind his shoulder. “Oh, uh, oh—”

It feels like a glass moment, given to him as a gift, one he could easily mess up, one he could have easily never made it to. But he steps aside slightly, holding his hand out towards May and Ned.
“MJ,” he says, swallowing hard. “Um, this is—this is my aunt, May Parker, and my best friend, Ned Leeds. May, Ned—I—I know you know Michelle Jones, but uh—this is our—the formal introduction we didn’t get to have.” He clears his throat. God, he’s such a moron.

But they’re not really paying attention to his stammering. MJ looks back and forth between the two of them, her eyes filling with tears, and then she tugs them both in, wrapping them up in a big hug.

“It’s so nice to meet you both,” MJ whispers.

“Oh, you too, sweetheart,” May says, rubbing her back. “Thank you for taking care of my boy.”

“You were amazing in there,” Ned mutters, holding onto her. “I particularly liked your use of the stop sign.”

All three of them laugh, and Peter sorta feels like he’s staring directly into the sun. Then he feels someone touching his arm. He looks up, and sees that it’s Natasha.

“Why are you still wearing their stupid uniform?” she asks, looking him up and down.

He laughs, like an idiot, taking a couple steps towards her. He gets a chance to look around, and the only word that pops into his head for this room is cozy. It’s spacious, made up to look like a den with carpets and couches, with what looks like a fake fireplace in the corner. Bookshelves, a kitchen area—much different from the rest of Thirteen, that he’s seen so far. This room seems intentional, like it was made for what it’s being used for now—a place for respite. A place for them. Peter sees all the other tributes and their families, and a few of the Mentors—Thor, Carol, Luke and Jessica. But no Janet, no Tony, and it makes Peter feel cold.

“Jesus, here he is,” a man says, coming up behind Natasha, startling Peter back to earth. He’s the same man that Peter saw her with earlier, except now there’s an easy smile on his face as opposed to immense and agonized relief. He’s got a brace on his leg, and what looks like a hearing aid in his right ear.


“Kid, you’re a hero—”

Peter shakes his head, his neck going hot. “I’m not—”

“Listen, this woman doesn’t need anyone’s help, ever,” Clint says, looking down at Natasha, “but the one time she did, hanging outside of that window—you came. What you did, I just—I can’t thank you enough. Honestly.”

Natasha smiles warmly at Peter. “I would have had it. A couple more minutes.”

“Mhm,” Clint hums, still grinning at Peter. “I just wanna say thank you, okay? Thank you. I’m not gonna freak out because you deserve better than that, but you’re—I’m just proud to meet you.” He holds out the hand that isn’t around Natasha’s shoulders, and Peter quickly shakes.

“Thank you,” he says, not really knowing if it’s the right thing to say.

“Peter,” Steve’s voice says. Peter peers around Clint’s shoulder, and sees Steve sitting next to Bucky, pushing himself to his feet. “They didn’t let you change?”

Clint claps Peter on the shoulder as Peter passes by, and Peter smiles awkwardly at him, approaching Steve. “Uh, I—I went to meet with Fury.”
“They’re not even giving you a moment, are they?” Steve says, shaking his head. “C’mon.”

“Uh,” Peter says, looking over his shoulder. May, MJ and Ned are still in a close-knit group.

“Don’t worry,” Clint says, following his line of sight. “I’ll let them know where you went.”

Peter sits under the shower spray for what feels like three lifetimes. He can’t reconcile the fact that he was only in the arena hours ago. He can’t accept the fact that he got out, even though he knows it’s true. The dirt and grime wash off him and swirl down the drain, and it seems like it’s never gonna stop.

He thought they’d dirtied him up before. He never could have ever anticipated what they’d do to him. He knows part of him will always be there, no matter what happens to that arena, no matter what’s left of it, what the Capitol chooses to keep. He died there. He changed there. They took from him.

He almost breaks the hot water handle turning it off.

There’s a small changing room outside of the shower, and there’s a whole closet full of clothes labeled PETER PARKER. He finds it strange, to think of them picking these things out. They were so sure. They were so ready. It reminds him of his abandoned closet in the Capitol, and sometime soon, he wants to pick out his own clothes. Make his own damn decisions.

He staves off a breakdown before he heads back outside, feeling too broken for a moment to continue on. He sucks in a breath, knowing they’ll be looking for him soon, and walks back out into the hallway.

There are a bunch of doors in this area, and he knows the rest of the families must be holed up here too, the other Victors, some of the refugees. He can hear the voices coming from the main area, Thor’s voice booming, Bucky’s voice entwining with Steve’s, and it’s still so damn strange to hear him. Hear him in real life. Alive. Speaking.

It’s strange to be here at all.

Peter hears a door open behind him, and he whips his head around, some kind of residual panic from the arena still holding onto him. He starts to think about how much he needs to sleep, when he sees just who opened the door.

She’s just as he saw her in the illusion. The one he made himself. Just as she looked in the images the tablet provided.

“Peter Parker,” Cassie Lang says, still holding onto the door knob. She lets go of it fast, though, faster than he’s moving because he’s frozen, stuck, seeing her dad in her eyes, the way she moves. She rushes over to him, and he kneels without thinking. He’s afraid he’s too damn scary. He’s afraid she hates him. It’s his fault her dad is dead. It’s his fault.

He doesn’t say anything, and he swallows hard.

“Are you okay?” she asks, soft, her big eyes intent on him. “I—they said you guys were coming, and we were wondering—”

“I’m okay,” he says, feeling worthless.
“My dad, he—he—he really liked you,” she says, nodding. She brushes her hair behind one ear. “I could tell.”

“He loved you more than anything,” Peter says, his voice breaking, his eyes straining. “I could hear it in every word he said.”

“I know,” Cassie says, nodding, and her eyes are red and swollen, like she’s been doing a lot of crying. More tears gather now, too. “I just—I just wanted to tell you that—I wanted to say thank you,” she says. “For—what you did, in the end. Mom didn’t—she made me leave the room, she had Paxton go with me—that’s my step-dad. He and my dad got along, though. But she—she told me what you did and I—I’m just happy that you...did that.”

Peter feels like a thousand different pieces. “Of course,” he says. “He—he saved my life. He was awesome.”

“He was,” Cassie says, giving him a watery little smile. “He was really awesome.” She leans in then, giving him a tight hug for someone so small, and he hugs her back, thinking of Scott. “You’re a hero,” Cassie breathes, against Peter’s shoulder. “You’re really a hero.”

“I’m not,” Peter says. “I’m not, I swear.”

A woman with long blonde hair rushes out of the same door Cassie left through, and gasps when she sees them. The noise startles Cassie, and she quickly pulls away, running towards the woman and directly past her, back into the room. Peter still kneels there, his heart stuck in a vice grip.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman says.

“No, it’s—no—” He struggles to his feet.

“No, about…” the woman holds onto the edge of the door. “About what...you all went through. I’m just...I’m just so sorry.” She takes a quick look at him, nodding, and retreats back into the room.

Peter shuffles back, leaning against the wall, and he digs the heels of his hands into his eyes. He’s dizzy, and the kind of hurt that lives inside him now feels too big, too much.

“Hey,” MJ’s voice says, suddenly, and she runs her hands down his sides. “Hey, hey.”

“Sorry,” Peter croaks. “I was—I was coming back.”

“It’s okay,” she says, fast. “It’s totally fine.”

“I just saw Cassie,” he says, letting his hands drop. He gestures towards the door. “And I’m the reason why her dad is dead, so. There’s that. I saw her, in real life, and I should have expected that —”

“Peter,” MJ says, her brows furrowed. “You know Scott wasn’t your fault. You know it.”

Peter swallows hard, shaking his head, and he can’t follow his own line of thought. He’s falling apart. “And I’m—I’m their new icon, or whatever, except I have no idea what’s going on out there because no one’s told me anything and I’m too afraid to ask. I met with the President and I saw images but I’m just—I was too afraid to ask.”

“You met with the President?” MJ asks.

Peter nods. “Yeah, and he’s giving me a little time, but I know he won’t wait for me forever. And I
don’t know how much time I need. A million years, probably. I’m—I have no idea who I am now, what I—what I am. I don’t know how to be me anymore, I never understood why anybody liked me and I don’t—I don’t know how to be what that spider made me. I don’t know how. I don’t—I don’t know how to be a hero.”

She looks at him, concern in her eyes, and she steps closer, one hand on his hip.

“And Tony,” Peter says, the backlog of tears breaking loose as soon as he says his name. “I’ve had him for as long as I can remember, even when I didn’t have him, and now he’s—he’s—” His voice breaks again and he looks down, his face crumpling. “And that’s because of me too. And I need him, MJ. I need him, he’s—he’s like my dad. He’s like a father to me.”

MJ rubs his arms up and down, and she cups his face in her hands. She presses their foreheads together.

“Tony is gonna be fine,” she whispers, stroking her thumb back and forth across his cheek. “He wouldn’t leave you. Knowing you’re here, that you’re back here where he can see you again—he will wake up. They’ve got incredible doctors here, Thor was telling us. They’ll do what they need to do and they won’t stop working until he’s in ship shape.”

Peter nods, trying to breathe her in.

“And you—you’ve gotta stop blaming yourself, for one. You were a victim in this, like all of us were. Anyone we lost in that arena is on the Capitol. This is all on them.”

“Yeah,” Peter whispers. He just loves the sound of her voice. It does something to him, and despite all the horror that’s wrapping around him right now, she’s soothing him. Just by touching and talking.

“You’re not different now,” she says, softly. “You’re you. You’re loved because you’re genuine. Because you’re kind. Because you don’t put on a mask. You don’t try to hide what you’re feeling, and you care with your whole heart. About everyone and everything. You’re completely full of love. And I don’t ever say anything like that about anyone, because I do try to hide and I do try to push down my feelings, but you just—I just can’t with you. Because of who you are.”

He feels like his breathing is getting shallow.

“I’m afraid of what’s going on out there too,” she says. “But whatever it is, from now on—we’re together. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says, and he’s never felt more sure of anything. They’re together. They’re together.

She closes the small amount of distance between them and kisses him. It isn’t like the kiss in the arena, too fast and full of panic. It’s yearning, and need, soft and quiet, and she presses closer, her hands sliding around to grip the back of his neck. He holds her waist and his stomach does flips, and he thinks that maybe he loves her.

The kiss breaks after a moment, and their foreheads are still pressing together.

“Okay?” she asks.

“Okay,” he says, not even really sure what she’s referring to.

He feels something brush against his leg, and he looks down to see Carol’s cat there, prancing back and forth, clearly believing she’s more important than whatever they’ve got going on.
MJ laughs, pressing another quick kiss to Peter’s lips before she bends down. “Oh my God,” she whispers. “I can’t even tell you how much I’ve missed animals.”

“This one is real sassy,” Peter says, kneeling beside her, resting his head on her shoulder as he brushes his hand up Goose’s back. “Belongs to Carol. Would always District hop from Eleven to Twelve.”

“That’s funny,” MJ says, leaning into Peter’s space as she pulls Goose into her lap. “A little rebel in her own right.”

“Definitely,” Peter sighs. He tries to clear his mind for a moment, and just be here. Just right here.

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He’s drifting in and out of sleep in his new quarters when they buzz him. He sits up in his bed, rubbing his eyes—they all have individual rooms, which are about half the size of the room he was in at the penthouse, but he doesn’t care. The bed is comfortable, he’s right next door to May and Ned, and across the hall from MJ. Supposedly, Tony will be across from him too. When he wakes up.

There’s a small panel by the door and that’s where the noise is coming from. He swings his legs over the side of the bed and pads over to it, still rubbing the burn out of his eyes. He presses the green answer button, and he sees Doctor Cho on the screen.

“Peter,” she says. “You—”

“Is he awake?” Peter asks, trying to focus.

“Not yet,” she says, as if she was expecting that question. “But you can come see him, if you’d like.”

Peter’s shoulders sag in defeat, but he nods. “Okay,” he says. “Uh, hospital wing?”

“Fifth floor,” she says.

It takes him about fifteen minutes to get there, because he gets lost five or six times, and he doesn’t wanna ask for help. This whole place is like a strange maze, but there are people everywhere. Everyone doing something, everyone working, everyone helping someone else. There aren’t any TVs anywhere and it feels like that’s a purposeful choice, the exact opposite of how things are in the Capitol and in the Districts. He keeps reminding himself that this is, technically, a District. But no one knows it’s here anymore. No one knows they’re here. He wonders what people think happened. He wonders if they think he’s dead.

He gets out of the elevator, chewing on his lower lip, and reaches the hospital wing, finally. It’s another set of doors with a handprint lock, but there’s a short list of names next to it that say they’re currently authorized, and his name is on there. He presses his hand to the screen, watches it scan, and then the doors open.

The inside looks very similar to the hospital wing in the tribute center, almost as if it was modeled after it and improved. There’s a desk to his right and a cheery-looking woman sitting there. She nods at him.

“Hello, Mr. Parker,” she says. “Fifth door down, on your left.”
“Thank you,” Peter says, sounding small and idiotic because his heart is raging in his chest, his anxiety is spiking, he’s breaking out in a cold sweat because Tony’s hurt, he’s hurt, he’s hurt and no matter what Peter is now, he can’t help him. He can’t save him. He can’t do shit. And as much as Peter wants to believe anything MJ said to him, he can’t help but believe he is broken by what they’ve done, by what they forced him to experience, because his thoughts aren’t his own anymore. They’ve gotten into his head.

He carefully knocks on the door when he reaches it, eager to see Tony but half inclined to run away, hide in one of the many enclaves in this place.

Doctor Cho opens the door, and smiles softly at him. Peter can hear voices inside the room, and he swallows hard. He wasn’t prepared to see anybody else other than who he was expecting to see. He feels like he has a giant red flag on his back, even though he’s out of the arena now. Like everyone is looking at him.

“Come in,” Cho says, holding out her hand. She closes the door behind him, and he can hear the voices louder now, just beyond the wall to his left. “Peter, I—I need to look at you too. After what happened. Fury sent some orders down, and we were trying to give you a little space, but you well know that something is—”

Peter flinches away from her. “I came here to see Tony, I wanna see Tony,” he says, his mouth dry. “And I—I don’t really want you guys to be...looking at me while I’m—by myself. I want May to be there, or Ned, or MJ, or Tony, and I’m not ready right now—”

“All right,” Cho says, nodding at him, as if she could tell he was about to lose it. “I’ll make an excuse, alright? But it’s not what you’re thinking. We just want to see what’s different, if there’s anything we need to worry about. See how we can manage.”

“All right,” Peter says, glancing towards the next room again. He thinks he hears people he recognizes.

“All right,” she says, too. “Go ahead. I apologize that the visit isn’t private. I’ll let you stay after they leave.”

He nods his silent thanks, and walks around the wall. There are more people in there than he expected—a male doctor, Janet, Happy, goddamn Bruce, and...Nebula. Nebula. Dead Nebula. Peter stands there, trying to contain his shock, and when Janet turns around, Peter can see Tony. He’s not in a hospital gown, just a soft white sweater, and he looks almost peaceful—there’s no more big car battery attached to him, but Peter can still see the slight outline of the ring in the middle of his chest. There are a couple machines beside the bed, and the heart monitor doesn’t beep, but Peter watches the lines move anyway.

“Peter,” Janet says, sending him a weary smile.

“Kid—”

“Mr. Parker,” the doctor says.

Neither Bruce nor Nebula say anything, but Nebula is stony-faced, while Bruce is smiling.

“I’m glad you’re here. My name is Ho Yinsen, and Mr. Stark is doing significantly better.”

“I can still—see that thing under his shirt,” Peter says, standing there awkwardly.

“Here, Peter,” Janet says, getting up from her chair.
“No, no, it’s okay,” Peter says.

“C’mon,” Janet says. She walks over to him, takes him by the hand, and leads him over to the chair. She pats his shoulder and has him sit down.

Peter tries not to stare at Nebula. He knew more tributes would be alive, but it’s still...shocking. He looks at Tony instead. Looks up at Doctor Yinsen, and hears Happy and Bruce whispering to each other back by the wall.

“Doctor Cho and I created a miniaturized arc reactor to keep the shrapnel out of his heart. It generates three gigajoules per second, and it’ll do him very well.”

Peter doesn’t ask why they didn’t just take the shrapnel out, because he figures he’s answering his own question. It’s probably extremely, extremely dangerous. It probably would have killed him. So this is the best he’s got.

“It’s very advanced,” Yinsen says. “It could run his heart for fifty lifetimes.”

Peter nods, because that sounds good to him.

“A large version of the arc reactor powers District Thirteen, Peter,” Bruce says, over his shoulder. “It’s the absolute best he could have gotten. And I’m sure, when Tony wakes up, that he’ll have his own ideas on how to improve it and everything else.”

Peter blows out a breath, glances up at Janet. She looks exhausted, and she ruffles Peter’s hair. She leans in, presses a long kiss to Tony’s forehead, and walks out of the room without another word. It makes Peter worry that she’s not alright. That she’s not coping. He hopes MJ gets to talk to her, if she hasn’t already.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” Yinsen says, looking back and forth between the rest of them. “Mr. Stark will be on and off oxygen, don’t take that as an indicator of bad news. It’s in the plan. We need to look at you too, Peter.”

That makes Peter’s heart jump a little bit, and he doesn’t acknowledge it. He reaches out as Yinsen leaves the room, and takes Tony’s hand in his own.

“You did a very commendable job in the arena,” Nebula says, from across the bed. “I could see Stark’s influence in you.”

“Thank you,” Peter says, voice shaky. “I—it’s—I’m sorry, it’s so crazy—”

She glances down at Tony, holding her chin a little higher. “I know,” she says. “It wasn’t easy for me, when I woke up, either. But we’re all adjusting in our own way.” Her eyes flick up to find Peter’s, and he’s just as intimidated by her as he was back when she was a tribute.

“I can imagine,” he croaks, nodding. “I get it.”

“You had it worse than I did,” she says. There’s a beat of silence, only filled with Peter’s frenzied thoughts and Happy whispering. “I don’t like a lot of people, but I like Stark. And I saw what your death did to him. I hope you’re with him when he wakes up.”

“I will be,” he says, fast. “I will.”

She doesn’t look at him again. She just smooths Tony’s hair back, ever so slightly, and then she gets up too, walking out the way the other two did.
Peter squeezes Tony’s hand and stares at him, like if he stares at him hard enough, he’ll make him wake up. He needs to talk to him, he needs to hear his voice—he’s out of the arena, he has May and Ned back, he’s got MJ—it feels like he can deal with everything else if Tony would just wake up. He has to wake up. Everyone is acting like he’s fine, he’s ship shape, despite the whatever they called it in his chest. Arc reactor. So why the hell isn’t he waking up?


Peter’s heart stutters. He can’t fucking believe it, or any of this. He sucks in a breath, scooting his chair back so he’s sitting sideways. “How are the, uh—Districts doing?” he asks, tentatively. “What’s going on out there?”

Happy and Bruce exchange a look, like they’re surprised he asked, and Peter is surprised too. He wants to know, he doesn’t want to know. But it feels like it’s necessary information, no matter how horrible. He did this, and he’s supposed to know. Plus, despite Tony’s current position, Peter feels like he’s drawing strength from him. From them being in the same place.

“Well, the revolution’s started,” Happy says. “They’re doing better in some places than they are in others. One and Two are strongholds for the Capitol, we didn’t have many sleeper agents there, so they’re settling in for the long haul and waiting for reinforcements. Five is the same way, because they need to keep the dam safe, but that’s one of our main goals right now. The resistance was heavy in Four and Six, so they’re working hard on keeping the upper hand.”

“Twelve?” Peter asks, voice small.

“They’re doing good,” Happy says. “That’s your home, so they’re fighting hard, harder than most. Everyone’s in on it. We’re gonna be heading back to each individual District to get more refugees out, but Twelve is making good progress. Eleven too.”

He doesn’t mention casualties. He doesn’t talk about that.

“What about Stane?” Peter asks, heat rising within him. “What about him?”

“Still holed up in his ivory tower,” Happy says, with venom, glancing at Bruce.

“Stane lets everyone else do the dirty work for him,” Bruce says, shifting, crossing his arms over his chest. “He likes to watch. He’s sick, and sadistic, and we won’t get him until the final hour of this war. He’ll make sure of that. But when the time comes, if you like, you can be the one to take him down. I feel like you’ve earned that honor, and it’ll certainly go along with our narrative.”

Peter’s brows furrow. As much as he wants Stane dead, he can’t imagine killing him himself. He’s already killed too many damn people, and he never wants to be a part of anything like that ever again. “No,” Peter says. “No, I wouldn’t—”

“It’s alright,” Bruce says. “We’re nowhere near any of that.”

Peter sighs, glancing at Tony again.

“This whole thing has been massively difficult, Peter,” Bruce says. “Near impossible. And I just want to thank you for making it all possible. It wouldn’t have worked without you, and you’re not putting anybody on. You’re just—well, I just want to thank you for being you. I’m sorry about what you went through, I’m truly sorry, and I—I wish you hadn’t had to experience that. Any of it. I wish we could have shed more light on the plan, not kept you all in the dark, but there were ears everywhere, and so much hanging in the balance.”
“I understand,” Peter says. But he does feel some kind of way he can’t describe. Some kind of—resentment. He doesn’t know if it’s coming from him, or from the very core of Tony’s soul, encompassing them and the whole room and everything else.

“The arena headquarters was a war zone in itself from the moment your powers became apparent,” Bruce says. “Physical fighting. Weapons. Orders for the arena coming down from Stane himself, and he had no idea we were fighting back. They kept trying to get their messages through to him, but we jammed his lines. The fire was them. The storm was us. The darkness was—an accident. I’m sure it made the escape more difficult. I’m sorry for that too.”

“It’s over now,” Peter says.

“It’s just starting,” Bruce says. He approaches him, bending his head a little bit, and there’s so much kindness in his eyes. “I hate that you’re in this position. I wish we didn’t have to rely so heavily on someone who was thrust into this world, but I promise you’ll have all the support you’ll need. From every avenue.”

“I’ll be ready soon,” Peter stammers, glancing at Tony again. “I just—”


Peter sighs. “I don’t even know what time it is,” he says, rubbing at his eye with his free hand.

“It’s nine in the morning,” Bruce says. He pats Peter on the shoulder. “It’s a new day, Peter.”

Happy and Bruce both leave then, and Peter is finally left alone with Tony. He sighs, one of those kind that feels like they start at his toes and ripple through his whole body, and he leans down, pressing his forehead to Tony’s shoulder.

“I’m gonna break our promise if you don’t wake up,” Peter whispers, squeezing his hand. He tries to remember his new strength, and he’d absolutely freak out if he hurt him, that’s for damn sure. He sighs again. “I’m gonna have a drink, do you hear me? I’m gonna—down a whole bottle of tequila, you hear me? But I won’t, if you wake up. I won’t. Okay? Just wake up, please. Please.”

He doesn’t wanna cry again. But he does it anyway.

~

He stays with Tony for an hour and a half, talking to him about things he probably won’t remember, praying and crying and just about losing his mind. When he finally leaves, he begrudgingly lets Cho and Yinsen check him out, but only when MJ arrives to be with him.

He’s gained muscle mass that wasn’t there before. His metabolism is significantly faster. He’s an inch taller. His strength is off the charts, unlike anything they’ve ever measured in a human being. Enhanced reflexes, balance and agility. Enhanced vision and hearing. And he has enhanced healing, depending on the type of wound. They can’t explain the sticking to walls thing, but they say they’ll work on it. He’s in the best shape he’s ever been in. He’s a pinnacle of strength, but he feels like a pillar of salt. Unable to stop looking back over everything that’s happened. Ready to topple down.

He eats pancakes with MJ afterwards, sitting in a new cafeteria area they’ve yet to explore, and once again, he can’t get out of his own head.

She reaches over, taking his hand, and he glances up, managing a smile.

“Sorry,” he says.
“For what?” she asks.

“Nothing, just...me.”

“Never apologize for that,” she says, tracing her fingers over the lines in his palm. “Hey, we made it, huh? It’s not dinner, but we’re—Peter, we made it to After. Our After. I met May, and we’re—we’re eating breakfast together. Just us. That’s even better.”

For some reason, that feels like a massive punch to the gut, and he’s mixed feelings all over, happiness and pure, unadulterated sadness. He picks up her hand and kisses her knuckles. No matter what he’s feeling, he knows he’s happy she’s here. That she’s with him.

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Tony is on the edge of sleeping and waking. A sleep too deep to really be sleep, woven with too much pain. He’s had a lot of pain in his life, enough to make them old friends, but this pain tried to drown him. This pain sunk its claws in and ripped at him, until, for the first time, he was within death’s grasp. He could feel them on the other side, could hear Pepper saying his name.

But Peter’s voice was in the chorus too. And Peter...isn’t dead. Not anymore. Tony knows it, in his heart. The world feels different when Peter Parker is gone.

So Tony drifted into the darkness, but he held on.

His eyes flutter open, and he can feel all the pain circulating, settling in the core of his chest. He blinks, dizzy, and reaches up with his left hand and feels it underneath his shirt. Something hard, round, sunken into his chest. He traces the edge of it with the tip of his finger, groaning behind an oxygen mask.

They’ve got him in a fucking sweater. He hasn’t worn a sweater in years. This feels like Janet’s doing, but he’s too weak to be properly mad about it.

He’s propped up in a hospital bed. There aren’t any windows, only a few, too-bright lights. He realizes there’s—something on his right, and he glances down. There’s a pillow lying against his side, and Peter is resting on it, one arm underneath his head and the other gripping the edge of the bed. It doesn’t look like the most comfortable position, but he’s sleeping all the same.

Tony peels off his oxygen mask with his left hand, casting it aside, and he stares.

Last thing he remembers is the explosion. Trying to pull Peter up into the hovercraft, and then the explosion. That’s all he remembers. And now they’re here, Peter’s here—he’s not in the arena anymore. He’s here, and he’s alive.

Tony is struck with it. The reality that the kid made it. After everything he went through, after their impossible plan actually worked. Peter’s alive. He’s here. He’s safe. You don’t see a tribute on the other side of an arena. Only if you’re lucky. Only if they win. But they got eight of them out. They were able to save eight of them, if everything went correctly after that goddamn other ship hit them. Eight, Including Peter.

He watched Peter die, and now he’s here. He’s actually here. It isn’t a dream, or a hallucination fueled by too much gin.

Tony stares at him like he’s an apparition. Like he’s not really there. Because Tony doesn’t get this lucky. He doesn’t, not ever. And now the kid is here. He’s right here.
Peter’s brows furrow, and he turns his face into the pillow, making a little noise. He shakes his head, and starts to breathe through his mouth.

A nightmare if Tony’s ever seen one. He’d faced enough of them to know.

He reaches out, tentatively brushes Peter’s hair back from his forehead. He has a couple long cuts that weren’t there before, but it looks like they’re already fading, just the ghost of them left behind. Peter makes another distressed noise, his breathing getting faster, and Tony runs his hand through his hair again, trying to soothe him.


Peter’s breathing slows and he scrunches his face up, turning towards Tony’s hand. His eyes slowly open, and he blinks at Tony, looking at him but seemingly not registering what he’s seeing. He’s still half asleep, the nightmare dying in his eyes.

Tony smiles, ruffling his hair one more time. “Hey, kid,” he says, trying not to sound so damn sickly. But the emotion is all there, laid bare, and he’s not trying to hide that shit anymore.

Peter stares, and then his gaze gets clearer. He reaches up, finds Tony’s hand, brings it down and holds onto it as he straightens up, gaping at him. “Oh my God,” Peter breathes.

“Nah,” Tony says. “Just me.”

“Oh my God,” Peter says again, his eyes filling with tears. “Tony—Jesus, finally, it’s been three days, you were scaring me to death—”

“Sorry, you are completely off limits from death, because I say so,” Tony says, and his voice breaks stupidly somewhere in the middle, and he’s having a really hard time right now. He wants to ask what the fuck is going on with his chest, but he just—can’t stop staring at the kid. Can’t stop squeezing his hand. He’s right here. He’s right here.

“Tony,” Peter breathes, his brows furrowing, and he scoots closer.

“Pete, it’s so good to see you,” Tony says, around a laugh. “God it’s—are you okay? What the hell happened?”

Peter sniffles, reaching up to wipe at his eyes with his free hand, and Tony shakes his head, feeling that pull in his chest that no weird new battery can erase.

“Doesn’t matter, c’mere,” Tony says, pushing himself up a little straighter, his own waterworks starting. “C’mere, c’mere.”

Peter gasps a couple times, perching on the edge of the bed, and Tony pulls him into a hug that’s been well on its way for what feels like years now. Peter buries his face in Tony’s shoulder, sobbing and hiccupping and clinging to him, and Tony feels like someone has beat the shit out of him, his chest bursting, his arms straining—everything hurts. But none of it matters, because he’s got Peter. He’s got him.

Tony runs his hand through Peter’s hair, breathing him in.

“God, you scared me,” Peter whispers, into the material of Tony’s sweater. “You scared me.”

“I know,” Tony says, rubbing Peter’s back. “I know, kid, I’m sorry. If we’re counting, you scared
me too, but it’s not your fault, so I guess I owe you double now.”

Peter laughs a little bit, and Tony holds him tighter. It feels like a goddamn miracle, and he’s loath to let go. It doesn’t seem like Peter wants to either.

“There’s shrapnel trying to go into your heart,” Peter says, still trying to quell his own sobs, resting his cheek on Tony’s shoulder. “That thing in your chest is keeping it from going in. Makes you stronger. You’re a cyborg now.”

Tony snorts, and winces, because it fucking hurts. “Well, that was always my destiny,” he says. He switches up his grip, resting his hand at the base of Peter’s neck. “Are you okay? Honestly.”

“No,” Peter says. “Not at all. Not in the slightest. Physically, yeah, sure. Emotionally, I’m a basket case. But this...this helps. This really helps.”

Tony heaves another sigh, trying to get used to the feel of it. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever be capable of that, and he’s gotta talk to some doctors and see just what the fuck is going on. Peter pulls back, still hiccupping, and he manages a small, weary smile. Tony reaches up, brushing the kid’s cheek with the back of his own knuckles. “It’s so damn good to see you,” Tony says, voice breaking.

“You too,” Peter says. “Finally. You shouldn’t have leaned out of that hovercraft to get me.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Kid.”

“No, you almost died,” Peter says, crossing his arms over his chest. “You almost died and you know I can’t deal with that. I don’t want to deal with anyone else I love dying—”

“You almost died,” Tony says, poking him in the shoulder. “You were falling, I jumped off the fucking mini-gun because no one was moving fast enough and I wasn’t gonna let my kid fall back into that fucking hell hole. No way.” He sighs, wincing again, rubbing his fingers around the edges of the round thing. “What’d they call this?” he asks, tapping it lightly. It glows a soft blue under the sweater, and he wonders if they’ll be able to see it through all his shirts.

“Arc reactor,” Peter says, still pouting a little bit.

“Okay,” Tony says, trying to work through it. He looks up at Peter again. “Did we get everybody?”

“Everybody in our group, yeah,” Peter says.


“Janet brought May and Ned here, along with a bunch of the other families,” Peter says. “I haven’t seen Sam yet, but I know he’s here, Thor told me.”

Peter looks tired. Older than he should. There’s a fatigue clinging to him that Tony recognizes from his own After The Games time, immediately after, but everything is different now. It’s all different. There’s a fucking war on, and Peter’s at the direct center of it.

Peter leans down, bracing his forehead on Tony’s shoulder. “I’ve been putting off being their icon or whatever and I know they’re getting tired of me. I told them I was waiting for you. We took some pictures that they circulated, so people would know I’m alive, but they want to do these—propo commercial things, to...rev up the troops and I just—I don’t know, I don’t know. I know I have to, that’s the deal, and I might be messing things up even more if I don’t—”
“You’re not messing anything up,” Tony says, cupping the back of Peter’s neck. “Okay? They’re lucky to have you. And three days is fucking nothing, these things aren’t won or lost in three days. And they’re not gonna kick us out, because the vitriol would be—massive.”

“I need to do it,” Peter says. “I know I need to.”

“And I’ll be there with you,” Tony says. He stares off towards the far door. He can do this shit. He can get out of this bed. He can be himself again. The best version of himself. The one Peter deserves to have supporting him. “Okay? The whole time. The whole way. We’re not playing by Capitol rules anymore, and they can’t take me away from you. That’s it, alright? You’re capable of anything, and you’ve got your whole support system here. We’re all here for you.”

He feels Peter nod. “Okay,” he mutters. “If you think so.”

“I know so,” Tony says, pressing a brief kiss to Peter’s temple. “And if you’re ever upset with something, we’ll change it. We’ll fix it.”

“Oh, Peter whispers. “As long as you’re there. Don’t go falling asleep on me again.”

“Trust me, I’m not gonna,” Tony says. He thinks back to the darkness, to all the watery noise in that half, comatose world. “And if I recall correctly, you were threatening me with breaking our promise? Downing tequila or something? Kid, that is some savage shit to say to a comatose man.”

Peter pulls back fast, his eyes wide. “You heard that?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Tony says, smiling at his horror. “I remember it, anyway.”

“Well, good,” Peter says, holding his chin high. “I guess I made my point.”

Jesus, Tony loves him so damn much.

~

After touching base with May, Peter falls asleep in the plushy chair in the corner, and Tony wonders what the hell his sleeping schedule’s been like since he got here. He talks to Yinsen, who explains the arc reactor to him, explains what’s really going on with his body, and he gets to thank both him and Helen Cho, who made sure he didn’t die.

He paces around the room just to prove to himself that he can, and he puts on some more dignified pants than the orange sweats that no one but Janet would have dared put him in.

He’s close to the door when the woman herself comes through it, walking with Happy Hogan, the pilot from the plane.

“Oh,” Janet says, looking at Tony incredulously. “Jesus. Jesus, you’re—you’re awake, you’re walking—”

“No one called you?” Tony asks. He’s blissfully happy to see her.

“No,” Janet says. “Happy just wanted to come see you again and I figured—”

Tony reaches over her shoulder and holds his hand out for Happy to shake. “Mr. Hogan, I didn’t exactly get to meet you under the best circumstances, but I really like you and I’d like you to know that. Excellent flying, and the kid trusts you, which makes you good in my book.”

“Thanks so much,” Happy says, grinning. “And the kid’s awesome, he’s incredible. Just like you,
“Huh?”

Tony smiles back, and yeah, he does like the guy.

“I’ll leave you to it, Jan,” Happy says. “Tony, so glad you’re awake, so glad you’re working with us! It’s an honor.”

“Honor right back atcha,” Tony says, and watches as he leaves. “Keep your voice down, Peter’s sleeping, and clearly he’s been having a hard time of it.”

“Are you sure you should be walking around?” she asks, trying to strong-arm him back into the room.

“I’m fine,” Tony says, holding his ground. “Got a lovely new chest piece, just what I always wanted. How are you? You okay?” He keeps them in the little entrance room, so they don’t disturb Peter.

Janet looks away from him, shaking her head. “I’ve been keeping an eye on everything that’s happening out there,” she says. “It’s a mess, Tony. The Districts are a mess. So many of them are dying, and the only ones that are gaining the upper hand are the ones that have District Thirteen soldiers on their side.”

“Well, wars aren’t won in a day, and all that,” Tony says. “A day, three days, whatever—”

“They need support or they’re not gonna be won at all,” Janet says, meeting his eyes.

“We’re gonna get Pete into action here in a bit,” Tony says, peering around the wall to make sure he’s still sleeping. “That’ll do with some good inspiration.”

“That will help, but I—I think I want to go fight,” Janet says.

The words sink into Tony’s gut and simmer there. All of his pain seems heightened, all of a sudden, and chills run up and down his arms.

“Tony,” she says, immediately reading his face.

“Nope,” Tony says, shaking his head. “Don’t like that. Not one bit.”

“Peter’s their north star, but they can find something in all of us,” she says. “We’re useless sitting here, underground. Hiding.”

“You’re useless dead,” Tony spits out, anger flaring up. “Okay? You told me you can’t lose me, well, I can’t lose you either.”

“This is different,” Janet says, stepping closer to him. “This is—bigger than us. Bigger than anything we’ve ever been. This is no rules, and that makes it more difficult to make these kinds of decisions—”


She smiles at him like she’s already chosen without him. And they always make their decisions together. They always have, since he was her tribute. Since he was her Victor. Since he became a Mentor, alongside her.

It feels like the fucking arc reactor is turning to acid and burning a hole through him.

She reaches up and cups his cheek.
“Janet,” he says, snapping on the final syllable. “Just—I literally just woke up.”

“Don’t worry,” she says, rubbing her thumb back and forth across his cheekbone. “I’m not gonna disappear on you.”

“Yeah, good,” he croaks.

She lets her hand fall, smiling at him a very certain and particular way. “Go lay back down, honey. I’ve gotta go meet with the President again, and where we are now, I’m actually looking forward to it.”

He glares, watching as she heads for the door. “Yeah, do that. Please get the two of us some fucking buzzers or something so I can contact you.”

“Will do,” she says. She hangs onto the door for a second, looking him up and down. “You took off the outfit I put you in.”

He’d nearly forgotten. “Uh, yeah, thanks for dressing me like a Capitol stockbroker, I loved that.”

She snorts, and blows him a kiss, shutting the door behind her. He stares at it, breathing hard, and he definitely did not keep his voice down. He knows Pete’s got the damn enhanced hearing now, and Janet just had to drop that kind of news on him right now. His heart is working on overtime and he’s wheezing, and Jesus, she’s gonna fucking kill him.

It’s like something clicks in his head, like there’s suddenly a need to be manic, an inability to manage what he’s been handed. Janet is a constant, an every day, all the time surety in his life. And the idea of what she’s saying cuts him into shards. Like he’s lost in a desert and unable to be what he needs to be. Without her? How?

He’s got tunnel vision, but for what, he isn’t sure. He peers around the corner and sees that the kid is still knocked out. Tony’s feeling antsy, awful, and he walks over, touching Peter’s ankle. He doesn’t wanna disturb him, but shit, he’s gotta do something. Something that means nothing but something all the same.

“Pete,” Tony whispers.

Peter startles awake after two more shakes, his eyes wild before they land on Tony and calm a little bit. “Hey, hey,” Peter says, sleepy. “You okay? Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” Tony lies. “No nightmares, right?”

“No, no—why are you standing?” Peter asks, quickly pushing the footrest down. It locks loud, like the kid was close to breaking the chair.

Tony knows Janet got into his head, but now he doesn’t know what to do about it. Yinsen doesn’t want him to leave the hospital wing until tomorrow, to take his place in whatever little pod they’ve got these people living in, but Tony wonders what kinda trouble he’d get in if he wandered around. He wonders if they hold the same reverence for Victors here as the rest of the Districts did, if he can use that to his advantage in case he does something stupid. He knows he can’t go after Janet, because she’d give him shit and he’d give himself shit, too. But he’s gotta move, now, before he breaks apart. That’s all he can do.

“Tony,” Peter says, standing up and taking his elbow.

“Weanna wander around?” Tony asks. “Maybe just like. Down the hall or something. I’m getting...
cabin fever and I feel like it’s only gonna get worse, considering we’re...under the damn ground.”

“Are you sure you’re up for it?” Peter asks. “Because—”

“Listen, buddy boy, I wasn’t even gonna wake you up, but I didn’t want you to wake up to me gone and I knew if you woke up that you weren’t gonna stay here, so—”


Tony doesn’t know about that, but he lets the kid think he’s got the upper hand for now. He nods, and takes the lead, and tries not to hunch over like some goddamn village elder. He gets into the hallway and realizes he has no idea what the hell time it is, and he knows the days are gonna run together here until they start making some big decisions. He keeps reaching up and touching the arc reactor, and he wonders if he’ll ever, ever get used to it. Or if he’ll have to.

“You know if anybody else is laid up in here?” Tony asks, looking at a nurse that crosses the hall without sparing them a second glance.

“Nobody that I know of,” Peter says. “Or, at least—nobody they told me about. I don’t know what they’re not telling me.”

Tony hums to himself. He’s anxious to see Sam, he’s even anxious to see Hammer. Anybody else that’s familiar, grounding. Janet just fucking—afflicted him. He’s got Peter, he just needs to keep looking at Peter. Peter’s here. He’s alive, he’s alive. Tony has to stay strong for him. Has to be an adult for him.

There’s an ornate door at the end of the hallway, and Tony cocks his head at it, and how out of place it looks here. “Look,” he says, pointing at it. “I think that leads to an alternate dimension.”

“I think you probably need to lay down,” Peter says, taking hold of Tony’s forearm. And Tony can feel the strength there, the first real solid example of it that he isn’t viewing through a TV screen. It’s a little shocking, and he spares him a glance, but he keeps moving forward.

“This door, then lay back down, okay, Spider-Man?” Tony asks.

Peter sighs and lets him go. “Fine.”

Tony reaches for the handle when they get there, and his eyes only register the CHAPEL & MEMORIAL plaque as he’s already stepping inside.

The room is—spectacularly big, lit with small, clearly fake candles, because a fire in a place like this wouldn’t go over well. It’s orange and bright, with about six pews on either side, leading up to a small stage and an altar. There are glass-blown flowers up there, golds and reds and pinks like a sunset, shimmering like the reflection of the sea.

But the walls.

On the left, there’s a phrase heading up what looks like thousands and thousands of names, etched into bronze granite. The phrase is in solemn letters—TO THE THOUSANDS OF LIVES STOLEN IN THE BOMBING OF 2046. They span out underneath it like a wave, name after name after name, and Tony doesn’t know how they all fit.

“The bombing that wiped them out,” Peter breathes, behind him.

“Yeah,” Tony croaks.
He’s starting to feel like coming in here wasn’t the best idea, considering his damn heart is broken emotionally and physically. But he decides to distress it more, and turns to the right wall—there’s no overall phrase, but when he approaches, he sees that these are also names of lost people, broken up by year and District, after the bombing.

There are so many dead. So damn many.

“Jesus,” Tony says, as they wade through the pews and get closer to the wall on the right.

“They’ve been keeping track,” Peter says.

It starts the year the Hunger Games started, and it doesn’t just list the tributes that never made it back home. There are other names in each year, in each District, and Tony’s heart feels different now, when it strains, when he thinks of her. He wonders if she’s there, and he finds the year, finds his year, and his fingers trace over the P E P P E R like they were tied to it by some invisible string. He lets out a wavering breath, tracing over her last name too, and he remembers discussing whether or not she’d be Pepper Stark or if she’d hyphenate. They never got to choose.

They’ve got names of tributes killed, and everyone else the Capitol took, and when they took them. Tony wonders how they know. How they found out. How many bodies they saw.

He thinks of them looking at hers.

“Yeah, this room was a bad decision,” Tony says, clearing his throat. “Sorry, Pete.”

“Yeah, I told you,” Peter says, but there’s no heat or anger in his words. “Come on. Lay down time.”

“Jesus,” Tony says, wiping at his eyes as Peter takes his arm again. “I didn’t want to be an old man this fast.”

“You literally just woke up today,” Peter says.

Tony starts to place blame in his head, starts to think Janet did this, but really, he did it to himself. His reaction to her, the idea of losing her, kicked loose a couple cogs in his head. Janet is her own person, always has been, and he can’t, he cannot imagine losing her. It’s making him falter. It’s making him question.

If Janet can go, Peter can go too. They’re parts of him, the two of them, the two people in his life he’s closest to. He almost lost Peter, got him back, and now Janet is making plans to knock on death’s door for the greater good. Peter is the greater good, he’s all about that, and if she can do it, he can do it too. Tony doesn’t even want to think about the kid going, because if Janet is making him behave like this, he knows he’ll completely drown if Peter does it too. Losing both of them is a death sentence. The world can’t function. His world.

They’re met with a distraction in the form of Sam and Hammer in the hallway, as if Tony’s wants have manifested in front of him. He wishes he would have had that power before, but he’ll take it now. Sam is holding Hammer by the arm a lot like Peter is holding Tony, and they’re bickering back and forth. It feels so much like before, like what he’s used to, that Tony lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.


“You wouldn’t, you’re too good for that,” Hammer says. He glances over his shoulder when the chapel door closes, and his entire face lights up. “Oh, holy shit. Here they are. The both of them,
back from death’s door.”

“Oh, hey,” Sam says, grinning. “You awake now, big man? I came in to see you yesterday but you were still snoozing away.”

“You must have missed me,” Peter says, brows furrowed.

“I just popped in real fast,” Sam says. “I’ve been making sure this moron doesn’t die, but I’m pretty sure he’s just a hypochondriac. How you doing, Pete? You made everybody proud.”

“I’m better now, seeing you,” Peter says.

Justin scoffs. “Hypochondriac. Don’t listen to him. Anyway, what the hell were you two doing in there?” he asks. “The chapel? Really, Tony?”

“Just looking around,” Tony says, trying to straighten up to his regular stature. “Glad you two are alive, what happened? What injuries? What’s going on?”

“Some dickhead peacekeeper shot me in the leg when we were picking the families up in Four,” Hammer says. “Like, they don’t recognize me. Or they did. Whatever, fuck them. Worst part about being a rebel is not having any of my clothes with me. Not one single blazer, not one single set of thigh-highs. I don’t know how I’m gonna live.”

“Jesus,” Sam says, rolling his eyes. “I took a knife to the shoulder in Seven. Not a big deal.”

“Don’t try to sound strong,” Hammer says.

Tony snorts, looking down at his feet, and he leans a little bit into Peter’s space. “I’m really glad you’re both here,” he says, in a rush of breath. Thinking of all the names on that wall, and he tries to blink them out of his mind’s eye. “Really, really glad.”

They talk to them for about ten minutes before Peter makes an excuse for him, as if he can read his mind, and the two of them walk back to Tony’s room and settle back down again. Tony wanted to keep talking but his exhaustion, his panic, they’re eating at his outer edges, and he’s gotta fucking stop. He’s not a child anymore. He’s not, he’s not, he hasn’t been for a long damn time. He’s gotta be responsible.

“Are you okay?” Peter asks.

Tony sits on the edge of the bed, burying his head in his hands. Peter shouldn’t have to be asking him that. Not after everything he’s been through. “Nah,” Tony says, without thinking, because he can’t think. He wipes at his eyes and looks up again, trying to set his brain straight. Trying to put himself on the right path. This is about Peter. This is about the kid. Tony’s being fucking selfish. “Yeah,” he corrects.

“Tony,” Peter says, tilting his head.

“Janet just...expressed interest about going to...join the fight,” Tony says, figuring honesty is the best policy. “And it fucked with my head. I’m sorry.”

“Why would she do that?” Peter asks, his eyebrows furrowing. He looks back at the door, like she’s gonna appear now that they’re talking about her. “MJ, she’d—”
“Don’t tell her, please,” Tony says, reaching out and taking Peter’s hand. “Listen, I—I’m not thinking about it. I’m not. I’m—I just wanna focus on you. That’s it. That’s what’s—that’s what’s important.”

“She’s important,” Peter says, voice breaking.

“But she’s—she can make her own decisions...without me,” Tony says, trying to convince himself. “I need to—keep my eye on you, make sure no more shitheads try to take advantage of you. Make sure...everything is...going right.” Tony squeezes his hand. If Janet leaves, the kid is gonna be all he has. “You just went through hell and part of me can’t believe it, part of me can’t—reconcile it. Getting you back. It’s beyond anything I could have ever prayed for, but it’s like...breaking my brain. We don’t get this far. This is—all of this is new territory.”

“Neither one of us are okay,” Peter whispers.

Tony blows out a breath. “Yeah,” he says. “But we’re gonna be.”

Peter watches Tony, and Tony watches him right back. Peter is worried about him, worried about the arc reactor, his state of mind, and he can tell Tony feels guilty for even sharing his fears, clearly worried about putting more on Peter’s plate. Peter is glad he did, he’s glad they’re sharing, it actually makes him feel a little bit more sane that they’re both not dealing, at all, but he knows he’s got different anxieties now. Janet leaving, MJ and Tony’s reactions to that. What might happen to her. Whether Peter himself should be thinking about leaving too. Going to fight. He’s strong, and he’d be of use. But he’s terrified.

The world is shaking.

Yinsen examines Tony the next day and tentatively lets him out of his care, and Peter can tell Tony is still anxious about what’s going on with Peter’s new powers. Something nobody can explain, and he’s sure, at some point, that the Capitol, Thirteen, maybe both of them, are gonna dredge up details of what his parents did to him. Maybe try to recreate it.

Peter tells Fury he’s ready. Or, more like, he sees Frank in the hallway with Karen Page, he gapes for a couple seconds, and then he yells to tell Fury he’s ready before the elevator door closes. And Frank looks at him like he’s insane.

“I don’t know about that guy,” Tony says, as he punches the floor number to take them down to the training rooms. “Him and Bruce were the only ones who knew about all this shit with you and what your parents did and they still let you go through hell.”

Peter’s got too many thoughts on all that, but his own suffering is usually down at the end of the list. He doesn’t like that May, Tony and Ned had to suffer, watching it. He doesn’t like that the others had to suffer, waiting for him to come back. “Well, it served its purpose, I guess,” Peter says.

“You’re a human being,” Tony says, slowly, looking at him. “They used you and that’s not okay with me.”

Peter smiles to himself, looking down. “I guess we’re just pieces in another game, huh?”

“I fucking hope not,” Tony says scoffing. “Unless this is one we can really win. But I’m not letting them try any more shit like that with you again. No access.”

“I’ve got some pretty intense defense mechanisms now,” Peter says, as the elevator opens. He’s
wanted to show him, even though there’s still some kind of fear tainting his movements and the possibilities.

“Good,” Tony says, as they start down the hallway. “Let’s hone those skills.”

They have to share their handprints when they go into the training room, and Peter wonders, for a moment, if it’s gonna keep them out. But the doors open once they both scan through, and Peter can’t stop himself from comparing every aspect of Thirteen to aspects of the Capitol. None of it reminds him of Twelve, which he’d thought it might, and he figures the amount of Capitol refugees in high positions had a hand in rebuilding once Thirteen went underground.

“Oh Jesus, they’ve got coffee in here,” Tony says, rushing over to a machine in the corner. “I didn’t think I’d miss it as much as I do.”

The whole place is like a better version of the training rooms in the Capitol, with workout machines and more simulation projectors and illusion pads. They’ve got all kinds of weapons and tools in cabinets that line the walls, and there are no cameras. No cameras anywhere. It hits Peter, well and truly in that moment, that his time is finally his own, for all intents and purposes. No one is watching him that he didn’t invite in. It’s no longer a competition.

“Are you allowed to have coffee?” Peter asks, looking over the walls, how they’re padded, and he reaches down, pulling his shoes off. He sets them aside, and grabs his webshooters out of his pockets, putting them both on. He doesn’t have that much web fluid left, but they’ve got plenty of materials to make more here.

“Am I allowed,” Tony scoffs, and Peter hears the machine rumble to life.

Peter keeps thinking of the arc reactor as Tony’s heart on the outside of his body, and he’s gotta stop doing that. “I just don’t know, uh, health wise—”

“Coffee has never led me astray and I don’t think it’s gonna start now,” Tony says. “I’ll make you a cup. I don’t know why I never tried to shove it at you in the Capitol.”

Peter’s only had it once or twice before, with May, and he doesn’t have the heart to say it’s not his favorite. He sucks in a breath, looking at the wall, and he quickly jumps into a sprint, running right up it and onto the ceiling.

“Holy shit,” Tony says, looking up at him with wide eyes.

Peter presses his palms to the ceiling, crawling a little bit further, and then he presses the soles of his feet, letting himself dangle. He sticks like nothing, no problem, hanging there upside down. Easier than he did in the arena.

Tony just stares at him, empty mug in hand.

“I can stick a little through shoes,” Peter says, his hands on his hips, and he waits for all the blood to start rushing to his head. “But yeah, it’s easier without them. We’re gonna have to...invent some shoes that work with...what I am now.”

“I’ll tell Sam,” Tony says, a little deadpan.

“Sam?” Peter asks, as he aims his right web shooter at the far wall. The web flies and it sticks, and Peter swings over there, doing a couple high flips in the process. He shoots another web over his shoulder and swings back around, taking a running leap off the wall.
“Uh, Sam’s designing your suit for the commercial things,” Tony says, watching him. “He’s almost done with it.” Peter glances down, sees Tony try to pour a cup of coffee and watch Peter at the same time.

“When’d you find that out?” Peter yells, continuing to shoot webs and swing around, making arcs that even he can consider graceful. He lands on the balls of his feet over by a pile of weights, and he picks up a medicine ball labeled 100lbs. He grabs it with one hand, and starts juggling it back and forth.

“This morning, while you were still—how much does that weigh?” Tony calls.

“Hundred pounds,” Peter says. He tosses it up to the ceiling, and catches it behind his back. He was sort of worried it would all go away. He doesn’t know if worried is the right word. He wants it and he doesn’t. He feels like he earned it, but it intimidates him. He sighs, bouncing the medicine ball on his head.

“Jesus, Peter,” Tony says.

“It’s fine!” Peter calls. He puts it back down, and looks around. There are some steel stepping stones in the corner that clearly aren’t meant for picking up, but he stacks four of them and sprints back and forth with them in his arms.

He hears Tony clicking his tongue. “I feel like I could have brushed all of this off as a fever dream,” he says. “But seeing it, like—really seeing it…” He shakes his head, and takes another sip of his coffee.

Peter puts the stones down, swallowing hard, bracing his hands on his hips. “Uh, you think people—are gonna be afraid of me?” he asks. Something he’s been longing to ask Tony since this all happened. A fear that’s been digging itself deep.

Tony shakes his head. “No,” he says. Then he raises his eyebrows. “Only the right people.”

He drinks four more cups, which Peter tries to ward against, but Tony ignores him, which isn’t surprising. Peter makes more webbing, flipping around and destroying things and running simulations that he never would have been able to beat before. He feels cut off from the world but not necessarily in a bad way, and for a couple moments, it feels like there is no war, there is no fighting, no Capitol or Hunger Games. There’s here, Tony drinking coffee. MJ, her family, Ned and May doing tours of Thirteen while Peter trains.

Then the page comes in.

**PETER PARKER AND TONY STARK. PLEASE REPORT TO PRODUCTION ROOM 17-A ON THE ELEVENTH GROUND LEVEL FOR PROPO PRODUCTION.**

Peter jumps down off the ceiling, looking at Tony, his heart beating a little faster. “Right now?” he asks.

Tony blows out a breath, downing his last cup and walking towards him. “Sounds like it.”

Peter nods, and all that bravado he had in the moments prior diminishes, swirling down the drain. He nods again, chewing on his lower lip, listening to the rapid beat of his own heart.

Tony stops in front of him and puts his hand on his shoulder. “We’re all gonna be there with you,” he says. “Just act like you’re talking to us, and that’s it.”
Peter has no idea what to expect, so when he walks through those doors with Tony, he tries to suppress his surprise.

He’s got his cameras back, that’s for sure.

The room is small, though the ceiling is taller than he would have imagined, and most of it is dark, the walls black. There’s a small stage directly ahead of him, and those walls are green, surrounded by fluorescent lights. The cameras are floating around the stage, buzzing. At least ten of them.

May, MJ and Ned are sitting in chairs along the wall, and there’s one empty one beside May, presumably for Tony. There’s a glass window off to the right, behind them, and it reminds Peter of the judgements, a chill running down his spine. He sees Fury in there, talking to Bruce.

May gets to her feet, the other two quickly behind her. “You okay, sweetheart?” she asks. “I talked to Fury and he said this shouldn’t take too long.”

“Yeah,” Peter says, taking a quick look at Tony. “Yeah, yeah, it’ll—it’ll be fine.” He’s had some experience with this. Sort of, if the interviews with the Grandmaster count.

“We’ll be right over here,” MJ says.


“Yeah,” Peter says again, swallowing hard.

“Okay, here,” Sam’s voice says, from behind Tony. He’s rushing over with something in his hands. “Just finished, shit, they were breathing down my neck.” He holds up the new suit, which is black, sleek, with that iron look like the one from his first interview. It has a much bigger yellow spider in the middle of the chest, and another one on the back. “I tried to compensate for the new sticky hands and feet—”

“Good,” Tony says, looking it over. “Read my mind.”

“And this thing might actually be battle ready,” Sam says. “It’s bulletproof. If they gave me more time, I could have put on some more bells and whistles—”

“It’s great,” Peter says, nodding at him, and he really does like it, really thinks it’s something special. He can’t articulate that, though, because his mouth is so dry, and he feels like he’s on a time clock again. The arena flashes in his mind, and darkens around him. “Uh, where can I…”

“Right over here,” Sam says, holding out his hands.

Peter changes fast, listening to the thump thump thump of his own heart, and when he gets back out there, Bruce is standing by the stage, Tony next to him.

“Alright, Peter,” Bruce says, beckoning him closer. “Just—get on up there, read from the teleprompter, give it your best performance. You’ll be great, I know it. The scene behind you will be a rendition of the rebel forces storming the Capitol with you at the frontlines, we’ll edit it to make you look battle-worn but still strong, full of power—and you’re delivering what we can consider...a victory speech.”

Peter sucks in a breath, hardly able to stand on his own two feet. “Okay,” he says, glancing at Tony. He’s got an almost unreadable look on his face, but Peter can detect hints of doubt in him, about this
whole thing.

Peter steps onto the stage, and winces against the glaring lights. He can barely see anything out there, not Bruce or Tony, or the others sitting back by the wall. He breathes hard through his mouth, his chest going tight with anxiety, and he tries to tell himself that this isn’t live, like Ned said. This isn’t pleading for sponsors. This isn’t life or death.

But it is. Just not his own.

The teleprompter in front of him lights up with words, and Peter lets out a shuddering breath, somehow struck with fear in the face of all this and what it means and just how much weight is sitting on his shoulders again. A little red light comes on next to the teleprompter.

Peter hesitates for a long second, and then he starts speaking.

“They’ll hear us in the streets,” he says, probably too low, his eyes quickly scanning over the lines. “They’ll hear us—marching on the mansion—”

“Cut it, cut,” Fury’s voice says, and Peter wilts, closing his eyes tight. “A little less breathy, kid, and a little faster, alright?”

“Okay,” Peter says, nodding.

“Let’s go again. You’re a conquering hero, alright?”

Peter nods. He doesn’t feel like it. He didn’t feel like it when he got out of the arena, either. The red light turns back on.

“They’ll hear us in the streets!” Peter says, faster, definitely too fast, but he keeps going. “They’ll hear us marching on the mansion, only—love in our hearts for a world—”

“Cut,” Fury’s voice says again.

Peter sighs, already feeling weary and washed out, and he reaches up, rubbing at his eyes. He tries to seek Tony out, tries to connect with him, give him a look, anything, but he knows he can’t give up this fast. He’s gotta do this.

“You look like you’re reading, kid, just glance at the prompter and then back at the cameras.”

“Okay, got it,” Peter says, chewing on his lower lip. He sucks in another breath, shifting from foot to foot. His chest hurts, and he cracks his neck, trying not to panic. He keeps getting flashes of the arena. Of that room, with the spiders.

“You okay, Pete?” Tony’s voice asks.

Peter blows out a breath, draws another one in, and looks over where his voice came from. “Uh, yeah,” he says.

“You sure?”

Peter nods.

“He’s fine, go ahead, Peter.”

The red light comes back on, and Peter’s heart sinks. He holds his head high and tries to concentrate. “They’ll hear us in the streets,” he says. “They’ll hear us...marching on the mansion...”
Tony steps into view. He steps onto the stage and stands directly in front of Peter, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Stark, come on,” Fury says. “You’re—”

“Can we turn off the lights, please?” Tony asks, politely, and Peter wants to fall over himself in relief, resting his forehead on Tony’s shoulder. Tony reaches back, ruffling his hair.

“Peter—” May starts.

“It’s okay, May,” Tony says. “Lights, please, huh?”

Peter can hear Fury sigh, and the lights go down. Peter raises his head and Tony lets go of him—he can see the others now, and Sam with his arms crossed, Bruce behind the cameras, a couple technicians in the booth with Fury. Peter feels like an absolute moron, and he knows they’re regretting their choice of icon right about now.

“First of all, whoever wrote that…” Tony trails off, shaking his head. “Fury, if that was you, you need a presidential script writer. Tout suite.”

Peter hears Fury huff, but he doesn’t acknowledge past that.

“Second of all...why do we love Peter Parker?” Tony asks, looking around. “Why do we love our Peter? I know we’ve got five people in this room, counting myself, that love the kid. One of you, c’mon. Why?”

Peter’s heart is beating a little fast again.

“Because he’s genuine,” May says, proudly.

“That’s right,” Tony says. “He’s kind. He’s genuine. He helps people, he is not scripted. This is—this seems like them. This doesn’t seem like him.”

Peter looks down, his cheeks burning, and he doesn’t say anything.

“So what do you suggest?” Fury asks.

“Let him talk,” Tony says, holding his hands out. “Let him say what he experienced. Why he wants to be a part of the resistance. If the people see that, the holdouts, they’ll follow him. They don’t wanna see some bullshit put together prop piece. They wanna see him, they wanna know what he’s thinking. They’re smarter than you think.”

There’s a brief silence, and Peter looks at Bruce, who’s looking over his shoulder at where Fury is.

“Fine,” Fury says. “Go on as long as you can, kid. We’ll cut it if we need to.”

“With my help,” Tony says. Fury doesn’t acknowledge that. Tony turns, looks at Peter, and motions for him to sit down. They both sit on the edge of the stage, and the cameras follow them. “I’m gonna stay right here,” Tony says, nodding at Peter. “They can edit me out. Just...just be truthful. Just be you.”


“And no red lights,” Tony says. “Just be ready when he’s ready.”

“Gimme an arena background,” Bruce says. “Or maybe somewhere in District Twelve.”
Peter feels a lot better with Tony up here too, and he takes another deep breath, trying to channel everything that’s within him, regarding all this. There’s so much, there’s too much, and he needs to narrow it all down.

He looks up into the camera. Takes a breath, and starts.

“The Hunger Games have been a part of my life since the moment I came into this world,” he says, leaning to his right so his shoulder touches Tony’s. “My parents were forced into creating mutts for the Capitol, knowing all the while they could potentially kill their son sometime in the future. They were murdered, in their pursuit for a better life for the generations to come. My Uncle Ben died as a result of the conditions in Twelve, the conditions that almost all the Districts have to live with on a daily basis.”

He looks down at his hands when his voice breaks, and he sucks in a breath, trying to keep going. “I lived in the same fear that all of you lived in, every year, wondering if I’d get chosen. But the fear was worse when I realized that they’d pulled my best friend’s name out of that bowl, that I’d have to watch him fight for his life, and I had to—I couldn’t let them murder him too. The entire lead up to the Games is a game in itself. We can’t say what we want to say. We can’t go where we want to go. We’re all prisoners, all of us, except the tributes are just prisoners on display. I—President Stane sent those spiders for me, special. And you all saw it. You all saw what happened. That pain, it will—it’ll always live inside of me. I’ll never get rid of it, or the fear it instilled in my heart. The fact that I’m here is a miracle, the chance that so many before me didn’t get. And now I can say what I want to say. Now I can say that I want to fight for you. Fight alongside you, for the life we deserve. Each and every one of us is trapped, locked—locked into the life, into the position they forced on us. Even the people living in the Capitol, and you know it, too.”

He chews on his lower lip, glances at Tony, who nods at him.

“I never want war,” Peter says, softly. “I don’t want any more death, any more loss, any more—empty spaces where someone precious once was. And we all have people, we all have people we love. But the Capitol will not let us keep them. They’ll keep taking and taking and taking until there are none of us left. And that’s why all of us need to step up. All of us need to fight for the future. For a world with no more Hunger Games. No more peacekeepers at every corner. No more wondering if this day may be our last. I’ve—I’ve experienced loss, I’ve experienced death from both sides, and I want a world that—knows what peace feels like. Real peace, with real choices. Please. Stand up for what you believe in. Please meet me on the other side. A world that we’ve fought for. A world that we’ve won. One that we’ve earned.”

He looks down again, and he can’t find anything else. A tear races down his cheek, and he quickly wipes it away. Tony reaches over, squeezing his knee.

“I’m not often keen on acquiescing to others,” Fury’s voice says. “But Stark, you were absolutely right. That’s enough for today. Thank you very much, Mr. Parker.”

“That’s it?” Peter asks, looking up.

“For now,” Bruce says, softly. “Incredible job, Peter. That’s gonna pull at their heartstrings.”

“C’mon,” Tony says. “Let’s go get something to eat, yeah?”

Peter doesn’t know how Tony got them to make cornbread casserole, but the first bite fills him with the kind of warmth he’s been searching for since he got here. Peter, Tony, May, MJ, Ned and Sam
all sit in a private room to eat lunch, and Peter feels like he could sleep for days. The lack of Janet’s presence scares him, but she shows up when Peter is starting his second plate, quietly taking her place next to Tony, pressing a quick kiss to the top of MJ’s head.

“I’m glad you turned that around, Tony,” May says, finally speaking up about it now that they’re all somewhere alone. “They—I think they’ve been under the ground for too long.”

“You’d think Bruce would know a little bit better,” Sam says, twisting his finger around his fork. “He’s been part of the Capitol for years, he’s seen all their production value.”

“But we don’t want any of this to be like that,” MJ says.

“It made me nervous,” Peter pipes up. “Just—until Tony stepped in, I—I didn’t like how it felt.”

May sighs, reaching over and rubbing his arm.

“We don’t want this to be another version of the Capitol,” Tony says. “We just gotta look at our history. Sometimes it happens right under our noses and we don’t notice until it’s too late. I’m not even sure if they knew what they were doing was wrong. How they were presenting you.”

“But he brought it back around,” Janet says. “I saw it, it—it played really well, Peter.”

“That’s because he was being himself,” Ned says. “I know for a fact there are a lot of people out there who just—wanna talk to Peter, see what he has to say, so that ad—it’ll make a difference, I know it will.”

“Do you know when they’re airing it, Tony?” Sam asks.

“Should already be doing it,” Tony says, and Peter doesn’t miss the quick look he sends his way. Peter’s doing that thing again, where he’s watching himself from the outside, where he feels like some other person observing all this so he doesn’t have to let the details in. But he can still feel that hurt in his heart, that hurt trying to keep him here, trying to remind him that he is in this, that he’s in deep.

“Uh, can I have more?” Peter asks, eyeing one of the other casserole pans.

“Of course you can,” Tony says, grinning at him.

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The lack of night and day and all the heavy emotions make Peter long for sleep, and part of him wants to push away from everyone else. Wants to wall himself off, kick them all out, keep them all away from him. It’d be better for them anyway, and he’d deserve it. Deserve that loneliness, that solitude. Somehow, he fooled everyone into thinking he was important, and it feels like one of the biggest mistakes he ever made.

But the other part of him wants to plaster himself against them and never let go. That part of him wants to regress, wants to cry and cry and cry so they won’t leave, so they’ll take care of him.

He can’t find a good in between, and he’s sick with worry that there’s no real peace. No real place for him and the life he wants to live. He has responsibility now.

He has dreams about the light leaving Scott’s eyes. Tony’s voice, screaming. The explosion.

He startles awake when May shakes him.
“Sorry, honey,” she says, and there are pained lines in her forehead, her mouth set and firm.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, wiping at his eyes and sitting up, feeling dizzy. “What’s going on?”

“You were asleep for five hours,” she says, and her voice is shaking. She helps him sit up. “Come on.”

That alert system in his head is buzzing in anticipation, and it feels like he’s missed something while he was sleeping. “Is Tony okay?” he asks, and he finds himself shaking. “MJ? Ned?”

“Yes,” she says, and she takes his arm, leading him out of the room.

“May, what’s happening?” Peter asks, anxiously following her, and the moment reminds him of when Ben died. When she couldn’t even speak, like all the air had been sucked out of the space around them.

“I…” she stammers, and she’s holding onto his arm tight as she can. She stares straight ahead, and he isn’t used to seeing her like this. “I, uh. I just need to take you to...the others. They need to tell you.”

“May,” Peter says, his throat going tight. “Tell me.”

Tony walks out of a room just ahead of them, turns the corner, and rushes up when he sees them. “Peter,” he says, and his voice is shaking too. “Kid.”

Peter pulls away from May, rushing towards him, his heart beating wildly now. “What’s going on?” he asks. “What happened? What happened?” He hears something coming from the room Tony left, sounds like radio static, the occasional voice.

“Peter, I need you to—”

Peter runs past him, into the open door. It’s a small office, and Bruce is in there, along with a couple other men in uniform. They’re watching—Peter can’t tell what it is. It looks like—it looks like the images of Thirteen they always used to show them, right after they bombed it. Pure destruction, bodies, ash—the—the City Center in—in the square—the City Center in Twelve—that’s the City Center in Twelve—torn apart—decimated—

Peter’s whole body seizes up, and he reaches up, grasping at his throat.

“Twelve is completely eradicated—population—maybe a hundred refugees on the—if that—”

Peter’s vision goes blotchy, and he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe. “They bombed—they bombed Twelve?” he gasps. “They bombed Twelve?”

“About half an hour ago,” Bruce says, his head hanging. “We’re just now getting the reports.”

Peter sways, trying to catch his breath, trying to stop trembling, trying, trying to—trying to think, and he makes stupid, whining noises he can’t stop, and he reaches up, covering his mouth with his hand. They bombed Twelve, they bombed Twelve. His home. His home. They destroyed his home. Eradicated. Only a hundred survivors out of thousands and thousands.

“Peter,” Tony whispers, beside him, touching his shoulder.

Hot tears stream down Peter’s cheeks and the shock is rushing through him like electricity, and his heart is throbbing with the pain of it, stabbing, stabbing pain—

It hits him. Like a ton of bricks. His ad went out everywhere, just earlier. Just before he went to
sleep. His ad went everywhere. And now this. Now this. Now Twelve is gone. Because they thought he was there? Because they wanted to retaliate? Doesn’t matter. Either one. Both. It’s his fault. It’s his fault. They’re all dead because of him. They’re all dead because of him.

“This is not your fault,” Tony whispers.

Peter hears May crying and it reminds him of Ben again, that day, and he grew up with Ben in Twelve. Ben spent his whole life in Twelve. Ben’s buried there, his grave is there. Peter knew his parents in Twelve, and that’s where they chose to save him. None of it—none of it is there anymore. None of it. It’s gone. Peter’s eyes flash to the screens, showing the carnage. Bodies everywhere, locked in their last horrified moments. People he knew. People he lived alongside. His home, his home, and it’s gone. It’s gone and it’s his fault. It’s his fault.

He takes one wavering step backwards, his whole body feeling too heavy, and he feels Tony’s hand on his back. The emotions are choking him and he doesn’t know which one to latch onto, doesn’t know which one is right, and he quickly finds that anger is rising up with new vigor. Anger, and the need to fight.

He turns, weaves around Tony, past May, and starts out into the hallway. He can hardly see through his tears, and he clenches his jaw.

“Where are you going?” Tony asks, following him.

“I need to go fight,” Peter says, trying to remember the way Frank took him when they first got here. He has to meet with Fury. He has to get on one of the hovercrafts out of here. “I need—I need to ship out, with—with Thirteen’s soldiers, wherever they need us most, I need—I have to fight.”

“**No,**” Tony says, voice gruff, and Peter hears him trying to catch up. “No way, no.”

Peter turns, and heads towards the elevators.

“No, Peter,” Tony says, and his voice breaks this time. “No.”

Peter’s tears are just getting worse, and he keeps picturing the images on that screen. He can never go back. Not if they win. Not the way it was. It’s gone, it's gone. They're all dead. Ashes. Ashes.

“Peter!” May’s voice calls, and she sounds far away.

“I have to,” Peter says. “I have to do—I have to show him—I have—I need—”

Tony wraps his arms around him from behind, tight, trapping his arms at his sides, and he holds on, trying to stop Peter’s forward movement. It reminds Peter of when they were training for the Games, and he can’t think straight, he can’t think, he can’t think, all those bodies, all that death, his home, his home, it’s leveled, they burned it down, they burned it down—

“Let me go,” Peter gasps. “Tony, I’ve gotta—I have to do this—I have to—”

“I know you can get outta this,” Tony says, close to his ear. “I know you could before, you definitely can now, but Peter, I—”

Ashes. Ashes. They’re all dead, they’re all fucking dead. All his memories are buried in that rubble, the ghost of Ben’s footsteps, and it’s Peter’s fault, it’s his fault, because that ad, all the things he said —

“I’ve gotta go,” Peter sobs, and he shifts forward, pushing himself out of Tony’s grasp.
He hears the crack, hears Tony hiss, and Peter whips around, sees him holding his wrist. The world seems to stop shaking for a second, and it breaks instead. He told himself he wouldn’t hurt them, not any of them, not the people he loves, and now he’s hurt Tony, and May’s close behind him and her eyes are wide, shocked, and he did that, Peter did that too. Tony has already been through so fucking much, and now Peter’s hurt him again. He loves him and Peter hurt him. He stands there, staring, stunned.

“Hey, I don’t care,” Tony says, shaking his head. “Don’t care. I don’t care. See?” He holds up his wrist, twisting it, and he doesn’t hide his wince of pain well at all. But he shakes his head again anyway, the arc reactor glowing blue under his shirt. “Doesn’t matter to me. I knew it was gonna happen, I just wanted to—get your attention, okay? Okay?” He’s got tears in his eyes too. It was his home too. Peter keeps looking at his wrist, and he feels dizzy.

“It’s my fau—”

“It’s not,” Tony says, taking a step closer to him, tentatively. “It’s not your fault. At all. That’s what that asshole wanted you to think, Pete. He knows you. He would have done it anyway, alright? He was already planning on it. He would have done it to Four. Eleven. It is not your fault. It’s not. It’s not. Okay?”

Peter’s lower lip trembles, and he looks down, sucking in a breath. His equilibrium is off, and he takes a step back. Away. “I wanna—I’ve gotta show him, Tony, I—he did this, he did it, and I—I’m fucking useless, I’m fucking useless here, I could—I could make a difference out there, I could—I could get him back—”

Tony takes two big steps forward, cradling his wrist again, like he’s trying to hold in the pain. “I cannot lose you,” he says, low. “I cannot. I told you what Janet said. I told you. I don’t know where the hell she is, she could be—she could be gone already, Pete, and I—May, Michelle, Ned, every goddamn body—you are essential, okay? To all of us. You are irreplaceable. We had to watch you die already and kid, I will walk into hell myself before I let it happen again. I don’t care how fucking strong you are or how many of my bones you break, I don’t fucking care. I don’t matter, okay? You matter. You matter and it’s not your fault and you’re not going.”

“He’s right,” May says, rushing closer. “Baby, you can’t—”

“Don’t.” Peter says, holding out his hand, crying harder. “Don’t, I can’t—I can’t hurt you—I already—I already hurt Tony—”

“I’m fine,” Tony says, shaking his head. “I don’t need hands, wrists, whatever. It doesn’t matter. Okay?”

The world is cracking all around him. Twelve is gone. Twelve is gone. He’s useless, fucking useless, and he’s terrified to think, for a moment there, charging out into the hallway, that he wanted to die. That he wanted to rush into battle, kill as many Capitol drones as he could before they eliminated him completely. He doesn’t know what he feels now, looking at them, through his tears. He doesn’t know.

He stumbles over to the wall, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead there. The pain busts out of him in a muffled wail, and he feels May and Tony converge on either side of him, holding onto his shoulders.

“It’s not your fault, Peter,” Tony whispers. “It’s not.”

“He must have always been planning this,” May says, kissing Peter’s shoulder. “It could have been
any District. It could have been any of them.”

“I can’t.” Peter breathes, dizzier and dizzier. All he does is hurt. Twelve is gone. It’s gone. “I can’t—
I can’t do this—” He closes his eyes, and all he can see is ashes.

He drops into the darkness.

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Tony sits at the edge of Peter’s bed once Cho gives him the all clear, and she sets the break in his
wrist, giving him a cast that’s smaller and unassuming, one that hopefully won’t draw Peter’s eye
when the kid wakes up.

Tony wasn’t lying when he said what he said. He doesn’t care. He’d let Peter break every damn
bone in his body before he allowed him to join the fight like this, and he’s pretty sure May is on the
same page. She walks in and sits next to Tony on the bed, taking his hand in her own.


Tony nods. He’s been disconnected from Twelve since he was reaped, but he wanted to protect
those people. He thinks about where he lived with Pepper, before it all changed. She was buried
there. Stane let him have that. Now there’s not even a place where he can go see her. They’re all
dead. There was no underground for Twelve to retreat to.

“I hope you know it’s genuinely not his fault,” Tony says, hoping the kid is pretending, at this point.
Laying there, awake, listening. “That kind of thing, it requires planning. Preparation. As insane as
Stane is, you can’t do that type of thing on a dime, within the amount of time they had since the ad
aired. He was ready. He’d been—waiting for the right moment. He knows precisely how to hurt
people.”

“I know,” May says. “And Bruce said—the fight’s picked up, since the Districts saw it. There’s been
more involvement. More bases. More strikes.”

Tony chews on his lower lip, and nods. Bruce had said that. The news of the bombing just...eclipsed
everything else. “If he could blow us all away he would have done it already,” Tony says. “He
would have done it all together. Coordinated strike. I think they’ve—used a good portion of their
resources.” He isn’t really sure. He just hopes. The feeling in his chest is dire, and Peter was the light
keeping him going. He has to build the kid back up.

They sit there for a long while, in silence, and May keeps holding his hand. Tony wishes Peter had
someone else, other than him. Someone that’s as strong as May is. He’s nowhere near a match for
the kid’s Uncle, and he’s sure they both know it.

There’s a knock at the door, and Bucky pokes his head in before either one of them can open it.
Tony sees Steve hovering behind him out in the hallway.

Parker,” he says, lowering his voice.

“It’s alright,” May says, nodding back at him. She looks at him with genuine fondness, and Tony
knows, despite the circumstances and recent events, that everybody is over the moon about the
previously dead tributes being anything but.

She lets go of Tony’s hand.
“One sec,” Tony says, looking up at them, and Bucky lets the door close. Tony gets up, blowing out a breath, and he walks over to Peter. He kneels down next to the edge of the bed, gently touching the kid’s arm. “Love you, bud,” he says. “I’ll be back.” He waits for a second, hoping Peter will wake up, look at him, but he doesn’t. Tony squeezes his arm and gets up, heading for the door.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, once it’s closed. “Can’t deal with any more bad news, Buck.”

Bucky exchanges a look with Steve, and Tony feels something strange pass between the two of them, like they’re closer than Tony previously imagined.

“Steve, uh,” Bucky says, ducking his head down. “Tell him.”

“Jesus, what?” Tony asks, and he’s got no idea where the hell they’re walking to, or why. If there was another bombing he knows he can’t fucking deal with it, especially when it comes to Peter. He looks at Steve, widening his eyes. “What, Rogers? What?”

“Uh, Janet left about an hour ago,” he says, jaw clenched. They pass the office where he found out about the bombing earlier, but he hardly spares the closed door a look. Steve keeps on. “She shipped out to Four, along with M’Baku, Frank Castle, Misty Knight and a few other tributes from years past.”

Tony’s mouth is dry. He doesn’t know how he’s still moving.

“I tried to reason with her,” Steve says, and Bucky walks between them, almost like he’d expected Tony to attack Steve or something. “But she—well, she’d made her decision, and she threatened to knock my head in when I started to page you.”

“Should have let her,” Tony says, trying to stave off a panic attack, and any new tears.

“We’ve all seen what Janet can do,” Bucky says, not looking at either one of them. “She would have knocked him unconscious in seconds flat.”

Chills run up Tony’s arms.

“It isn’t a death sentence, Tony,” Bucky says. “She’s with highly trained people—”

“I don’t know why they let them go with them, anyway,” Tony says, through gritted teeth. “They don’t have any real military training, at fucking all, none of us do—”

“They’re taking all they can get,” Steve says, in a rush of breath, and Tony’s logical brain tells him that Steve obviously doesn’t like this, either. But his emotional brain is crumbling into dust, pulling him towards District Four, rooting him in one spot, rushing him back to Peter’s room and hurling himself in front of the door so the kid can’t leave him too. Go and get killed. Janet can’t die. She can’t. And he wouldn’t even fucking know. He wouldn’t even know if his world got that much smaller.

Maybe he’d feel it.

He tries to maintain decorum. Tries to remain a normal human being and not the collapsing, dying star he feels like. Tries to remember what he told himself before. She’s her own person. It’s her decision. But that makes him think that Peter is his own person too. No, Peter’s sixteen. No, Peter leaving would kill Tony, and May too. But this. This feels like a burn. This feels like he’s on fire.

“Where are we going?” he asks, hardly sounding like himself at all.
“That’s, uh, another matter entirely,” Bucky says. “Separate. Uh, something that may be something. May be nothing. May be something.”

Tony glares at him.

“But, uh, Janet left you this,” Steve says. He hands him an earpiece, and Tony stares down at it in his palm. Feels like a bomb. He’s been thinking too much about bombs lately. Steve clears his throat.

“Uh, you need to press—”

“Yeah, thanks, sparkles, I know how to use one of these,” Tony says. Snaps, more like, and he feels guilty, but he doesn’t say anything to acknowledge that. He shoves the thing in his ear and presses the red button, the two of them going quiet and letting him listen.

“I hope you’re not too mad,” she says, with a bit of laughter in her voice, which makes it hurt all the more. “I just knew you’d try something, if you knew the exact moment. If you were there. I just—I know what I told you, and I feel like a hypocrite, but now, at the end, after everything, I just feel like I need to do something. I need to be...of worth. It feels like an ode to Hank and Hope. To fight against the people who took them from me. I’ve finally got an opportunity to make them proud. To make sure that no mother loses another child. No woman another husband.

I love you to the moon and back. You’ve been the light of my life since that terrible day, and amongst all this darkness, I had you, and you had me. But you don’t need me anymore, baby. You’re so strong, and you’ve got your own people to support now. You can do it. I know you can. You’ll be in my heart with whatever I may face, and no matter what happens, I will see you again.

Love you, Tony. Take care of them. Take care of Peter, and my Michelle.”

She clears her throat, and he hears something else in the background, and then it cuts out.

He pulls it out of his ear and slips it into his pocket. He feels like he’s going to disappear any second, because she’s the only person that’s kept him standing, kept him alive all these years. Always her hands on his shoulders, pulling him back.

He’s standing on his own for the very first time since the Hunger Games spit him back out.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Bucky says.

Tony realizes they’re still walking. They’re on a different goddamn floor. How? When did they ride the elevator? He sucks in a breath. Tries to be normal. Tries to be a Tony Stark that can live without Janet Van Dyne.

“Uh, what’s the other thing?” Tony asks, voice rough, still unrecognizable. He’s not at all prepared for the other thing. Whatever the fuck it is. Anything else is gonna be too much.

“The tablet Peter obtained in the arena has been ringing, since a bit after the bombing,” Steve says. “Shuri and Riri brought it to our attention.”

Tony tries to regulate his breathing. “Who’s our?” he asks, without thinking about it, some kind of bitterness and anger working its way into his voice. “You part of an our, huh? What our is that?”

Steve sighs, and exchanges another loaded look with Bucky. They turn down another hallway.

“We wanted to give you space to recover,” Bucky says. “Peter too. But we’re all part of this. Whatever...this is, moving forward.”
Tony just keeps thinking that Janet is no longer part of this. She’s gone. Some of the others too. Tony knows how Peter gets attached, and he knows hearing that they shipped out won’t do well for his morale. “Why are you bringing me in for this?” Tony asks. “The ringing? Just because you had to tell me about Jan?”

“Uh, no,” Steve says. He clears his throat, stands up a little straighter. “It’s—the recipient is you. And when we track the location, it’s...coming from inside the Capitol.”

“They’re not tracking us, right?” Tony asks, fear prickling at his heart, thinking about Peter, what he has left.

“No,” Steve says.

“We made sure;” Bucky says.

“Well. Shuri made sure.”

Bucky stops at a set of double doors. “It rings every couple minutes, and we figured, by the time we got you here, they’d call again. We don’t know what it is, but we figured we’d bring you in to make sure. There’s no way to track our location, even though I know they probably have an idea of where we are.”

Tony stares at them, both of them standing there, shoulder to shoulder, on some kind of wavelength that Tony can’t touch.

“So I’m just gonna go inside, stare at the tablet and wait for whoever it is inside the Capitol to call me?” Tony asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Uh, yep,” Bucky says, and he pushes the door open. “There’s no one else in there, but it’ll start recording as soon as a call starts.”

Tony sighs, walking past them. “Jesus,” he mutters, and Bucky closes the door behind him without another word. The room is another version of every other small hole in the wall here, dark and bare save for a desk, a chair and the tablet. Tony walks over, sitting down, shaking his head. He traces his fingers around the edges of the tablet, thinking about everything Peter had to fucking deal with in the arena. He picks at his new cast.

He thinks about Janet. Wonders if she’s trying to court death, now that they’re at the end of all this, now that the Capitol’s forced structure is no longer imposed on them. He considers it too. But he refuses to leave Peter, absolutely flat out refuses to induce any more pain in that kid’s life. All he deserves is sunshine and fucking rainbows from here on out, and Tony can hear Pepper’s voice in his head, as if she’s actually said this phrase and it’s not just something his addled mind is repeating until the end of time. Love him like your own, Tony.

He sighs again, scrolling through the tablet’s latest commands. Shuri and Riri did some serious shit with the Iron Man suits, and it makes Tony want something he hasn’t thought about in a long time. He was never able to get the type of metal he needed way back when, but things are different here, in Thirteen. They’ve got things he previously thought only the gamemakers had access to.

The tablet starts ringing, startling him, even though he should have expected it. A whole bunch of lines of code come up, and he quickly reads them over, sees the location in the Capitol, sees what the caller is seeing—his own name, over and over. He sees their attempts to trace the location of the tablet, sees the walls Shuri and Riri obviously threw up there, strong and not breaking down, and he thinks those two might be able to take down the Capitol all on their own.
Tony sucks in a breath, and accepts the call.

There are only messy pixels at first, and then Obadiah Stane’s face comes into clear view. He grins, and Tony tries not to startle, shifting and tilting his head.

“Why, hello there, Tony!” Stane says, laughing to himself. “I never thought you’d answer.”

“Jesus, how many times did you call me?” Tony asks, trying to keep his voice level, trying not to reveal anything in his eyes. “I didn’t know you were that clingy, Mr. President, but I guess I should have known.”

“Well, I was worried!” Stane says, throwing up his hands. “I’d heard some awful, awful rumors, Tony, about what happened, and you went missing! I had no idea what in God’s name happened.”

“Aw, seems like you figured it out, though,” Tony says, clenching his jaw. “Used those deduction skills.”

“And I see some kind of—blue something shining there under your shirt,” Stane says, and he leans in closer to the camera. “Wow, let’s have a look—”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Tony says, and he adjusts the screen so Stane won’t be able to see down that low. “Hey, this isn’t exactly the best time, I’ve got a lot on my plate right now, we’ve got a carnival going on tonight, another party—”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re living it up,” Stane says, and he’s still smiling that sickening smile. “I’m absolutely sure.”

“Yeah—”

“I just wanted to check in,” Stane says. “See how everyone was doing. Because you don’t have much time, Tony.”

“Yeah, sure, sure,” Tony says, and he’s getting angry again. “We all know how much you love your bullshit threats, Obie—”

“How did little Peter like my response to his video?” Stane asks. “I thought he might like that. You know, a worthy knock back. I was biding my time on that one. I’d had it ready since the escape, but I wanted...well, I wanted to do it right. And I was particularly proud of my timing.”

Tony stares at him, shaking, his whole face going hot.

Stane laughs. “I will absolutely take him from you, Tony,” he says. “He’s my number one target. I won’t stop. What I said before? That’s nothing. I’ll rip him limb from limb right in front of you. I’ll—”

“No, no,” Tony yells, shifting forward again. “No, you don’t goddamn get these fucking soliloquies anymore, motherfucker.”

“Well, Mr. Stark—”

“Peter Parker can tear you apart without even blinking.” Tony says, too loud. “He can stop your breath with one squeeze. He can rip your walls apart and bury you in your own fucking opulence. He’s a superhero now, asshole, and you did that. You did that, in your own fucking hubris, you did that and now you can’t fucking stop him. You never could. The world loves him, they trust him, they will fight for him, and they’ll finally take you down. We’re not gonna sit around and cower in

Tony shoves his finger into the end call button before Stane can say anything else. He immediately delves into the code, and blocks the number from calling again, to any of the tablets in Thirteen. He shoves the tablet away from him, and braces his forehead on the desk, breathing hard.

He’s never talked to him like that. He’s never, ever talked to him like that. It feels like he’s free, finally free, no longer shackled, no longer theirs.

“Pep,” he breathes, squeezing his eyes tight shut. “I don’t know how long it’s gonna take, baby. I don’t know. But in the end—I’m gonna get him. He’s never gonna hurt anyone I love ever again.” A tear rolls down his cheek, and he lets it fall, imagining her thumb swiping it away. “I promise,” he whispers. “I promise.”

~

Peter wakes up a couple times before he actually wakes up. He flits in and out of dreams, of nightmares, and when he finally settles back inside his own soul, he’s facing the wall, and MJ is wrapped around him from behind. He can hear May and Tony talking to each other, whispering softly. He feels MJ kiss his shoulder.

Peter turns over, onto his back, and MJ looks at him, clearly trying to settle her shock. She keeps her arm around him, managing a smile.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” he whispers, trying to will his voice not to crack. He sits up, rubbing at his eyes, and grasps at the idea forming in his head, despite how much it hurts. He has to do something. It has to mean something.

He glances over, and sees that Tony and May are at full attention, looking at him. Tony has a cast around his wrist, which makes Peter feel fucking sick. Ned is there too, and he was reading a book. But he definitely isn’t now.

“Peter—”

“You okay, Pete?” Tony asks.

“Sweetheart, are you—”

“Is Twelve radioactive?” Peter asks, fast. “Is it—is it—are we able to go there?”

Tony narrows his eyes, looks at May. “Uh, it—they were incendiary bombs, Pete. We could go there. Twelve can rebuild, one hundred percent.”

Peter holds onto his decision. The one he plucked out of his dreams. And he tries to be stronger than he is. He tries to be Spider-Man. “I wanna go there,” he says. “I wanna—we need to film something there. And send it out over the airwaves. Like we did the last one. We need to all go, and we need to—show them what he did.”

There’s a significant change in the room, and Peter puts his hand on MJ’s knee, and she shifts so he can get up.

“I know you, uh, don’t want me to do it,” Peter says, looking around at the four of them. “I don’t
wanna do it. But we've got to. It's—it's bigger than me. It's bigger than what I feel. I just need to—I've gotta protect them however I can. Everybody that's left.”

Tony gets up, nodding. “Okay,” he says. “I'll contact Bruce.”

~

It isn't instant. It takes long conversation, preparation, but a day or so later, it all falls into place. Peter is continually trying to summon the kind of strength he needs to get through this.

May can barely let him go before he gets on the hovercraft, but the sheer number of them attending is—a solace. To her, and to him. But he would have felt safe if it was just him and Tony. Tony is Iron Man. Iron Man and Spider-Man stand together.

They have to keep a close eye on the skies the whole way over, and the amount of protection they have with them is more than Peter would have expected. Fury is a little worried Stane might try and take them out, with so many of them in one place, so he goes overboard to prevent it. It’s Peter and Tony, Bucky, Steve, Bruce, MJ, Natasha and Clint, Jessica and Luke, Carol and Sue Storm. Shuri’s brother makes her stay behind, much to her chagrin. There are other Victors that want to be involved, but Fury keeps them back. He doesn’t want them to be gone for long, because of all the danger. Sam makes Peter another black suit, with bright white webbing, a small white spider in the middle of his chest. He wears a jacket over it, and sinks into the sleeves.

They need to get in and out. In and out.

“You alright?” Tony asks, when they’re about halfway there.

“Yeah,” Peter answers, and he’s only half lying. It feels like the right thing to do.

“You sure?” Tony presses.

“I’m nervous,” Peter says, glancing over at where MJ is talking to Sue and her husband Reed. “But I—I need them to see it. See what he did.”

Tony looks at him for a long moment, nodding. “I’m really proud of you,” he says. “I think back, to the very beginning—and shit, I should have known. I should have known you’d change the world.”

Peter shakes his head. “I’m not—I—” He doesn’t know what to say, and he looks at Tony’s arm. “I’m sorry I did that,” Peter says, gesturing to it. “I’m—I feel awful.”

“Don’t,” Tony scoffs. “For real. Frankly, it’s an honor. Anyone should be so lucky.”

Peter smiles, ever so slightly.

“No guilt from you,” Tony says, hiding the cast behind his leg. “Not for me.”

Peter nods, and tries to accept that.

~

Twelve is smoldering.

He feels strangely separate from it, once they land, once he looks at it with his own eyes. Jessica and Luke go off away from the group, with two of the soldiers accompanying them, and he knows they’re trying to spare Peter of the worst of it, where most of the bodies are. He heard they’re mostly grouped a mile away from the border, like they thought they’d be able to escape.
Peter stares down at his feet as they launch the cameras. They’re right in front of the City Center, and it’s all dust. All broken, hardly discernible for what it once was. He was here, so often, so many times in his life. Right here, right in this spot. Twelve was his home. It was home.

Now it’s rubble.

“Hey,” MJ says, alongside him. Peter looks at her, and she leans in, pressing a chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth. There are tears in her eyes when she pulls away, and she rubs his back. “You got this, okay?”

“Thank—you,” he says, clearing his throat. He glances up, seeing Jessica and Luke come back, nodding at Tony. Peter’s chest is tight as he watches them all assemble behind him, the way they discussed, and he can hear the soldiers inside the hovercraft keeping track of any incoming threats.

“I’ve got them in my ear, Pete,” Tony says, at his right. “It’s okay.”

Peter’s afraid he’s standing on top of bodies. Bodies he can’t see, because they’re buried under all the debris. His fear is close to locking him up, but then Tony reaches out, gripping his shoulder. Tony holds his gaze, nodding at him, and Peter understands exactly what he’s trying to convey.

“Okay,” Peter breathes, as Tony lets go. “Okay.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Bruce calls, from behind him. “Like before. It’s ready for you.”

There are three cameras in front of him, more surrounding their group, about six others cascading over the remains of Twelve, collecting as many shots as they can.

Peter breathes in. Breathes out.

“This is Peter Parker,” he says, voice shaking. “I’m standing in the remains of District Twelve. Two days ago, the Capitol sent a pair of hovercrafts, and bombarded my home with incendiary bombs until there was nothing left.” He looks down at his feet, clutching his hands in front of him. He barely knows what to say. This feels like hallowed ground, now. “There were thousands of casualties,” he says, voice low. He looks back up again. “Thousands. Thousands of souls President Stane was willing to sacrifice to maintain his hold on the Districts.”

He looks over his shoulder, and all of the rest of them bow their heads, in an unrehearsed move that somehow lined up perfectly throughout their ranks. It sends chills through Peter’s body.

He looks back to the cameras again. “This is what they do,” he says. “This is what they’ll keep doing if we don’t fight back. They’ll keep tearing us apart until there’s none of us left. The people of Panem are more than pawns in Stane’s game. The people of Panem are more than target practice as he holds on desperately to his position. But it’s tenuous now, Stane. We will protect each other. We’ll build a new world, one where this—this—will never happen.” He looks behind him again, around at all the hell and destruction. It feels unreal. This feels like a sound stage. This is his home. His home.

Peter stumbles back, only slightly, but Tony reaches out and steadies him. MJ takes his other hand, and entwines their fingers together.

“All these people—all they wanted was a better life,” Peter says, his voice wavering again. “They just wanted a life that was theirs. Without the Hunger Games looming over them. Without a government that would murder them for trying to exist.” He shakes his head, his lip trembling. He looks directly into the camera. He thinks of Stane. He pictures him watching. “But we will avenge
them. We’ll avenge what they were, and what they were meant to be. And we’ll make the world safe for all the generations to come. They’ll never know what it was like to be trapped under the reign of President Stane. They’ll never know the Hunger Games. They’ll be free. Like we deserved to be all along.”

He nods, and squeezes MJ’s hand, and watches as the cameras power down. She leans in, pressing a kiss to his temple, and he sighs against her.

“That was perfect, Peter,” Bruce says, softly, from behind him. “It had—it had something. A certain something.”

Tony blows out a breath, beside him. “Do you want me to try and barter for more time?” he asks. “Do you want to—go again, or—look around?”

“They got them all out, right?” Peter asks. “They checked? They made sure no one was left behind?”

Tony nods. “They checked,” he says. “Everyone’s out, and with us. Cho and Yinsen have a full wing of the ones that got injured, but everyone that survived—they’re out.”

Peter thinks about staying to bury all the dead, but he knows they’d be sitting ducks. He kneels down, letting go of MJ, and he presses his palm to the dusty floor. He closes his eyes and says a prayer in his head, and he almost thinks he can hear Ben’s voice responding to him. Like he’s got them. Like he’ll lead them home.

One day, Peter will see him again. Him, his parents, all of them that died here. Scott too, and Pepper, and Rhodey, all the people Tony’s told him about.

But not today. Not anytime soon.

~

A group of twenty farmers in District Eleven hold off a band of peacekeepers, and drive them over the border. They steal their weapons, and force them out of their government offices and armories. They wear Spider-Man’s logo on their shoulders.

Rebels hide in trees in District Seven, dropping bombs down on peacekeepers as they pursue them. They call out Peter Parker’s words— “We’ll avenge what they were, and what they were meant to be!”

District Four has Scott Lang in their hearts, and they set up illusions all throughout the District, the same one Peter Parker created as Scott was dying. The peacekeepers get caught in their traps, and some are forced out into the ocean to drown.

Janet Van Dyne stands with those willing to die for the operation in District Five—bombs, to take down the dam, and all the power to the Capitol. It will take weeks, to set it all up, get the amount of people necessary. But it will get done.

The rebels in District Six lock off all the entrances to their District with abandoned train cars. They create masks, and costumes. They are all Spider-Man.

The battle in District Eight ends with rebel victory, and the citizens manage to corner the peacekeeper troops into one of their grain factories, setting it alight. They reinforce their borders, and don’t allow any more peacekeepers in. For the moment, they are free.

~
It’s been nine days, and Peter has tried to rid himself of some of his guilt. He doesn’t think of Twelve to make himself sad. He thinks about what he said. He wants to avenge them.

Thirteen has workshops unlike Peter has ever seen, and Tony is like a kid in a candy shop. Peter stands alongside him, and hands him things when he asks. He watches him build. It makes him feel safe, makes him feel normal. He might not know what those things mean, not really, but he’s starting to find out.

“You know who else is here?” Tony asks, bent over his work station, welding something to something else. He’s been tossing materials aside, not yet satisfied with the strength of the metal he’s got his hands on.

“Who?” Peter asks, eyes tracing over the skeleton of what Tony’s building.

“That Harley kid you saved,” Tony says. He sighs, turning around and facing Peter, tossing a screw into the air and catching it. “They’ve got classes for these kids, they’re— they’re letting them choose their electives and shit, it’s real cute. He likes to build too. Wants to be a mechanic.”

Peter smiles at the thought.

“I bet he’d love to see you again,” Tony says.

“I’ll go and find him later on,” Peter says. He clicks his tongue, and looks over his shoulder. The workshops are room upon room upon room, all open windows, complete transparency. Steve and Bucky are in the next room over, working on weapons, shields. Natasha and Clint keep coming in and out, Kate Bishop in tow. Behind him, Bruce is deep in conversation with Thor, and they’ve got their own projects laid out at their station. Sam is through the open door beside them, with a whole slew of Spider-Man designs that he’s working on at once. Carol is behind, with Riri, Shuri and Kamala Khan, all of them with too many ideas and not enough space to make it all work. Not yet. But if Peter knows any of them, he’s sure they’ll overtake at least six more rooms in here to get done what they wanna get done.

He sees MJ down the hallway, walking with May and Ned. They stop, admiring the wall of armor leading up to the workshops, and Peter watches for a moment before looking back at Tony.

“You’re building a suit, aren’t you?” Peter asks. His eyes dart down to what Tony is working on. Which is definitely a suit, whether Tony says so or not.

Tony smiles, raising his eyebrows. “I am...making an attempt,” he says. He crosses his arms over his chest. “Turns out, the arc reactor can power a suit like the one I made. In the way that I can have an artificial intelligence inside, a heads up display, just like those assholes can, and—and—I can fly. If I do things right.”

Peter’s face lights up. “Whoa,” he says. “Really? Like the ones in the arena?”


Peter smiles a little bit, and he glances back at Sam, who is currently weaving a suit out of Peter’s webs.

“There’s been sort of...talk,” Tony says, clearing his throat. “We obviously wanna keep us all alive, you know, for...many years to come, but I know—I know how you feel. I know what’s in your head, no matter what I say or how many times I throw myself in your path—I know you want to be a part of the fight, in some way. Maybe more than you already are, with the propos.”
“Maybe,” Peter says, chewing on his lower lip. “I just wanna—I don’t know.” He wants to make a difference. He doesn’t want to be safe when everybody else isn’t. But he doesn’t want to die. Not again. He doesn’t want May, Tony, Ned and MJ to have to go through that.

He keeps thinking...he’s got these powers for a reason.

“Well, like I said, there’s been...talk,” Tony says. He glances up, and Peter follows his line of sight. He’s looking at Steve and Bucky. “Pretty much everyone surrounding us right now feels the same way,” he says. “And Bruce was thinking we could potentially band together, like a group, maybe like...a team, and do some stealth missions. Rescue missions. Not any front lines stuff, but we’d...go where we’re needed. Take out Capitol strongholds that are too heavy for the rebels to grab on their own. Steal information. Shit like that. We’d be safe, we’d be protected, prepared—we’d have each other.”

Peter stares at him. “Missions?” he asks. “As a team?”

“Only if you’d want to,” Tony says. “I just want you safe, but I’m trying to be—flexible. I can do that. I can be flexible.”

Peter nods at him. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, yeah, I’d—I definitely want—”

“We’d have to do a shit ton of training,” Tony says, gesturing a little wildly. “As in, all of us. Nearly 24/7. This wouldn’t be the Hunger Games, this would be worse, and I wouldn’t want you going out there unprepared.”

“Of course,” Peter says, fast. “Yes, yes, of course—”

“And the suits we’d have to wear would be literally—I mean, Pete, yours would have to be bulletproof. I’d literally have to wrap you in bubble wrap to feel okay. And I wouldn’t even feel okay then.”


“It’s just—it’s just a conversation right now,” Tony says. He looks over his shoulder again, at Bruce and Thor. Bruce is looking very animated, like he’s imitating a monster, and Thor seems concerned. Tony looks at Peter again. “It’s—if it happens, we’ve just gotta be prepared. Meaning you have to be prepared. This war is gonna be long, and there’s...there’s gonna be a lot to do. Not all of it hand to hand combat.”

Peter stares at him, and he nods again. They all seem like giants to him, all of them, even MJ, and the idea of fighting alongside them, doing things that need to be done, it feels...it feels right. It fills him with purpose, and it finally feels like he can grasp that responsibility that’s been sitting on his shoulders since he woke up after that spider bite.

He takes two steps forward, and hugs Tony tight, burying his face in his shoulder. Tony laughs, arms coming up and around him.

“Hey, what’s this for?” Tony asks, rubbing Peter’s back. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Nothing,” Peter says, squeezing his eyes shut tight. He thinks about everything, all of it, how Tony was once a distant figure he held in such high regard, and now he’s this. Now he’s like a father to him. Now he’s here, for all of it. No matter what happens. And with him, May, Ned, MJ—and everyone else standing by him, Peter thinks he can do anything. No matter what Stane throws at him. They’ll take him down. Peter knows they will.
“Just...thank you,” Peter whispers.

“Thank you right back,” Tony says, quietly.

Peter holds onto him, imagining everything ahead of them, and he tries to think past the war, past the death and heartbreak, past possible losses. He tries to picture the After. The real, real After. A sunset on Stane’s hold on Panem. He’ll have a family, a life. A real girlfriend, who loves him. He’ll have a team.

He pulls back, all sorts of possibilities in his head, and he thinks about getting there. “So if we, uh—if all of us are gonna team up, we’re gonna need a name. They’re calling everyone the rebels, we need our own name. Team name.”

“Surprisingly, that was the first damn thing Fury came up with when he brought up the idea,” Tony laughs, clapping Peter on the shoulder and moving over to start working on the suit again, typing in the word *vibranium* on his tablet. “Seems like he’d been thinking about it. Said he was inspired by you.”

“What is it?” Peter asks, walking over and standing next to him again, ready to help.

“The Avengers,” Tony says, glancing at him. “Got a pretty good ring to it, huh?”

Peter never thought he’d be anything like this. He just thought he’d be a kid from Twelve his whole life. But now he’s Spider-Man. Now he’s...an Avenger.

He thinks Ben would be proud. His parents too.

“Yeah,” he says, feeling so much all at once. “Yeah. The Avengers. I like that.”

Tony grins at him, and the two of them get back to work. The Hunger Games are behind them. And the Avengers are on the horizon. No matter who else is there, at his side, Peter knows this—Iron Man and Spider-Man will always stand together.

Chapter End Notes

I never thought this would get the response that it did. I can never thank you enough for how much all of you have hyped this up, shared it, loved it. Thank you, thank you, and I hope you stick with me for the projects to come. I love you guys.

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