Set Theory
by Anonymous

Summary

"What the f-"

"Don't freak out! I'm not like, an evil clone or anything, I swear."

Peter doesn't relax in the least. The guy standing in front of him is *wearing his face*. This is not the kind of situation where relaxing seems like an appropriate response.

"That's definitely something an evil clone would say, just so you know," Peter says.

Notes

A continuation of *Archetype*, set several months after the snap has been undone.

The broad strokes of Endgame remain the same except Tony lives, and the Blip only lasted two years.
Chapter 1

"What the f - "

"Don't freak out! I'm not like, an evil clone or anything, I swear."

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"That's definitely something an evil clone would say, just so you know," Peter says.

"But I'm not! I swear I'm not."

The guy's suit looks a lot like Peter's, except it's yellow and black instead of red and blue. Peter's seen him around - never in person, since they generally stuck to different parts of the city, but on the news and stuff.

And never without the mask before, obviously.

But today Peter had chased a purse-snatching drone over the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan. At present, said drone was scattered in pieces across the rooftop, after a messy near-threeway collision between it, Peter, and possibly-a-clone yellow-suit guy.

"Okay... so is this another time travel travel thing?" Peter asks. "Did Mr. Stark send you back in time to fix something bad that's gonna happen?"

Dammit, he hadn't meant that to come out sounding excited.

Then again, if Mr. Stark sent him back from the future, it couldn't be that far in the future, Peter thinks. The version of Peter standing in front of him looks pretty much exactly the same as Peter does now. His hair is a little shorter, and the suit is different, but otherwise it's like looking in a mirror.

A really creepy, weird mirror.

"It's not a time travel thing. Sorry. That would be awesome though. It's not a multiverse thing either, if that's the next thing you were gonna ask." (It was.) "I'm, um. It's kinda hard to explain, actually?"

Peter is about two seconds away from calling Mr. Stark - he'll definitely be able to figure out what's going on here. But some part of Peter is incredibly curious to hear what the guy has to say. Because if it's not time travel thing, and not a multiverse or a clone thing, Peter is kind of out of ideas.

Unless this new guy is lying, that is.

"Try harder."

Other-Peter takes a deep breath, blowing it out through his mouth. "Okay. Okay, so - remember how you were kind of dead for two years?"

"I don't actually remember it, but yeah. It's kinda hard to miss."

"Tony didn't really... cope well with that."
Peter frowns. That seems kind of obvious. Half of all life in the universe had been snapped out of existence. Peter's seen the tributes, the books, the memorials. Hell, the cascading sociopolitical and environmental impacts of the Snap were covered in his social studies and life sciences classes these days.

In any case, Peter kind of doubts anyone who'd been left behind during that time had been able to deal with it particularly well; Mr. Stark probably least of all, since he'd been right there, so close to stopping it.

Peter could remember all too well the look on Mr. Stark's face when the reality of their failure had set in. Mr. Stark had been on the ground, bleeding, half his suit destroyed by going head to head with Thanos while the rest of them scrambled just to survive.

Thanos had already vanished from the planet, but the prickle of fear Peter could feel racing across his skin had only intensified, second by second. Peter shivers, remembering.

"But he fixed it," Peter says, forcing himself back to the present.

"Well yeah, eventually. But for a long time fixing it didn't even seem possible. Thanos was dead, and the stones were destroyed. There were two whole years where nobody thought it could be undone."

"I get that, but none of this is explaining who you are or why you're here."

"It is actually, you're just being kind of slow on the uptake - no offense. Tony had all this stuff on you - biometric scans, DNA samples, a ton of video and audio recordings from all the time you spent in the suit." Other-Peter pauses, swallowing. "He was a mess, when he first came back. Like, really a mess. And he really, really missed you."

"Oh my god, you're a robot. Mr. Stark made a robot-me?"

Other-Peter grimaces. "No! No, I'm not that either. I'm - I mean, my thought processes are based on some pretty advanced AI stuff that Tony developed, like, specifically for me. But I'm all biological," he says, gesturing vaguely to a small cut on his forehead. It was already healing, but a pinkie-sized smear of blood was clearly visible.

Other-Peter had mentioned something about DNA samples. It would explain the wall-crawling and the super-strength - not that Peter doubted Mr. Stark could design a robot with those same abilities, if he really wanted.

"So you sort of are a clone then."

Other-Peter shakes his head. "If he'd just made a clone, then I'd still be a baby, right? He printed me, using a prototype of the regeneration cradle Dr. Cho designed and built a few years ago."

"No way."

Peter reaches out, fingertips brushing against the shoulder of Other-Peter's suit before he realizes what he's doing and yanks his hand back.

"Sorry. That's just, that's really cool."

Other-Peter grins. "I know, right?"

But doubt starts to creep in once again. "How - how many other people did he bring back like that? During those two years?"
"Just you. I mean me, I guess."

Peter probably shouldn't let himself be convinced this easily. It could still all be a big lie. It does sound just a little bit too good to be true - why would Mr. Stark go through all that trouble just to recreate Peter, of all the people they'd lost?

Sure, he knew Mr. Stark cared about him, but he had plenty of other people he cared about too. Plenty of other people were way more important to bring back, like King T'Challa, for one. Or any number of the other world leaders who'd vanished, really.

But maybe Peter's not taking the practicalities of doing that into account.

Sure, there was plenty of footage of King T'Challa in the news, especially after his coronation and the subsequent opening of Wakanda up to the outside world - the media had gone (understandably) nuts covering that story. But even so, it's not like Mr. Stark would have access to the sheer volume of footage for King T'Challa that he must've had of Peter. Peter does a quick estimate on the number of hours he's spent in the suit since Mr. Stark first gave it to him, plus all the hours he spent just talking to Karen or doing... other things.

Oh god.

Mr. Stark probably didn't look at that footage, right?

No, of course not. He had way more important things to do than comb through all that video. He probably just created a base AI structure and then pre-loaded all the video and audio files on there. Peter shuts the thought, but can't quite help the blush he can feel heating up his cheeks.

Which of course, Other-Peter seems to notice, if the brief flicker of a grin on his face is anything to go by.

He seems to take pity on Peter though, because he doesn't actually bring it up out loud.

"Yeah, I mean maybe it would've made sense to bring back other people like that - but he didn't have the raw material he would've needed to do it. Not for anyone other than you, really."

It's a little bit creepy how easily Other-Peter seems to read his thoughts. Or maybe it's not even about that. Maybe all he has to do is put himself in Peter's place and try to figure out how he would react, if he were Peter. Which he is.

Kind of.

Yeah, this is definitely going to give Peter a headache.

"If I asked Karen to call Mr. Stark right now, would he tell me all the same stuff you just said?" Peter asks.

"He would. But uhh, please don't do that? I'm not technically supposed to be telling you any of this. Or interacting with you at all, actually. He was kind of trying to prevent you having to deal with any of this stuff. He didn't want to freak you out."

Peter's heart sinks, and he can't immediately put a finger on why.

Sure, he and Mr. Stark had gotten pretty close in the couple years after the whole Vulture thing. They'd spent a lot of time together in the lab, turning Peter's "internship" into an actual internship, at May's insistence.
Mr. Stark let Peter work on his suit, and mess around with tech that Midtown's science department would never be able to afford, and in return Mr. Stark occasionally asked him to make a fresh pot of coffee or hold something in place if it was too delicate for DUM-E to handle.

It'd been pretty great.

But then that crazy spaceship had appeared over Manhattan, and they'd ended up on Titan, ...and they’d lost.

And Peter had clung to Mr. Stark in those last moments, begging and crying like a little kid to make it stop as he'd felt himself fading away, piece by piece.

The next time he’d opened his eyes, Mr. Stark was gone and Doctor Strange had been in his place, pulling Peter upright and telling him they needed to move, now.

The battle that followed had been chaotic, and terrifying, and Peter had spent most of it wondering in a vaguely panicked way if he should even really be there at all. He wasn't some supersoldier, or magician, or Norse god; he was just a kid.

Mr. Stark must’ve had the same thought, at some point, because he stopped spending as much time with Peter, afterward.

At first he’d thought the man was just busy. Mr. Stark had all that rebuilding to do, after all, and a ton of other problems to deal with - half the world’s population had vanished for two years and then reappeared just as suddenly; power grids and water supply systems were overloaded.

A lot of people came back to find they didn't even have a place to live anymore, Peter and May among them. Mr. Stark had made sure they got a new place, but he’d done it from a distance; through employees and short, almost business-like emails to Aunt May.

It had felt good, to know that Mr. Stark was still watching out for him, even as busy as he was.

But it was hard not to think of it in another light too - that even after everything they’d been through together, Mr. Stark still thought of him as just a kid. Just one more of those problems he had to tick off a list - not a fellow Avenger, regardless of what he’d said to Peter on the ship.

If Mr. Stark thought of him as - well, maybe not as an equal, but at least as a sort of lesser partner - then he wouldn’t have felt like he needed to hide this Other-Peter from him, right?

“I’m not freaking out,” Peter says, even though he is. Other-Peter raises an eyebrow at him. It’s a familiar enough expression; he definitely picked that up from Mr. Stark. “Okay, maybe I am. I think it’s a little justified though. This is really weird, dude.”

“Oh it’s definitely weird,” Other-Peter agrees.

And suddenly Peter can see it in his expression - this other version of Peter may know more about what’s going on than Peter does, but he’s just as freaked out as Peter is, coming face to face with his doppelganger. Freaked out and more than just a little bit fascinated.

Peter grins. “Super weird.”

It’s not like Other-Peter is a completely unknown quantity, he figures. Peter’s seen the guy in the black and yellow suit in plenty of news reports over the past few months - he does the same kind of stuff that Peter does on patrol, helping people out. Friendly neighborhood stuff.
Peter just hadn’t realized they had a whole lot more than that in common until today.

“So wait, if you’re me - I mean, did Mr. Stark set you up with an apartment somewhere or something? And a fake name too?”

“That’s a yes on the fake name, no on the apartment though. Legally speaking, my name is Pete Reilly, although I’m still not really used to using it, to be honest. But I live in the tower with Tony.”

Peter gapes. “You live with Mr. Stark?”

“Yeah?”

Peter takes a deep breath, tries to remind himself that the wave of jealousy that overcomes him in that moment probably isn’t super great. Besides, it’s not like he wants to live anywhere that isn’t with May anyway, and he’s pretty sure she would hate living at the tower - she’d been iffy enough about accepting the apartment Mr. Stark had set up for them.

But still, he couldn’t deny that he was achingly curious about what it must be like. Sure, he’s been to Mr. Stark’s private lab a bunch of times, but he’s never actually been up to the penthouse.

The penthouse. Where Other-Peter, or Pete, lives. With Mr. Stark.

“You have to show me. That’s my deal - I won’t say anything to Mr. Stark about knowing you exist, but you have to show what living in the penthouse is like.”

“Okay,” Pete agrees readily, which, when Peter stops to think about it for a second makes perfect sense. If Peter lived in Mr. Stark’s private penthouse suite, he would definitely want to share that with someone.

“Tony’s down in DC today anyway. We can’t both swing up there though, it’d be too obvious,” Pete says. “How about this - change into your street clothes and go up to the lab. I’ll meet you there and take you up.”

That suggestion more than anything else convinces Peter that Pete must be telling the truth - because when Peter gets to the lab fifteen minutes later, FRIDAY grants Pete access upstairs with a warm welcome, even shuts off the interior surveillance systems at his request before he gestures Peter inside.

If FRIDAY allows Pete that kind of access, then that means Mr. Stark must trust him pretty implicitly.

Peter does his best to pretend that it doesn’t sting; knowing that Mr. Stark trusts Pete that much when he clearly doesn’t think of Peter the same way, even if they are supposed to be the same person.

After all, Peter wasn’t around during those two years, and maybe that’s all it is - Peter hadn’t been there, and Mr. Stark had grown close to someone else.

That the someone else just so happened to look like Peter was sort of weirdly irrelevant, somehow.

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Mr. Stark’s penthouse is - there’s no other way to describe it, it’s insane.
Sure, Peter’s seen parts of the place in pictures in magazines and articles online (he’s not a stalker or anything, he was just curious, really), but none of those really capture the experience of actually being there. The panoramic view out the floor to ceiling windows is breathtaking; even to Peter, who’s spent time perched on practically every skyscraper in the city.

There’s a pretty big difference between crouching on a precarious rooftop ledge and lounging on a plush designer couch that Peter can only assume costs more than a year of tuition at NYU, after all. It even *smells* expensive.

“Woah.”

“Right? I mean, it looks loads better now than it did the first time I was up here. The place was all empty and like, kinda creepy almost? They’d been in the process of moving everything out, so we barely had any furniture, just a couple beds and a couch.”

Someone had clearly fixed that at some point, though.

Peter wanders over to the immaculate-looking kitchen first, tracing his fingertips over the marble countertop of the island. He opens the fridge to peer inside, then closes it, blushing. “Sorry,” he says. Pete shrugs. “I’d probably do the same thing, if I were you.”

Oh. Right. Peter’s not sure how he keeps forgetting that of course Pete, of all people, is going to understand his burning curiosity.

Pete turns out to be a pretty great tour guide, showing Peter around the living area, then down the hall to a small but very comfortable looking media room, which they both spend some time geeking out over together.

One level down there’s a lap pool and a separate gym, with a boxing ring and free weights, complete with a sauna and showers tucked off to one side.

“Does Mr. Stark spend a lot of time in here?” Peter asks, trailing one hand through the water of a jacuzzi, idly picturing him leaning back in the water, with his eyes closed.

“Not really. He spends a lot of time working. I usually only see him at night, or sometimes first thing in the morning if I’m up early enough.”

“Oh.”

“Wanna go in?”

Peter shakes his head. He shouldn’t; May will be expecting him home soon anyway.

“Hey, what about your room?” he asks instead.

“Uh, yeah. It’s just a bedroom though, nothing special.”

“A bedroom in *Stark tower*, dude. C’mon, don’t pretend you don’t know how cool that is. Besides, you have to show me, a deal is a deal.”

But Pete turns out to be right - mostly. The room has incredible views of the city, to be sure, but just stepping inside makes Peter feel hollowed out and disappointed in a way he can’t explain.

There’s nothing in the room that’s really personal. No posters on the walls or photos tucked into the
frame of the mirror, no dirty clothes on the floor. Peter guesses maybe Mr. Stark just prefers Pete to keep things neat. He probably has like, housekeepers or staff to keep everything clean and tidy. Although maybe not - Mr. Stark is pretty strict about security, after all.

As cool as the penthouse is, Peter would hate to live here, like he was a guest in someone else’s home.

Peter turns away, not wanting what he’s thinking to show on his face, since Pete seems to be pretty good at picking up on that stuff. He fiddles with the handle of the dresser, pulling it open just for something to do.

“Don’t -!” Pete starts, but it’s too late.

Peter is already staring down into the drawer. The empty drawer. He closes it and opens the next one down, which is equally empty.

“This isn’t your room, is it?” he says, shifting so he can see Pete in the mirror’s reflection.

“Oh I’m so dead,” Pete mutters, eyes wide.

“Why did you lie?”

Peter’s thoughts are racing. FRIDAY allowed him access, sure, but FRIDAY wasn’t infallible. Maybe she’d been hacked. Or this really was some kind of time travel multiverse thing. If Pete didn’t actually live here -

“I didn’t lie!” Pete insists. “I just - maybe didn’t tell you the entire truth? I do live here, but I uh, I can’t show you my room.”

Peter turns around to face him.

“Why not?”

Pete winces. “It’s… personal?”

“If what you said about Mr. Stark creating you is really true, then you have a ton of my life downloaded in your head, including some pretty private stuff I may or may not have done while wearing my mask - ” Peter clocks the flicker of an expression across Pete’s face that basically confirms yeah, at least a few of his mask-assisted masturbatory sessions must have been included in there, “so I don’t think you’re the one who gets to decide what’s too personal to share, here.”

Pete purses his lips, then gives Peter a short nod.

He looks conflicted about it, but at least he hasn’t started villain-monologuing yet, which Peter takes as a good sign. Peter holds out hope that maybe there really is a perfectly good explanation for the subterfuge.

Pete leads him down the hall, back through the living area and over to a separate wing of the penthouse. Up a half-flight of stairs, Pete pushes open a door and gestures Peter inside without a word.

This room is bigger. A lot bigger. It also has plenty of personal touches - no posters on the walls, but plenty of knick knacks scattered around on the dresser. The sheets are rumpled, and there’s a pair of jeans on the floor next to the bed. There’s a couple of books and a tablet on the nightstand.
There are tablets on both nightstands, actually. Peter stands in the doorway, blinking dumbly at the room in front of him, trying to make sense of it.

The bed is really big.

There are indents on two of the pillows.

Peter takes a step further into the room without meaning to, drawn forwards by the sight.

The room is nice; really, really nice. It’s the sort of room he’d always pictured, whenever he’d thought about Mr. Stark in bed.

“I - I don’t,” he says.

Peter looks back over his shoulder to see Pete behind him, slouched against the doorframe with an almost apologetic look on his face, chewing on his bottom lip.

“This is Mr. Stark’s room,” Peter says. It’s not really a question.

It even smells like Mr. Stark in here.

“Yeah.”

“And it’s your room,” he adds, feeling numb.

“...Yeah.”

“You sleep in Mr. Stark’s bed.” Still not a question. Peter has no idea why he has to keep verbalizing the same thing over and over again. Maybe until it actually sinks in.

“Technically it’s our bed, but, yes.”

“Oh my god.”

“See, I knew this was gonna freak you out. For the record, I was trying to avoid throwing all of this at you all at once like this. But then you were all, you have to show me the penthouse and a deal is a deal. I should’ve just let you call Tony in the first place,” Pete pauses to swear under his breath. “He’s gonna kill me if he finds out about this. I’m so dead.”

Peter tries not to picture it - not Mr. Stark finding out, but Mr. Stark and Pete stretched out in bed together. In this bed. The one he’s looking at right now.

Now that he’s focusing on it, he can actually smell Pete on the sheets too; both of them mixed together.

He tries not to imagine what that must feel like, waking up to Mr. Stark’s hands in his hair, or rubbing his back.

He doesn’t succeed.

He does, technically, know what that feels like - to have Mr. Stark holding him like that. Sort of. He’s felt it twice now - once on Titan, crying and begging for his life, and the second time mid-battle, both of them bloodied and jittery with adrenaline, the fate of the entire universe hanging in the balance.

Moments later, the entire battlefield around him had erupted in fire and explosions.
Peter sits down abruptly, his breath going rapid and shallow and out of his control.

He digs his fingers into the carpet, trying to let the sensation of it overwhelm the panic. Pete is there a split-second later, his hands on Peter’s shoulders, his forehead pressed against Peter’s own.

Peter looks up only to find his own panic perfectly mirrored in Pete’s face. He clenches his eyes shut, and goes with it when Pete pulls him forward into a crushing hug.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Shit. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out with all this stuff, I swear. It’s okay,” Pete is muttering to him over and over, stroking his hair.

The panic starts to recede, just like it always does. Quicker than he expects when it first starts - when it feels like it might go on forever, but still fading far too slow.

It’s been a while since he’s had one that bad.

Pete being there helps a lot, actually.

“Sorry,” he mumbles into Pete’s shoulder.

“Don’t be sorry,” Pete says. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for. I get them too, sometimes.”

It doesn’t make Peter feel better, exactly, but it does make him feel like less of an idiot.

“Were you there that day? When Nebula - ”

“Yeah. Tony wanted me to stay out of it, but when Doctor Strange sent out the call for help it’s not like I was gonna say no.”

Peter doesn’t remember seeing him there, but he’s not entirely surprised. It really had been chaos.

“Have you - you know, talked to anyone about this stuff?” Pete asks.

Peter shakes his head. “It’d just freak May out, and she’s already scared enough about the Spider-Man stuff. I told Ned a little bit, but he’d freak too if he knew about all of it. How close it really was.”

“You can talk to me, if you want.”

Peter shifts back, looking up. It should be weird. It is weird.

But it’s also kind of nice, knowing that he’s not alone. There’s someone else out there who gets it, understands what it’s like. The way he used to think he and Mr. Stark might understand each other.

“Thanks, man.” He means it.

“Don’t mention it. I figure we’re kind of like a team, right? Or we could be.”

“Uh huh, yeah,” Peter says, distracted.

Now that he’s a little steadier, he can’t stop staring at the pair of jeans on the floor just a few feet away. He can’t tell what size they are, but it doesn’t really matter who they belong to, does it? One or the other of the two had kicked them off yesterday, or maybe the day before, and crawled into bed.

Peter swallows. He’s not going to think about what they might have done next.
It’s insane, possibly more so than anything else he’s heard or seen today. And worse, it stung. Mr. Stark barely even looks at him these days, even on the rare occasions they’re both in the lab at the same time. He thinks about Mr. Stark ducking out of the lab early or brushing him off entirely so he can go upstairs to spend time with this other version of Peter. The one he must like better.

“I should probably be getting home,” Peter says. “May’s gonna start wondering where I am.”

Pete hums in agreement, standing up and offering Peter a hand. They head back down to the lab in silence.

Peter grabs his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder and shoving his hands in his pockets.

“I guess I’ll see you around?” he says.

“Not if I see you first,” Pete answers with a grin, waving as the elevator doors slide closed.
Peter doesn’t stop thinking about it the whole way home.

He eats dinner with May, does his homework, contemplates going back out on patrol, and the whole time the knowledge sits heavy in the back of his mind like a black hole; drawing everything in.

He doesn’t go out on patrol that night. He’s too distracted.

Peter wonders how it started - if things were like that from the very beginning, if Pete stepped out of the regeneration cradle and right into Mr. Stark’s arms and just, never had to step back out again the way Peter has had to, every time.

He wonders how often they kiss, if Mr. Stark ever leans down over the breakfast bar to press his lips against Pete’s before he leaves for the day. He runs through every word Pete said over and over, trying to tease out meaning from the smallest of hints.

*I usually only see him at night. Or sometimes first thing in the morning, if I’m up early enough.*

And yeah, that makes sense. Mr. Stark probably works late. He probably comes in after Pete is already asleep, or at least is already in bed. Peter wonders if Mr. Stark wakes Pete up when he does, or if he just slides into bed without disturbing him.

Peter wonders what that would feel like, to roll over half-awake in the middle of the night and feel Mr. Stark breathing next to him.

He wonders if Pete would tell him, if he asked.

Probably not, he decides.

Pete had seemed pretty eager to talk about everything else, like he’d been wanting Peter to understand - to know how he existed, and why. But he’d tried to lie about where he slept at night, and he hadn’t exactly been forthcoming even after Peter had learned the truth.

Then again, Peter’s pretty sure that if he were the one lucky enough to be sleeping with Mr. Stark, he would *definitely* want to talk to someone about it.

Maybe that’s why Mr. Stark likes Pete better, though.

Peter rolls over in his bed, pressing his face down into the pillow. He wants to yell, to let his frustrations leach out into the air of his bedroom - but May is asleep right next door, and he doesn’t want to risk waking her.

Maybe he can just… take the edge off in a different way.

He rolls onto his back with a sigh.

It’s probably pathetic, he thinks, one hand snaking down into his boxers to wrap around his dick, using the memory of those scant few minutes he’d spent standing in Mr. Stark’s bedroom for this. Here, in his tiny bedroom.

In the apartment that Mr. Stark had helped them get, all without a word to Peter.

Tears prickle at the corners of his eyes, and he wipes the back of his hand across his face. Yeah, it
sucks, but he’s not going to freaking cry about it while he’s jerking himself off. He’s not that pathetic.

He closes his eyes, tries to imagine himself stretched out on top of the rumpled sheets he’d seen that afternoon.

They’d looked so soft. They’d looked expensive.

Which made sense; of course it did. Mr. Stark could afford to sleep on whatever he wanted, and he probably didn’t get enough sleep as it was, so of course he would spare no expense. Sleeping in that bed probably felt like sleeping on a cloud. Peter briefly regrets not seizing the opportunity to touch the sheets while he’d been there. It would’ve been a weird thing to do, sure, but he’s not sure if he’ll ever get the chance again.

That’s okay, he has a pretty good imagination.

He imagines Mr. Stark walking into the room, catching him going at it, and has to bite down on a moan. He slaps his other hand over his mouth. Imagines Mr. Stark sitting down on the bed next to him - the way he’d done in that first apartment, back before everything.

Mr. Stark’s hands would have a few calluses, but overall they’d be soft as silk. And strong. Not strong in the same way that Peter’s hands were strong, he thinks, shivering at an especially long, firm pull; no, but his hands would be sturdy. Or maybe sturdy wasn’t the right word, either.

They were made for building things, that’s what he meant. For taking all the fantastical designs and ideas from Mr. Stark’s once-in-a-lifetime mind and making them a reality.

Things like Pete, Peter thinks without meaning to, his hips jerking up off the mattress as a thick bead of precum spills out of him.

Okay, that’s, uh. Not something that’s ever done it for him before.

He stares down at his dick in disbelief. It’s got to be bad enough that he’s jerking off to Mr. Stark (again), but now apparently he’s got a thing for his own doppelganger.

That’s pretty messed up.

...a lot of things are messed up, though. Like missing two years of your life, or having a clone in the first place.

Besides, it’s not really himself that he’s getting off to - that thought alone isn’t enough, when he tries to get back into it. It’s not about that.

It’s about Mr. Stark making him.

He imagines it like a sculpture, like that story they had to read last year (three years ago) in English class, even though he knows that’s not how it happened: Mr. Stark’s expert hands running over every part of his body, stroking and molding and smoothing over every last inch until he was perfect.

Exactly what Mr. Stark wanted.

A perfect replica of Peter.

And that’s what does it, in the end - Peter comes with a soft moan, eyes clenched shut and heels
digging into the mattress. It takes a while to come back down. Peter shucks off his boxers, using them to wipe up as best he can before shoving them to the bottom of the hamper. While he’s doing that, he catches sight of himself in the mirror hanging on his closet door - face flushed and hair tousled from squirming around on the bed; still naked from the waist down.

He wonders if this is what Pete looks like after Mr. Stark’s been with him.

Probably.

Peter pulls on a fresh pair of boxers and slides back into bed.

He wonders what Mr. Stark looks like too, after, then pushes the thought aside. He’s probably never going to find out, not unless maybe Pete is willing to describe it to him. And as curious as Peter is, he’s not sure if he wants to ask. He can’t decide if it would be better or worse, to know for sure.

And maybe it’s not a sex thing at all, Peter thinks, although he’s not sure whether that’s optimism or naivety talking.

There were other reasons two people might share a bed, right? Pete had mentioned there hadn’t been much furniture in the tower, when they’d first moved back there. Maybe they’d just gotten into the habit of sharing and hadn’t thought to stop. Pete had said something about having anxiety attacks too - surely it wasn’t much of a stretch to assume that meant he also had nightmares, just like Peter does.

Peter takes a moment, now that he’s a bit calmer, to boggle at how insane it was that Mr. Stark had been able to create an AI so realistic that it - he, Peter corrects himself - could actually experience anxiety in that way.

He wonders if Mr. Stark had ever considered trying to program that out.

Peter would do it in a heartbeat, if he could - just erase the sense of rising panic he felt every time he started to remember Titan or the battle back on Earth that had come after.

He closes his eyes and tries not to think about it. Or about how much easier it might be to sleep if he knew Mr. Stark was right there beside him, ready to soothe away the nightmares when they came.

*

The rest of the week goes on like normal; like Peter doesn’t know that just across the East River there’s another version of himself living a completely different life. He doesn’t do anything different, but he also doesn’t stop thinking about it.

When he shows up at the tower on Wednesday he finds the lab empty. It’s not surprising, really, but he’s still disappointed.

He gets to work on the latest project, a new system he and Mr. Stark had been tinkering around with to help improve transportation networks in newly hyper-crowded cities. He can tell from some of the notes and the change log that Mr. Stark has made a pretty solid amount of progress on it on his own at some point in the past week.
Peter picks up where he left off, trying out a few different things, running simulations. Three hours pass in the blink of an eye, and before he knows it it’s time to head home for dinner with May. Mr. Stark never shows up.

He knew Peter was coming by today.

Peter comes by the tower every Wednesday for lab time - it was part of the internship deal with May, that Peter gets some actual experience doing something other than being a superhero each week.

Peter wonders if the reason Mr. Stark didn’t come downstairs is because he had better things to do upstairs, with Pete.

“Hey FRIDAY,” he starts, and before he can think the better of it he’s asking, “is Mr. Stark here, in the tower right now?”

“Mr. Stark is currently in Geneva. Did you need me to contact him?” she offers.

“No! No, that’s okay. I don’t need anything. I was just wondering.”

Peter feels like an idiot. Of course Mr. Stark wasn’t missing Peter’s internship hours to mess around with Pete upstairs. He was thousands of miles away, probably busy advising on the development of the new planetary defense coalition the UN was trying to put together.

Peter’s tempted to ask FRIDAY if Pete is around, but decides against it. If he asks, then FRIDAY will know that Peter knows about Pete, and Pete had been pretty insistent that Mr. Stark not find out that they’d met.

A small voice in the back of Peter’s mind asks why he should care if Mr. Stark didn’t want them to know about each other. Mr. Stark is supposed to be his mentor, sure, but the man barely seems to have time for him at all these days. And even if he did have the time, that wouldn’t mean he got to decide who Peter talked to or hung out with, and the same goes for Pete.

They were basically like brothers, after all. Or they could be, if Mr. Stark hadn’t been trying to keep them apart.

He wonders though, if Pete feels the same way.

*

Peter spends most of his free time the rest of the week out patrolling.

In the quiet moments, when he’s stuck just waiting around for something to happen, he’ll pull out his phone and scroll through the #ManhattanSpider-Man tags on Twitter, looking at photos and videos of his double.

The pics and stories make him smile. Pete is out there doing almost exactly the same things Peter does, just a few miles away - which, duh, of course he is.

He wishes for a moment that he and Pete had swapped numbers, but calling each other like that probably would just tip off Mr. Stark. Maybe they could get burner phones or something.

By the time Saturday rolls around Peter has a plan. He empties his backpack and shoves his suit and
a water bottle in there instead, along with some chips and a granola bar. On second thought, he shoves his Spanish textbook back in, since he’s got a test coming up next week.

He runs into May in the kitchen on his way out.

“You look excited about something,” she says, reaching up to fix his hair.

“Yeah. Just, Saturday, you know.”

“Uh huh.”

“I was gonna go study for a little bit, and then patrol later.”

May’s hand slides down to cup his jaw, thumb stroking over his cheek. “You be careful out there, you hear me?”

“I will. I mean I am! I’m always careful,” Peter insists.

“Good.”

Peter can almost feel it, how hard she’s struggling not to tell him he can’t go.

He knows she doesn’t like it, that she worries almost constantly. Peter would do almost anything to take that worry away… but he can’t stop being Spider-Man.

Being out there - helping people, doing good, it’s the only thing that seems to steady him, these days. It makes the panic attacks fade a little faster, swinging around the city instead of stuck somewhere just sitting alone with those feelings.

He thinks maybe May already knows that, too.

“Have fun,” she says, letting her hand drop.

Peter grins, pulling her in for a quick hug before he heads out the door.

Instead of heading to the library or the park though, he catches the subway heading into Manhattan. He gets off a couple stops away from Stark tower, picks a building that looks like it has a nice, unused rooftop and a secluded alley for access, and climbs on up.

He settles in to wait.

His heart races a little every time he hears a far-off police siren, split between excitement that Pete might already be swinging into action and anxiety thinking that he should be putting on his own suit and going down to help, even if it means potentially clueing Mr. Stark onto his location.

He figures Mr. Stark probably isn’t monitoring his suit data all that closely anyway, since he hadn’t noticed last time.

Plus, Peter is pretty sure he managed to remove all the trackers.

Now all he has to do is wait for Pete to find him.

He reviews for Spanish, spends some time texting Ned, stopping every so often to scan the horizon for a familiar blur of black and yellow. He thinks he sees him, once or twice - too far away to be sure, but he sees something that definitely isn’t moving the way a bird would.
When Pete shows up though, he isn’t in the suit after all.

Peter hears him before he sees him - a shuffle of clothing in the alley below and the scuff of sneakers against the concrete. Pete’s head pops up over the ledge of the building in the same spot Peter had climbed up earlier, eyebrows raised in question.

Peter grins and waves. It seems strange, to feel like he’s missed someone he’s only met once, but that’s definitely how it feels.

Pete grins back, flipping easily over the ledge and coming over to sprawl out on the rooftop across from Peter.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” Peter answers back, then realizes he has no idea what to say next.

Pete saves them both from the awkward silence by speaking up first.

“I saw a cell phone vid of you catching that construction crane. That was awesome.”

“Oh my god, yeah. I could hear it creaking, like, starting to go, and I didn’t think I was gonna make it there in time,” Peter says in a rush, relieved to have an opening. “I saw you save that little kid that wandered out into 5th Ave.”

Pete blows out a breath. “That was so close, dude. And then she was crying too much to even tell me her name when I got her back on the sidewalk. Her dad was like half a block away, going nuts trying to find her.”

Peter had seen video of that, too: Pete handing off the little girl to a sobbing man, awkwardly patting the man on the back while he clutched his daughter to his chest.

“Twitter went nuts over that one,” Peter says.

Everyone was eager to latch onto the good things, these days. And these days, everyone on Earth could all-too-easily empathize with the overwhelming panic and desperation that came with a loved one disappearing without warning.

Neither he nor Pete mentions that part of it. But one topic leads easily to another, and another.

They talk about their patrols; the stuff that makes it online in the form of pictures and videos, and the stuff that generally doesn’t. Like hours spent milling around on rooftops or stretched out on top of trains, waiting for something to happen. Or how gross it was to sneeze in the suit, on the rare occasions that a new smell would tickle their noses in just the wrong way.

They don’t talk about Mr. Stark. Peter doesn’t ask, much as some part of him is tempted to, and Pete seems to be fine with talking around the subject.

But they talk about pretty much anything and everything else - school, the tower, May’s new job, movies scheduled to come out soon, the rebuilding efforts in the city and elsewhere.

Before Peter knows it, the sun is starting to set.

“I should probably get going,” he says, regretfully.

“Yeah, me too.”
Pete looks back over his shoulder at the tower. Peter wonders what he’s looking for - maybe to see if the quinjet is parked on top or not. It isn’t.

He turns back around to look at Peter.

“So… next Saturday?”

“Yeah! Definitely. Same place?” he asks, gesturing around at the rooftop.

Pete shrugs. “Wherever. Find a good spot, and I’ll find you,” he says with a quirk of his lips.

It’s a challenge. Peter grins back.

“Works for me. See you around, man!” He yells, swinging himself over the ledge and dropping down to the alley below.


Saturdays become a regular thing, after that. Peter will pack a bag and head over to Manhattan, scouting around until he finds a good perch, then settle in to wait while he tackles his homework.

He has to be careful though. If they were in their suits, probably no one would question it - but that would almost definitely tip off Mr. Stark. But in street clothes, other people might notice and be alarmed to see two teenage boys casually swinging their legs over the edge of a building, or off the support beams of the Queensboro bridge.

So, only places that aren’t visible from neighboring buildings, or from street level. Nothing that might get caught on security cameras, either. Heights work to their advantage, there.

They spend hours side-by-side or knee-to-knee, talking, reading, scrolling through Twitter to watch videos together. When Peter is super swamped with school stuff, Pete will grudgingly ask him to hand over some of it so he can be done faster.

It’s not cheating. Not really, Peter tells himself.

He always makes sure he re-reads what Pete’s done, so it’s not like he’s missing out on learning the actual stuff.

Peter had been caught by surprise when he’d realized that Pete didn’t go to school. He forgets how exactly it’d come up, only that Pete had shrugged it off.

“Tony finagled the records so it looks like I was homeschooled and graduated already. Besides, if you could do this stuff full-time, wouldn’t you want to?” he says, gesturing at the city at large.

Peter would. Well, maybe.

May is pretty set on Peter having as normal a life as possible, superhero powers notwithstanding, and after the whole mess during his sophomore year Peter can understand why. He would definitely miss not getting to spend time with Ned every day, or even the weird sort-of friendship he has going with MJ now too.

He loves being Spider-Man, but sometimes he really needs to just feel... normal.
It’s weird to realize Pete is different from him in that way.

But maybe that makes sense too. It’s not like Mr. Stark would want to waste his time with a high school student.

Peter shoves that thought as far away as he can.

In any case though, he starts sleeping a little better, just knowing that some of his memories and fears don’t have to stay locked down inside his own head. He doesn’t tell Pete about the nightmares themselves; not exactly. Especially not some of the newer ones. But he talks around them in a way that still feels like a confession, like unloading.

Pete just snorts when he tries to explain it. Not in a mean way, but it throws Peter for a loop regardless.

“Sorry, sorry.” Pete says, noticing his expression. “I wasn’t - that wasn’t laughing at you. It’s just, y’know, Pete.”

“Huh?”

“Tony’s whole thing with acronyms. P-E-T-E? Stands for Pretty Emotionally Therapeutic Entity.”

Peter chokes on a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“He couldn’t think of something for the R?”

“He likes to tell me the R stands for Reckless, and he left it out of the name because it wasn’t supposed to be in my directives, but you went and snuck it in there anyway when he wasn’t looking.”

“I’m not reckless!”

“Neither am I! But... I mean, you did sort of stowaway on an alien spaceship.”

“That was an accident.”

“Really?”

Pete’s got him there. True, Peter hadn’t really thought about it before he acted - he hadn’t had time. But in that moment there was no way in hell was he going to let himself drift safely back down to Earth and leave Mr. Stark to go take on a bunch of aliens on his own.

“Mr. Stark didn’t really create you to be like a therapist, did he?” Peter deflects.

“Dude, no. I think he just wanted someone to talk to, or someone to talk to him.” Pete is silent for a few beats, his gaze focused on the alleyway below. “He wanted you to tell him that it wasn’t his fault. Stuff like that.”

Peter swallows, hard. “It wasn’t,” he says.

“I know. And I told him that. But I think as much as he wanted to hear it, he couldn’t actually believe it.”

Pete glances up, meeting Peter’s eyes. Peter can only imagine what that must have been like, and
Pete’s only ever alluded to it in the vaguest of ways before.

Pete shrugs. “Turned out okay though, I guess. Feeling responsible for losing you kept him motivated, feeling like he had to do whatever he could think of to bring you back for real.”

Pete says it like Peter is the only one that they brought back - like Dr. Banner’s snap hadn’t been about literally billions of other lives, but just about one: his. Or maybe Peter’s just hearing what he wants to hear, imagining that Mr. Stark had done the impossible, risked everything just to get Peter back.

Which is ridiculous.

Mr. Stark may have figured out the how, but the Avengers had done it as a team, every single one of them with their own reasons.

And besides, if Mr. Stark cared that much then he wouldn’t have started avoiding Peter practically as soon as the battle had ended and almost before the dust had cleared.

*

Four days later Peter is zoning out in the lab while he waits for a simulation to finish running when Mr. Stark walks in the door.

He hesitates for just the briefest second in the doorway, looking surprised to find Peter here.

It’s Wednesday. He shouldn’t be surprised, not unless he somehow forgot what day it was.

“Hey, kid,” Mr. Stark says, belatedly. “What’re you working on?”

“CO2 conversion tech. I was trying to scale it down, make it possible for smaller cities to invest in their own production plants.”

“Good.”

And that’s apparently all he’s going to get. Mr. Stark is still a good six feet away, like he’s afraid if he comes any closer Peter is going lunge forward and bite him or something. It makes Peter want to scream.

The simulation finishes running.

Peter scans over the results. It’s efficient, but not quite efficient enough to be worth the investment for most places, he thinks. He can do better.

“Did you uh, want to look at what I was doing?” he says, sliding his chair to one side so the screen is visible. Or it would be if Mr. Stark wasn’t still standing halfway across the room.

“Of course. I’ve gotta leave in a couple minutes, but I can take a quick look, make sure you’re on the right track.”

Peter resists the urge to roll his eyes. He’s worked with Mr. Stark for over two years now, and he’s not an idiot. Of course he’s on the right track. He just wants to know if Mr. Stark can think of any shortcuts to make the track go by a little bit faster, is all.
Mr. Stark steps over to the display, eyes scanning over the data, one hand coming up to rest against Peter’s upper back. It’s the kind of touch he wouldn’t have thought twice about a year ago - or three years ago, whatever. Mr. Stark was just kind of like that - he was always stepping into Peter’s space, squeezing his shoulder, putting his hand on Peter’s back to guide him one direction or another as they walked.

It doesn’t happen as much now.

Peter stays very, very still, even as every instinct in his body clamors for him to lean back into the touch.

“Looks pretty good.” Mr. Stark’s hand slides up to the join of Peter’s neck and shoulder, squeezes once, then falls away.

“That’s it?” Peter blurts out, unable to stop himself.

“That’s - what? I said you’re making good progress, kid. Keep at it.”

Mr. Stark pulls his phone out of his pocket and glances down at it like he’s checking something. Peter hadn’t heard it vibrate.

“Gotta go,” Mr. Stark says. “Do me a favor and don’t blow anything up while I’m gone, okay?”

Mr. Stark doesn’t even look up from his phone as he says it. Peter resists the urge to throw something at the man, or grab the phone out of his hands and just squeeze until it falls to the floor in little pieces.

He does neither.

“No promises, Mr. Stark.”

Pete is wrong, Peter thinks as he watches Mr. Stark walk out of the lab.

Mr. Stark doesn’t miss Peter at all. Or at least, not in the way that Peter misses him.

* 

For all that he and Pete don’t talk much about Mr. Stark or what’s its like to live at the tower, they talk about Peter’s life a lot.

Peter figures it makes sense, he can’t imagine what he would feel like if he woke up one day and was told he was a clone and that someone else was out there living his life for him.

Peter doesn’t really mind talking about it, which is good because Pete seems to have a seemingly endless supply of questions. About Ned, about school, about May. He even asks about Flash sometimes, and who the heck wants to talk about Flash?

But Pete keeps asking questions, and Peter answers them as best he can.

No, he doesn’t remember the first time he met May. Or Ben, for that matter - he was probably a baby. May would know, if he asked her.
Yes, he and Ned became best friends practically on sight. They’d bonded over Legos and reruns of Invader Zim, and the rest was history.

No, he doesn’t really remember much about his parents.

For some reason, it’s thinking about the fleeting memories he has of his parents that does it, and Peter feels like an idiot for not noticing before now. There’s a reason Pete keeps asking about May, and Ned, and Ben.

“Oh god, you must miss them so much right? I’m so sorry, I didn’t even think about - ”

But Pete waves him off. “It’s okay, really.”

“But - ”

“Peter, seriously. It’s okay. It’s not… it’s not the same for me, as it would be for you.”

Peter frowns. He doesn’t get it. There’s no version of him that wouldn’t miss his family like crazy, clone or no. Yeah, maybe Pete had Mr. Stark, but that couldn’t be the same. Could it?

“Tony gave me a lot of your memories, but - he couldn’t give me everything. There’s a lot of stuff about your life that wasn’t saved on video, you know? I know who they are, I know that I - you - text them both a lot, but other than that it’s just kind of… blank.”

“You don’t really know them,” Peter says, slowly.

Pete nods in confirmation. “Can’t really miss someone you never knew, you know?”

“I guess not.”

Peter can’t quite wrap his head around it, the idea that Pete could be so much like him without even knowing the people in his life most responsible for making him who he was. It seems wrong.

“Would you want to know them? I mean, if there was some way to do it?”

“I dunno,” Pete says. “I haven’t really thought about it in a long time, I guess. At first, all that stuff was just gone, and even if there was some way for me to remember it, the people I’d be remembering were gone too. I’d just be remembering them to mourn them.”

“Yeah.” Peter nods; he gets it. “Things could be different now though, right?”

“Maybe. I don’t really know how we’d do it though, other than what we’ve been doing. Just talking about them.”

“How did Mr. Stark do it? Do you have a, um…” Peter trails off, not sure how to ask.

Pete stares at him, then bursts out laughing. “Oh my god, dude, no. I don’t have like a microUSB port in the back of my skull.”

“Sorry! I just, I wasn’t sure!”

Pete, still shaking with laughter, reaches out to grab Peter’s hand and bring it around to the back of his head.

“See?” he says. “No on/off switch either.”
Peter has to laugh too, pulling Pete forward so he can perform his pseudo-examination. It’s weird, seeing and feeling his own neck like this - possibly even weirder than seeing his own face when he looks at Pete. At least he’s used to looking at his own face in the mirror every day, but it’s not like he looks at the back of his neck very often.

Pete’s forehead is pressed up against the join of Peter’s neck and shoulder, in almost the same spot Mr. Stark had touched him earlier in the week. Peter swallows, remembering.

He should probably let go; back off a bit before it gets weird - but Pete isn’t moving away either, and so they end up just sort of staying like that, leaning into one another.

It feels nice. Different from hugging Aunt May or Ned, and still a little weird. One of Pete’s hands comes up from his lap to twist into the hem of Peter’s shirt, the back of his knuckles brushing against Peter’s hip.

Pete turns his head to the side to talk. “So, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m really really glad you’re okay with all this stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just. I didn’t know if you were going to be mad at me, or too weirded out to ever want to see me, once you knew.”

Anger had never been in the equation. Shock, absolutely. More than a bit of confusion, too. That and a touch of envy. But it’d never crossed Peter’s mind to be angry about it.

“Would you be mad, if you were me?” Peter asks.

“No. But, I don’t really know what it’s like, you know? To be the real one. I’ve always known I was a copy.”

“You’re not a copy.”

“Uh, pretty sure you’re wrong there. Did you miss the part where I said Mr. Stark literally fed your DNA and biometrics into the regen cradle to make me?”

Peter shakes his head. “That’s not what I mean. You wouldn’t pick one twin and call them a copy, would you? Or two brothers, just because they looked really similar?”

“That’s different.”

“Not to me it isn’t. And if you think about it differently, that’s cool, but it kinda just proves my point, doesn’t it?”

Pete doesn’t answer him. They move onto other things - patrols and stuff going on in the lab, a dumb thing Flash had done that week, arguing over where to get the best pizza. Normal stuff.

Easy stuff.

They don’t talk about Pete’s memories or lack thereof again. But that’s okay.

*
Something changes after that conversation, something Peter would be hard put to explain in any kind of specific way. They touch more easily now - not just sitting side by side, but leaning against each other, one arm wrapped around the other one’s shoulders.

Peter will laugh at Pete’s mask-hair and reach out to fix it for him, the times that he comes to meet up wearing the suit. Pete will take one look at Peter’s expression or the slump of his shoulders after a rough week of nightmares and pull him into a hug.

When midterms week rolls around and just so happens to coincide with a run of Chitauri-tech assisted robberies in Queens, Peter almost considers skipping the Saturday meetup to catch up on some much-needed sleep.

He goes anyway though, since it’s not like he has an easy way to tell Pete he won’t be coming.

“Dude, lay down before you fall down,” Pete tells him as soon as he gets there.

“Can’t,” Peter replies, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “Got English Lit reading to catch up on.”

“So lay down and I’ll read it to you. Gimme.”

Pete grabs the book from his hands and pulls him over to lay down with his head resting on Pete’s thigh.

He falls asleep maybe ten pages in and can only hope he might have absorbed some of the rest of it through a kind of sleep-osmosis, because he wakes up three hours later to see Pete slumped back against the low ledge of the rooftop, out cold.

Peter spends a while just watching him sleep. It’s probably kind of creepy, but, well, Peter’s never seen himself asleep before. It’s weird.

He wonders if Mr. Stark ever looks at Pete the same way he’s doing right now.

“I can feel you watching me, you know,” Pete says, without opening his eyes.

Peter winces. “Sorry.”

“I swear, you and Tony are way more similar than either of you give yourselves credit for.” Pete opens his eyes, apparently just so he can roll them.

Peter files that comment away for later.

He thinks about it a lot in the weeks that follow; at night, when he’s by himself in bed.

*
“I had this idea,” Pete says the next time they meet up, before Peter has even had a chance to sit down.

“Wow, all by yourself?”

Pete smacks at Peter’s shin. “This is important. I was thinking about what you said last time, about your memories.”

“Oh.” Peter hasn’t really thought about it much since then, but it’s clearly been on Pete’s mind.

“Yeah, and trying to figure out how Tony got the memories he had loaded into my head in the first place. ‘Cause it’s not like he was just saving files, otherwise there’d be no difference to me between your memories and like, the plot of Back to the Future. Right?”

Peter’s not entirely sure he follows, but he nods anyway. He guesses it makes sense, in a general sort of way - except that Peter’s own memories of watching Back to the Future were still personal memories. It wasn’t just the movie he remembered when he thought about it; it was being curled up on the couch between May and Ben, the two of them tossing pieces of popcorn at each other over his head.

Pete knew the plot of the movie, but he didn't have any of the other stuff.

“Oh, so - what does that mean?” Peter asks.

“BARF.”

It takes a moment for Peter to make the connection. “The therapy thing?”

“Exactly! What if we could like, put me inside your memories?”

Peter has to stop to think about it. He’s watched the video of Mr. Stark’s presentation of the tech at MIT, but he’s never actually seen it in person. As far as Peter knows, Mr. Stark had relegated the project to the scrap pile of ‘cool, but not useful and potentially dangerous in the wrong hands.’ The same place a lot of other ideas went to die.

It’s not like he’s ever let Peter mess around with it.

He knows the tech isn’t meant to be used the way Pete is suggesting, though. It's a closed loop - you put the glasses on and it stimulates your memory centers, lets you relive an event from start to finish. The projection piece of it was super cool, but just watching those alone probably wouldn’t allow Pete to internalize a memory any more than watching any other video or holographic display would.

They’d have to find a way to hook him into the feedback loop, so he wasn’t just watching the memory play out, but experiencing it for himself.

“We don’t have to, if it’s too weird. It was just an idea,” Pete says, quietly.

Peter blinks, turning his head to look over at Pete, whose expression has switched from barely contained excitement just a few moments ago to something more like resigned acceptance. Peter belatedly realizes that his dead silence is giving Pete the wrong impression.

“Shit, sorry. I wasn’t objecting or anything, I was trying to think about how it would work. Do you
even have access to it?”

Pete is looking at him uncertainly. “You’re sure you’re okay with this?”

“I am if you are. I mean, it’s your head we’re gonna be messing around with.”

“It’s your head too, dude,” Pete says. “Your memories.”

“Oh. Well yeah, I guess so. But all I’d have to do is remember stuff, and that part's easy.”

They talk about it for a while - how it might work, how Pete thinks he can get away with borrowing it without Mr. Stark noticing.

"I can probably just ask him to explain it, if I get him in the right mood," Pete says.

Peter makes a sound that sounds vaguely like agreement, and tries not to think about what might be involved in getting Mr. Stark ‘in the right mood.’

*

Most of Sunday is spent hanging out with Ned, both of them making only incremental progress on their history papers while mostly arguing about whether or not Kylo Ren was lying about Rey’s parents.

Peter keeps zoning out, wondering what Pete would think of the discussion, if he were here.

It's bad enough that Ned stops mid-sentence to ask, "Dude are you okay? You've been kind of weird lately."

"Yeah, sorry - I'm fine. Just really wish I was already done with this paper."

It's too much like when he'd first gotten bit; the near-constant itch under his skin, wanting to tell Ned everything. For all that Ned talked sometimes about not being able to keep a secret, he's been pretty awesome about it so far.

Besides, they've already cleared the 'dude, I'm a superhero' hurdle with relative ease. Surely 'dude I have a secret clone' one had to be be easier.

'Dude, my secret clone is boning my mentor and first celebrity crush, who both happen to be the same person,' would be a lot more awkward to work through, but there's no reason Peter has to go there with it. That part isn't really Peter's secret to tell, anyway.

Peter is pretty sure Ned still knows something is off. They've known each other for too long for it not to be obvious. Plus, by now Ned knows exactly how Peter acts when he's keeping a secret.

"Has Mr. Stark shown up for any of your lab sessions lately?" Ned asks.

"Nah. He's been really busy."

"Oh. Yeah I bet he must be, with the whole planetary defense thing. I wonder how that's going to work anyway. Like, are they going to make you sign up for it? Do you have to sign up, or are you like automatically included because you're an Avenger?"
"I don't know."

“I still can’t believe you’re an Avenger. Like, for real now. Was there a ceremony? Did you have to swear an oath?”

“No, Ned. I told you, it was just a quick thing. I think that’s how it happens for most of us, actually.”

"Okay. But seriously, no one’s said anything about the defense coalition? I thought Mr. Stark would’ve mentioned it to you, at least a little. Sort of like how he talked to you back when the Accords were still a thing."

"Nope, he hasn't said anything at all to me about it." Peter struggles to keep the irritation out of his voice. It's not Ned's fault. He's only asking the same questions Peter has been wondering about himself.

But getting answers to those questions would require Mr. Stark to actually talk to him for more than five minutes at a time.

"C'mon," Peter says, "let's just finish our papers so we can finally do something else."

Thankfully, Ned lets the subject drop.

Getting through the rest of the paper is still a slog, and Peter is still distracted, but eventually they finish and Ned can finally show off his latest video game haul.

When Peter gets home that night, he climbs into bed frustrated and exhausted.

*

Mr. Stark is away on business the following Wednesday, but Peter’s actually totally fine with that, this time.

He looks at the thick-framed sunglasses Pete plunks down on the table in front of him.

“Wait, that’s it?”

“What were you expecting?”

“I dunno. I knew the glasses were part of it from that presentation he did. I guess I thought there was another part of it, like a server or something hidden backstage."

“Nope,” Pete says. “I mean, there’s the hologram tech piece, but that’s not what we need.”

Peter picks up the glasses, turning them over in his hands. They feel heavy - way more than titanium or polycarbonate frames would. He can only guess what they’re made out of.

“So, dry run first?” Peter says.

“Yeah. Just to get a baseline idea of how they work. Tony said all you have to do is put them on and think about the memory you want to revisit. ”

Peter pauses for a moment, searching back for a memory Pete would want to see. Nothing too heavy
though, since he wasn’t sure how many tests they were going to have run before they could figure out a way to jerry-rig a secondary headset.

Something in long term memory, since that’s where the vast majority of the memories they’d need to mine would be coming from, and Peter doesn’t know if tech works differently on short term stuff, but he suspects it might. Decision made, he slips the glasses onto his face and focuses his mind on meeting Ned for the first time. And then -

“Oh woah,” he breathes out.

“Is it working?”

“Yeah it’s - it’s really weird.” Peter closes his eyes to tamp down on the sensory overload, but that only makes the memory come back even stronger; the sleek walls of the lab around him replaced with a colorful mishmash of art projects and science fair trophies of his third grade classroom. He can actually smell it.

“Oh man, this is so cool.”

He can feel Pete lean in closer, their knees pressed together, Pete’s face probably only inches away from his own. But he can also feel the nervous excitement pounding through his own veins as he walks over to one of the empty desks and takes a seat.

They’re supposed to learn about space today; it’s gonna be awesome.

There’s a kid he doesn’t recognize sitting across from him. “Hi, I’m Peter,” he says, because Uncle Ben always says it’s important to be polite. He doesn’t immediately understand why the thought sends a pang of hurt running through him.

“I'm Ned,” the kid says back. “I like your backpack.”

“Yeah?” Peter looks down at the floor, where his brand new Star Wars backpack is slumped next to his chair. “Thanks! My aunt got it for me.”

“Awesome.”

Peter reaches up to his face, pulling off a pair of glasses that feel like they shouldn’t be there at all. The classroom fades, the smell of whiteboard markers and Elmers glue still lingering in his nose.

“Holy crap.”

“I’m assuming that means it works,” Pete says, watching him intently.

“Yeah dude, it works. It works crazy well. I felt like I was there.”

Pete takes a deep breath and blows it out. “Good.

They get to work.

What they need is some kind of secondary system, like a shadow terminal that Pete can use to hitch a ride through Peter’s memories. It’s a simple enough concept in theory, but the actual development proves to be a lot more difficult. Doubly so because they can’t ask for FRIDAY’s help with it, not without risking tipping Mr. Stark off.

What they do have though, is the design of the primary headset to work off of.
“It reads the parts of the brain that are stimulated in real time and uses that as a map to simulate sensory input. There’s also sort of like a predictive element to it - what were you thinking about, just now?”

“Third grade, meeting Ned for the first time.”

“Okay, so you probably don’t remember every single thing that was in the classroom, right? But the program has some idea what a third grade classroom looks like, and so do you, so it fills in the blanks for you to give you as complete an environment as it can.”

Peter nods along to the explanation. The same predictive tech was also probably being used to alter how other people reacted within the memory, if he was to change something. That was the point of the tech, after all; for Mr. Stark to go back and tell his parents he loved them one last time, before they were gone forever.

Except Peter and Pete won’t be using the tech to alter memories; all they need to do is clone the sensory feedback loop from Peter’s end so Pete can live through the same experiences he had.

Pete ends up trying out the glasses as well, although he doesn’t say which memory he relives. It’s only a couple minutes, and he seems a little shaken when he pulls them off.

“You okay?” Peter asks, leaning in to look Pete in the eye, one hand braced on the other boy’s shoulder.

Pete nods. “Yeah, yeah I’m fine. I, um. I wasn’t totally sure they’d work on me.”

Shit, Peter hadn’t even considered that. It’s easy to forget, sometimes, that Pete’s brain isn’t built quite the same way as his own. But apparently close enough for the tech to still work, which is the important part.

They start small. Pete unlinks Mr. Stark’s printing tech from the network so they can create a secondary set of glasses to mess around with without FRIDAY knowing. Working together, they’re able to create a device-to-device subnetwork, which is relatively easy. Digging into the coding to slave the secondary headset to the primary turns out to be a lot harder.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Pete seems to be incredibly adept at digging through Mr. Stark’s code. And after two years of working with Mr. Stark in the lab, Peter’s no slouch at it either.

“Okay so this is what triggers the feedback loop,” he says, tapping a line of code on the holo-display. “If we can get this function to take the inputs from the other set and run the exact same way - ”

“- then we shouldn’t have to re-write everything to make it work.”

It takes a bit of experimenting - Peter puts on the primary set and thinks of memory after memory, both of them watching the output terminal as reams of data scroll by.

“So cool,” Peter says under his breath. Those lines and lines of data are his memories turned digital. And not just a video or a photo either, but the actual electrical impulses in his brain that mimicked the sense-memories. Like smelling whiteboard markers and Elmers glue in the classroom.

“Yeah,” Pete agrees.

When they finally get the secondary output terminal to stop throwing up errors, they try for the first test run. Pete puts on the secondary glasses, and Peter thinks of another memory - a simple one, just he and Ben and May at the beach one summer, playing in the waves.
He knows it must be working when he hears Pete gasp.

“I feel… sand?”

Peter can’t help the grin that breaks across his face. “Yeah. What else?”

“Smells like salt water. And I can hear a woman laughing.”

“Can you see her?” Peter holds his breath as he waits for the answer.

“It’s May! Her hair is short.”

Peter exhales in relief.

Ben is there too, one hand on Peter’s shoulder to steady him as the waves break across their calves. May has her jeans rolled up to her knees, sandals held loosely in one hand, her hair whipping around in the wind. Peter looks up at Ben, who’s squinting off into the distance, trying to identify a small flock of birds. They’re definitely not seagulls, although there are plenty of those around too, squawking up a storm and generally circling the barbecue grills a little ways off.

Ben’s got the faintest touches of gray in his hair, Peter notices with surprise.

Peter feels a hand slide into his own, too smooth and too lean to be Ben’s. It’s Pete’s, he realizes after a moment.

Peter doesn’t remember the entire day, but he relives it in flashes - chasing down one of May’s sandals through the waves when she’d accidentally dropped it in the water, Ben and May burying him in the sand all the way up to his neck. How good it’d felt to climb out (with some help) a few minutes later, running down to the water to rinse away the sand sticking to him everywhere - stuck in the waistband of his bathing suit, behind his ears, in his hair.

Peter licks his lips, tasting the salt water in the air, on his skin.

When the memory finally ends, Peter can’t bring himself to open his eyes right away.

But he has to know if it worked. If it really worked.

He pulls off the glasses and looks over at Pete. He looks devastated.

“Shit, sorry. I should’ve picked something else. I’m sorry. I meant to stick with meeting Ned for the first one anyway, I don’t know why I - ”

“It’s okay!” Pete interrupts. “It’s fine. It was just - we were all so happy. You were, I mean.”

“We were.”

Their hands are still laced together. Peter gives Pete’s hand a squeeze and gets one back in response.

“Did you want to keep going? We don’t have to, if it’s too much,” Peter says.

“Yeah, yeah let’s keep going. If you’re okay with it?”

Peter shrugs. “I’m fine if you are.”

“I’m fine. Let’s keep going, just - maybe something not so intense?”
Peter knows what he means. The memory itself hadn’t been intense, but seeing Ben again, knowing that in a few short years he’d be gone - that part hadn’t been easy. Peter spins so they’re facing each other, legs criss-crossed, sitting knee-to-knee with one another.

“Wanna meet Ned?”

Pete grins. “Yeah.”

They both put their glasses back on and spend the rest of the afternoon being eight years old again.

*

“I’m really glad we’re friends,” Peter tells Ned when he sees him at school the next day.

“I’m glad we’re friends too, dude,” Ned says, nodding at Peter and looking vaguely touched. “That’s not usually something you say to me out of the blue like that, but I really appreciate it. Wait - we’re not about to be attacked by aliens again or something, are we?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“That’s not super reassuring, you know that right?”

Peter shrugs.

*

Mr. Stark is back in town that weekend, so they can’t meet up in the lab. Neither one of them is particularly fond of the idea of reliving the memories out in the open, even if they are up on a rooftop away from prying eyes - but thankfully May has to work Saturday morning, so Peter gets up early to see her off and then waits for Pete to come by.

Pete steps into the apartment with some hesitation, looking around like he’s trying to absorb it all at once. He frowns.

“It’s smaller than your old place.”

“You knew the old apartment?” Oh, duh. Peter had worn the suit in the apartment a few times, those memories had probably been uploaded along with the all the rest. “Nevermind. Yeah, it is a bit. I guess Mr. Stark tried to get May to take a bigger one, but we thought since I’ll be going to college in a couple years we might as well save a bit on the rent, you know?”

“The stuff is different too.”

“Yeah. Some of our stuff got saved - photos and mementos, stuff like that. But a lot of it we had to replace, when we got back.”

Pete looks over at him. “I’m sorry.”
“It’s not your fault. It happened to a lot of people when they came back. It’s a lot of what May’s doing now, trying to help people rebuild their lives.”

“No, but... I was around. I could’ve saved stuff, or asked Tony to buy out the apartment, but I didn’t even think -”

“You thought we were gone for good, and so did Mr. Stark. Everyone did.”

Pete is still frowning.

“C’mon, let’s go to my room,” Peter says, grabbing a bag of chips from the basket on top of the fridge. “Hey, did you think of what you wanted to see today?”

“Um, yeah.”

They climb onto Peter’s bed, shoving pillows behind them so they can lean back against the wall, Peter ripping open the bag of chips and setting it between them. Pete pulls the glasses out of his bag and hands Peter his pair.

“So?” Peter asks.

“I thought it might be good to like, work through it in order, if we can?”

Peter nods. It makes sense. Memories were interlinked, each one colored by what came before and what followed after. Besides, cherry-picking just the easy ones was bound to leave Pete feeling like he was still missing things. Important things.

Peter turns his thoughts inwards, and tries to think back to the earliest thing he can remember.

He remembers being sick once, when he was really little. Everything had ached, and he couldn’t understand why it was so hot and so cold at the same time. He remembers his mom’s hand on his forehead, the frown in her voice when she’d checked his temperature. He remembers his dad reading to him, for what had felt like hours and hours until his fever had broken. He remembers the strawberry popsicles they’d let him eat, once it finally had.

He remembers bubble baths, and sitting in his dad’s lap learning how to tie his shoes. And his mom blowing raspberries on his stomach every night when she tucked him into bed.

Peter puts the glasses on and lets himself remember it all.

*

He has to blink at the clock a few times before the numbers make sense - it’s only been a couple hours, but it’d felt like ages.

Their hands are linked together once again. Something about it was grounding; helped Peter remember he wasn’t walking through the memories alone. Pete seemed to need the connection just as much - for Peter all of this was well-trodden ground, but Pete was experiencing everything for the first time.

“You okay?” Peter asks.
Pete opens his mouth to reply, but closes it and shakes his head. Peter slips his hand out Pete’s grip and wraps his arm around Pete’s shoulders instead, pulling him close.

“I never really missed them before, you know?” Pete says, his voice raspy and quiet.

Peter doesn’t know, not exactly. He has no idea what it's like to be seventeen and not miss his parents every day. But he does know what it’s like to go from knowing his parents one minute to knowing that they’re gone in the next, and won’t ever be coming back.

“I know this isn’t really going to help, but you do get used to it, eventually. Or maybe not used to it, ’cause you still miss them, but you figure out how to keep going anyway. May and Ben helped a lot, too. If - uh, if you want to keep going.”

Pete nods against his shoulder.

Peter puts his glasses back on.

Starting again isn’t any easier; he remembers bits and pieces of the funeral, and then a lot of time spent curled up in Ben’s lap. There’d been a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, because neither Ben nor May really cooked, and neither one of them had a clue how to make food for a five year old who had to be coaxed into eating anything at all.

They figure it out though, just like everything else. Peter eventually stops sleeping in their bed every night and starts sleeping in the den they hastily convert into a second bedroom.

They take him to the park, and to the beach, and to the Natural History Museum to look at dinosaur fossils and watch movies about the ocean on a giant movie screen. They take him to visit his parents’ graves, to leave buttons and stickers from the museums instead of flowers, and tell them all about the things he’s seen and learned and done.

It still hurts, but Peter learns to carry the hurt with him rather than letting it drag him under.

He remembers movie nights with Ben. You’re gonna love this one, kiddo, Ben would say every time, before launching into an explanation why. He remembers watching Back to the Future, and the Lord of the Rings, and that Star Trek movie where they’d saved the whales.

May shoots Ben a look when he brings home Alien for the first time.

“You’re really going to show him that?”

“Why not? He’ll love it!”

“I think there’s a rule,” May says, eyes narrowing, “you have to be able to spell Xenomorph before you can watch Alien.”

“I can spell Xenomorph!” Peter chimes in, eager to prove himself.

“Can you?” May asks.

“Um. Can you use it in a sentence?”

“How about this: Uncle Ben is going to spend the next month checking under your bed and in your closet every night for Xenomorphs.”

Just behind May, Ben is making a lot of complicated hand gestures in Peter’s direction.
Peter gets the “x”, but flubs it in the home stretch by going for an ‘f’ instead of ‘ph’. They watch the movie anyway, and just as May predicted, Ben spends the next several weeks checking the apartment over and over again for lurking Xenomorphs at Peter’s terrified insistence.

Two months later Ben brings home *Aliens*, and this time Peter spells Xenomorphs perfectly on the first try without any outside help. The second movie is just as scary as the first, but Peter likes it.

They end up back at the beach, the very same memory they’d started out with the first time.

Peter opens his eyes slowly, figuring that’s as good a place as any to take a break.

“All the movies,” Pete starts to say, trailing off.

“Yeah, those were all Ben.”

"Tony didn't know that."

Peter stiffens. "Well, now you can tell him. If you want."

"Nah," Pete says, yawning. "I'd have to explain how I know, since I didn't before, and I can't."

Pete has to leave not long after, since May is due back in the afternoon. He feels sort of oddly numb, alone in the apartment again, old memories painfully fresh in his mind. He doesn’t really do much until she gets home.

“What’re you up to, kiddo?” May asks, tousling his hair as she walks by the couch.

“Nothing. Hey, you want to watch a movie?”

“Yeah. You pick something, I’m gonna get changed.”

Peter scrolls through Netflix until he finds a classic - something they’ve both seen a million times but will both enjoy nonetheless. They lean into each other on the couch, May’s hand in his hair. She seems to know what he’s thinking without a word.

“I miss him too,” she says, quietly.

*

Peter’s early memories are a lot of short flashes, but as he gets older the memories are more complete, longer, and there are just more of them in general.

It’s not entirely sequential; it’s not like Peter can flip through his memories like pages in a book. But he tries not to skip around as much as possible.

The next time they meet up, Mr. Stark is back in town, and May isn’t working, so they’re stuck on a rooftop again. Peter climbs up the side of a building and sets his backpack between his legs, pulling out a photo album to help things along.

There’s some stuff in there he hasn’t thought about in years - had completely skipped over, last time.

Pete cocks an eyebrow when he arrives, glancing down at the album. “Retro.”
“Yeah. May - ”

“- hates digital photos. I know,” Pete finishes for him, grinning. Pete unpacks his own bag, laying out a bounty of snacks between them. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Peter glances down at the album and then slides the glasses on, remembering his sixth birthday; the first one since his parents had died.

Peter cranes his head back to watch the lemurs jumping from branch to branch, their tails cantilevered out to help them balance. His hands are sticky from tearing off pieces of funnel cake, fingers splayed out wide over the handrail of the exhibit.

“Want a lift?” Ben asks.

Peter nods without turning his head away, captivated. Ben chuckles and lifts him up onto his shoulders for a better look. He’s too big now to spend much time up there - he’s not as small as he once was, but it’s more than enough time to look his fill.

The rest of the day passes in a blur. They eat pizza for dinner. It’s a great day - at least until the birthday cake comes out and Peter remembers in a flash that it’s not just a regular fun day, it’s his birthday.

It’s his birthday, and he’s not with May and Ben because his parents are busy working, he’s with them because his mom and dad are gone and they aren’t coming back.

Instead of blowing out the candles, Peter bursts into tears.

The lights are turned on, the candles hastily extinguished and the cake vanishes somewhere out of sight - not that Peter is all that aware of any of it, sobbing into May’s chest and trying to apologize.

“Shh, honey. It’s okay,” May whispers in his ear, one hand cupped around the back of his head and her other hand rubbing up and down his back. “It’s okay.”

“S-s-sorry.”

May pulls away, tipping his chin up to look at her. “Hey, remember what I told you? We don’t apologize for crying, not in this family.”

It only makes Peter sob all the harder, but he does stop trying to apologize.

*

Other memories are easier.

Like getting first place in the science fair in second grade, or the time he and Ned had snuck into Ned’s dad’s workshop and tried to build a miniature catapult.

He stands on a stepstool in the kitchen, tearing up lettuce while May chops vegetables for a salad. Eats popcorn on the couch while Ben tells him, watch this part Pete, this is so great; Ben pointing just as something epic happens onscreen. He does his homework at the kitchen table, rushing
through it because one of May’s coworkers gave her an old broken DVD player and she said he could take it apart if he finished everything before dinner.

Every time they slip out of the memories, it’s quiet.

Peter will grab a soda and take a long drink, waiting for Pete to say something. Sometimes he doesn’t say anything at all. Peter gets it, sort of. He can’t really understand what it’s like, trying to absorb a lifetime’s worth of memories in short bursts like this, week after week.

It’s not always just about the memories, though. They talk a lot too - and it’s somehow even easier now. There’s a shorthand there now that didn’t fully exist before, a catalogue of references they share with barely more than a word, or a look.

Peter still brings his homework, working on it while Pete flips through his photo albums - slotting each image into place in his memories, searching for any he doesn’t recognize. Peter doesn’t remember every picture; there’s a lot he has no memory of at all, but he’ll usually recognize the apartment, or the shirt he’s wearing, or something else completely trivial that will spark a new memory to relive.

Some memories are harder than others.

The memory of getting bitten leaves them both shaken. The memory of Ben’s death is even worse.

It hurts to look at Pete and see his own pain mirrored back at him; both of them mourning, both of them responsible.

May must notice the nightmares getting worse, but she doesn’t say anything about it, just pulls him into the living room to watch late-night reruns of old buddy cop movies that Peter forgets the names of.

“Maybe you could hang up the suit for a little while, just to give yourself a break,” she suggests.

But Peter shakes his head. He doesn’t know how to explain it to her, that taking a break wouldn’t help with the nightmares anyway. The only thing that’s going to help is time, which he knew before but sees now with even more clarity. It’d been the same way after he’d lost his parents, and after Ben. The pain and the fear didn’t go away, but you learned how to carry it with you - and Peter would learn to carry this too, just like he had all the rest.

Besides, he doesn't have to carry it alone anymore.
Chapter 4

One quiet Wednesday when Mr. Stark is out of town (again), Peter and Pete opt to skip ahead and relive all of Berlin together.

They’re grinning like idiots, both of them remembering what it was like to put on the suit for the first time; the insanity of the fight at the airport, swinging around the city later that night to burn off the still-lingering adrenaline rush. But at some point the suit came off, slung haphazardly over the back of the chair in Peter’s hotel room, and Pete’s original memory of that night ends.

Peter’s doesn’t though. He blushes bright red when he remembers what he did after that, because while the adrenaline rush may have run its course, he’d still been kind of amped up mentally, overstimulated and completely unable to get to sleep.

“Oh my god, we didn’t,” he hears Pete say beside him as he watches himself scrolling through the VOD options on the screen.

Peter winces. “Yeah, we did.”

“Does Tony know?”

“I don’t think he looked all that closely at the hotel bill with everything else going on, but, uh… I think Happy might have.”

Pete has one fist pressed up against his mouth. “Happy paid for our porn,” he says to himself slowly, horrified.

“Technically I think he just signed off on the charges. Mr. Stark paid.”

Pete shoots him a look.

Yeah, that doesn’t make it better.

He wonders if he should pull them out of the memory, or jump forward to the next morning to save them both the embarrassment. It’s incredibly weird, watching himself stretched out on the hotel bed, feeling his hand cupping himself through the soft fabric of his sweats, knowing Pete is feeling the same thing.

Peter pulls his knees up, thighs pressed together - the movie is playing in the background now, the sounds of canned moaning almost but not quite covering his own hitched breathing as his memory-self starts to jack himself off.

But while Peter is busy curling inward, Pete seems to be doing the exact opposite beside him; sprawled out to give himself room, one bent knee pressed against Peter’s outer thigh.

“Should we, um,” Peter tries.

“Hm?”

He swallows. “I can skip forward.”

“Don’t. I wanna see.”

It’s half request and half demand, and in the end it’s easy to let memory carry them both along as if
neither one of them has any choice in the matter.

Peter presses his knees together even tighter and curses himself for wearing jeans. Pete seems to be having much the same thought, because underneath the very much fake-sounding moans, Peter hears the distinctive sound of a zipper being undone. Peter freezes at the sound.

He doesn’t look over - that would be doubly weird. Although he’s pretty sure it’s already plenty weird, watching yourself watch porn while your sort-of clone is (almost definitely) jerking off right next to you. Peter can actually feel the minute clench and release of Pete’s thigh against his leg. He risks a glance, just quickly enough to catch the way Pete’s hand is fisted up inside his boxers, some strange sympathetic impulse making his toes curl up in his sneakers and his dick twitch at the sight.

Screw it.

Peter unzips his jeans and shoves his hand down into his boxers as well.

He’s still wearing his webshooters in the memory, hasn’t taken them off since he’d put them on with the rest of the suit before heading to the airport, not even to shower when he’d come back.

It’s that thought that does it more than anything else; Mr. Stark’s tech sized to fit his wrists perfectly, tech he must have built himself, custom, just for Peter. The edges of the hard composite casing digging into Peter’s stomach as he jerks himself off in the middle of the insane hotel suite Mr. Stark got for him.

In the memory, he comes with a soft moan long before the movie is done playing. He reaches out for the remote blindly with his non-sticky hand, clicking the TV off - now that he’s not actively getting off on it, all the fake moaning is hard to listen to without feeling vaguely embarrassed in a second-hand (and now third-hand... possibly fourth-hand?) kind of way.

Pete swears when the TV clicks off, head thunking back against the wall. “You didn’t watch the rest?”

Peter shakes his head.

“Damn.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter can see Pete darting a look over in his direction, an uncertain expression on his face.

“Would you, uh... want to see any of my memories? Of, you know - ” Pete doesn’t finish the question, but he doesn’t need to. Neither one of them is in any position to hide what they’re doing. What neither of them have finished doing.

But what Pete is offering - they haven’t talked about it. Pete hasn’t really brought it up, and Peter hasn’t wanted confirmation that Pete and Mr. Stark sharing a bed means exactly what he thinks it means, regardless of how obvious the answer already is. Not talking about it hasn’t stopped Peter from thinking about it though, every night when he’s alone in bed; what it would be like to stretch out and feel the steady rise and fall of Mr. Stark’s chest under his palm, if he wanted. What it would be like to feel those hands touching him in return.

“We don’t have to,” Pete adds. “But - you’ve been really cool about sharing yours, so... if there’s anything of mine you wanted to see, just like, say the word and we’re there.”

It’s tempting.
It’s so, so tempting.

Tempting enough that Peter hears himself agreeing even before he’s had a chance to stop and think about whether or not he wants that kind of confirmation, that level of detail kicking around in his head. Fantasies about how it might go were one thing, but knowing for sure - that was different.

Knowing for sure that Mr. Stark wanted Pete in a way he definitely didn’t want Peter was worse.

But the potential for getting hurt has never stopped Peter before, and it sure as hell isn’t going to stop him now.

He wants to know.

He wants to know what it feels like to be in Pete’s place, even if he won’t ever have it for himself.

“Yeah, yeah sure. I wanna see,” he says, echoing Pete’s own words from earlier.

Peter fumbles taking off his glasses and swapping with Pete, but Pete just grins dopily at him and winks. It calms him a little bit for some reason; the wink is all Mr. Stark, but Pete is clearly just as jazzed for this as he is.

Peter closes his eyes, and when he opens them he finds himself in bed.

A nice bed, by the feel of it, with silky cool sheets. He’s somewhere in the murky boundary between asleep and awake, and it takes a moment to recognize what must have woken him is the mattress dipping gently somewhere behind him.

Even half-conscious as he feels in the moment, Peter knows it’s Mr. Stark.

A hand slides over his hip under the covers and yep, okay, apparently he’s naked under the sheets. Peter is aware that his heart is pounding in reality, but in the memory he’s perfectly calm. Lazy, almost. This isn’t the first time they’ve done this - not the second or the third or the fourth, either.

He feels lips brush against the back of his neck, that same hand squeezing at his bare hip.

“You awake?” Mr. Stark whispers, and Peter shivers at the feel of the words against his skin.

“Mm, am now.”

Mr. Stark’s arm snakes around to his stomach, pulling him back against the warmth of his body, planting an open-mouthed kiss to the skin at the join of Peter’s neck and shoulder.

“You should be asleep. It’s late.”

Peter snorts. “Do you even know what time it is?”

Mr. Stark doesn’t answer. His stubble is scratchy against Peter’s neck, sending shivers down his spine. His hand is splayed out over Peter’s stomach, stroking and massaging with no apparent goal in mind. Peter groans and shifts his hips, dick already half-hard and aching.

Outside of the memory, Peter is fully hard, one hand fisted around his cock, the knuckles of his other hand brushing against the outside of Pete’s thigh.

He’s thought about this before - maybe not exactly this; not the sharp tang of whiskey he can smell on Mr. Stark’s breath, but the feel of the man’s hands, the scratch of his beard. He’s imagined both of those so many times and so many different ways the exact circumstances seem trivial at best.
“What do you want?” Mr. Stark says, his voice pitched low. It’s not meant as a challenge. It’s an offer.

“You know.”

“I don’t, Pete. You gotta say it. I need you to tell me -”

“Touch me,” Peter pleads, and is instantly rewarded when the hand splayed out over his stomach slides down to wrap around the base of his cock.

He can’t control the embarrassingly high-pitched whine that escapes his lips as Mr. Stark starts to jack him off, slow and steady. Mr. Stark is kissing along his jawline, muttering Peter’s name over and over again, seemingly unconscious of it.

Peter rocks his hips forward into Mr. Stark’s fist, impatient for more and Mr. Stark obliges, picking up the pace until Peter’s breath is stuttering and his eyes are squeezed so tightly shut he’s seeing vague flashes of light against his eyelids.

He comes with a gasp, wet heat spilling out of him against the silk sheets.

Mr. Stark doesn’t stop touching him right away; he strokes Peter through the aftershocks, hand slipping down further to cup Peter’s balls, then trailing the pads of his fingertips up and down Peter’s thighs.

Mr. Stark’s head is on the pillow just behind Peter’s own. Peter can feel his breathing growing steadier with each passing second.

Eventually Mr. Stark’s hand drifts away from his groin, his arm wrapping back around Peter’s stomach and pulling him in tight. Almost tight enough to hurt - but it only lasts for a few minutes before Mr. Stark’s body slackens, bit by bit, finally falling asleep.

Despite the rapidly-cooling wet spot, Peter feels himself drift off too.

He doesn’t open his eyes right away when the memory ends, hand still shoved in his jeans, sticky with come. He’d be embarrassed about it, but he’s almost certain Pete is in the exact same situation right beside him.

“Woah,” Peter says.

“Dude, how have we not thought about using this for sex stuff until now?”

“Yeah that was - um. Really good.”

“I mean, forget therapy. This tech could make a killing in the porn industry.”

“...I guess?”

“You don’t think so?”

“Sure, maybe. But how are you gonna explain to Mr. Stark how you know how it works?”

“Oh. Right.”

Pete looks down at himself and makes a face, then shoots a web to yank a over a thing of paper towels, grabbing a couple for himself and then passing the roll over to Peter so he can clean himself up too.
“Hey uh, was that okay?” Pete asks, without looking up.

“What? Yeah, of course.” Peter has to make a conscious effort not to gesture down at the mess in his boxers as proof. *Was that okay*, as if Pete hadn’t just given him his standing jerkoff fantasy come to life. “Is it - um, is it always like that?”

“Hm? Oh - no, not always. That was before they brought everyone back, and Tony was still kind of a mess. You know, drinking a lot and whatever. But I didn’t want to jump in with anything super intense, in case it was too much.”

“Oh.”

“You can ask me, you know. If you want. I’ve been trying not to talk about it because I didn’t know if you wanted to hear about that stuff.”

Peter presses his lips together. “The drinking?” he says, knowing full well that wasn’t what Pete meant.

“That too I guess, but I was talking about the sex.”

There it is, laid out in the barest possible terms, and it hurts just as much as Peter was expecting it to - maybe just a little bit more. He pushes it away for now. He’ll face it later, when he’s alone.

“Does he still drink a lot?” he asks instead.

Pete shakes his head. “He stopped when he realized there was a way to bring everyone back. Not cold turkey or anything like that, but it’s not like it was before.”

Peter doesn’t quite know what to say to that.

“That’s good,” he tries, which sounds just as stupid out loud as it had in his head.

“Now he just works a lot instead,” Pete adds, the faint tinge of disappointment in his voice far too familiar for Peter not to catch it.

“It’s important work,” Peter says.

It’s the same thing he’s told himself over and over again, ever since he’d come back. Like at first when Mr. Stark used to show up just a little late to his lab sessions, obviously distracted. And even more often later, when he stopped coming altogether. *Mr. Stark is an important man, and he has important work to do, keeping the whole world safe. Making sure something like the Snap can’t happen again.*

Pete flashes him a look that says he knows exactly why Peter needs so badly to believe that.

“Yeah, it is,” he agrees.

*"

Mr. Stark doesn’t usually wear his tinted sunglasses in the lab. Not that they’re super dark or anything, but even so, it’s weird.
Peter figures hey, at least he’s here this week.

Not that it makes much of a difference from the weeks when he doesn’t make it. Mr. Stark mostly stays buried in his own project - something about restructuring a water filtration system, only stopping to make off-hand comments to Peter every so often without looking up.

It would bother Peter a lot more if he wasn’t just as determined to hide, half-convinced that Mr. Stark will just know by looking at his face what he and Pete have been doing.

In any case, for most of the afternoon neither one of them seems to be especially interested in probing conversation - or conversation of any kind, really. Peter because he's actively avoiding it, and Mr. Stark because he looks like the only thing keeping him awake right now is his determination to get water system thing done as quickly as possible.

They both stick to their own work, and Peter tries repeatedly to swallow the lump that’s taken up residence in his throat.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time in the suit,” Mr. Stark says at one point, a couple hours in.

“Yeah.”

“May okay with that?”

“Yeah. Yeah she’s fine. She knows I - ” Peter stumbles over his words, “...she knows why.”

It’s not necessarily a lie. Peter hasn’t exactly explained to her why he’s been spending so much time out on patrol - even aside from the time he’s been spending with Pete, but she knows him. She could know. He wouldn’t put it past her to have already figured it out.

Peter risks a glance over at Mr. Stark, whose hands are spread flat on the lab table in front of him. The tinted glasses don’t hide the way he’s staring hard, down at the table between his hands.

“Should I know why?” Mr. Stark asks.

Peter shakes his head, even though he knows Mr. Stark won’t be able to see it. “No.”

“You - nevermind.” Mr. Stark stops, nudging his glasses up so he can pinch the bridge of his nose.

“What?”

“You know it’s okay to spend some time being a normal kid, right? The world isn’t hanging in the balance right now. Take a night off every once in a while.”

“Do you? Take a night off every once in a while?”

Peter hadn’t meant for that to slip out, but it finally gets Mr. Stark to look up from the table; he stares hard at Peter for a beat before glancing away again.

“No, but that’s me, not you. I thought the point of this whole mentorship thing was for you to learn from all my many and varied mistakes.”

The room isn’t completely silent in the minute or so that follows, there’s too much tech around them, busy whirring and humming.

“I feel better when I’m in the suit,” Peter says, quietly.
“Better?”

“Yeah. All the stuff that’s happened, I - it’s not like I can change any of it. But I can be out there, trying to make sure nothing else happens now. I can be ready.”

“Pete -” Mr. Stark starts, and stops just as abruptly. The color drains from his face.

Peter wouldn’t have noticed, if he hadn’t already known to listen for it. But there’s a reason Mr. Stark never calls him Pete anymore. Or, not this version of him, at least.

Like clockwork, Mr. Stark looks down at his watch. “Shit, I’ve got a thing I’m supposed to be at. You okay here if I duck out early?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Peter says. As if he was going to say anything else. He's always fine.

Mr. Stark is out the door a minute later, leaving Peter along in the lab. Peter spends a while longer pretending to work, but eventually gives up and heads out as well. He can’t focus on anything right now anyway.

*

He goes out on patrol instead, turning off the heater and letting the rush of cold air through the suit and the burn in his shoulders as he swings between buildings clear his head. Not much is going on tonight, which, yeah it’s Wednesday. He wasn’t expecting much of anything.

Peter isn’t actually sure if he wants something to happen or not. It might help distract him, if there was something important to focus on, but on the other hand, if something important did come up he’s not sure if his head would be in it enough to not miss something, possibly get somebody hurt by mistake.

Probably better that it’s quiet.

It’s just… it’s hard to reconcile everything sometimes. Feeling scared of what might happen, but relieved knowing Mr. Stark will be there to back him up if something does. But only for the big stuff. Not for the every day, weekly lab time type stuff. Not when Peter is alone at night and can’t close his eyes without feeling like he’s drifting off into nothingness again, his eyes snapping open, heart pounding.

Or knowing what it feels like to have Mr. Stark’s lips brushing against his neck, his palm splayed out against Peter’s stomach, but the man can barely bring himself to look at Peter when they’re in the lab together. That it hurts in such a stupid, simple way that he won’t even call Peter ‘Pete’ anymore - feels like something’s been taken away, stolen by someone else.

Not that any of this is Pete’s fault, but still. It feels like it should be somebody’s fault. And Peter can’t bring himself to really blame Mr. Stark for any of it, even if maybe he should.

He just wishes he didn’t feel so torn in five different directions all the time. Like he got pasted back into the world just a little off-center, so none of the edges fit right anymore.
It doesn’t stop him from asking Pete to share more of his own memories. As much as it hurts sometimes, Peter still wants to see - still wants to know for himself what it’s like.

Peter and Pete trade memories back and forth, like flipping through the channels on the TV. Peter is nine (nine and three quarters) when Justin Hammer’s drone demo goes nuts at the Stark Expo and starts trying to shoot everyone.

He’s old enough to know that the blaster on his palm is just a toy, but he’s frozen in place anyway. His legs won’t move. Even if they could, no way he could outrun how fast all those drones can fly. He raises his hand, wishing he were as strong and as brave as Iron Man, that he could do something, anything other than stand there, frozen in place - and then the drone in front of him explodes.

“He didn’t know that was you,” Pete says, slowly. “At least, I don’t think he did. He didn’t give me the memory, and he’s never said anything about it.”

Peter shakes his head. “I never mentioned it.”

Peter knows what it’s like to sit on a dock out in the woods somewhere, jeans rolled up and bare feet just skimming the cool lake water, leaning back on his hands and tipping his head back to grin up at Mr. Stark, who’s standing right behind him. They sit on the dock for what feels like hours, nothing except the wind in the trees and the clink of ice in Mr. Stark's glass to interrupt the silence.

A year after the Expo something rips a hole in the sky above Stark tower and a whole horde of aliens pour into Manhattan.

Peter spends the afternoon curled up on the couch with May’s arm wrapped tight around his shoulders, both of them wishing Ben was right there with them instead of halfway across the city, stuck at work.

Peter doesn’t find out the whole story behind the nuke until later - much later, after DC.

No one had really known back then that it hadn’t been planned that way; they’d all just assumed that Mr. Stark somehow knew that sending a nuclear warhead through the portal would stop the invading army in their tracks.

Peter is eleven, getting bullied by the older kids at recess; and twelve, watching shaky cellphone footage of some seriously weird stuff going on in London. He’s thirteen when he starts discovering what his dick is for, and can’t explain to May why he really wants to keep the Iron Man poster up on the wall in his room, even after all that stuff that happened in Sokovia.

Pete watches that conversation with both hands clasped over his face, caught somewhere between cringing in horror and hysterical laughter. He’s more than a little bit indignant on Mr. Stark’s behalf, but mostly he’s amused.

And in return, Peter knows now exactly how it feels when Mr. Stark pushes a finger inside of him, or threads his hands through Peter’s hair to tug his head down for a kiss. He knows what it feels like to have beard-burn rapidly healing on his inner thighs, and the way that Mr. Stark will sometimes set his teeth against Peter’s shoulder, letting them scrape along the skin as he pushes inside.

Peter hasn’t come so many times or gone through so many tissues so fast in his life, jacking off to memories of someone else’s memories. Someone else’s memories that could be his, but aren’t.
It’s enough that he’s almost thankful Mr. Stark doesn’t show up to their next lab session, even though it hurts to be ignored yet again. Peter isn’t sure how he could look Mr. Stark in the face without doing something heinously embarrassing, not now that he knows exactly how it feels to have Mr. Stark’s tongue in his mouth. Not to mention a few other places.

So, Peter chats with FRIDAY and lets DUM-E help out when he can, and sends up a silent thank-you to the universe that he has another week to figure out how to keep his thoughts (and his dick) in check before he sees Mr. Stark again, with all these new memories rolling around in his head. Which is, of course, why Mr. Stark shows up at the apartment for dinner three days later.

“Uh,” Peter says, staring at him standing in the doorway.

“Are we eating out in the hallway, or…?” Mr. Stark says, gesturing at Peter, who belatedly moves out of the way. Mr. Stark steps inside and Peter closes the door behind him.

“You’re early,” May calls out from the kitchen.

“I thought I was on-time.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t expecting you to be.”

Mr. Stark's brow wrinkles, like he's trying to figure out if he should feel insulted or not.

Peter looks back and forth between May in the kitchen and Mr. Stark in the front hallway.

“You knew - ?” he says.

They both ignore him.

“I can circle around the block a few times, if you want. Or… help,” Mr. Stark offers, stepping into the kitchen and looking around.

May pauses and they both regard each other. Peter is still waiting for an explanation of what the hell is going on right now.

“You can help Peter set the table,” May says, after a beat.

Peter nods, numbly grabbing plates and glasses out of the cabinets and handing them off to Mr. Stark, who seems to be equally mindful about not letting their hands brush.

“Um, what’s going on?” Peter asks.

“Hopefully dinner,” Mr. Stark says. "May invited me, and I thought it would be a good idea to check in, make sure you two were settling into the new place okay.” He makes it sound like this is something totally normal that he’s done a hundred times before, as opposed to literally the first time he’ve been here since they moved and only the second time he’s been to Peter and May’s apartment, ever.

There’s a big bowl of salad, and garlic bread wrapped up in tinfoil, still warm from the oven, and a pan of baked ziti large enough that even with company and Peter's supercharged appetite, he and May will probably be eating leftovers for a week.

“Smells delicious,” Mr. Stark says.

“Well, nothing caught fire this time, so I’m already counting the recipe as a win,” May says as she takes her seat.
The salad and bread get passed around the table, and the ziti served from the center in large, cheesy scoops. Peter focuses on his plate while May and Mr. Stark trade small talk so intentionally innocuous it almost sounds scripted. Mr. Stark asks about how the new apartment is working out and May’s charity work. May asks about rebuilding efforts around the city, carefully avoiding anything to do with reconstruction at the compound or the UN defense coalition.

It’s not until the end of the meal that the reason for this whole visit becomes obvious.

“How’s school going?” Mr. Stark asks Peter. “I heard Midtown wasn’t as badly hit with the overcrowding as some other places.”

“Oh, fine?” Peter says.

“Yeah? All your after school clubs back open again - band, decathlon, all that stuff?”

This is a trap. No way Mr. Stark asks that question without already knowing.

“Yep, they’re all started again.”

“You’re just not going to any of them,” Mr. Stark says, and it’s not a question.

“Wait,” Peter says. “That’s what this visit about? You’re here because I quit robotics lab again?”

Mr. Stark opens his mouth to respond but May gets there first.

“He’s here because I’m worried about you,” she says. "I thought, after everything that happened, you just needed some time to process, let things get back to normal. I thought that the point of this internship was so you would have someone you could talk to about the hero stuff.”

Peter looks back and forth between them, gobsmacked. “Oh come on, seriously?”

Mr. Stark isn’t looking at him. Instead, he’s watching Peter’s right hand, where he’s busy fiddling with the handle of his fork. Which - oops, now has a small dent in it.

Peter sets the fork back down on his plate.

What Peter would like to do is remind both of them that talking to Mr. Stark about ‘hero stuff” would require Mr. Stark to look him in the eye every once in a while, and maybe not run out of the room every time they talk about anything even vaguely not-science related.

But based on the expression on Mr. Stark’s face, he isn’t here entirely of his own free will. Peter would be willing to bet May’s offer to come to dinner tonight had been something a lot more like a demand, and even though Mr. Stark still could’ve just said no, he didn’t because he still felt responsible for Peter ending up on Titan - and everything else that came after. Peter knows all that, or at least he’s pretty sure of it, based on all the stuff Pete has said or sort of implied over the past couple of months.

Which also means Peter can’t call Mr. Stark out on any of it - not when it might mean admitting he knows about Pete, especially not with May sitting right here.

“So, what, you’re gonna take away the suit again?” Peter asks, wishing his voice sounded steadier.

Mr. Stark closes his eyes for a brief second. Out of the corner of his eye, Peter catches May discreetly slipping out of her chair and heading out to the living room to give them some space.

“No, that’s not - I’m not taking away the suit. I don’t want you caught without it if you need it.” (Not
“again, he means, Peter thinks wryly.) “But you can’t keep going on like this, and I’m not just saying that, okay? I’ve been there. I’ve done the whole on-all-the-time hypervigilance thing.

“I know it feels safer to stay in that headspace, because you feel like if anything comes at you then at least you’re already expecting it, you’ll be ready, but the problem is you can’t stay there forever. You get sloppy, and then you make mistakes that put the people you care about in danger. I know you’ve got superpowers, but you’re still human, and that means you’ll crash, eventually, and the longer you try to run out the clock the harder you’ll go down when you do.”

Peter already knows. Ever since coming back it’s felt like an agonizing slow-motion crash he hasn’t been able to escape.

“Every time I try to fall asleep, it feels like I’m back on Titan again,” Peter says, achingly aware that even though she’s in the other room, May can probably still hear him. “You know, at the end.”

Mr. Stark isn’t looking at him, but he nods in response. “Yeah. I thought it might be something like that. Which is why I brought you a little something that might help.”

He sets a very familiar looking glasses case down on the table in front of Peter.

“What - um, what?”

“T ook a couple days to even find the suckers, haven’t even looked at them in years. I did a whole presentation at MIT a couple of years ago, not that you would’ve seen it -”

Peter had. Of course he had.

“- anyway, it’s called Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing. Yes, that stands for BARF, and no, I haven’t thought of a better name for them yet. They let you relive memories to sort of jump-start processing grief, trauma, that sort of thing. You don’t have to use them, but if you want them, they’re yours.”

Peter reaches out with shaky hands to flip open the case, revealing the all-too-familiar set of glasses inside. He briefly wonders if Pete had been caught with them, or if he’d been putting them back in whatever storage locker they’d come from between meetings. He wonders if Mr. Stark has noticed they’ve been tampered with.

Probably not, if he’s handing them off to Peter like this.

“What do I do?” Peter asks, because he knows he should.

“Put them on and think of a memory. I’d recommend not doing it alone, at least not the first time.”

Peter is almost certain that piece of advice comes from direct experience.

“Should I - um, right now?”

Mr. Stark’s sharp intake of breath probably wouldn’t be audible to anyone else, but Peter doesn’t have the luxury of not hearing it. So, that’s a no. Mr. Stark wants him to face the nightmare, overcome it - he just doesn’t want to have to be present when Peter does. Of course, he doesn’t actually say that out loud though.

“Only if you want to. It doesn’t have to be tonight. Or ever, if you don’t think it’ll help,” Mr. Stark says. "Totally up to you."
Peter nods, flipping the case closed and pretending he doesn’t hear the sigh of relief that comes from across the table.

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

“I should get going,” Mr. Stark stands up, reaching back down for his plate until Peter waves him off.

“You can leave it, I’ll clean up.”

“Right.”

Mr. Stark heads towards the living room, stopping just behind Peter’s chair. For a second, it seems like he’s about to say something else, but instead he lays a hand on Peter’s shoulder and squeezes. Peter leans back just far enough to feel his hair brushing against Mr. Stark’s midsection, seeking out just the barest fraction of extra contact.

In the next moment Mr. Stark is gone, his voice drifting out from the living room as he says goodnight, thanking May for dinner before he leaves.

Peter holds the case in both hands like a talisman. It means something that Mr. Stark is giving him this, even if it’s not the thing he really wants.

He sets them back on the table and starts clearing up, bringing everything back into the kitchen, rinsing off the plates and bowls in the sink and sticking them in the dishwasher. The leftover ziti and garlic bread get wrapped up and stuck in the fridge for later.

When he goes out into the living room, glasses case back in hand, May is waiting on the couch, an open book in her lap.

She glances at the case, looking unimpressed. “He actually thinks he can fix everything with some new invention, doesn’t he?”

Peter shrugs. “Maybe he can.”

“Well, just in case he can’t,” May says, gesturing him in with one hand and setting her book aside with the other. “You know you can always talk to me, right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Peter lets her pull him down onto the couch, leaning back against her, her arm wrapped around his shoulders. He turns the glasses case over and over in front of him, grateful that May doesn’t push it any further, at least not tonight. Instead, she turns on the TV, flicking through the channels.

*Prometheus* is playing.

“Hey, remember - ”

Peter rolls his eyes and starts spelling before she can finish asking.

“X-E-N...”
Not that this should come as a surprise (at least, I don't think it is?) but there is some element of cheating here when Pete & Peter are together. I'm not adding a tag for it because I don't think this is what people would be looking for when they're searching out that tag? But I did want to give everyone a heads up.

(I also think that there are in-story reasons why the characters themselves wouldn't necessarily consider it cheating, mostly because Pete & Tony have never sat down to actually discuss whatever it is that they're doing together, and they both have reasons to believe the other person wouldn't or shouldn't consider it an exclusive relationship.)

“We might have a problem,” Pete says right off the bat as he climbs over the building ledge.

Peter holds up the BARF glasses case for him to see.

“Okay, maybe we don’t have a problem. How did you - ”

“He gave them to me.”

Pete settles down next to him. “Because of the stuff on Titan?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you used them? I mean, for that?”

Peter shakes his head.

“Do you want to?”

“Not really.”

Pete leans into his shoulder, reaching into his backpack and pulling out a brown paper bag.

“Chocolate croissants from Cannelle,” he explains. “I think they were supposed to be an apology for skipping out on dinner last night.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Yesterday it was babka french toast from somewhere else.”

“He’s gone a lot, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

It’s not that it feels good, knowing that Mr. Stark is just as much a big blank space in Pete’s life as he
is in Peter’s - but it is oddly reassuring, to know that at least Peter’s not the only one being sidelined. Maybe Mr. Stark really is just that busy.

That actually makes Peter feel worse, knowing that as busy as Mr. Stark must be, he’d still taken the time to stop by last night; trying to make sure Peter was dealing okay.

“I didn’t bring the second set today, since I couldn’t find the primaries,” Pete says, breaking the silence.

“That’s okay.”

They work their way through the rest of the croissants, neither of them talking much for a while. Peter licks a smudge of melted chocolate off his thumb, grinning when he looks up and catches Pete doing almost the same thing right next to him.

“Mr. Stark’s going out of town again tonight,” Pete says, after a few minutes. “If you wanted to come over and hang out for a while. Or stay over.”

Peter’s first reaction is that he can’t, but then he thinks about it. May would probably be relieved to think he was spending some time with Ned, and he knows Ned would cover for him, if Peter asked.

Peter hasn’t been back to the penthouse since that first day. It’d be cool to go back there and just hang out. Take a night off from patrolling, try to relax for a little while.

He nods. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

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Peter doesn’t feel great about asking Ned to lie for him, and he feels even less great asking him to lie so that Peter can go hang out with someone else, but Ned seems to take it all in stride because he’s an awesome best friend.

“Superhero stuff, right?”

“Sort of superhero adjacent,” Peter replies, hoping it’s good enough answer. Ned seems to think it is, nodding back at him.

An hour later, Peter meets up with Pete in the lab and they head upstairs together.

“Do we have to worry about - ” Peter gestures towards the ceiling.

“FRIDAY? Nah, I already asked her to switch off monitoring. What do you want to do first?”

Peter looks around the penthouse. It looks almost exactly the same as the last time he was here.

“I dunno. What do you usually do when Mr. Stark isn’t around?”

“Uh, patrol, mostly.”

As awesome as it would be to go out on patrol with Pete, there’s no way they can do that without risking both May and Mr. Stark finding out. Besides the suit data, it’d definitely end up all over social media, one way or another.
“May thinks I’m taking the night off, she’d kill me if she found out I went out,” Peter says.

“I wasn’t actually suggesting it, I was just saying that’s usually what I do. If you brought the glasses we could do that, or we could just hang out and watch stuff in the TV room, or - um,” Pete blinks. “Wow, I just realized I’ve never actually had someone over before. That’s probably kind of sad, isn’t it?”

“You’ve had people over before, just not here. Hey, you guys have a jacuzzi downstairs, right?”

Pete grins. “Yeah. C’mon.”

Neither one of the bother with bathing suits - Peter because he hadn’t thought to bring one, and Pete because he doesn’t seem to care. Instead, Peter strips down to his boxers, sitting down on the side of the tub and letting his legs sink slowly into the water. He’s slightly taken aback when he notices that Pete has stripped down completely, stepping into the hot tub across from Peter buck naked like it’s something he does every day.

...maybe it is.

The water feels amazing, and the view of the city out the windows is even better. Peter pushes himself forward on his hands, letting himself sink down into the tub until he’s submerged up to his shoulders.

“Oh man, that’s awesome,” he says, closing his eyes and tipping his head back. “I would do this like every single day if I were you.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever actually used it before.”

Peter opens his eyes. “Dude, why not?”

Pete is still sitting on the edge of the tub, leaning back on his hands with his legs in the water. He shrugs.

“I dunno. It wasn’t like…” he stops, and starts over. “Things weren’t good, when we first started staying here. The whole world was, I don’t know. There’s all this every day stuff you don’t think about until it stops working, you know? And a lot of stuff wasn’t working, because the people who made it work were just… gone.

“So it wasn’t like ‘oh cool, crazy penthouse’ when I woke up here. It was just another place with a kitchen and a bed and a lab. I spent most of my time out patrolling, trying to help people, and Tony spent all his time in the lab.”

Peter can’t really imagine what that must have been like - well, he could, technically. He could experience it himself, If he put on glasses and Pete felt like sharing. But that’s a line that neither of them have crossed, without ever actually talking about it. Peter hasn’t ever shared his memories of Titan, and Pete has only very selectively shared memories of that period of time after the snap and before the world was knit back together again.

It feels important, even if Peter can’t put a finger on why, exactly.

Pete is looking out at the city. The sun had set a little while ago, the sky a murky greenish-blue, lights just starting to come on in the windows of the hundreds of buildings below.

“Have you ever been drunk?” Pete asks out of nowhere.
“Uh, no.”

“Wanna try?”

Peter hesitates. “Won’t Mr. Stark notice if stuff is missing?”

“He might. If he does I’ll tell him I wanted to see what it did with my metabolism, but I don’t think he’s gonna ask. Odds are like fifty-fifty he even notices.”

Peter considers it. Not that he necessarily wants to get drunk like Pete is suggesting, but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t curious. Besides, Pete’s excuse is sort of a good point - both of them should probably know how it affects them, and better to try it out here, in private, than at some party with a bunch of strangers sometime down the road (assuming Peter ever gets invited to those kinds of parties, that is).

But none of that is the real reason he’s tempted to try.

He’s tired of being smart and responsible and reliable. He’s tired of feeling like he’s running all the time, caught between patrolling and school and trying not to worry May with how little he’s sleeping. It feels like this tug in his stomach; a desperate, lurking need to do something completely and utterly stupid. Something a dumb teenager might do, not an Avenger.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll try some, if you’re buying.”

“Technically, Tony’s buying,” Pete answers with a quick grin. “Be right back.”

And with that, Pete pulls his legs out of the water and slips back upstairs without bothering to get dressed.

It leaves Peter alone in the silent gym, still a little dumbstruck at the idea that Pete walks around the penthouse naked like that. It’s not that Peter is super body shy or anything; he’s stripped down to his underwear to change into his suit in way too many alleys and random rooftops for that, but he’s never just like, walked around a huge apartment butt naked.

He wonders if it’s something Pete does all the time, or if maybe it’s just because Peter is the only one here. It’s not like it’s anything Peter hasn’t seen before, anyway.

Pete is back barely a minute later with two glasses and a bottle of something dark. He sets them down on the ledge and slips into the water beside Peter, both of them turning around to kneel on the bench, elbows resting on the edge of the tub.

“Are we supposed to put ice in it or something?”

“No idea,” Pete says, uncapping the bottle and pouring about an inch of liquor into each glass. “This is how Tony drinks it though.”

Peter picks up a glass, sniffing at it. He has no idea what good whiskey is supposed to smell like, but it does definitely smells like whiskey, he knows that much. He’s pretty certain it must be good stuff - no way Mr. Stark would buy anything else.

“Cheers,” he offers, holding up his glass towards Pete.

Peter returns the gesture and they both take take a sip. Peter gags almost immediately - the taste of it is overpowering. Pete is coughing beside him, sticking his tongue out like it’s personally offended him.
“Oh god, that’s gross,” Pete says.

Peter nods a bit frantically, clamping his mouth shut and face screwing up in distaste.

“It doesn’t taste like that when... you know,” Pete says.

Peter does know; second-hand at least. When Pete tastes whiskey on Mr. Stark’s lips, it tastes dark and sharp and just a little bit sweet. The drink itself is all sharpness though, making his lips tingle and his throat burn.

Pete is looking down at his glass, considering. Peter can actually see him steeling his resolve before he takes another sip, wincing as he swallows and then licking his lips.

“C’mere,” Pete says, tipping his chin forwards. “Wanna try something.”

Peter’s heart is pounding in his chest. He knows exactly what Pete is asking, bracing one hand against the edge of the tub as he leans in to press their lips together.

It barely tastes like anything at all, just a quick touch of lips against lips, at least until Peter starts to pull away and feels Pete’s hand come up around the back of his neck, holding him in place and opening his mouth to deepen the kiss. Peter’s own mouth falls open of its own accord, tipping away for just a second to suck in a breath before leaning back into it.

It’s nothing like the borrowed memories of kissing Mr. Stark.

For one thing, it’s infinitely more intense, to be present in the moment as opposed to just riding along in the passenger’s seat. For another, there’s no now-(almost)-familiar scratch of beard against his face, just smooth skin. It’s completely different, but just as perfect. Almost more so for actually being real, rather than just someone else’s memory.

They both pull away at the same moment, breathing hard.

Pete looks away.

“Sorry,” he says. “I think that stuff hit a lot faster than I expected it to.”

Peter’s not sure if that’s supposed to be an excuse, since it’s not like either of them have had that much yet, or even why Pete feels the need to apologize in the first place. But instead of asking, Peter picks up his own glass and takes another sip. This time it goes down a little easier - the burn of it more warm and heady instead of sharp and stinging.

Maybe that’s the trick to it; it gets easier after that first taste.

Pete also takes another sip of the whiskey, tipping his head back to swallow.

“It’s actually not bad,” Peter says. “I mean, it’s not good, but it’s not awful.”

They’re both looking at each other. Peter doesn’t know what the rules are, if he should be asking the way Pete did or if he can just lean in again.

Pete doesn’t seem to have the same reservations. He leans forward, pushing Peter back against the side of the tub and catching Peter’s mouth in another open-mouthed kiss.

Peter isn’t actually sure how long they spend like that, trading kisses back and forth, arms looped around each other’s shoulders, the combined heat of the water and the alcohol making them both loose-limbed and a little clumsy. At some point Peter finishes his glass and Pete pours him another,
stealing a mouthful for himself before handing it over.

“Hey!” Peter objects, snorting with laughter.

“Sorry, sorry. Here I can replace it, look,” Pete reaches back for the bottle but Peter grabs his hand before he can get there.

“Don’t, s’ok. That’s - this is enough. This is good.”

Pete’s head falls forward, chin dipping down towards his chest.

“I think we might be drunk,” he says, earnestly.

“Mmm.”

Pete is kneeling with his legs on either side of Peter’s lap and his cheek resting against Peter’s shoulder. It feels nice. Everything feels nice, actually. Peter reaches up and strokes a hand through Pete’s hair, and is rewarded with a quiet hum in response.

He feels Pete shift in front of him, and gasps when he feels lips latching onto the skin just above the hollow of his throat. The nerve endings there light up all at once, the sensation shooting straight to his dick.

“Oh, fuck,” Peter manages, and hears something that might be a snicker in response.

“Good, right?”

Pete knows, he realizes. Pete knows exactly how this feels - of course he does. They have the same body, after all. He probably knows every last sensitive spot, even ones Peter doesn’t even know about himself yet.

“Is this - ” Peter stops to swallow, “should we stop?”

“Drinking?” Pete asks, looking up.

“No, not that. We should probably stop that though too, I feel pretty weird. I meant the - uh, the touching.”

Pete sits up, leaning back. “Do you want to stop?”

There’s a long pause where neither of them speak, just sit eye to eye, looking at one another.

“Not really,” Peter answers, and is immediately rewarded with a grin.

“Good, then we don’t.”

Pete leans back in for another kiss; they’re closer than they were before, chests pressed together, cocks caught between their bodies. Pete rolls his hips forwards and Peter gasps, the heat and pressure and slip of the water making it feel like his senses are temporarily short circuiting.

“Holy fuck,” he breathes out, and then, “do that again.”

Pete does.

They’re not exactly well-coordinated, but they don’t really need to be, not when every shift of their bodies against each other send pleasure sparking up and down Peter’s spine. Peter comes first,
overwhelmed by how different it feels when it’s not just his own hand getting him off, and Pete isn’t far behind.

They collapse back in the water, breathing hard, Pete rolling off his lap to sprawl out beside him.

“Um,” Peter starts, because it feels like he’s supposed to say something. He stops though, because he has no idea what.

“Wanna go back upstairs?”

Peter looks down at his hand, which is starting to get super pruny looking. He nods.

They climb out of the tub and grab towels from a shelf over in the corner, picking up the whiskey bottle and glasses as they go. The air of the gym is cool against his skin, goosebumps prickling up along his arms and legs as they head back over to the elevator.

Pete nudges his shoulder just as the elevator dings.

“So, uh. Remind me later to look up how to clean come out of a jacuzzi. It’s not really the kind of thing I want ask FRIDAY.”

If Peter wasn’t otherwise occupied holding up his towel and the the two whiskey glasses, he would burying his face in his hands right now.

“Oh my god. We just came in Mr. Stark’s jacuzzi,” he says out loud, the reality starting to sink in.

“Dude, relax. It’s probably not even the first time that’s happened in that specific jacuzzi, which is actually sort of gross if you think about it. And even if it was, it’s not like Tony’s gonna be scandalized.” Pete pauses. “Well, okay, so if he knew it was the two of us together that might throw him for a loop. But I’m pretty sure once he got over the surprise, he’d be into it.”

Peter shifts on his feet, the tiles cold against his bare toes. He doesn’t know what to say to any of that.

Pete seems to be sort of willfully ignorant about the difference between how Mr. Stark thinks of him verses how he thinks of Peter. Peter’s seen how Mr. Stark looks at Pete, at least in memories; it’s definitely not the same.

Even if their bodies and their minds are the same in every way Peter can think of, it’s clearly not close enough.

Upstairs, the whiskey bottle is set back in its place and the glasses rinsed and put in the dishwasher. Peter grabs his backpack off the floor and pulls on some sweatpants and an old t-shirt in the media room while Pete heads off to the bedroom. He comes back dressed in sweats and a t-shirt as well.

“What do you want to watch?” Pete asks, reaching for the remote.

“Dunno. Anything’s good.”

He thinks the alcohol is starting to wear off; the sloppy, loose feeling from earlier replaced by something more restless and achy. Pete seems to notice, opening a small cabinet next to the couch and tossing Peter a bottle of water.

Peter downs half the bottle and feels better almost instantly - the restless feeling persists, but the achiness settles down to a barely noticeable thrum. He passes the bottle back to Pete, who finishes it.
“I guess this is what a hangover feels like,” he says when he’s done, wincing a bit.

“Yeah.” The floaty feeling had been nice, while it lasted, but Peter wasn’t much enjoying the aftermath.

Peter flops down next to Pete as he scrolls through their movie options.

He isn’t even sure what Pete ends up picking, except that he’s pretty sure it’s something he’s seen before but only vaguely remembers. Something about the combination of the low rumble of sound from the TV and Pete’s steady breathing close by pulls him under in a matter of minutes.

* 

Peter actually sleeps through the night, which is different.

When he wakes up, there’s a brown paper bag with fresh bagels sitting in the kitchen. Peter has a momentary freak out when he sees them on the counter. “Someone was here?”

“Nah, just a drone.”

Now that’s fully sober and well-rested, Peter realizes he should probably feel awkward about what they did yesterday. Jerking off next to each other was one thing, but rubbing off against his sort-of clone was something else entirely - or at least, it seems like it should be.

But then again, maybe not. Because Pete licks his lips and grins at him, both of them leaning over the kitchen island across from one another, and Peter has to grin back. Maybe he should feel awkward about it, but he doesn’t; not at all. Mostly he’s wondering how soon they can do it again, and without the alcohol this time.

“So, I have an idea,” Pete says.

Peter looks up. “Yeah?”

“We can’t really swing around together, not without Tony finding out. But there’s the gym downstairs. We could spar, if you want.”

Peter’s libido may have been hoping for something else, but yeah, he supposes that’s a good idea too. It’s a really good idea, actually. It’s been forever since Mr. Stark had put on his armor and offered to spend time training with Peter, not since before Titan.

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

Bagels demolished, they head back downstairs. As soon as they enter the room, Pete flips himself up onto the ceiling.

“Webs, or no webs?” he asks.

Peter thinks for a moment. “When is Mr. Stark supposed to get back?”

“Not until tonight. Plenty of time for everything to dissolve.”

“Webs, then.”
They don’t bother to set any other rules.

It’s crazy; fighting someone who can match him speed for speed, strength for strength. All of the adrenaline rush of a real fight without any of the danger. It’s awesome.

He spends so much of his time carefully modulating his strength - he can’t go around punching pickpockets and car thieves at full force, not unless he wants to accidentally really hurt someone. The only times he’s really been able to go all out were times he didn’t like to think about that much, like trying to hold the ferry together that time. Or Titan.

This is just pure fun, even when he’s getting tossed across the room. Especially getting tossed across the room, when he uses the momentum and a quick web to slingshot himself back around towards Pete with a triumphant shout.

They land in a tangle of limbs, rolling to a stop on the floor. Pete pins him down, catches his lips in a quick kiss, and then they’re off again.

Peter isn’t sure how long they spend sparring. His shoulder muscles are burning, his hair a sweaty mess, and Pete doesn’t look any better off. They end up sprawled out in the middle of the boxing ring, examining the frankly impressive array of webbing now criss-crossing the room all around them.

“Man, imagine having to clean all of that up,” Peter says.

Pete snickers.

“Speaking of cleaning up,” Pete says, plucking his sweat-damp t-shirt away from his chest.

“Ugh, yeah.”

Pete rolls to his feet and offers Peter a hand to pull him up as well. The bathroom has one of those huge rainfall showers that Peter’s only seen in crazy nice hotels, like the one Mr. Stark put him in when they went to Germany.

It’s still weird to think that Pete lives like this all the time - that he’s comfortable in it, used to it. But Peter guesses it makes sense. Pete’s been living here for over a year now, it’s his home; of course he feels comfortable.

Pete cranks on the water and they share the shower, stripping down and leaving their clothes on the floor outside the stall.

Peter leans in and kisses Pete under the spray. It feels exactly as good as Peter remembers from last night, licking his way inside Pete’s mouth.

Pete’s shared a couple of memories that involved showers - they’re some of Peter’s personal favorites. Something about the way the water slightly muffled his hearing, pulling in the outer limits of his senses, and the way the steam and the heat would make the subtle scents of fresh clean water and Mr. Stark’s body wash all-encompassing.

Mr. Stark is taller than them - although not by much, really. And broader too. Not that Peter is comparing kissing Pete to kissing Mr. Stark, but it’s kind of hard not to think about it. Also, speaking of things being hard... yeah, that too.

Peter almost comes the moment he feels Pete’s hand wrap around his dick, and it takes a bit of clumsy maneuvering on his part before he can return the favor. It’s incredibly weird; exactly the
same but different, the all-too-familiar slide of his dick in his fist but at an angle he’s (obviously) never felt before, both of them stroking just out of time with one another.

It doesn’t take long before they’re both coming, their heads tipped forward, leaning into one another, sated.

*

As much as Peter loves hanging around at the tower, he doesn’t want to risk Mr. Stark coming back and catching him there.

It’s bad enough that Mr. Stark barely looks at him now, Peter doesn’t want to think about how it would feel if Mr. Stark was actually angry at him for… doing whatever it is he and Pete have been doing.

Plus, he promised Ned they would hang out today.

He gathers up his stuff and shoves it all in his backpack, making plans with Pete to meet up again during the week.

“Thanks for coming over,” Pete says, when they’re back down in the lab. “I kinda hate staying here alone when Tony’s gone, you know?”

Peter doesn’t know, not really. But he can definitely understand not wanting to be alone. It’s been a long time since he’s slept that well, or that long. Between the full night’s sleep and the crazy workout that morning, Peter actually feels pretty awesome.

It’s enough that even Ned seems to notice a change, by the time Peter makes it back across town. Peter hesitates when Ned asks about it.

“There’s this thing,” Peter starts. He has no idea how to continue.

Ned is his friend, his best friend, and he covered for Peter last night so Peter could go hang out with Pete. Which feels like a pretty shitty thing to do to his friend, now that he thinks about it.

Ned deserves to know.

At least, if Peter can figure out how to explain it.

“Is it a bad thing?” Ned asks. “Should I be calling my mom to warn her I might disappear again?”

“No! No, it’s nothing like that, I swear.”

Ned looks relieved. “Oh, then okay. Anything else can’t be that bad, then, right? Just tell me. I know something’s been going on with you.”

“I want to, I just - it’s kind of complicated.”

Ned waits. Peter knows it must be killing him not to ask.

“So, um, Mr. Stark cloned me,” Peter blurts out. Okay, so. Maybe not actually all that complicated.
“Dude, what?”

“Yeah. I mean, sort of? He used my DNA like a blueprint, and he has this machine that basically prints live tissue - that’s super classified, by the way, please don’t tell anyone I told you about that. I don’t think I’m even supposed to know.”

It only takes Ned a couple minutes of gaping-mouthed shock to start putting the pieces together.

“The other Spider-Man, the one in Manhattan - that’s not just a copycat, that’s actually you? Or another version of you?”

“Yeah.”

“Holy crap dude. That’s so cool.”

Peter has to smile at that. Yeah, it is pretty cool, even if everything else is all messed up and complicated. It occurs to him that this is exactly why he and Ned are friends.

“Wait, why did Stark clone you? Did he need another you to help the team save everyone? Did he clone anyone else?”

“No, and no. At least, not that I know of.”

“Man, if I had a clone I could stay home whenever I wanted and play Shadowbringers all day. Think of how much faster we’d be able to level up.”

That’s definitely one way to look at it.

“Is he cool? Or is it just weird, having someone else say all the same things you were about to say? Wait - is this why you act kind of weird sometimes? Have I met him already?”

“No! You haven’t met him, we haven’t done anything like that, I promise.”

Peter’s not sure why or how the possibility hasn’t occurred to him before now. It’s like the oldest prank in the book. Not that either he or Pete have been in much of a pranking mood.

“Can I meet him?” Ned has apparently already blown past being worried about possibly being tricked, and he’s right back to stoked.

“Uh, yeah, probably.”

“Awesome.”

“You’re not freaked out?”

“No. On a scale of things to freak out about, you having a secret clone is pretty far down on the list, since that list includes stuff like ‘oh hey everyone, aliens are invading New York again.’ Besides, I have twice as many best friends now! Unless he’s like, secretly a jerk. He’s not secretly a jerk, is he?”

“No, he’s not a jerk.”

“Good. ’Cause that would suck. How much did May freak when she found out?”

Peter tries to disguise a wince, but Ned catches it.
“She doesn’t know?! Oh my god, Peter. How do you hide something like that? I mean, okay, hiding Spider-Man is one thing - and even that didn’t actually last all that long - but there’s literally another you running around the city right now. What if they bump into each other?”

Embarrassingly enough, Peter hasn’t actually ever thought about that. Pete is a close enough match that it probably wouldn’t be too bad… at least until May noticed that Pete was wearing clothing she didn’t recognize, or didn’t remember something she told him the day before.

Okay, so possibly that wouldn’t go so well.

On the other hand, Pete mainly stays in Manhattan anyway. And it’s not like May avoids Manhattan, but it’s also not like she’s there on a daily basis. Even if she was, Manhattan’s a big place, something like two million people live there, the odds of them running into one another must be pretty small.

“May can’t find out,” Peter says. “Okay? She’d have all these questions about how it happened that would be really hard to answer.”

“Like why Tony Stark cloned you in the first place?”

“Yeah, like that.”

“So... why did he?”

“Kinda hard to answer, remember? It’s complicated.”

Peter knows the explanation that Pete had given; that hadn’t been complicated. Not really. But he can’t really believe it’s all that simple, that Mr. Stark copied him just because he missed Peter that much.

The very thought of it is enough to make Peter feel dizzy and a little bit sick - Mr. Stark, coming back to Earth half-starved, defeated, shutting himself away from what was left of the team. Peter can’t fully wrap his head around what that must have been like, or if any one, all-encompassing answer even existed for why Mr. Stark had done what he did.

But he does know there’s no way he can explain any of it to Ned.

Thankfully, Ned has already moved on.

“You said I get to meet him though, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Pete hasn’t said anything, but Peter has to assume that by now Pete has enough shared memories of Ned to feel like he knows him just as well as Peter does, which also means he must miss hanging out together.

Everything else in Peter’s life might be complicated, but at least this one thing could be simple.

*  

He pitches the idea to Pete the following Saturday.
“You told Ned?” Pete says, surprised.

“Well, yeah.”

“Wow, we kind of suck at keeping secrets.”

“I didn’t want to keep lying to him about what I was doing. Besides, I thought you might, you know, want to hang out with him.”

“I do! But - ” Pete looks away, shrugging one shoulder. “I didn’t want you to feel like you had to share him. I know it’s not my life.”

Oh.

It’s hard not to go there; not to imagine for a moment waking up one day with half his memories gone and knowing that someone else has a claim to his spot on the couch next to May, and someone else is Ned’s first call when there’s some new Star Wars movie rumor making the rounds.

He gets why Pete tries not to bring it up, the ache of it settling deep in Peter’s chest. It’s so easy to ignore when they’re laughing at old memories (or jerking off to newer ones) together, but it never really goes away.

“It still sort of is,” he says. “Maybe not in the present, but the past is still both of our pasts.”

“Yeah, exactly. It’s the past,” Pete says.

“If you don’t want to meet him that’s fine, if you think it’ll make things harder. But he’s gonna be disappointed. And also probably kind of insulted that you think his friendship is like, a limited resource.”

Pete looks up. “You really don’t mind?”

“I really don’t.”

“Okay, yeah. Let’s do it.”

A quick call to Ned confirms that he’s got the house to himself that afternoon, and soon enough he and Pete are catching the subway back to Queens.

Peter is giddy at the prospect of introducing the two of them, although he realizes that it only sort of counts as an introduction at all. They already know each other.

*

“No way.”

“Dude, are you okay?” Peter has to ask.

“No freaking way!”

Ned reaches out with both hands, poking them both in the chest.
“I thought you already told him…” Pete says.

“I did.”

“Yeah, he told me, but this - this is crazy! Dude, there’s two of you! He even has your weird eyebrow, look.”

Peter reaches up to run a finger over his left brow, suddenly self conscious. He only notices a second later that Pete is doing the same thing right beside him, while Ned looks like he’s about to self combust on the spot.

He’s not sure exactly what happens, but in the next moment Ned and Pete are hugging. Pete has his eyes shut tight, hugging Ned in what looks very similar to the way Peter had the first time they’d seen one another after snapping back into existence.

“Oh my god, I missed you so much,” Pete says, quietly.

“You missed me,” Ned repeats, like he’s still trying to wrap his head around it. “Wait, do you go to school? You should come to Midtown. Peter and I can catch you up on classes, don’t worry about that, it’ll be great. Although I guess it would be kind of a commute from Manhattan. You live in Manhattan, right?”

Pete snorts out a laugh at the barrage of questions, but answers easily enough. “No, I don’t go to school. Tony had to pull some strings to make up all my ID stuff, so on paper I’m nineteen and unsnapped. And yeah, I live in Manhattan.”

“That’s awesome.”

“He doesn’t just live in Manhattan, he lives in the penthouse at the tower,” Peter feels obligated to point out.

“In the Avengers tower? No way.” Ned is back to repeating things. “Is it awesome? Does Banner really eat Wheaties for breakfast every morning, or was that just a marketing thing? Oh and how does Thor braid his beard like that - does he do it himself, or does he have someone do it for him?”

“Um, it’s not really like that. Thor went back to New Asgard for a little bit, and then I think he went back to space? No one really stays at the tower, except for me and Tony.”

“My best friend is Tony Stark’s roommate,” Ned says slowly, his voice filled with wonder.

Pete opens his mouth to object, but Peter nudges him. Nothing either of them say is going to convince Ned otherwise, now that he’s latched onto the idea.

It is pretty ridiculous to think of it like that. Roommates. Like they have a chore wheel and leave each other passive aggressive sticky notes on the fridge. Okay, so most of Peter’s understanding about adult roommate situations comes from the Big Bang Theory and old reruns of Friends. Maybe that’s not how it actually works in real life.

It’s definitely not how it works with Pete and Mr. Stark though. Peter is pretty sure roommates don’t usually share a bed, or clothes, and sometimes a shower. There’s a very different word for that sort of relationship.

Peter pushes the thought aside.

As expected, Ned has a ton more questions for them, most of which Pete and Peter can answer.
without straying into dangerous territory.

It’s actually pretty great, hanging out with Ned and Pete all afternoon. They play video games together - but only after Pete and Peter solemnly swear not to use their ‘freaky clone powers’ to cheat. Which sort of happens anyway, because it’s not really Peter’s fault that his superpowered reaction times give him (er, both of him) an unfair advantage.

Plus, it’s hard not get competitive, given the opportunity to play against someone who has the exact same advantage. They’re both honor-bound to play with only their left hands, after that. Which is a struggle, but an entertaining one.

Peter and Pete both freeze mid-game when they hear a car pull into the driveway.

“What?” Ned asks, looking back and forth between them.

“Your mom,” Peter explains as he hears the front door open.

Pete glances over at the bedroom window and then back, and Peter nods in agreement. Without a word, Pete gives Ned a quick sidelong hug and then slips out the window. Peter hears a soft thud as his feet hit the ground outside.

“I should go too,” Peter says.

Ned nods. “Tell Pete we should hang out again sometime, okay?”

“Yeah.”

Peter goes out through the front, only stopping for a quick hello and goodbye to Ned’s mom as he leaves. Pete is waiting for him on the sidewalk about halfway down the block, a baseball cap pulled down low over his face.

The same ache from before comes back in full force at the sudden reminder that Pete can’t even hang out with Ned without needing to hide. It must show on his face, because Pete looks over at him, perplexed.

“Sorry,” Peter says. “It just sucks you have to sneak around like that.”

“Oh. I sort of got used to it, I guess, having to hide. And I lived for a whole year in a world where Ned wasn’t even alive anymore, so having to sneak around a little bit to hang out with him doesn’t seem like such a big deal.”

Peter can’t really imagine it, and he doesn’t want to try, either. He changes the subject instead.

“See you next Saturday?”

“Yeah, see you.”

They split up, Pete heading back towards the subway station and Peter opting to walk home, since it’s not as far for him.

For a few minutes, he lets himself imagine a life where Pete didn’t have to leave, where they could both go back to the apartment and eat dinner with May.

They could go patrolling together sometimes - not all the time, because it would be better to split up and cover more ground, but every once in a while would be fun. They’d hang out in the lab and work on stuff together, and maybe Peter wouldn’t care as much if Mr. Stark skipped out on every lab
session, if he wasn’t alone.

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